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Listening to Millennials:
An Exploration of the Relationship Between Millennials and the Church

by
CHARLES R. THOMPSON

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Luther Seminary
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ABSTRACT

Listening to Millennials:

An Exploration of the Relationship Between Millennials and the Church

by

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This mixed methods exploratory research project investigated the relationship between the millennial generation and the Christian church. Through interviews of seven millennial couples connected to my congregation, six millennials not connected to the church, and conversations churched millennials had with peers, I was able to learn what the variables were that impacted their involvement or lack of involvement with the church. A survey of the congregation was also conducted to compare spiritual practices of millennials with other generations in the church. The results indicated the importance of a strong Christian upbringing and meeting millennials where they are at spiritually.

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Secondly, I wish to thank all of the millennials who participated in my research. All of them were very gracious in allowing me the time to interview them, as well as being candid with me. When I asked the churched millennials to interview friends and coworkers most of them were more than willing to help. While the non-churched millennials were a little apprehensive of the interviews at first, they gradually warmed up to me and their responses were quite helpful. I am also grateful for the non-millennials in my church who participated in my interviews and the questionnaire. I could not have had a complete project without their help.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

COVID-19	2019 Novel Coronavirus
D. Min.	Doctor of Ministry
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church of America
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

Introduction to Research Subject

“Where have the young people gone?” “How do we reach unchurched youth in our community?” “Where have we gone wrong with young people?” In my twenty-four years of ministry, these are the questions that come up most often when the topic of church challenges is discussed. When I began my first call, at the age of twenty-seven, a comment from a prominent member was, “we need a young pastor to bring in young people.” This was a rapidly aging congregation that was looking for a quick fix to the problem of lack of youth involvement in the church. Based upon my experience with all three parishes I have served, as well as conversations I have had with colleagues over the years, I believe this church’s perspective is not unique. Over and over again, I have listened to colleagues and older members of churches lament the fact that many youths leave the church after confirmation and do not come back. It used to be that you may see them when they get married and start having children of their own, but now that is not necessarily the case anymore. Many in the church, including myself, struggle with how to approach this. We ask, “Where do we start?”

Context of Grace Lutheran Church

For the past nineteen years that I have served Grace Lutheran Church in Moriah, a small bedroom community in east central Wisconsin.¹ The village has a population of about 1000. When most people hear about our community what usually comes to their mind is “speed-trap.” The reason for this is that our village is at the intersection of two very busy highways, which the police monitor carefully. Many speeding tickets are given out. However, our village had very modest beginnings. It was first inhabited by settlers in 1844. Most of them came from New England and the Middle Atlantic states, lured by the promise of fertile land offered on lenient terms by the government.² Most of them had their roots in England and as they established their farms and businesses, they also founded churches of English origin: a Congregational church in 1848, a Methodist church in 1854, and an Episcopal church in 1864.³ However, shortly after the Civil War, an increasing number of land-hungry immigrants from northern Germany invaded the area.⁴ Moriah, then, became an ethnically diverse community rather quickly. The spiritual needs of this small group of Lutherans were met by the Rev. Joseph West from a nearby small city.⁵ Although they were grateful to Pastor West, a group of these Lutherans was eager to establish its own church in their village. Accordingly, on December 14, 1884, after services held in the Congregational church, Pastor West organized Grace Evangelical

¹ Pseudonyms are used in this thesis for all proper names of persons and congregations.

² Emajeane B. Westphal, *Yesterday, Today, & Forever: A Pictorial History of Moriah, Wisconsin and 100 Years of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Ripon: Ripon Community Printers, 1984), 57.

³ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

Lutheran Church.⁶ The first constitution was adopted and signed by eleven charter members.

Today our congregation has approximately 300 members and averages slightly over 100 in worship. It could therefore probably be considered a mid-size congregation. Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in March, our congregation has offered online worship as well. As our in-person worship was shut down for about three months, we began recording services and uploading them to YouTube. Then we began live worship on Facebook, which was recorded for use later on YouTube and Facebook. The views of our church services varied, so it is difficult to judge just how many participated in our services. However, we have discovered that even though we have now resumed in-person worship many are still viewing our services online. Our online presence needs to stay, as it is reaching people both inside and outside of our church community.

Up until the pandemic, we offered confirmation classes as well as Wednesday night Christian education for elementary age children, and Sunday morning classes for preschoolers. We have also provided adult Christian education at different times. Our numbers are relatively small, but we have consistently had some form of Christian instruction for youth and adults. In addition to education, we also have been fortunate to have a dedicated youth director for the past nine years. He has worked with middle and senior high school youth during this time, leading them on mission trips, youth gatherings, service projects, and some small group Bible studies. Therefore, our congregation has had many ministries to offer different age groups. At this time, we are waiting to see how to conduct these ministries as the pandemic continues.

⁶ Ibid., 58.

However, there is one age group our church has not been actively engaging with. There have been no intentional ministries focused on the millennial age group, which is considered ages twenty-one to thirty-nine. Other than those few millennials who have children old enough to participate in Sunday school, most others in our church participate only when they are able to attend worship services. Fortunately, one thirty-year-old woman last year approached me about this very issue. She was frustrated with the lack of opportunities for involvement of her age group in our congregation. With her help, we were able to bring together seven couples in the “twenty-to-thirty something” age range and ask them what they are dealing with in their lives and how we as a church can address their needs. For instance, I asked them, “What keeps you up at night?” What came up was a little surprising: all of them were concerned about finances. I would never have guessed that. As a result, in the spring of 2019 we completed together a nine-week financial course from Dave Ramsey’s Financial Peace University.⁷ At these weekly meetings, not only did people learn practical ways of handling finances, but slowly relationships were being built. One thing that was interesting is that the older couples, that is, those in their thirties, were able to give advice to the younger couples in their twenties. What I learned is that when we actually listen to people first, as opposed to starting a new program assuming we know what people are looking for, the results are much better!

Therefore, I learned from this experience that the best way to address the anxiety of the church in engaging with this age group, usually defined as millennials, is to take the time to listen to them. Instead of focusing upon how we need to keep and attract

⁷ Dave Ramsey, *Financial Peace University* (Brentwood, TN: Lampo Press, 2019).

millennials in the church through new initiatives, we need to find ways to build relationships with them. As Andrew Root argues in his article “Stop Worrying About the Millennials,” we need to stop treating them as objects that need to be fixed. He writes:

I wonder if millennial anxiety is about our concern for real young people, or if it’s about the church’s desire to possess a youthful spirit. Do we want departing millennials and nones to encounter the gospel or to merely become members? Are we worried more about their spiritual health or about the health of our institutions?⁸

When it comes to ministry with younger families, up until this point our congregation had focused much of our attention on upgrading our Sunday school and confirmation programs, as well as our youth ministry. Our Sunday school has gradually shrunk in numbers, but Christian education leaders do meet periodically to address this concern. Through my learnings in the D. Min program, I have been encouraging leaders to listen to parents of young children to receive ideas and input before implementing changes. We have changed our confirmation program from Sunday mornings to Wednesday nights, which has increased attendance dramatically. We are also fortunate to have a youth director who connects well with junior and senior high youth, and has helped them develop their faith through mission trips, youth events, and encouraging them to participate in Teens Encounter Christ weekends.⁹

However, I believe we need to find ways to connect with the millennial age group as well. As these young families have small children or will be having children in the near future, this will impact the future of our Christian education and youth programs.

⁸ Andrew Root, “Stop Worrying about the Millennials.” *Christianity Today* 59 no. 1 (Jan-Feb 2015): 30.

⁹ Teens Encounter Christ weekends are three-day retreats focused on helping youth through talks, small group activities, and learning spiritual practices to develop relationships with Jesus Christ.

The Dave Ramsey course was a good start, but since then we have struggled to get this group together. This is not surprising, as church attendance and participation in church events commonly decreases during the summer months. In the fall of 2019, I attempted to arrange gatherings after church to keep the spark from the course alive, but attendance had been minimal. Typically, four out of the seven couples would show up. However, when I began my interviews in December 2019, all seven couples were willing to be interviewed. This told me that there is potential to keep this group connected. I believe that we can find new ways to connect with them individually and collectively. In the meantime, I believe our church needs to stop obsessing over the millennial problem.

Again, Andrew Root says:

Anxiety always obscures and corrupts our ability to share in each other's lives. Thus, the best way to help the church engage millennials is to stop wringing our hands over the millennial problem. Instead, we might seek the Holy Spirit together with all generations, looking for concrete experiences of the presence and absence of God.¹⁰

Root's point that different generations can together seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit is well taken. Instead of viewing ministry to millennials as a project, we can find ways to connect the stories of different generations. This is why I decided to survey the entire congregation on spiritual practices as well as engage with millennials. That way, we were able to compare generational perspectives and find common ground as well as differences. In other words, in exploring the faith perspectives of millennials, other age groups were included in the process. In summary, while our church primarily needed to listen to the stories and perspectives of millennials, it was also helpful to get other

¹⁰ Ibid., 36.

generations involved in the research. This was a reminder to me that when it comes to the church, we are all in this together. We can all learn from one another.

Research Question

From out of all this came my research question:

What might Grace Lutheran Church learn about the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with God and the Church?

Independent Variables

As my intention was to explore the faith perspectives and practices of millennials, I decided to use mixed methods exploratory research methodology. That is, I sought to listen to this age group first before drawing conclusions. Therefore, I began the research with the independent variables being unknown. I had some suspicions as to what influenced the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with the church, but tried to listen to them and keep an open mind. I decided to interview both church and unchurched millennials to compare and contrast what factors influenced both of these groups in whether or not they were involved with a church. These interviews were conducted in December 2019 and January 2020.

When it comes to the millennials associated with a church, I decided to interview the seven couples I had worked with before in the Financial Peace Course. I intended to ask them what drew them to the church and what keeps them coming back. Most of these couples were raised by parents who were active in church, but I wanted to see how much impact their upbringing had on their current spiritual practices. All of the millennials I talked with who are still connected to a church were raised in families in which church participation was a priority. Most of their families of origin attended worship regularly,

and they attended Sunday school as well as confirmation classes. Some even participated in youth groups. In my research I wanted to find out what variables influenced their involvement in church either positively or negatively.

When it came to millennials who were not connected to a church, I chose people in the community who did not attend worship or participate in church activities in at least a few years, if at all. I wanted to find out if they were actively raised in a congregation, and what their experiences were with the church. If they had no church background, I sought to find out what their impressions of the church were today. I thought it would be helpful to hear their stories in order to understand where they were coming from. All of them were more than willing to talk with me. In my results chapter, I will discuss what I learned and then identify the independent variables.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with God and the church. In this research my intent was to explore the reasons why some millennials were connected to a church and others were not. That is why I made it a point to interview both churched and unchurched millennials who lived in our community. To broaden this research, I also asked millennials in our church to go out and ask two to three family members or friends about their church involvement. As I shall share later, the results of the interviews were quite enlightening.

Intervening Variables

One intervening variable that affected the research was life changes in the churched millennials who worked with me. Of the seven couples, one had a son who came down with a serious illness before we were going to hold our first focus group, in

February 2020. About the same time another couple welcomed twins into the world. Needless to say, this affected their ability to join us in the focus group sessions. Both of these couples participated in the interviews before this intervening variable came up, so they were able to be a part of the overall research.

A second intervening variable was the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in March 2020. This began at the time of our second focus group, in which I had the millennial couples share with me the results of their conversations with friends and coworkers. Fortunately, I was able to get both focus groups of my church members conducted before the social distancing went in affect, which gave me valuable data. This mandate from our governor allowed no gatherings of more than ten people to occur, which shut down all worship and church activities. All nonessential businesses were also closed, and everyone was required to remain six feet apart from everyone else. This prevented me from conducting the focus group of non-millennials in our church that I had planned. In that focus group I had intended to ask them the same questions I had asked the millennials in my interviews. However, in lieu of a focus group, I interviewed each of these non-millennials by phone. As a result, I was able to include their perspectives on church involvement in the research.

Importance of the Research

Why was this research so important to me and my ministry? As I mentioned before, in my twenty-four years of ministry, I have seen a disturbing pattern of young people drifting away from churches after confirmation. It is also apparent that there are many millennials who have never been part of a church. Not only does this not bode well for the future of the church, but also for the present. The church needs the input and

participation of all age groups in order to thrive. As for millennials who are still engaged with the church in some way, it was helpful to learn what keeps them coming. From what I have learned in my studies in the D. Min program at Luther Seminary thus far, it is important to remember that the church as an institution is not the center of God's mission. We as a church are not on a mission from God; rather God's mission has a church. This to me indicates that when it comes to engaging with millennials both inside and outside of the church, the church needs to join in with what God is already doing in their lives as opposed to focusing upon what they can add to our institution. This involves listening to millennials as opposed to simply recruiting them. It involves building and fostering relationships with them. One important thing that I hoped to learn from my research is how we can we discover what millennials are looking for. That is why I felt I needed to hear their stories. Through exploratory research I hoped to find out how God is at work in their lives already, and how we as a church could partner with them.

Theoretical Lenses

Studies of Millennials

As I conducted exploratory research, my first theoretical lens was *studies of millennials*. Along with interviewing millennials inside and outside of the church, I believed I needed to explore research and findings of social science in order to obtain a broader picture of this age group. For instance, I discovered that Barna Group¹¹ as well as

¹¹ Barna Group, "Millennial Non-Christians Show Greater Spiritual Curiosity than Older Adults," <http://www.barna.com/research/millennial-spiritual-curiosity/>, accessed September 1, 2019.

Pew Research¹² have conducted numerous studies on characteristics of millennials. Barna has studied religious and spiritual attitudes of millennials, as well as their work ethics. Pew Research has studied how many millennials do not affiliate with any religious institution or tradition. Both of these sources were helpful in my research. They discovered that more and more millennials are practicing a more individualized faith rather than a communal one. That is, many believe that they do not need to be a part of a church to have spiritual satisfaction. Other sources that I found helpful for this lens were Mark Perna's *Answering Why*¹³ and Adam Brooks' *Understanding Millennials: A Guide to Working with Today's Youth*.¹⁴ Both of these authors are interested in how to prepare millennials for success in the workplace, but their insights are helpful for the church as well. In general, they point out that millennials have a totally different understanding of respect for authority than the rest of us grew up with. To this generation, respect must be earned; it is not a given. Millennials do not like to be simply told what to think or what to do. They also insist on authenticity and can spot a fake person a mile away. In my research I sought to explore if these insights from the authors matched what I heard from millennials in my context.

Spiritual Practices of Millennials

A second theoretical lens I used to address my research question was *spiritual practices of millennials*. As the basis of my research question was seeking to learn about

¹² Pew Research Center, "Religion among the Millennials," <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>, accessed September 1, 2019.

¹³ Mark Perna, *Answering Why* (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Publishing, 2018).

¹⁴ Adam Brooks, *Understanding Millennials: A Guide to Working with Today's Youth* (Phoenix, AZ: Brooks Books, 2016).

why millennials are or are not involved with the church, I found it useful to explore what research others have done in this area. As many churches are struggling to keep this age group engaged in church life and activities, much has been written on this subject. For instance, the Siebert Foundation has published a work entitled “Engaging Millennials in Ministry.”¹⁵ Jolene Cassellus Erlacher wrote a book called *Millennials in Ministry*.¹⁶ Both of these authors conclude that millennials are seeking community, but it cannot be forced upon them. Many millennials tend to be generous with their time and talents but tend to want to give from the heart and not out of obligation. I will discuss many more of these characteristics in my results and lenses chapters.

As I have mentioned before, one thing I kept in mind as I used this lens was as much as possible not to enter the research with suppositions. For instance, while millennials may not be involved in a church, this does not necessarily mean that they do not engage in spiritual practices. One common belief is that more and more millennials are considering themselves as spiritual people but not religious. This means that many millennials have distrust of church institutions and would prefer to practice spirituality in their own way. In their article “The Table Briefing: Ministry to Millennials,”¹⁷ Darrell L. Bock and Mikel Del Rosario interviewed Q Ideas founder Gabe Lyons to discuss this view. Lyons argues that many millennials are desiring some sense of the transcendent, but they are just not finding it in the churches. While this may be true in some cases, my

¹⁵ Siebert Foundation, “Engaging Millennials in Ministry,” <http://www.siebertfoundation.org/EngagingMillennialsinMinistryResearchReport2>, accessed September 1, 2019.

¹⁶ Jolene Erlacher, *Millennials in Ministry* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2014).

¹⁷ Darrell L. Bock and Mikel Del Rosario, “The Table Briefing: Ministering to Millennials,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 174 (July-September 2017): 343.

interviews indicated that other millennials appreciate more formal, liturgical worship styles.

Finally, I decided to investigate what spiritual practices millennials are engaging in both inside and outside of the church.¹⁸ I wanted to see if there are many activities people participate in that they considered spiritual. Usually, we think of spiritual as worship and prayer, but many people find energy and excitement in such practices as music, art, and helping other people. To explore this, I decided to survey the entire congregation in order to discover what practices millennials and non-millennials participate in to express their spirituality.

Generational Theory

My final theoretical lens was *generational theory*. It was helpful in understanding millennials to include other generations in my research as well. That is why I began my studies by conducting a survey of spiritual practices of everyone in the entire congregation who was eighteen years or older. To further understand the characteristics of age groups I read the works of Haydn Shaw¹⁹ and William and Le Etta Benke.²⁰ Both of these works thoroughly described characteristics of each generation. It was fascinating to me to see how the different generations impacted one another. While their analyses were generalizations, nonetheless they were helpful to me to get a broader perspective on

¹⁸ By spiritual practices I mean things people do, either individually or in groups, that nourish and give witness to their spirituality.

¹⁹ Haydn Shaw, *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Millennials Aren't the Problem, and the Future Is Bright* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015).

²⁰ William Benke and Le Etta Benke, *The Generation Driven Church: Evangelizing Boomers, Busters, and Millennials* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005).

millennial attitudes toward faith and the church. I was curious to see if many of the characteristics they described of the different generations would be verified in my research.

Biblical Lenses

The theoretical lenses of *studies of millennials*, *spiritual practices of millennials*, and *generational theory* provided the framework for both my biblical and theoretical lenses used in this research. As for the biblical lenses, I paired *studies of millennials* with God's grace lived out in lives of faith; *spiritual practices of millennials* with marks of living the Christian life; and *generational theory* with the instructions given in Deuteronomy chapter six. All three of these biblical lenses immediately came to my mind as I prepared for this research. The study of the relationship between millennials and the church, in my view, relates well to how God in the Bible has always reached out to His people to meet them where they are. These biblical lenses helped me connect God's word to reaching out to millennials.

God's Grace Lived Out in Lives of Faith

One of my favorite scriptural passages is the description of God's grace given in Ephesians chapter two. The author plainly states that it is only by God's grace given to us through faith that any of us can be reconciled to God. None of us can work our way towards salvation: God has already done the work for us in the death and resurrection of Jesus. God is the one who initiates our relationship with Him, and it is God, not we, who is at work in the world. This reminds me of one of the central tenets of missional church theology: that God's mission has a church and not the other way around. In my research this biblical lens helped me to stop and listen to millennials as opposed to trying to force

an agenda upon them. This passage reminded me that since God is the one who is at work in the world, He is already at work in the lives of millennials. When I conversed with millennials both inside and outside of the church, and showed them respect, they were responsive to my questions. Since all of us are dependent upon God's grace, I was able to work with millennials on a level playing field. One helpful resource I used in applying the Ephesians passage to my research was a column Richard Carlson wrote in *Working Preacher*.²¹

Marks of Living the Christian Life

Since in my research I was interested in studying the spiritual practices of millennials, I looked for biblical passages that gave examples of how to live a Christian life. While many think of spiritual practices primarily as what we do in the church building, the Christian faith is lived out in many ways in our daily lives. In the twelfth chapter of Romans, the Apostle Paul gives a list of actions that people can perform to live their faith, such as prophesying, serving, encouraging others, giving generously, leadership, and showing mercy. Paul provides, in my view, an excellent summary of what the Christian life looks like. A resource that I found helpful for this lens was Ernst Kasemann's *Commentary on Romans*.²²

²¹ Richard Carlson, "Ephesians 2:1-10 Commentary," Luther Seminary, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=262.htm, accessed September 4, 2019.

²² Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980).

Deuteronomy Chapter Six

When I studied characteristics of different generations, I looked for biblical passages that would be relevant. When I was looking for biblical support on the importance of one's upbringing in their church involvement today, Deuteronomy chapter six immediately came to mind. This chapter contains the central confession of faith of Judaism, the belief in one God, and the importance of passing down from one generation to another God's instructions. While the instructions of the Torah were given thousands of years ago to a different people in a different context, the underlying premise of passing down the faith to next generations is one that Christians can relate to as much as Jews. As Christianity came out of Judaism, it retained many of the same teachings and practices. Even Martin Luther saw the importance of instruction of younger generations on the basics of the faith as he wrote his catechisms. One source that I found helpful in applying this message from Deuteronomy to my research was Raymond Brown's book, *The Message of Deuteronomy*.²³ I will go into much more detail on this lens in my chapter on biblical and theological lenses.

Theological Lenses

As I did with the biblical lenses, I matched the theoretical lenses with the theological ones. I paired *studies of millennials* with the *grace of God; spiritual practices of millennials* with *the priesthood of all believers*; and *generational theory* with *witnessing to God*. As I conducted my research, the lenses all worked well together.

²³ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993).

It was inspiring to me to see how secular research can go hand in hand with theological concepts.

Grace of God

When I worked with millennials, I began with the notion that it was extremely important to approach them on a level playing field, that is, with humility. I tried to convey to them that I could learn as much from them as they could from me. The reason that God's grace was important to my research is that it helped me to avoid a sense of superiority as I worked with them. God's grace has been given to all of us a free gift. It is not something any of us can earn. Both before and during my research, I heard negative things being said between generations. Instead of listening to one another, I believe that different generations often stereotype one another. Often, they do not cut each other some slack. This is one reason that most of the millennials I worked with did not appreciate the label "millennial." To many it has a negative connotation. However, when I think of how Christ came to die for all of our sins and rose again solely out of love for us all, I cannot help but be humbled. As I need God's free gift as much as anyone else, I believe it is essential that I do not label or stereotype anyone. One resource that I found helpful in applying the concept of grace to my research was Max Lucado's work, *Grace: More Than We Deserve, Greater than We Imagine*.²⁴ Lucado effectively describes how grace frees us to love one another as God loves us.

²⁴ Max Lucado, *Grace: More Than We Deserve, Greater Than We Imagine* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012).

Priesthood of All Believers

As I viewed the spiritual practices of millennials through the biblical lens of Romans twelve, this passage also reminded me of how Christians need to recognize that all of us are important to the church. Martin Luther expressed this with his doctrine of the *priesthood of all believers*.²⁵ This is the teaching that all Christians have equal access to God. While Christians are called to different vocations, all are priests in the sight of God. Why I thought this would be helpful in my studies of millennials is that, in my previous experience, all too often those of us in older generations have not been open to the ideas and insights of younger age groups. The question that has often been asked is: “How do we get more young people to come to church and support it?” As well intentioned as this is, it makes an assumption that young people need to conform to our image. That is, we want to mold young people into what we think they should be. We do not understand why they do not make support of the church a priority. While we all certainly need to be concerned about the future of the church, as the church will not survive unless more young people get involved, my research was intended to allow them to give us their input. One resource that I found helpful with this was a book by Uche Anizor and Hank Voss entitled *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers*.²⁶

Witnessing to God

My final theological lens through which I conducted my research is witnessing to what God has done for us. As my theoretical lens I paired with this one is *generational*

²⁵ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 313-18.

²⁶ Uche Anizor and Hank Voss, *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016).

theory, I wanted to explore how different generations relate to one another. Through my biblical lens, Deuteronomy chapter six, I studied how much impact millennials' upbringing had on their church involvement today. As the Deuteronomy passage commanded everyone to teach younger generations God's Word, I intended to explore how much Christian education each millennial had, as well as how involved their parents were with the church. I wanted to invite them to share positive as well as negative experiences with the church as they were growing up.

As I used this lens, I discovered two useful resources on how we might witness to millennials in a positive way. Dwight Zscheile's work, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*²⁷, was quite helpful with this. Zscheile emphasized how we should not view anyone as objects to be fixed, but rather as partners. He rightly argues that we as a church need to genuinely listen to our neighbors. Then we can build relationships with them as opposed to coming across as trying to sell them something. Christopher J. H. Wright's work, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*,²⁸ was also helpful as Wright honestly addresses tough questions.

Methodology

As my primary goal was to learn about the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with the church, I used mixed methods exploratory research methodology. Originally, I had considered using action research methods. However, it became clear to me that in order to understand the spirituality of millennials, I needed to listen to them

²⁷ Dwight Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014).

²⁸ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2009).

first. It would not have been as helpful to attempt interventions, for instance, as our congregation's ministry with millennials is still in its infancy. We are starting from scratch. Originally, I believed that qualitative research would be adequate, as my intention was to get acquainted with millennials by interviewing them and hearing their stories. However, my professors wisely convinced me that in order to fully understand millennials' spirituality, I needed to get a broader perspective of age groups as well. The best way to accomplish this was to use quantitative research. With quantitative research I could receive data from a much larger group of people in the shortest amount of time. Hence, it became clear that I needed to use mixed methods in my research. This turned out to be the correct methodology for my exploration of millennials. Using both qualitative and quantitative methods helped me accomplish my goal.

Research Design

The first part of my research project consisted of a questionnaire to survey all members of our congregation ages eighteen and older on how often they engaged in different spiritual practices; it was sent out as a census of the congregation. I prepared the questionnaire and distributed it using SurveyMonkey.²⁹ The questionnaire was sent out on November 15, 2019 through our church office email list of members who received our newsletter. Hard copies were also made available to members who were unable to complete the questionnaire online. These hard copies were printed out and made available at the rear of the sanctuary for people to fill out before or after worship on Saturday nights or Sunday mornings. Responses were collected until December 31, 2019.

²⁹ "SurveyMonkey," Palo Alto, CA: Survey Monkey, Inc., www.surveymonkey.com.

The qualitative portion of my research began in December 2019 with interviews of the seven millennial couples I had gathered previously to complete the Dave Ramsey course. These couples were also considered connected to the church because they attended worship at least a few times a year. I met with the couples either at the church or at the local coffee shop. I wanted them to feel as comfortable as possible during the conversations. The interviews went well, as the participants appeared to be open and candid about their experiences with the church. Each interview consisted of seven questions and lasted between thirty minutes to an hour. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Rubin and Rubin's methods.³⁰

The interviews with millennials not connected to a church took place in January and February 2020. I selected six individuals that I have encountered on a regular basis in the community. As I have lived in the Moriah area for the past eighteen years or so, I have had many opportunities to get acquainted with people. through attending school events, eating at the local coffee shop, and my interactions at the food mart and pet grooming places. Since I had established a connection with these individuals, they were comfortable sitting down with me for interviews. These interviews, as with the church millennials, also consisted of seven questions and lasted about thirty minutes to an hour. They were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using the same methods as the interviews with the church millennials.

As for the rest of the qualitative data, I conducted two focus groups with the millennials who were connected to the church. The first group consisted of the seven

³⁰ Rubin, Herbert J. and Irene S. Rubin. *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*. 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014).

millennial couples I had interviewed. During my interviews with them, I mentioned that I would be asking them to approach two or three millennial friends, family, or coworkers to ask them about their involvement or lack of involvement with a church. I gave them three possible questions to use in these conversations to look over. When we met in January 2020, we approved the questions as a group and I sent them on their way. When we met again in March 2020 for the second focus group, they shared with me verbally and in writing what they had heard in their conversations. Both of these focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and coded using the same methods as with the interviews. I had intended to hold a focus group of churched non-millennials, but due to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic I was unable to get them together in person. As a result, in April 2020 I interviewed four non-millennials individually to get their perspectives.

Analysis

I analyzed the data from the questionnaire I sent out using descriptive statistical methods, aided by IBM's SPSS program.³¹ First, I exported the data from Survey Monkey, and then cleaned them. To analyze these data, I used the methods of Peter Nardi's book³² as a guide. In order to compare how millennials compared to other generations in frequency of engagement in various spiritual practices, I conducted an independent t-test using the SPSS program. My intention was to compare the millennials' responses to three other generations combined. That is, I compared millennials' responses in the categories of worship, prayer, Bible study, and participation in other activities to

³¹ IBM SPSS Statistics 23, IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY.

³² Peter M. Nardi, *Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods*, third edition (Boulder, CO: London: Paradigm Publishers, 2014).

the traditionalists, baby boomers, and Gen X combined. In reporting the data, I reported the total responses, the frequency of responses by category, the percent of respondents by category, and the mean where appropriate.

When it came to analyzing the qualitative data, I relied heavily on the methods suggested by Herbert and Irene Rubin's book.³³ When I conducted the interviews and focus groups, I recorded the conversations on my iPhone using the Voice Memos app, as well as taking notes on sheets of paper. The voice memo recordings were then sent to the Transcribe app³⁴ on my phone. From there the transcriptions were downloaded onto my computer for analysis. I then coded the data using the seven steps that Rubin and Rubin recommended, which I will describe in detail in the methodology chapter.

Other Matters

Definition of Key Terms

Millennials: An inclusive term for those born during the years 1981-2000. Also known as Generation Y and Mosaics.

Millennials Connected to a Church: Those millennials who attend worship or participate in church related activities at least twice a year.

Millennials Not Connected to a Church: Those millennials who attend worship or participate in church related activities less than twice a year.

³³ Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012).

³⁴ DENIVIP Group LLC 2020.

Non-Millennials: Those persons born before 1981 who participated in the research.

Priesthood of all Believers: The doctrine that all humans have access to God through Christ, the true high priest, and do not need a priestly mediator.

Spiritual Practices: Things people do, either individually or in groups, that nourish and give witness to their spirituality.

Spirituality: An inclusive term for any belief system that reflects upon and gives witness to an individual's or group's understanding of the greater meaning and purpose of human life.

Ethical Concerns

All of the research I conducted conformed to the ethical standards and requirements of Luther Seminary. The research for this thesis went according to the plan I outlined in the proposal, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Luther Seminary (IRB). As I conducted the interviews, focus groups, and the survey, I made sure to protect the confidentiality of all participants as well as ensured that no participant was harmed in the process. Pseudonyms were used, and all raw data are being kept in password protected computer files or locked cabinets in my home. Raw data will be destroyed after June 4, 2024. I will not share any data with anyone except my professors, if necessary.

All individuals in the project understood that their participation was voluntary. All participants in the questionnaire received an implied consent letter prior to completing it (appendix B). All those who participated in interviews were asked to sign an informed consent form prior to interviews (appendix C). The forms stated that participants could

cease participation at any time. Participants did not receive any financial or other benefit beyond knowing that they were helping the researcher complete his study of their age group. Throughout the process, I assured all participants that their views or opinions would not be subject to any judgment. As a result, all participants appeared to be at ease with the project, and were happy to help. The participants who conducted conversations between millennial friends or coworkers outside of our congregation also signed a confidentiality form stating that they would not share any information connected to any individual they spoke with.

Summary

The chapters that follow describe in detail what I have outlined in this chapter. Chapter two contains the theoretical lenses I used in the project. It was helpful to use the insights of secular research on millennials to give me a broad perspective. Chapter three examines the biblical and theological lenses in more detail. Chapter four describes in depth the research methodology. Chapter five presents the findings of the research and chapter six contains my conclusions. The following chapters discuss in depth the process and discoveries of my project.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL LENSES

Introduction

In my introduction to this research, I stated that my motivation to study millennials came from questions that have been raised over the years about why fewer young people are involved with or attend worship at a church than in the past. While many churches have Christian education programs, and ministries for youth up until high school, I have been surprised to find out that few churches have active ministries for young people after this. It appears as if churches do not know where to start. Therefore, I decided to pursue why this is the case. It became apparent to me that for the church to engage with millennials, we must first understand where they are coming from. That is, we need to look outside of the church to obtain a broader perspective. In order to explore this, I chose theoretical lenses that utilize secular studies to examine characteristics of this generation as well as compare this age group to others.

Studies of Millennials

As I intended to conduct exploratory research, my first theoretical lens was *studies of millennials*. Along with interviewing millennials inside and outside of the church, I believed that I need to explore research and findings of social science in order

to obtain a broader picture of this age group. For instance, Barna Group¹ as well as Pew Research² have conducted numerous studies on characteristics of millennials. Barna has studied religious and spiritual attitudes of millennials, as well as their work ethics. Pew Research has studied how many millennials fit into the “nones” category of religious affiliation. In other words, more and more millennials are choosing not to affiliate with any particular religious institution, but rather, practice a more individualized faith. I made use of these studies as I sought to understand why millennials are or are not involved with ours or any other church.

In the Barna study, “Millennial Non-Christians Show Greater Spiritual Curiosity than Older Adults,” the results indicated that: though Christianity remains a powerful force today, its waning influence in American life means that younger generations are coming of age in a country more secular than ever. And with these shifts come challenges to talking about or sharing faith. In fact, Millennials—even those who are practicing Christians—tend to oppose evangelism altogether. But despite the growing indifference, other Barna data suggests an openness to different forms of faith sharing among the less religious, and a spiritual curiosity among millennials in particular.³

This is fascinating to me, because it indicates that contrary to many perceptions, millennials who are considered non-Christians have just as much if not more spiritual curiosity as older generations. While older adults may in general attend worship more often than younger ones, this does not mean that younger adults have less spirituality.

The findings of this study indicate a few key trends:

Millennial non-Christians are much more likely to have had one or more conversations about faith than their older counterparts and are twice as likely to

¹ Barna Group, “Millennial Non-Christians Show Greater Spiritual Curiosity than Older Adults,” <http://www.barna.com/research/millennial-spiritual-curiosity/>, accessed September 1, 2019.

² Pew Research Center, “Religion among the Millennials,” <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>, accessed September 1, 2019.

³ Barna Group, “Millennial Non-Christians,” 1.

express personal interest in Christianity (26% vs. 16%). They've also had much more personal experience with all kinds of evangelistic methods than older non-Christians, including through tracts (45% vs. 26%) or encounters with a person either at church (35% vs. 19%) or on the street (30% vs 16%). However, their favored method for exploring faith is one-on-one conversation with Christians (53%), something only one-third of older non-Christians prefer (32%).⁴

In my research I engaged in one-on-one conversations with millennials inside and outside of our church in the community. As I completed these interviews I attempted to do so without preconceptions. Studies such as this Barna study indicated that I really needed to listen to these young adults first before drawing conclusions about their spirituality. That is the reason the interviews with millennials both inside and outside of the church were beneficial.

Pew Research has also conducted many studies that were helpful to my research. For instance, in 2010 it conducted a thorough study of religious attitudes and practices of millennials. In summary, the studies indicate:

By some key measures, Americans ages 18 to 29 are considerably less religious than older Americans. Fewer young adults belong to any particular faith than older people do today. They also are less likely to be affiliated than their parents' and grandparents' generations were when they were young. Fully one-in-four members of the Millennial generation, so-called because they were born after 1980 and began to come of age around the year 2000, are unaffiliated with any particular faith. Indeed, Millennials are significantly more unaffiliated than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their life cycle (20% in the late 1990s) and twice as unaffiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults (13% in the late 1970s). Young adults also attend religious services less often than older Americans today. And compared with their elders today, fewer young people say that religion is very important in their lives.⁵

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Pew Research Center, "Religion among the Millennials," <https://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>, accessed September 1, 2019.

At first glance, none of these findings surprised me. From my own observations it is quite obvious that younger generations are far less active in church participation than older generations. It is quite common for young people to be seen infrequently, if at all, attending worship and participating in church activities. However, this does not necessarily indicate that millennials are not spiritual. It may mean that many millennials are seeking to fulfill their spiritual needs in ways other than being active in a church. This is the reason that I, through my interviews and the survey, studied what spiritual practices millennials as well as older generations found meaningful.

One interesting finding from the Pew Research study was that there are millennials who remain fairly traditional in their religious beliefs and practices.

Pew Research Center surveys show, for instance, that young adults' beliefs about life after death and the existence of heaven, hell, and miracles closely resemble the beliefs of older people today. Though young adults pray less often than their elders do today, the number of young adults who say they pray every day rivals the portion of young people who said the same in prior decades. And though belief in God is lower among young adults than older adults, Millennials say they believe in God with absolute certainty at rates similar to those seen among Gen Xers a decade ago. This suggests that some of the religious differences between younger and older Americans today are not entirely generational but result in part from people's tendency to place greater emphasis on religion when they age.⁶

This information tells me that whether I am conversing with churched or un-churched millennials, there will likely be some common ground to work with. It cannot be assumed that millennials will fit exactly into one theological mold. Some millennials are quite traditional in their views, while others are unorthodox. At least it appears as if most millennials have some sense of spirituality, even if they do not express it in the same ways as older generations.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

Mark Perna, in his work *Answering Why*, provides some helpful insights as well when it comes to understanding characteristics of millennials. While his main concern is how to prepare millennials and generation Z to successfully enter the workforce, his insights were helpful to my studies. For instance, he points out a core trait of these age groups:

In every context, these generations want to know why something is important. Why should they do it this way or that way? Why is a particular step important in the grand scheme of things? Their desire to understand the reason and purpose behind everything almost seems inborn, because this is how they've been taught to think and interact with the world.⁷

Another characteristic of millennials that Perna points out that was relevant to my studies is how they understand the concept of respect. As I talk to church members as well as school officials in my community I hear repeatedly how “young people just don't have any respect for authority.” Perna addresses this plainly in his work:

When I was growing up, I respected my elders, teachers, and employers first and worked tirelessly to earn their respect. Because society has changed so fundamentally, Y generation members aim it 180 degrees in the opposite direction: they require you respect them first, and then, and only then, will they mirror back that respect. Thankfully, the moment they feel that respect, they return it quickly.⁸

This tells me that as a church we need to find ways to show respect to our young people before expecting them to listen to us. This is an entirely different way of thinking that many of us are used to. All too often we assume that we automatically have their respect. Then we get frustrated when we cannot get them to do what we want. We wonder why they do not worship regularly or participate in church activities. We expect

⁷ Mark Perna, *Answering Why* (Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Publishing, 2018), 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 186.

them to have the same priorities that we do. This is why in my research I listened to millennials first and attempted to build relationships with them rather than trying to force my spirituality on them.

Finally, Adam Brooks, in his work, *Understanding Millennials*, also provided helpful information. As with Mark Perna, Brooks is also interested in how to increase productivity of millennials in the workplace. However, his suggestions on how to work with millennials could be helpful in our church contexts as well. One of the characteristics he points out is that many grow up believing that it is all about them. He writes:

Millennials never decided how they would be raised or what sort of world they would grow up in. Everything today is customized, from our phones to social media even the cars we buy. Why shouldn't kids growing up today think it's all about them? They should think that and they do. Yet we get frustrated and upset at them, which makes it even more confusing for them. They are living out what they know to be true. Their helicopter mom told them they were the most important thing in the world, so they aren't sure why *you* didn't get the memo! They want what they want and typically they want it NOW!⁹

While this is a generalization, which certainly does not fit all millennials, it nonetheless is true in many cases. It fits the experience of many employers I have known have shared with me. They have told me that many millennials they have hired do not last long on jobs that they do not find immediate satisfaction in. As soon as the going gets tough, they quit. While this is certainly disturbing, nonetheless it is a reality that those of us who seek to work with millennials must contend with.

However, at the end of the book he does give helpful suggestions on how to work with millennials. I believe the church could benefit from these as well.

⁹ Adam Brooks, *Understanding Millennials: A Guide to Working with Today's Youth* (Phoenix, AZ: Brooks Books, 2016), 15.

1. Short-range goals. Set millennials up with assignments and goals for the short-term.
2. Opportunities for coaching and input. Design times for workers to get together and give one another valuable feedback.
3. Get real. Millennials value authenticity and genuineness.
4. Choices that motivate. Offer millennials choices on incentives.
5. Simple steps can change the world. Find a cause that millennials can get behind,
6. Harnessing technology. Utilize millennials' understanding of technology.
7. I know somebody who can help with that. Take advantage of millennials' networking abilities.
8. Multitasking is my middle name. Let millennials multitask since that is what they're good at.
9. Team power. Allow millennials to choose who they want to work with on teams.
10. Focus on outcomes and results Do not tell millennials how to do things. Let them figure it out and see their results.¹⁰

Therefore, I believe Adam Brooks' work was helpful to my research as well. He presents his views in a simple, light-hearted, and straightforward way. Along with Mark Perna, the Pew Research Center, and the Barna group, I believe that I had the necessary tools I needed to study millennials through the lens of *studies of millennials*.

Spiritual Practices of Millennials

A second theoretical lens I used to address my research question is *spiritual practices of millennials*. As the basis of my research question was seeking to learn about why millennials are or are not involved with the church, I intended to explore what research others have done in this area. As many churches are struggling to keep this age group engaged in church life and activities, much work has been written on this subject. For example, the Siebert Lutheran Foundation has published a work entitled "Engaging

¹⁰ Ibid., 21-35.

Millennials in Ministry.”¹¹ Jolene Cassellus Erlacher wrote a book called *Millennials in Ministry*.¹² I will outline the main findings of their work later in this chapter and present their suggestions to meet spiritual needs of this age group.

As I mentioned in my introduction, one thing that I kept in mind as I used this lens was not to enter the research with suppositions. For instance, while millennials may not be involved in a church, this does not necessarily mean that they do not engage in spiritual practices. One common belief is that more and more millennials are considering themselves “spiritual and not religious.” This view is that many millennials have distrust of church institutions and would prefer to practice spirituality in their own way. In their article “The Table Briefing: Ministering to Millennials,” Darrell L Bock and Mikel Del Rosario interviewed Q Ideas founder Gabe Lyons to discuss this situation. Lyons argues that:

Thirty-four percent of eighteen-to-twenty-two-year-olds don’t identify with any religion. . . . But a significant number of them still believe there is a God. They still desire some sense of spiritual formation or transcendence, and yet they’re not finding the church as the place that would ever lead them towards that. . . . The church must identify methods we’ve institutionalized that may not be aligned with what Scriptures ever taught.¹³

In my research I explored if this is actually the case. Lyons seems to argue that many young people have left the church because the church is too steeped in its human-made traditions that do not speak to them. That is, the church is losing millennials because we

¹¹ Siebert Foundation, “Engaging Millennials in Ministry,” <http://www.siebertfoundation.org/EngagingMillennialsinMinistryResearchReport2>, accessed September 1, 2019.

¹² Jolene Erlacher, *Millennials in Ministry* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2014).

¹³ Darrell L. Bock and Mikel Del Rosario, “The Table Briefing: Ministering to Millennials,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 174 (July-September 2017): 343.

are not using language and liturgies that relate to this age group. I wonder if that is reality. Millennials may or may not appreciate traditional worship services. In my research interviews I asked millennials both inside and outside of the church where they find spiritual fulfillment.

When it comes to spiritual practices, I investigated what practices millennials are engaging in both inside and outside of the church. I have learned that there are many different kinds of practices that can be defined as “spiritual.” For instance, while worship and prayer are what likely come to mind most often when the term “spiritual practices” comes up, there many, many others.

In the meantime, I found some of the resources I mentioned earlier to be helpful as I explored the spiritual practices of millennials. The Siebert Foundation partnered with the Kern Family Foundation to study what practices and worship traditions are “most effective at reaching and engaging millennials with the Gospel and developing millennials as future church leaders.”¹⁴

Researchers approached the project with a two-fold methodology to gather both primary and secondary data on Millennials and worship traditions. This included: a) in-depth interviews with thought leaders in the fields of ministry, discipleship and church leadership to identify best practices from real-life applications and experiences, and b) secondary research that gives a macro-level perspective on demographic, psychographic and behavioral trends of Millennials and their faith practices.¹⁵

More specifically, the total number of interviews by type were twenty-four congregations, eleven outreach ministries, five researchers and authors, five

¹⁴ Siebert Foundation, “Engaging Millennials in Ministry,” 2.

¹⁵ Ibid., 2.

denomination leaders, and five camps and service organizations.¹⁶ Initial exploration and findings from the research identified six key insights that were tested and reconfirmed through subsequent interviews:

1. *Millennials struggle with identity.* They are highly transient and are likely to have grown up in a transient, fluid family structure, without a defined set of religious practices. They resist labeling and dislike being categorized as “Millennials” with all of the implications that suggests. With all of the world’s information on demand, at their fingertips, they experience tremendous pressure to find meaning.
2. *The influence of Millennial mindset and behavior can be seen in urban areas, where they are highly concentrated and highly mobile.*
3. *Traditional membership models are meaningless to Millennials,* who deeply desire to belong, but resist institutional membership and instead seek out relational belonging. They prefer to associate with “tribes” where they feel welcomed and accepted for who they are. They look for active involvement and opportunities to make a real difference.
4. *Millennials seek a sense of belonging first,* then conform behaviors to the norms of the group before finally changing their belief systems. This contrasts sharply with older generations who join worship communities based on shared belief. This also confounds traditional church models, where the primary emphasis is on beliefs rather than action.
5. *Millennials are philanthropic, but they are philanthropic in different ways than their elders.* They do not give out of obligation or habit, they do not give because someone tells them to, and they do not give to institutions. If institutional membership is irrelevant and giving no longer automatic, the traditional financial model of the church must change as well.
6. *Millennials can spot a fake a mile away.* While they desire mentorship and interaction with older generations, their greatest longing is for authentic leaders who seek out and welcome their input, who appreciate them, and who involve them in meaningful ways.¹⁷

When it comes to how to apply these insights, the Siebert study asked interviewees to think beyond just the initial attraction and talk more about true engagement.¹⁸ That is, they were looking for practices and offerings that effectively

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸ Ibid., 21.

engage millennials. Though millennials place less emphasis on formal membership in institutions, they asked interviewees to tell them what motivates millennials to make an enduring connection to their worship communities.¹⁹ As a result, five themes emerged consistently:

1. *Symbolic faith practices.* Millennials are drawn to more traditional and ancient forms of worship, which symbolize a connection to something bigger than themselves.
2. *Genuine welcome.* Millennials want to feel like they are part of a group, and they want to be accepted for who they are.
3. *Meaningful community service.* Millennials want to make a difference in the world, and they are drawn to causes that allow them to have what they perceive of as meaningful impact.
4. *Relevant contribution.* Just as Millennials want to serve, they want to know that their contributions are valued by the worship community.
5. *Authentic relationships.* Millennials are seeking authenticity. They can be quite savvy when it comes to seeing right to the core of any institution, organization, or agency. They can see past what they see as a sales pitch.²⁰

These findings tell me that millennials can view spirituality in many ways.

What seems to be most important to them is that they are participating in actions and rituals that actually have meaning and purpose. They are looking for meaningful relationships and not seeking to become members of institutions. This reinforces for me the need to listen to them and find out what they are passionate about and find ways to help them use this passion.

¹⁹ Ibid., 21.

²⁰ Ibid., 22.

Jolene Erlacher, in her work *Millennials in Ministry*,²¹ while primarily focused on how to encourage and equip millennials for ministry positions, does describe certain traits that seem to be common to most millennials. One of them that she points out is that choice constitutes a powerful part of life for most young adults today.²² Millennials experienced more options in life than any previous generation. Therefore, young adults expect consideration of individual preferences even when such consideration creates delay or results in indecision.²³ She writes:

This expectation impacts how they relate to the church and religion. Fewer and fewer young people buy in wholeheartedly to particular statements of faith or doctrinal beliefs put forth by denominations or church boards. They want the flexibility to choose the tenets of faith that resonate with their personal views and experiences. When it comes to their faith, Millennials shop around, looking for the best deal or product for their perspective or place in life. This mindset deters Millennials from joining membership classes or making a decision to adhere or commit to one particular congregation, denomination, or set of beliefs. It also allows them to avoid traditions or practices that lack biblical support or cultural relevance.²⁴

This directly relates to how many millennials view spirituality. She stresses that millennials are not interested in doctrine as much as having experiences that make sense of their lives. She writes:

While religion inherently brings with it prescribed belief systems, spirituality allows for greater openness and flexibility. It encompasses either mild interest in one's inner life or passionate commitment to a personal faith. Spirituality describes a wide variety of perspectives and faith traditions, and thus avoids disrupting relational harmony the way adhering to a specific religious code might. By choosing spirituality over a specific religious position, they distance themselves from the aspects of established religion that seem inconsiderate, discriminatory, disrespectful, or hateful. They sincerely pursue a sense of

²¹ Erlacher, *Millennials in Ministry*.

²² *Ibid.*, Kindle location 160.

²³ *Ibid.*, Kindle location 172.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, Kindle location 172-175.

belonging and unity. Claiming a religious position that seems to alienate others lacks compatibility with current cultural values.²⁵

In light of this, Erlacher likes to think of millennials as a source of accountability to churches. She believes that they can challenge churches that continue doing things one way to look at different options. She states that they can “bring fresh eyes, a fresh view of where things stand and how things can be run.”²⁶ Church leaders need to welcome questions from millennials or they can easily become disengaged. In addition, she argues that churches need to have a clear vision that millennials can grasp. She writes:

Because young adults have so many options to choose from when it comes to church experiences and spiritual growth—a vast array of church sizes and varieties, books, online ministries, worship styles, and social media outlets—they want to clearly understand the vision and purpose of a church they are considering and what makes it unique. If they are going to choose one church or ministry over the many options available to them, they need to feel confident in their decision.²⁷

To summarize the literature I have reviewed, when it comes to spiritual views and practices of millennials, what appears to be most important to them is building authentic relationships with others. Millennials may or may not appreciate traditional liturgical practices but are concerned about connecting with something larger than themselves. Many do want to participate in groups but are reluctant to commit to specific denominations or institutions. They are interested in working with others to achieve specific goals, such as feeding the hungry and other humanitarian efforts. As I conducted my research, I explored ways to help our church work with millennials to form relationships that will help all of us discern what God is up to in our lives.

²⁵ Ibid., Kindle location 184.

²⁶ Ibid., Kindle location 211.

²⁷ Ibid., Kindle location 218.

Generational Theory

This leads to my final theoretical lens, *generational theory*. I began my research with a survey of the entire congregation aged eighteen and older. On this questionnaire I asked everyone about what spiritual practices they engage in both inside and outside of the church. This gave me a broader picture of our context. I believed it would be useful to compare perspectives of different generations. The literature I chose also helped me to compare characteristics of different generations.

The first source I read was Haydn Shaw's *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Millennials Aren't the Problem, and the Future Is Bright*.²⁸ Shaw describes four different generations which he calls traditionalists, baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials. Traditionalists were born before 1945, baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964, Generation Xers between 1965 and 1980, and millennials between 1981-2001. In his work he describes what societal factors shaped each generation's perspectives, and how they responded.

He contends that the traditionalists were shaped by the Great Depression, World War Two, the move of many from farm to city, mass marketing, and confidence in experts.²⁹ This generation has many spiritual strengths, such as: they cooperate, they serve with lower expectations, and they give generously financially to causes and organizations.³⁰ As a result, they are often very faithful church members. They have much more respect for institutions than the generations after them. As they have been

²⁸ Haydn Shaw, *Generational IQ: Christianity Isn't Dying, Millennials Aren't the Problem, and the Future Is Bright* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2015).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 34.

through many difficult times, such as WWII, they appreciate what they have and believe that when people pull together for a common cause, good things happen.

The baby boomers, he argues, were largely shaped by the baby boom after WWII, the rise of affluence, the advent of television, and what he calls “the shift from sacrifice to self.”³¹ They grew up in a time of prosperity for Americans. Some of the results of this, he believes, are hyper-individualism, focus on the self, and “church-hopping.”³² Shaw obviously is quite critical of this generation, as he believes this self-centeredness has not been beneficial for society as a whole. The ideas from the previous generations that we should be focused on the common good is often lost in the baby boomer generation. Based upon my own experiences, I believe that Shaw has some valid points. It has been my observation that many seek churches that meet their individual needs. When churches fail at this, they move on to somewhere else. This is a very consumer-driven mentality that impacts how people view participation in church.

Shaw’s analysis of Generation X was intriguing to me. He describes this generation as being “squished” in between boomers and millennials.³³ Therefore, it is often overlooked. As they were raised by parents who often were individualists, many grew up in divorced homes. The economy of their upbringing was not as strong as in previous generations, so therefore many have grown up with higher housing and education costs, resulting in greater debt. However, he lists some strengths of this generation such as they value community, family life over work, and reclaiming of

³¹ Ibid., 43.

³² Ibid., 52.

³³ Ibid., 64.

spirituality for all of life.³⁴ He states that many Generation Xers see themselves as realists and tend to be cynical of human abilities to solve the world's problems.

Finally, when it comes to millennials, Shaw argues that they are raised with heavy parental involvement. Many parents tend to be over-protective and shelter their kids. Kids are raised with a fear of low self-esteem. They are told from the beginning that they are special. Many boomer and Xer parents want to make sure that their millennial kids feel good about themselves. For instance, when their children participate in sports, everyone often gets a trophy so that no one feels bad. In addition, parents would prefer to dialogue with rather than command their kids. No matter what, kids need to know that they are special.

Millennials also are being raised in a highly technological age. Millennials are the first generation to grow up digital, surrounded by technology.³⁵ Millennials spend more than fifty-three hours a week with media because they use more than one kind at the same time.³⁶ Millennials have so many options available to them that this has taught them to ask for what they want and to look someplace else if someone cannot give it to them.

Shaw believes that it is important to focus on the strengths of the millennials, because they receive so much criticism. He then lists some sample criticisms of them:

- They won't get off their phones.
- They aren't loyal.
- They don't show respect.

³⁴ Ibid., 70.

³⁵ Ibid., 84.

³⁶ Ibid., 84.

- They're impatient and drop out if you don't implement their ideas.
- They're materialistic.
- They have no work ethic; they want everything handed to them.³⁷

While some of these statements may be true, some of them may not. I agree with Shaw that it is not helpful to focus on the negatives. He rightly argues that millennials have much to offer society. For instance, they are focused upon finding meaningful work. They want to be involved, expressing themselves and making a noticeable impact. They want what they do to matter.³⁸ They want to make a difference in the world. They want authenticity. I believe that we as a church have opportunities to work with them if we can earn their trust. Partnering with them, we can make a difference in the world together.

William and Le Etta Benke also address generational theory in their work, *The Generation Driven Church: Evangelizing Boomers, Busters, and Millennials*.³⁹ While they are primarily interested in how the church can reach out to millennials, they do provide emerging characteristics of this age group based upon various studies, and compare them with other generations. A summary of their findings is as follows:

Generation Y (also known as millennials) is like the Boomers in some respects, more like Generation X in others, and uniquely different from either in still others. Like the Boomers, they are optimistic and confident, are the beneficiaries of being raised in a youth-friendly environment, and are generally supportive of establishment institutions. Like the Xers, they are totally indoctrinated in postmodernist philosophy, are much more family friendly, more spiritually sensitive, and less obsessed with careers and materialistic fulfillment than the Boomers. Like both the Boomers and Xers, Millennials are largely tolerant of all views, including religious ones. And like both of the preceding generations,

³⁷ Ibid., 85.

³⁸ Ibid., 87.

³⁹ William Benke and Le Etta Benke, *The Generation Driven Church: Evangelizing Boomers, Busters, and Millennials* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005).

Millennials recognize no absolute rights and wrongs. Unlike either, they are oriented toward collaboration and teamwork in virtually all areas of life, as opposed to an individualistic approach, and may be undergoing a sexual counterrevolution.⁴⁰

Conclusion

As a whole, I found these lenses to be quite helpful in my research. The insights from secular research were useful to me as I sought to explore the spiritual practices and attitudes of millennials. As I began my research, I was really curious to see if these insights would turn out to be accurate. As I intended to compare different age groups, I was interested to see how this would play out. In the next chapter, I will review the biblical and theological lenses I used to conduct the research. These lenses worked well with the theoretical lenses to guide me through the research process.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 85.

CHAPTER 3

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL LENSES

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I described how the theoretical lenses I used helped me to get a broader perspective on the attitudes of millennials on spirituality. It was interesting to me to see if what I read about characteristics of millennials would be affirmed in my research. I will discuss these findings in much more detail in my results chapter. In this current chapter, I will share how the biblical and theological lenses informed and guided my research.

Biblical Lenses

As I used the theoretical lenses of *studies of millennials*, *spiritual practices of millennials*, and *generational theory*, I chose biblical lenses, I believe, that matched the theoretical ones. The first one is the description of God's grace as articulated in Ephesians chapter two. The second is the marks of living the Christian life as defined by Paul in Romans chapter twelve. Lastly, I explored the relationship between different generations through examining the greatest commandment given to Israel as defined in Deuteronomy chapter six. As I reflect upon these passages, I believe they have much to say to us today as we seek to work together across generations to live in relationships with God and with one another.

God's Grace Lived Out in Lives of Faith

In Ephesians chapter two, the author describes the new life that we have received through faith in what Christ has done for us. As I studied millennials, I did so while keeping in mind that God is already at work in their lives. All of us have access to God's grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus; therefore, I believe they need to be studied without judgment. What I mean by this, for instance, is that it is easy to question millennials' faithfulness to God if they do not express it in the same way others do. We need to keep in mind that all of us are dependent upon God's grace. As the text says:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not by works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.¹

In his commentary on Ephesians 2:1-10, Richard Carlson examines the relationship between faith and good works.² He points out that in this passage the author contrasts the Christian life in terms of “before and after” divine intervention.³ Before intervention we were children of wrath, but God acted out of his mercy and abundance of love to bring us into relationship with him. This divine conversion had nothing to do with how loveable we were, but how incredibly loving God is.⁴ Thus, God made us alive with Christ, raised us with Christ, and sat us in heavenly places where God rules over all

¹ All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, ed. Herbert G May and Bruce M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

² Richard Carlson, “Ephesians 2:1-10 Commentary,” Luther Seminary, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=262.htm, accessed September 4, 2019.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

powers and dominions.⁵ While the text emphasizes that our salvation is not from works, it understands works to be an indispensable component of God's grace.⁶ We were saved so that we could perform good works that God had prepared for us ahead of time. Our good works have not saved us, but they are part of the goal God had in mind of saving us. Hence our good works are not simply by-products of our conversion but were pre-planned and prepared by God. God is always the one who is at work in our lives. On our own we can do nothing.

As I studied the spiritual attitudes and practices of millennials, I kept in mind that God is the one who is working in their lives. As it has been emphasized throughout my studies in missional theology, our role as a church is to join in where God is already at work. Instead of viewing millennials as objects that need to be fixed, we need to listen to their stories and build relationships with them. In my interactions with them, I explored if many were looking for authentic relationships with the church. I wanted to see if they desired to find ways to make a difference in our community. As all of us are dependent upon God's grace, and God is working in and through us to perform good deeds that He has already prepared for us, there is much potential for different age groups to bond together.

⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

Marks of Living the Christian Life

When it came to finding a biblical lens to match the theoretical one of *spiritual practices of millennials*, I was drawn to Romans 12:9-13, in which Paul describes fundamentals of living the Christian life. He writes:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the Saints, practice hospitality.

This list that Paul provides also describes spiritual practices. In the questionnaire that I distributed to the entire congregation, I listed a number of different practices to determine what millennials and non-millennials are engaging in. It is quite possible that people have been engaging in practices that they were not aware were spiritual. Paul makes it clear that everything we do can be spiritual. Paul repeatedly in his letters is encouraging the early church to use spiritual gifts to work together for the common good (I Corinthians 12:7).

In his *Commentary on Romans*, Ernst Kasemann describes in chapter 12 what he calls “the charismatic community.”⁷ He states that in verses 9-21 Paul is arguing that every Christian has the gifts necessary to live the Christian life. He writes, “Serious account is taken thereby of the fact that every Christian is a charismatic and that the gift received by him must be verified in daily life.”⁸ This reminds me that the Christian life is about living out God’s love in relationships. Kasemann rightly points out that all too

⁷ Ernst Kasemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1980).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 344.

often gifts of the spirit have been solely seen in individualistic terms. He writes: “It is a common error to understand charisma, which certainly is an individuation of *Charis*, as a possession of the individual rather than an effect of grace in the community which is represented in the individual gifts.”⁹ This of course does not mean that everyone is suited for everything, as everyone has different gifts and abilities, but everything that we do both inside and outside of the church is done through the Spirit. Christianity is an individual, personal faith, but is not individualistic. In other words, while each of us has our own personal ways in which we express our faith, such as through prayer, exercise, meditation, social justice actions, etc., we cannot grow spiritually solely on our own. Living the Christian life is both personal and communal.

Deuteronomy Chapter Six

As my final theoretical lens is *generational theory*, I searched for relevant biblical passages to explore this. While I focused primarily on millennials in my studies, I was also looking at similarities and distinctions between age groups. While I studied both millennials who are involved or not involved with a church, I felt it would be useful to compare the impact older generations have had on the younger ones. What came to my mind almost instantly was the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy. While throughout the Scriptures, the people of Israel are commanded to pass down the faith to the next generations, Deuteronomy 6:4-9 contains what is known as the central confession of faith of Judaism:

Hear O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart, and you shall

⁹ Ibid., 344.

teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

These instructions are written for a people who lived in a totally different time, obviously, and not to Christians. However, Christianity has always been a faith influenced by the Jewish traditions. The earliest Christians were Jews who kept alive the importance of instructing younger generations in the faith. Martin Luther wrote his catechisms so that parents and common people can teach the basics of faith to young people. In my study of millennials, it was interesting to see what impact the instruction or lack of instruction they received at home or in a church in their upbringing has had on their spiritual views.

Raymond Brown, in his book, *The Message of Deuteronomy*,¹⁰ discusses the importance of religious instruction for youth in the home as well as through the church. It all begins with the command to love God with all of our heart, soul, and strength. The Lord is the only God they can love; there are no others.¹¹ God has deliberately chosen Israel as his elect people, emphasizing that they are a people bound to him in the special relationship of covenant love.¹² God has initiated the relationship with His people out of love. If they love Him, they are responding to the unchanging love of a reliable God who has been true to their ancestors.¹³

¹⁰ Raymond Brown, *The Message of Deuteronomy* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, 97.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 97.

Moreover, Brown argues, this love for God was not to be a secretive devotion, a purely private relationship that did not concern others.¹⁴ He continues:

First, this loving devotion to the *one* Lord must be shared in the home. These God-given truths must not only be taught by Moses but also by every parent in Israel, so that children and grandchildren would learn and keep *all His decrees and commands*. Parents were to *impress* this word on their children's minds and make it the subject of natural everyday conversation within family life.¹⁵

Brown points out that as it has been said, “the family that prays together stays together.”¹⁶ In earlier generations family worship was an important aspect of spiritual devotion. Many families would meet together before or after a meal to read scripture, pray, and share everyday concerns. However, he acknowledges that the pressures of contemporary life make it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for many families to gather around meals and share these practices together.¹⁷ In spite of this, he encourages every Christian parent to strive for some opportunity to gather the family together for brief Bible reading and prayer.

When applying this to my study of millennials, I am attempting to discern how much their families of origin engaged in spiritual practices in the home, and what impact this has had on their spirituality. As Raymond Brown pointed out, in today's society it is difficult for families to find time and energy to engage with one another in prayer, Bible readings, and personal reflection. In my research I engaged with millennials who grew up in homes where regular church attendance was practiced, as well as with those who had

¹⁴ Ibid., 97.

¹⁵ Ibid., 97.

¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

¹⁷ Ibid., 97.

no connection to a church. Some were raised with much spiritual activity in the home, others not so much. I explored if weekly attendance in worship has helped to ingrain in many millennials the importance of passing down to their children the benefits of worship and Christian education that they grew up with. In my exploratory research, I explored further how older generations have impacted millennials in how important church involvement is to them.

Theological Lenses

Grace of God

When it comes to working with millennials, I believe that it is essential to approach them with humility. All of us are sinners who have been redeemed by God's grace, that is, His unconditionally loving, unearned favor. All of us fall short of what God intends for us. I started my exploratory research by listening to millennials with the same humility whether they are involved with a church or not. I believe that all too often different age groups tend to pass judgment upon as opposed to listening to one another. As Christians, we need to recognize that all of us are ultimately helpless before God and dependent upon his mercy. We can dialogue with churched and un-churched millennials on a level playing field. With this in mind, I believe that there can be fruitful sharing and dialogue. When we realize that we are all on the same level before God, it will be easier to feel safe sharing stories and building trust.

One Christian author who has focused largely on God's grace is Max Lucado, pastor at Oak Hills Church in San Antonio, Texas. His view of grace is that it is Christ living in us. He illustrates it this way:

Grace is God as heart surgeon, cracking open your chest, removing your heart—poisoned as it is with pride and pain—and replacing it with his own. Rather than tell you to change, he creates the change. Do you clean up so he can accept you? No, He accepts you and begins cleaning you up. His dream isn't just to get you into heaven but to get heaven into you.¹⁸

This way of looking at grace reminds me that God comes to us before we can turn to Him. When it comes to the mission of the church, God is always before us, paving the way for us to reach out to our neighbors. We can join in where God is already at work in people's lives.

This applies to how we can form relationships with millennials. We need to remember that we are not on a mission from God; rather God's mission has a church. It is by the grace of God that Christ lives in us, empowering us to love people and listen to their stories. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, we can build trust. When trust is established, then partnerships can form. All of this is possible because God's grace given to us in Christ lives in us. Lucado continues:

Grace is everything Jesus. Grace lives because he does, works because he works, and matters because he matters. To be saved by grace is to be saved by him—not by an idea, doctrine, creed, or church membership, but by Jesus himself.¹⁹

This is what I try to remember as I engage with millennials: it is all about Jesus and what He has done, and not about us. The Christian is a person in whom Christ is happening.²⁰ No church program in and of itself is going to reach millennials; only Christ at work through the Spirit can. In addition, we cannot expect millennials to fit our mold:

¹⁸ Lucado, *Grace*, 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

we need to acknowledge that God is already at work in them. By God's grace we can build relationships of trust and let go and let God work.

Priesthood of All Believers

As I stated earlier, I viewed the spiritual practices of millennials through the biblical lens of Romans twelve. This passage reminds me of one of the most important tenets of Protestant churches: the priesthood of all believers, a concept emphasized by Martin Luther.²¹ This is the belief that through Christ all have been given direct access to God, just as with a priest. God is equally accessible to all believers, and every Christian has equal potential to be a minister for God. The Reformation was the instigation of this process. I believe that this doctrine provides a solid foundation to our efforts to work with millennials. Millennials need to be reminded that they have just as much to offer God as any other age group. Perhaps unintentionally, it has been my experience that older generations have a tendency not to be open to the ideas and insights of younger age groups. While everyone realizes that the churches need to include younger people in our ministries, we are sometimes hesitant to listen to their perspectives. Instead, we try to mold millennials into our image. In other words, we would love to have more younger people involved with ministries of the church, as long as they do things our way. We are alarmed when we see mostly gray hair in worship and hope and pray young people will step up to keep our institution going. However, we need to be open to the possibility that the church of the future will be different. God, through millennials and the generations after them, may build a church with new ideas and practices.

²¹ Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, 313.

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers came to mind as a lens to view my exploration of millennials because it emphasizes the equality of all Christians before God. One helpful analysis of this doctrine comes from the work of Uche Anizor and Hank Voss entitled *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of all Believers*.²² They identify both the pros and cons of this notion and then argue why it is still essential for the church today. They identify two potential priesthood problems: clerical priesthood and individualistic priesthood.²³ The former sometimes can become manifest in unhealthy hierarchy, and the latter in extreme individualism.

For many Christians the ordained priest or pastor stands at the top of an ecclesiastical hierarchy.²⁴ The clergyperson is seen as a go-between for God and His people. In our Lutheran tradition, pastors are set apart for the ministry of word and sacrament. This does not mean we are elevated above the common believer but are set apart to be spiritual leaders. In my experience, many see ministry as “what the pastor does.” This, I believe, is counterproductive. It has been my understanding that the role of the pastor is to motivate and equip the saints to carry out the ministry of the church. One thing I have learned from my studies in the Doctor of Ministry program is that if ideas only come from the top, changes most likely will not happen.

On the flip side, the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers has at times been misunderstood to promote unfettered individualism. For some it has come to mean

²² Uche Anizor and Hank Voss, *Representing Christ: A Vision for the Priesthood of All Believers* (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016).

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

something akin to the First Amendment right to “freedom of speech.”²⁵ Under the guise of freedom of conscience or religious liberty, the priesthood of all believers has sometimes been used to sanction rugged individualism and schism in Christ’s church.²⁶ What often happens is when people disagree with others, they form camps with those who agree and church splits occur.

Anizor and Voss then ask, “Is the priesthood of all believers a concept worth salvaging?”²⁷ Their answer, of course, is yes. They write:

The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is essential for the church today! However, as with many doctrines, the devil is in the details. Much depends on how we understand and practice the doctrine. Ordained leadership need not carry with it the aura of superiority, and believers’ priesthood need not be individualistic. Both official leadership and the priesthood of all believers are necessary for Christ’s body to grow into maturity.²⁸

They rightly argue that this doctrine both honors the leadership of the ordained ministry and uplifts using the gifts of the laity. There does not need to be an either/or, but rather a both/and application of this doctrine. While many millennials are skeptical of the authority of ordained leaders, their trust can be earned through building relationships. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers can be a useful tool in including the gifts and insights of millennials in participating in God’s mission for the church.

²⁵ Ibid., 13.

²⁶ Ibid., 13.

²⁷ Ibid., 13.

²⁸ Ibid., 14.

Witnessing to God

My final theological lens through which I viewed my research with millennials was witnessing to what God has done for us. As my theoretical lens is generational theory, I explored through the survey and through interviews how different age groups witness to God's activity in their lives. The Deuteronomy passage which provides the biblical lens emphasizes how God's people are commanded to show covenant loyalty and fidelity to God, display their devotion through teaching younger generations God's Word, talk of them at any time of day, bind them as a sign on their hands, and write them on the doorposts of their houses. It is especially in the interviews of the millennials that I hoped to see how the Christian faith has been shared with them, if at all. When it comes to millennials not involved with a church, I explored if they have had any exposure to Christian education or practices, and if so, what their experience was. Some have had negative experiences or have had minimal contact with Christianity. For millennials who are engaged with a church, it was interesting to explore how the faith has been passed down to them, and why they find church involvement meaningful in their lives.

As I have stated before, it was my hope through using mixed methods exploratory research to engage with millennials, meet them where they are, and partner with them in their faith journeys. One thing I kept in mind as I conducted my research is that I needed to first listen to their questions and concerns, and then be honest with them in my responses. Authenticity is extremely important to them, and it is only through being honest and real with them that respect and trust can be earned. One resource that I have found helpful in addressing tough issues of faith with people is Christopher J. H.

Wright's *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith*.²⁹ In this work Wright approaches difficult questions of faith humbly and intelligently. He models an approach that I believe works well in engaging with any age group, including millennials. For instance, he bluntly points out that there are certain things that he does not understand about God that leave him angry or grieved, morally disturbed, and puzzled. He goes into these various issues honestly and does not pretend to have all of the answers. This is the approach that I try to use in witnessing to God with millennials or any other age groups. However, he does provide a positive response to his struggle with difficult questions about God. He writes:

There are things I don't understand about God, but they flood me with *gratitude* because I couldn't live without the reality of their truth, accepted by faith. The supreme example is, of course, the cross itself. Who is bold enough to say they *understand* exactly *how* the cross has dealt with our deepest needs? And yet we cling to the fact, that, by God's grace and on the authority of God's Word, it has. It has been wisely pointed out that when Jesus set out to explain the atonement to the disciples, he did not give them a theory but a meal. . . . There are things I don't understand about God, but they fill me with *hope* in the midst of the depressing destruction of the earth and its inhabitants.³⁰

This is what I believe is essential to Christian witness: listening humbly to our neighbors, and sharing with them our experience, strength, and hope.

Dwight Zscheile, in his work *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age*,³¹ offers helpful suggestions on witnessing to God in our neighborhoods. While he is primarily addressing how to plant churches in neighborhoods, his insights do

²⁹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *The God I Don't Understand: Reflections on Tough Questions of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 2009).

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

³¹ Dwight Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014).

apply to my exploration of spirituality of millennials in our community. He argues strongly against objectifying our neighbors as “targets.”³² This makes sense to me, as in my studies thus far millennials in general strongly object to being marketed to. That is, they are skeptical of sales pitches designed to get them to buy into something. Instead, as Zscheile says, when we approach millennials, we must begin with real openness to what the Spirit of God might want to bring forth, rather than starting with preconceived plans that need to be implemented.³³ He continues:

Church planting practice invites us into extensive conversations and relationships with neighbors in order to discern what God might be up to among the lives of the people in that place. When Christians present themselves as genuine partners in serving the well-being of the community, rather than just getting new members, deeper relationships, connections, and credibility open up.³⁴

This affirms for me that exploratory research has been the best way to connect with millennials both inside and outside of the church. When we take the time to listen to and engage with millennials, credibility does open up. It takes time to build relationships. However, I believe this is the best way to witness to God’s work in our lives, and open millennials up to sharing their witness as well.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I described the various biblical and theological lenses through which I conducted the exploratory research on millennials. These lenses provided insights into the beliefs, behaviors, and involvement of millennials with the church. They were useful to me as I explored if millennials are looking for ways to live out God’s grace in

³² Ibid., Kindle location 2030.

³³ Ibid., Kindle location 2050.

³⁴ Ibid., Kindle location 2059.

their lives, and if they want to make a difference in the community. I wanted to find out if millennials who are still active in the church value their upbringing, and desire to pass on the faith to their children. Finally, I explored why millennials desire or do not desire to be part of a church family. The biblical passages in Deuteronomy, Ephesians, and Romans provided support for these theological lenses. God's Word still has much to say to all generations as we all seek to live out our spiritualities. The church, through building authentic relationships with millennials, can partner with them as we all participate with God's mission in the world. In the next chapter, I will discuss the research methods I used to come to these conclusions.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I described the various biblical and theological lenses I used throughout my exploration of the spiritual attitudes and practices of millennials. I began this research with three biblical lenses: God's grace lived out in lives of faith, marks of living the Christian life, and the theology of Deuteronomy chapter six. However, a new biblical lens emerged from my research: the account of Jesus engaging in conversation with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. Jesus walks alongside them, asks questions, listens to their stories, and then opens their eyes to understanding the meaning of his death. The biblical and theological lenses I used followed this same pattern. Through the theological lenses of the grace of God, the priesthood of all believers, and witnessing to God, I was able to walk alongside millennials in my interviews, ask questions, listen to their stories, and engage with them on what faith means in their lives. Through these various lenses I was able to listen to them before speaking.

In this chapter, I will describe step by step how I carried out this research. I will begin by reviewing my research question. Next, I will explain the methodology I used and why it was chosen. Then I will describe the research instruments and data methods used. Finally, I will reveal how I analyzed the data I received.

Research Question

The research question that was behind this study was:

What might Grace Lutheran Church learn about the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with God and the church?

Before I chose this topic, I was looking for a way our congregation, Grace Lutheran Church, might join in with what God is up to in our community. My studies in the D.Min program at Luther Seminary have taught me that for the church to participate in God's mission in the world, we need to get outside of our walls and engage with people in our community. Therefore, I sought to find ways to work with the businesses in town as well as the school district. I had conversations with school teachers and administrators as well as business owners. While the conversations were helpful, I was unable to discover a topic that would be practical to investigate.

Fortunately, about this time a young woman about thirty years old came to me and expressed frustration at the lack of opportunities for involvement of her age group with the church. While in the past others in our congregation had expressed concerns about the apparent shrinking numbers of younger people attending worship and participating in church activities, I did not know how to begin to investigate this. However, it quickly dawned on me that a study of people in their twenties and thirties would provide a golden opportunity to put to use what I have learned about missional church theology. That is, in engaging with this age group, commonly referred to as millennials, I could learn how to join in with what God was already doing in their lives. Instead of viewing them as objects to be fixed, I could instead walk alongside them and listen to their stories. It became apparent to me that if the church wants millennials to be more involved, we need to listen to them and invite their input. We cannot meet their

needs if we do not know what they are looking for spiritually. Therefore, I decided to explore what we as a church can learn about why millennials are or are not active in a church.

Research Methodology

As a result, I chose to use mixed methods exploratory research methodology. This is mixed methods research as I used both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data. The quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire that was administered as a census of the congregation, and the qualitative data were collected through interviews of millennials who were connected to our congregation as well as those who are not connected to any church. I defined “connected” to our congregation as those millennials who have worshipped at or participated in some activity at our church at least twice during this past year. Qualitative data were also collected through two focus groups with churched millennials and interviews with churched non-millennials.

Originally, I had intended to use only qualitative methods, as I thought that interviews would be the most effective way to connect with millennials and gather data. However, my professors strongly encouraged me also to use quantitative data. They convinced me that in order to understand millennials, it would be helpful to get a broader perspective by analyzing other age groups at the same time and comparing the spiritual practices of the different generations. Using the quantitative method of the questionnaire allowed me to get the broad perspective that I needed. I was also able to collect data from many more people in a short period of time, as well as find similarities and differences among the different generations.

The reason that I decided to use exploratory research as opposed to action research was that I believe the church needs to understand millennials before we implement programs or conduct interventions to analyze them. All too often I have observed well-meaning congregations start a new ministry and hope young people will come flocking in. However, I have learned that this often does not work. The major reason for this, I believe, is that we do not know what millennials and other younger generations are really looking for. The only way to find out is to ask them through individual conversations or in group settings. One example of this that worked for me was to bring a group of seven millennial couples together last year and ask them questions such as, “What keeps you up at night?” What came up was their anxieties over finances. Therefore, I arranged for this group to participate in Dave Ramsey’s Financial Peace University course. For nine weeks we met and discussed budgeting, saving, paying off debts, etc., and in the process, relationships were beginning to build. Some couples attended more sporadically, but overall, this class went over well. This experience convinced me that I needed to continue to ask these people what we as a church can do to meet their needs and partner with them in their spiritual growth. This group provided the population I needed to conduct interviews of churched millennials.

Biblical/Theological Perspective on the Methodology

As I stated before, one of my favorite Bible stories that for me demonstrates exploratory research is that of Jesus’ conversation with two followers walking the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). He had just been crucified, and the two individuals were trying to make sense of this tragedy. Jesus joins them on their journey and listens to them before speaking. He starts with asking them about what they were discussing. While they

are baffled that anyone in the area did not know what events had taken place, they begin to share their story. Jesus asks them follow up questions to get them to talk. They share with him their hopes, dreams, and disappointments. After listening to them, he then explains to them how the scriptures had prophesized his coming, and how everything that took place was foretold. As they are intrigued by him, they invite him to share a meal. It is finally when he breaks the bread that they recognize him. He had approached them, listened to their stories, and then opened their eyes. This to me is an example of exploratory research as Jesus walks alongside the two persons and listens to them as opposed to forcing his agenda. Since he met them where they were, they were open to his message.

This was my hope with my research with millennials. I hoped to meet them where they were in their faith journeys and join in with God's work in their lives. Whether they are involved in a church or not, I hoped to form relationships of trust with them and go from there. As I stated before in my chapter on theological lenses, I believed that engaging with millennials with the understanding that all of us are dependent upon the grace of God is an effective way to establish a level playing field. What I was exploring in my research was what they are looking for when it comes to relationships. I tried to approach them humbly and show them that we as a church value their input as opposed to trying to mold them into our image.

Research Design and Population

My research began in November 2019 and was completed in June 2020. It began with the survey of the congregation in November and December. Interviews with millennials inside of the church began in December and were completed in early January.

Interviews with millennials in our community not connected to a church also began in December and were completed in January. In February I held two focus groups of people in our congregation: one with millennials and one with non-millennials. In March I held one final focus group with millennials to have them share the results of their conversations with their friends, co-workers, etc. The design diagram is as follows:

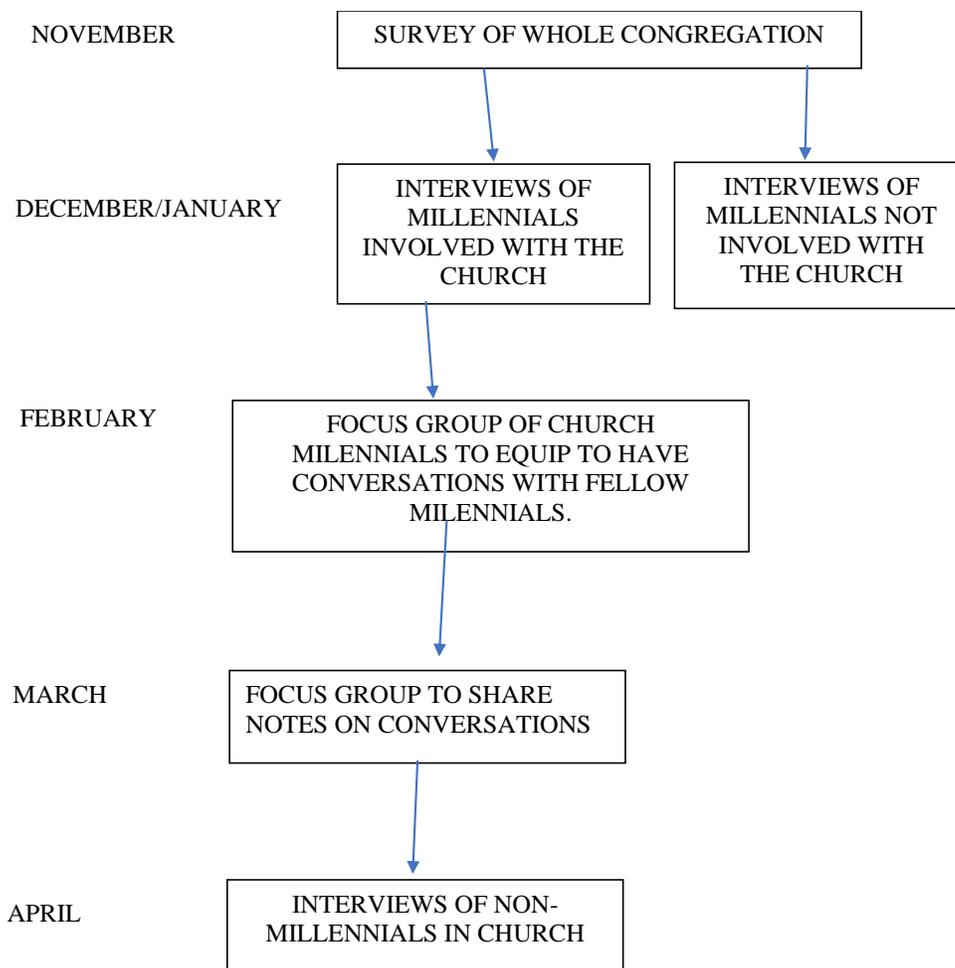


Figure 4.1 Research Design

The questionnaire was developed through Survey Monkey (appendix A). In this questionnaire, I asked twenty-two questions regarding what spiritual practices people engage in, and how often. The questionnaires were then sent out by our office manager on November 15th through her email list of all people in our congregation over the age of

eighteen who receive our newsletter. Along with the survey, an implied consent form was attached (appendix B). Therefore, this was conducted as a census of the congregation. For those adults in our church who did not have email or preferred to hand write responses, hard copies of the survey were made available in the rear of the church to be picked up, filled out, and placed in a box. Responses were collected through December 31st. Survey Monkey tabulated data online, and the data were transferred from the hard copies into Survey Monkey. The data were then exported to IBM's SPSS program for analysis.¹ After cleaning up some of the data that mistakenly separated question responses into separate questions, the data were ready for analysis.

As I stated before, the qualitative data were collected through interviews and informal focus groups. The interviewees were selected through non-probability convenience sampling. In December and January, I interviewed seven millennial couples who are involved with our congregation, and then in January and February six individuals in our Moriah community with whom I am acquainted who are not involved in a church. I chose the seven millennial couples in our church to interview based upon their participation in the Financial Peace course we held last spring. Each interview consisted of seven questions and lasted between thirty minutes to an hour. The interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using Rubin and Rubin's methods. I will discuss how I analyzed the data later in this chapter.

When it comes to understanding the spirituality of millennials outside of the church, I decided to seek out people in this age group whom I encounter on a regular basis in the community. As I have lived in the Moriah community for the past eighteen

¹ IBM SPSS Statistics 23. IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY.

years, I have had many opportunities to get acquainted with people. Through attending music and sporting events at the schools, eating at the local restaurants and coffee shop, and my interactions at the food mart, I have established some connections. I approached six individuals and asked for their help as I conducted a study of their age group.

Through these contacts, I interviewed two local small business owners, employees of the food mart, and neighbors of mine who are at best minimally connected to a church. These individuals were receptive to the interviews, as I explained that this is research conducted to understand this age group and not try to push any agenda on them.

To further my exploration of millennials and their relationship with the church, I conducted two focus groups in February and March with churched millennials. In March I had intended to conduct a third focus group of non-millennials in our church, that is, those over the age of thirty-nine. I was going to ask four individuals in my congregation who have been a part of my conversation team in past courses to participate. In this group, I would have asked them the same questions that I used with the interviews with millennials in order to compare how these different age groups came to the church and why they continue to attend. However, due to the arrival of COVID-19 this group did not materialize. Instead, I interviewed them individually in April.

The first focus group took place in February and consisted of the seven millennial couples I interviewed previously in December. I met with this group for about an hour to help them develop a brief protocol to informally interview two to three millennial friends, family members, or coworkers to find out why they are or are not involved with a church. I had sent them three sample questions ahead of time through our Facebook group to ponder and encourage their input. The approach I recommended to them to engage with

people was to say that they were helping their pastor conduct research on the involvement or lack of involvement of their age group with a church. When we met, we agreed as a group what questions should work well, and then I asked them to record a simple paragraph summarizing their encounters. I shared with them an informed consent form that they signed (appendix C) to protect confidentiality of participants. Together we set a date in March to meet again and share results.

The second focus group took place in March. I met with the group of seven couples that I had sent out before and we shared the results of their conversations. I asked them to share their brief summaries of their experiences. I invited them to share what surprised them or what they expected to find out. I thanked them for their efforts and was hopeful that we can continue building these relationships within the group. In addition, I believe their conversations with friends could lead to inviting others to join in with the group. In any case, I hope we can continue conversations with millennials on how our church can work with them to discern what God is up to in all our lives.

Instruments

As I conducted mixed methods exploratory research, I used several instruments. For the quantitative portion, I developed a questionnaire in the fall of 2019 using Survey Monkey. This questionnaire (appendix A) consisted of twenty-two questions asking people about the frequency of their participation in different spiritual practices. The intention was to compare the spiritual practices of three different age groups, including millennials, and then comparing millennials to everyone else combined. After receiving feedback from colleagues and professors, the questionnaire was sent out on November 15, 2019 through our office manager's email list of adult members (age eighteen and

older) who receive the church newsletter. People were given until December 31, 2019 to respond. Hard copies of the questionnaire were also made available for members who wished to participate in this way. They were placed at the rear of the sanctuary for anyone to complete before or after worship services. All responses were received by December 31, 2019.

At the same time that I developed the questionnaire, I prepared the instruments for the qualitative portion of my research. The first instruments used were protocols for interviews with millennials who were connected to a church (appendix D), as well as for interviews with those not connected to a church (appendix E). I field tested the interviews with two members of my congregation: one millennial and one non-millennial. After I received feedback from my cohort, as well as from my professors, I began the interviews in early December. Seven millennial couples from our congregation participated in the interviews. In January and February, six millennial individuals outside of our church were also interviewed. The interview questions worked well, but I was able to ask many follow-up questions in addition to the prepared ones. As I conducted the interviews, I took notes on paper, and audio recorded them to be transcribed later.

The second instruments I used for qualitative data were protocols for two focus groups. After receiving feedback after submitting my proposal, I conducted the first group in February. This was with millennials who were connected to our church. The protocol for millennials connected to our church consisted of preparing three questions for them to consider asking two to three friends, family, or coworkers outside of our congregation (appendix F). Participants were invited to revise the questions as needed.

All participants signed a confidentiality form stating that they would not share any information that could be identified with individuals they spoke with (appendix H). The protocol of the final focus group in March 2020 was for the millennials to share with the group the results of their conversations with other millennials not in our group (appendix G). The final focus group was to be with a group of four non-millennial people. After gathering them together, I was going to ask them the same questions that I asked the millennial couples in my interviews (appendix I). However, due to the pandemic of COVID-19 hitting us in March 2020, I did not get the group together. As these were older people, many did not have the computer capabilities to meet virtually. Instead, I interviewed each one individually in April 2020 using the same questions. This helped me get the perspectives of age groups other than millennials.

Analysis of the Data

I analyzed the quantitative data using the methods of Peter Nardi's book we perused² as a guide. The four generations I sorted were the traditionalists, baby boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y (millennials). As I had each individual record their birth date on the questionnaire, I had them grouped into their generation through SPSS. In order to compare how millennials compared to other generations in frequency of engagement in various spiritual practices, I conducted an independent t-test using the SPSS program. My intention was to compare the millennials' responses to three other generations combined. That is, I compared millennials' responses in the categories of worship, prayer, Bible study, and participation in other activities to the traditionalists, baby boomers, and Gen X

² Nardi, *Doing Survey Research*.

combined. For the analysis I used (N- total) and (n – frequency) as well as percents by group and means of groups. This independent t-test was quite helpful in helping me gain a broader perspective of how millennials compare to the rest of the congregation in involvement.

When it came to analyzing the qualitative data, I relied heavily on the methods suggested by Herbert and Irene Rubin’s book we perused.³ When I conducted the interviews and focus groups, I recorded the conversations on my iPhone using the Voice Memos app, as well as taking notes on sheets of paper. The voice memo recordings were then sent to the Transcribe app on my phone. From there the transcriptions were downloaded onto my computer for analysis.

As I found them to be helpful, I used the seven steps recommended by Rubin and Rubin for analysis:

1. Transcribe and summarize each interview.
2. Define, find, and mark in the text (that is code) excerpts that have relevant concepts, themes, events, examples, names, places, or dates.
3. From across your interviews, find the excerpts marked with the same code, and sort them into a single data file; then summarize the contents of each file.
4. Sort and resort the material within each file, comparing the excerpts between different subgroups, and then summarize the results of each sorting.
5. After weighing different versions, integrate the descriptions from different interviewees to create a complete picture.
6. Combine concepts and themes to generate your own theory to explain the descriptions you have presented. While doing so, constantly test your ideas by examining them in light of the interviews.

³ Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012).

7. See how far your results generalize beyond the individuals and cases studied.⁴

I found that this method worked quite well. It was not difficult to discern the codes and sort them into files, and then resort the material as needed. I was able to combine the concepts and themes to generate theories to explain the findings. This process was simple enough for me to analyze the data thoroughly.

Summary

Using both quantitative and qualitative methods, I was able to study the spiritual practices and attitudes of millennials, as well as compare this age group to others. The quantitative method of the questionnaire allowed me to get a broad picture of how different generations related to millennials. The qualitative methods of interviews and focus groups provided me the opportunities to get better acquainted with the interviewees as well as give them safe places to share their perspectives. I triangulated the quantitative and qualitative data by comparing how millennials matched up to the other generations combined when it came to spiritual practices. The process affirmed that exploratory research was the best way to go, as I was able to listen and learn from the subjects as opposed to forcing something upon them. In the next chapter I will present the results of the research.

⁴ Ibid., 190.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS OF STUDY

Introduction

In the previous chapter I described the methodology I used to study the spirituality of millennials. Using mixed methods exploratory research methodology, I was able to converse with both churched and unchurched millennials, as well as compare churched millennials' spirituality with that of other generations. In the qualitative portion I interviewed millennials involved with our church as well as millennials in the community not affiliated with any church. Several of the churched millennials then interviewed other millennial friends and coworkers to help me get a broader perspective. I was also able to interview non-millennials in our congregation to compare perspectives. In the quantitative portion I used a questionnaire to compare the spiritual practices of four generations: the traditionalists (those born before 1945), baby boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964), millennials (those born between 1981 and 2001), and Gen Xers (born between 1965 and 1980). Both the quantitative and qualitative methods were useful in helping me address the research question for this project:

What might Grace Lutheran Church learn about the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with God and the church?

The foundation for this research project was the relationships I began with seven millennial couples who were actively involved with our church. As I gradually got to know them, I was inspired to study this age group further. I wanted to know what it was

that kept them coming back to church. To learn about this, I decided to interview these couples one by one. To get a broader perspective, I thought it would be useful to interview millennials in the community outside of the church to learn about what keeps them from coming. Fortunately, I have lived in the community long enough that I had formed relationships with several millennials who were not a part of any church. I was able to interview several, including one young man who was confirmed in our congregation but then fell away. Finally, I asked the seven churched millennial couples to ask two to three millennial friends and coworkers about their involvement or lack of involvement with a church. This, I thought, would broaden my sample and give me more useful data.

For the quantitative portion of the research, I decided to survey adult members of the congregation on what spiritual practices they engaged in using a questionnaire. The purpose of this was to get a broader perspective of age groups on how they practice their spirituality both inside and outside of the church. I was able to compare the responses of the four age groups I mentioned earlier. It was interesting to compare attitudes on worship, prayer, small group studies, and volunteering for church activities.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Study of Churched Millennials

As I was able to form relationships with the seven couples who participated in the class on managing finances, it was easy to set up times to meet with each couple. I met with them either in my office at church or at the local coffee shop. The instrument I used to gather data for these groups was an interview protocol I developed which consisted of seven questions (appendix D). These questions asked them about such things as how long

they have been a part of the church, what originally brought them, and what keeps them coming back to the church. At the end I gave them opportunities to add any other insights or concerns. All of these sessions were recorded, transcribed, and then coded by me using Rubin and Rubin's method. To make things simple, I put together the following table to summarize the responses I received.

Table 5.1. Churched Millennial Couples Church Involvement Interview Summaries

<u>Participating Couples</u>	<u>Reasons for Involvement</u>	<u>Challenges to Involvement</u>
Mary and Joseph	Raised in the church, sense of family, relevant sermons friendly church.	Hard to keep God #1 Lack of time.
Kirk and Lulu	Raised in the church, sense of family, future for kids.	Lack of time. Work Schedules.
Jack and Jill	Raised in the church, sense of family, tradition, sense of community, welcoming.	Lack of time. Difficult to balance time between work, church, and family obligations.
Harry and Edith	Parents' influence, tradition, like knowing everybody, church is welcoming.	Work Schedules.
Bonnie and Clyde	Parents raised them to worship regularly, like to decorate church at Xmas, enjoy sermons.	Work Schedules limit to every other week worship.
Adam and Eve	Active Catholic and Lutheran upbringing, sense of obligation, sense of belonging, serving others.	Same people do everything. Getting beyond ourselves. Church intimidating too new people.
Ozzie and Harriet	Upbringing, wife brought him, tradition, sense of home, sermons relevant.	Work schedule, getting kids to church on time.

As this chart indicates, one of the most important factors in the involvement of millennials with the church was how they were raised. This is what I believe is one of the independent variables in this research project. Their upbringing had a huge impact upon their current involvement. All seven of the couples to some degree indicated that their exposure at young ages to the church had an impact on their spiritual lives. When their parents instilled in them the importance of attending worship and participating in Christian education, this rubbed off on them. When they were young, they were expected to attend worship, as well as Sunday school and confirmation. Participation was not optional. Since they were used to going to church, it was a part of their lives. Two of the millennials came from a Roman Catholic background and described their church participation as an obligation. In any case, since these seven couples were a part of the church early on, it was natural for them to stay connected to it. This did not surprise me at all, as it makes sense to me that if one is raised to believe that church participation is important, it is more likely to carry over into one's adult life. In addition, as several of the churched millennials I interviewed have young children or are going to have children in the near future, they see the need to raise their children the same way. They want their own children to have the same foundation for their faith that they were provided in their upbringing.

What did surprise me, however, was the fact that four of the couples used the word "tradition" to describe one reason they attend worship. The reason for this is that there is a common perception that millennials prefer more informal, contemporary style worship experiences as opposed to traditional liturgical styles. These millennials, however, felt comfortable worshipping at a church that had the same hymns and liturgy

that were familiar to them. They felt comfort in worshipping the same way that they did as children. While one of them indicated that they would not mind if Grace Lutheran would incorporate some new contemporary Christian songs, this person also did not appreciate the more informal style of some larger churches. Several of the millennials had tried out larger community churches but did not feel at home there. They appreciated being able to worship in traditional ways, which they saw as having more substance than some newer, contemporary styles.

Another reason many of the churched millennials gave for staying active in church was the sense of “family” they felt in the congregation. Five couples indicated that they felt they belonged to a warm, welcoming community. This tells me that many millennials are looking for what other age groups are looking for as well: authentic relationships. While millennials may not necessarily attend worship, Bible study, or other activities as often as other generations, nonetheless they do find value in being part of a Christian community. The millennials I interviewed saw it as important to associate with other believers. As one of the older millennials put it well: “You are who you hang out with.” This was a hopeful sign to me that if millennials feel that they belong to a caring community, they are likely to stay connected. If they believe they are a part of a community in which people love and serve each other, they are likely to keep coming back.

When I asked millennials about what challenges they faced when it comes to involvement with the church, six out of the seven couples indicated lack of time. This was another independent variable that came out of the exploratory research. Of these six couples, four of them indicated that work schedules made it difficult to find the time to

attend worship or church activities. For instance, one young man works every other weekend. His wife had their two small kids by herself Sunday mornings, and found it quite difficult to get them ready for church. Other couples indicated that because they work long hours during the week, they are worn out on the weekends. It was easy for them to sleep in Sunday mornings. Even when the church had midweek services, work made it difficult to find the time to attend. Others indicated that it was difficult to balance church, work, kids' sports, and family obligations. They felt spread thin in trying to live up to so many expectations. Many in older generations argue that lack of time is a convenient excuse not to attend church. In other words, it is a matter of making church a priority. While there may be some truth to this, my sense from interviewing millennials is that it is simply difficult to set priorities. Millennials are living in a time in which they are pulled in so many different directions that they struggle with how much time they should invest in each activity. I believe that millennials are well-intentioned in how they invest their time, and do not deserve the judgment they sometimes receive from other generations. We need to listen to them and meet them where they are. We need to be grateful as a church for any involvement of millennials,

Study of Unchurched Millennials

In order to fully address my research question, while I found it quite helpful to listen to the perspectives of millennials who were active in our church, I felt it would also be useful to interview millennials who are not connected to any church. I wanted to learn what keeps many of this generation from being a part of a faith community. As I have lived in this community for many years, I have formed relationships with millennials through school activities, community events, and patronizing local businesses. Six

individuals were willing to allow me to interview them. I met five of them at the local coffee shop, as I felt this would be a neutral, non-threatening setting, and one in her home. Several of them appeared slightly nervous at first but relaxed as the conversation progressed. The protocol I used consisted of seven questions (appendix E). Each interview was recorded on my phone, transcribed, and then coded using Rubin and Rubin's method. I put this table together as a simple way to summarize my findings. Here is a summary of their responses to the questions:

Table 5.2 Unchurched Millennials Interview Summaries

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Church Background (if any)</u>	<u>Reasons Not Attending</u>
Ashley	Very minimal experience.	I do not need church to be a good person, but God is there for me.
Jack	Not raised in any church, Mom Catholic but turned off.	Church does good things but do not see need to go.
George	Raised at Grace, confirmed here.	No time. No good reason. Just not a priority. Sports takes time.
Andrea	Raised Catholic, went to Catholic school, burnt out by rules.	Church "drilled into you" Church brings people together but who has time for it? There are other ways to spend hour.
Mark	Raised Lutheran, but not actively.	Very busy, gone on weekends. I enjoy helping people, do not need church.
Steve	Raised Catholic until age 13, then family stopped going. Church did not fit lifestyle.	Nothing against church, but how can priest tell me how to live my life?

Three of the six unchurched millennials were raised somewhat actively in the church into their teenage years, while two had minimal exposure and one had none. Those who were actively raised in a congregation also participated in Christian education, but eventually fell away. Two of these individuals indicated feelings of being “burnt out.” Since church was forced on them, and faith was presented to them in a very legalistic way, they were offended. Church was about following rules rather than having a relationship with God. One young man, “Steve,” struggled with how a Roman Catholic priest, who had no family, could tell people how to live their lives. These two individuals did not express hostility to the church, as they acknowledge the church can bring people together to do good things, but they do not see the necessity to become a part of one. The third individual, “George,” was raised at Grace Lutheran and confirmed. He was grateful for his upbringing in our congregation and stated that faith is very important to keep us grounded in morality. “George” also stated that he prays regularly. He expressed concern that so many in our society do not seem to care about faith or religion. When it comes to why he does not attend worship anymore, he admitted he was somewhat lazy and just did not make it a priority. He did indicate that he felt bad about not attending worship, but felt satisfaction coaching young kids in sports.

Two others I interviewed had some exposure to worship growing up, but not enough to instill in them the importance of it. Perhaps they attended on holidays such as Christmas and Easter to make Grandma happy, but beyond that had little participation in church life. Both had very little Christian education or exposure to church youth groups. One young woman, “Ashley,” indicated that she believed in God but did not see the church as necessary to her spiritual life. She said that God has been there for her during

some tough times in her life, and will call upon God when needed, but otherwise God is not a part of her daily life. She stated, "I do not need to go to church to be a good person." She was not hostile to churches but did not see the need for them. I also interviewed her boyfriend "Mark," who also expressed the same attitude. "Mark" also stated that they are usually gone on weekends and are too busy to make time for church. The two of them run a car repair shop together and enjoy helping people through this business. To them, that fulfills their spiritual needs.

The one individual who had no exposure to church at all was very interesting to interview. He had been involved in a bicycle accident when he was in high school and nearly lost his life. Several churches in the area had been praying for him throughout his long recovery. He was grateful for this, and visited each church to personally thank them, but did not see the need to become involved in any of them. It appeared to me that his mother's negative attitude towards churches due to her upbringing had an influence on him. He saw that the church does good things in the community, and is a place for like-minded people to gather, but looks to him to be a "social club." To meet his spiritual needs, he plays a video game called "Tetris." He sees this as an outlet, an activity that gets his mind off of stresses in life. His general impression of churches was that they work for those who need community but are not relevant to where most of society is at spiritually.

Study of Churched Non-Millennials

While the focus of this project was the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with God and the church, I thought it would be beneficial to also hear the perspectives of other generations using the theoretical lens of generational theory.

Engaging other age groups gave me a broader picture of how different generations view church involvement. My original intent was to hold a focus group in March with a group who had served as my conversation team during my earlier work in the D. Min. program. However, the pandemic of COVID-19 forced our church to shut down the building and cease all fellowship activities. I had originally thought that I could conduct a focus group virtually but discovered that half of this group did not have the internet capabilities to participate in such a forum. Therefore, I decided to interview each of them individually, using the same questions I asked of the churched millennials (appendix I). This group consisted of four individuals: two baby boomers, one from the traditionalists, and one Gen Xer. I interviewed them by phone and wrote down their responses as we talked. I was mainly interested in hearing why church involvement was important to them. Using Rubin and Rubin's method, I coded the data. Here is a summary of these discussions:

Table 5.3 Churched Non-Millennials Interview Summaries

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Generation</u>	<u>Reasons for Church Involvement</u>
Larry	Boomer	Church friendly when you get to know it. Very good experiences in small groups. Roof and carpeting projects brought people together. Sermons and songs special to him. The chimes and signboard speak to people.
Francis	Boomer	We have a solid, caring congregation. Small group helped out in tough times. There is a sense of love and family here. The chimes, signboard good witness to community.
Lori	Traditionalist	Church is friendly when you get to know us. Good pastor, sermons, Bible studies. Partnership with inner city church. Signboard.
Rhonda	Gen X	We have a faithful, friendly congregation. We are good with the community, come together for building projects, have long history, friendship.

It was interesting to me to see the similarities as well as the differences between these age groups and the millennials. As for the similarities, each of these individuals indicated the church provided caring relationships which is what I also heard from the millennials. All age groups appear to value solid, caring relationships. All groups stated that our church is friendly when you get to know us. All age groups value coming together to support common causes, and the value of small group Bible studies. Everyone seems to appreciate the sense of family that comes with being a small to mid-sized congregation.

What was striking to me was that every one of these non-millennials mentioned how important the building was to them. I did not hear this from the millennials. Every one of the other generations mentioned how meaningful the chimes and the signboard were and saw them as good witnesses to the community. Rhonda, the Gen Xer who grew up in this congregation, recalled the story of how the church raised enough pledges in one day to begin building a new sanctuary. Larry, a baby boomer, moved to this church about eighteen years ago, and has been impressed with how building projects bring people together. Lori, from the traditionalists, joined the church about nineteen years ago, and appreciates the stained-glass windows and stability of the building. Finally, Francis, also a baby boomer, mentioned how the chimes and signboard are good witnesses to the community. This focus on the building indicates to me an important difference between how millennials and other generations view church. All generations appreciate loving, caring relationships, but older generations identify church with the building more than the millennials. It will be interesting in the future to see how the different generations will

respond to the ongoing pandemic. Thus far all have been forced to deal with the virtual worship. It remains to be seen how long the church as the building mentality will last.

Millennials Interviews of Other Millennial Friends/Coworkers

To get an even broader sample of millennials, I asked the group of seven churched millennial couples to informally interview two or three millennial friends or coworkers. We held a focus group in February in which I gave them a protocol consisting of three questions (appendix F). Several in this group were willing to participate in this. The purpose was for them to find out if their friends were involved in a church, and the reasons why they were or were not. Six individuals in our group followed through with my request and interviewed thirteen millennial friends or coworkers. We regrouped for another focus group in March in which they shared their results verbally and then turned in their notes to me. I recorded this session on my phone. Most of the notes were handwritten, but two of the interviewers sent me their response notes through text and Facebook messenger. I then sorted through the notes and summarized what I was seeing. I used Rubin and Rubin's method to code the data.

Table 5.4 Churched Millennials Interviews of Friends Summaries

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Do You Attend Church?</u>	<u>Why or Why Not?</u>	<u>Spiritual Practices</u>
Kate	Yes, I go for my dad.	Husband does not go, but I go with dad.	Nothing.
Mary	No, I work third shift.	Have not found church I like. Third shift makes it hard.	Occasional prayer.
Jane	Yes, worship is important.	Church welcoming	Prayers, meditation.

Table 5.4 Churched Millennials Interviews of Friends Summaries (continued)

<u>Participant</u>	<u>Do You Attend Church?</u>	<u>Why or Why Not?</u>	<u>Spiritual Practices</u>
Pat	Yes, I love church family	Fellowship, learning God's Word.	Reflection, prayer, meditation
Ramona	Not looking	Would go to church for kids.	Prayers, devotionals, listening to music
Lynn	Yes. Mentor of high school girls, adult small group.	Modern and relevant to today, welcoming to everyone.	Read/study Bible, listen to old women.
Amanda	Yes. Attend discipleship group that studies Bible.	I learn from Bible that we are all imperfect. We all need Jesus' grace and mercy.	Read Bible, journal, prayer, connecting with God.
Penny	No we do not. Worn out by being forced to attend.	I have developed beliefs, but do not need church to practice them.	Nothing regular but pray when I need help.
Greg	Attend seldomly. Do not have good reason why.	When I do go, I have opportunity to relax and think without distraction.	None.
Harry	No. Belong to church but do not attend.	I work too much. No time.	Prayer.
Wendy	Yes. Attend worship, community events.	The people, pastor, positive environment. Family environment.	Prayer, Bible study.
Mike	No. Busy at work.	No time due to work.	Prayer.
Bill	No. Church too informal, misses tradition.	Fights within church, lack of trust.	Prayer, meditation, exercise.

The results indicate there are a variety of views represented. This was quite helpful to me in my research. Approximately half of those interviewed were involved

with a church, and half were not. Those who were involved in a church seemed to be active because of relationships they have built in their churches as well as because they were learning how God's word applies to their lives today. This affirmed what I discovered in other research that meaningful relationships are what many millennials are desiring. They want to be welcomed and accepted for who they are. Many millennials are also looking for spiritual depth that they can receive from Bible studies and church activities. They attended churches that through sermons and activities were able to make the Christian faith relevant to them. Some who were extremely active indicated that they enjoyed mentoring younger youth. They felt meaning making a difference in the lives of other people. Others felt in their involvement in church the love and grace of God.

As with those millennials I personally interviewed, time seemed to be a major factor for those millennials who were not active in a church. Several of those who did not attend a church indicated that it was because their work schedules made it difficult as well as a lack of time in general. Those who work third shift especially found it difficult to make time for church. Some indicated that they were turned off from church by fights within congregations and burned out from being forced to attend as a child. Others indicated that they had a faith but did not need a church to express it.

Summary of Qualitative Data

The two major independent variables affecting church involvement for all of the millennials I interviewed appeared to be time management and level of church involvement they were raised with in their family of origin. The issue of lack of time came up repeatedly in interviews with both churched and unchurched millennials. Many indicated they worked different shifts, making worship attendance challenging. However,

millennials who were involved with the church were motivated to make more efforts in getting to church when they could. Part of this, I believe, is because it has been engrained in them from their upbringing that they should make every effort to attend worship when possible. Many millennials felt comfortable attending our church due to the familiarity of the worship service and the other people. They expressed a sense of family in the congregation.

Meaningful relationships also keep them coming. Millennials who attended other churches expressed some of the same sentiments. Even though they, due to lack of time, could not attend as frequently as they would have liked, many found meaning in the sermons they heard as well as in small group Bible studies. I discovered that millennials in general are looking for depth in relationships and in their spirituality. Those who were raised in a church sought out relationships in the church more often than those who were not. This leads me to believe that churches need to continue to stress Christian education and building relationships with children right from the start.

For those millennials who were not raised in the church, I believe the best way to reach them is to listen to their stories and try to meet them where they are at spiritually. Very few of the unchurched millennials indicated any hostility to the church. Their lack of involvement appeared to be largely due to lack of exposure in their upbringing as well as not seeing any need to be a part of a church. As with many of the churched millennials, time management is crucial, as many millennials work long hours and have many other obligations to fulfill in their lives. For the church to reach them, we cannot see them as objects to be fixed but rather take time to get to know them. In any case, as God is at work both inside and outside of the church, God is at work in both churched and

unchurched millennials, and we need to find ways to build relationships with them as opposed to trying to mold them into the Christians we think they should be. We need to listen to them and walk alongside them in their faith journeys. God is up to something in all of their lives. The question is how we can join in and partner with them.

Quantitative Data Analysis

While the qualitative methods were extremely useful in answering my research question about why millennials were or were not involved with the church, I decided also to include a quantitative method in order to gain a broader perspective of age groups. In order to understand millennials better, I thought it would be useful to explore how they express their spirituality in comparison with other generations. I thought this could be helpful in determining what traits are unique to millennials and what traits they have in common with other generations. To accomplish this, I wrote a questionnaire through Survey Monkey consisting of twenty-two questions asking them how often they engage in different practices such as worship, prayer, Bible study, and volunteer activities (appendix A). The office manager of Grace Lutheran sent out the questionnaire through email, using the newsletter mailing list to reach all members who were eighteen years of age and older. For those who did not have computers or internet access, hard copies of the questionnaire were printed so that people could fill them out by hand and return them to the box at the church. The survey, therefore, was a census of the congregation. The response was fifty-eight individuals completed the questionnaire online and fifteen filled out hard copies. The responses were recorded by Survey Monkey, and then exported to my SPSS program for cleanup and analysis. I then sorted the respondents into four age groups: the traditionalists, baby boomers, Gen Xers, and millennials. The traditionalists

were those born before 1945, baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964, Gen Xers between 1965 and 1980, and millennials between 1981-2001. The number of respondents per generation was as follows:

Table 5.5 Number of Respondents to the Survey by Generation

<u>Generation</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>
Traditionalists	18
Baby Boomers	26
Gen Xers	10
Millennials	13

Of the seventy-three total persons who responded to the survey, sixty-seven shared their year of birth. Therefore, I cannot know the generation of six of the respondents. However, the highest number of responses came from the baby boomers. The traditionalists had the second highest number of respondents, followed by millennials. Only ten Gen Xers completed the survey.

As I looked at the questionnaire, I decided that I wanted to begin by comparing millennials to non-millennials in the four most common spiritual practices: worship, prayer, participation in small group or Bible studies, and volunteering in church ministries. I could have conducted tests on many of the other questions but thought it would be most beneficial to focus upon just a few. To start with, I conducted an independent t-test comparing millennials to the other three groups combined.

The results of the t-test surprised me. I had anticipated that there would be significant differences between millennials and non-millennials in all four categories. The means were not much different except in one category: prayer. Non-millennials had a

significantly higher mean frequency of engagement in prayer (mean =1.43) than millennials (mean = 2.23); $t_{(60)} = -2.654$, $p = .010$. None of the other categories showed significant differences. What this tells me is that when it comes to basic spiritual practices, millennials are not that much different than anyone else. Going into this study I anticipated that millennials, in general, are less active in church attendance and participation in the ministries. These data suggest that I was wrong about this. It surprised me that only significant difference between millennials and non-millennials was in prayer. In my qualitative interviews many of the millennials reported engaging in prayer regularly. These data, however, suggest that the other generations pray more often. This particular study contradicts the idea that millennials are in general less active in spiritual practices than anyone else.

In order to examine in more detail how millennials match up with other generations in engagement in spiritual practices, I intended to conduct an ANOVA test. This test would have broken down the four age groups within each of these four categories. I thought it would be helpful to see how each individual age group matched up against the others. However, when I conducted the test, the results indicated there were not statistically significant differences between the four age groups. Therefore, I decided not to include the results of this test in this chapter.

To summarize the quantitative data, the only area the millennials differed significantly from any other age group in this church was in prayer. The millennials in this study indicated they prayed less often than the participants from the other generations. Otherwise, the churched millennials of this congregation who participated in this survey were fairly similar in how involved they were with the church. This indicates

that it is unwise for anyone to assert that millennials take involvement in church less seriously than anyone else.

Summary of Results

One important thing I learned from my research is that we cannot assume we know what millennials are seeking when it comes to spirituality. We need to hear their stories and value them. What my exploratory research revealed was that there was some sense of God at work in their lives already, whether they are connected to a church or not. The church's role is to find ways to join in and partner with what God is already doing. The interviews I conducted revealed that the involvement of millennials was heavily dependent upon how the faith was passed down to them from previous generations. It was not surprising to me that the more active in church millennials were growing up, the more likely they were to be active today. This was true for both churched and un-churched millennials. Another important factor that impacted their church involvement was what many shared as lack of time. Many millennials are pulled in several directions in their daily lives. However, those who made time for church found fulfillment when they were able to form meaningful relationships within the church. The millennials who had children, or who were soon to have them, wanted to pass on to their children the faith and tradition that they were raised with. The quantitative portion of the research, the questionnaire, surprisingly indicated that churched millennials did not show significant differences with other age groups when it came to attending worship, being involved in church activities, and participating in small group or Bible studies. The only spiritual practice where they differed from the other age groups was in prayer. Perhaps this tells us that we should not be so quick to judge millennials as not making church a priority. All

generations have challenges when it comes to involvement with the church. To me this indicates that different generations who are involved in churches have more in common than we think. This could be because people of similar spiritual views tend to gather in particular congregations regardless of what generation they are a part.

In the next chapter I will discuss the conclusions I have drawn from my research. I will draw upon my findings in order to explore ways we as church can learn from millennials and partner with them. As I have said before, rather than viewing millennials as objects to be fixed, we can walk together as brothers and sisters in Christ.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

I undertook this research project because I was interested in exploring why millennials are or are not involved with a church. By millennials I mean those persons born between the years 1981 and 2001. This idea came from my discussions with a millennial in my congregation who was frustrated by the lack of opportunities available for people in her age group to become involved in the church. With her help I was able to bring together seven millennial couples who were members of our congregation to discern what their spiritual needs were. When I asked them about what concerned them most in their lives, they responded that they were worried about their finances. As a result, we completed a course together on how to handle finances. This experience motivated me to explore further how the church could meet the needs of millennials. In addition, I became interested in exploring why millennials outside of the church were not involved with any congregation.

In the previous chapter I shared the results of both the qualitative and quantitative methods I used in this exploratory research. Both the qualitative and quantitative methods affirmed to me that we as a church need to find ways to engage with millennials in a non-judgmental way. We need to hear their stories and partner with them as we are able. An unfortunate tendency that I have observed is that those of us in older generations often

tend to have preconceived biases when it comes to working with millennials. For instance, we can have a tendency to assume that millennials do not make church involvement a priority while many of them do make efforts to stay connected to the church in some way. This tells me that we need to meet them where they are, and work with them when they are available for church activities. For instance, my interviews revealed that since lack of time is an important factor in their level of involvement, we need to be sensitive to this when we ask them to join in activities. We also need to listen to them to discover what their interests are. They may have ideas that none of the rest of us have thought of. I believe they need to have a place at the table when the church makes decisions about what particular ministries in which to engage. In the process we may discover that we share much more common ground with them than we realize. I will in the next section go into more detail of these findings.

Summary of Research Findings

The research question that guided this thesis was:

What might Grace Lutheran Church learn about the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with God and the Church?

To pursue this question, I decided to use mixed methods exploratory research methodology. That is, I used both quantitative and qualitative methods. For the qualitative portion I interviewed seven millennial couples, six unchurched millennials, and four churched non-millennials. I also conducted two focus groups for the churched millennials. As for the quantitative portion I surveyed the entire congregation through a questionnaire that asked them about what spiritual practices they engaged in. Seventy-three congregation members filled out the questionnaire. Through this mixed methods exploratory research, I was able to get a good grasp on why millennials are or are not

involved with a church. I was able to listen to the stories of both churched and unchurched millennials through the interviews and focus groups and compare their engagement in spiritual practices with other generations.

Churched Millennials

As I stated before, the research process began with the seven churched millennial couples that I met with to complete the financial management course. As we met over nine weeks in the spring of 2019, relationships began to slowly build. This inspired me to get to know them better. Therefore, I met with each couple and interviewed them using the protocol I designed (appendix D). All of the couples were raised in the church to some degree, so they therefore had a strong background in church involvement. For instance, they were raised attending worship regularly, attending Sunday school and confirmation, and participating in volunteer activities. Several of them shared that their upbringing had an important impact on why they are connected to a church now. Church participation became a part of them. Several also indicated that the sense of family they experience at Grace Lutheran keeps them coming back. They appreciate knowing most of the people and seeing the same faces on a regular basis. This tells me that building relationships is very important to them. Many of them also said that they found the sermons meaningful and relevant to their life experiences today. While many of them would like to see some more modern Christian music in the worship services, they also felt at home with the traditional, structured format of worship.

When I asked them about challenges to their involvement with the church almost all of the couples indicated time constraints were a major factor. Many of them worked long hours and struggled with balancing time between work, family, and church

participation. Several of the millennials also worked weekends on a regular basis which limited their church attendance. While most of them indicated they enjoyed attending worship and seeing their church family as often as possible, they also were quite tired on weekends. Many also struggled with arranging childcare and dealing with kids who had special needs. This told me that while many churched millennials intend to be more involved with the church, they are spread thin when it comes to time. There are only so many hours in the day. Perhaps this means that the church needs to not ask millennials for long term commitments. They would be far more likely to participate if the time commitments are minimal or short term. For instance, millennials may be willing to dedicate a few hours to a service project as opposed to serving indefinitely on a committee. In addition, while I may encourage them to become members of our church, I would not pressure them to join as a condition of participation in a ministry. Millennials are willing to work with churched people on service or ministry projects but do not see membership as that important.

In addition to the interviews, I conducted two focus groups with this group. The first one was to equip them to go and ask two or three millennial friends or coworkers about their involvement with a church, using three questions I prepared (appendix F). Through the churched millennials' efforts, thirteen millennials outside of our congregation were interviewed. About half of those interviewed were involved with a church and half not. This provided valuable data for me as it increased my sample of millennials. I then conducted a second focus group after the interviews with friends and coworkers were completed in order for them to share their results. What I discovered is that the fellow millennials they interviewed indicated many of the same reasons for why

they are or are not involved with a church. The respondents indicated time was a huge factor, as well as how strong their upbringing in the church was. Several of the respondents shared that their work schedules made attending worship difficult. Those who were raised in the church and had a positive experience were likely to be active in a church today. If they had negative experiences with the church or had little exposure in their upbringing, they were less likely to be active in one today. Most of them also indicated the importance of building relationships with people in the church, as well as the need for relevant sermons.

Unchurched Millennials

As I wanted to gain the perspective of millennials in our community who were not connected to a church, I approached six individuals that I had some contact with through patronizing local businesses. For instance, I interviewed a person I have talked with many times at the local food mart as well as the owner of the local pet grooming business. As I have had several of our cars worked on at the local garage, I interviewed both of the owners. I also interviewed one young man who was confirmed at Grace Lutheran but had not attended worship in over a year, as well as a young man I met through school activities. During the interviews I asked them seven questions I had prepared ahead of time (appendix E). What the interviews revealed was that those who were not actively raised in a church did not see the need to be a part of one now. They did not have any antagonism toward the church, but did not see the need for attending worship or participating in church activities. However, they were willing to partner with our church in any efforts to address challenges in our community. Many of them also indicated that they did not have the time to be active in a church as there are plenty of other ways to

spend Sunday mornings. These findings were generally in line with what I heard from churched millennials. Time constraints and amount of church involvement in their upbringing were huge factors in whether or not they were involved in a church today. However, these millennials were open to partnering with the church when opportunities arise.

Churched Non-Millennials

Finally, in order to gain a broader picture of how different generations viewed church involvement, I interviewed four individuals who were active at Grace Lutheran who were not millennials. Two were baby boomers, one was from the traditionalists, and one was from Generation X. This was originally supposed to be a focus group, but due to the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic we were unable to get together in person. Two of them also did not have adequate computer access, so I decided to interview them individually. What I heard was that all of them were actively raised in a church, so therefore it has always been a part of their lives. They also emphasized the importance of hearing relevant messages in worship, and the sense of family they experienced when they attended worship or other church activities. In these ways, they were similar to the churched millennials. However, one striking difference between these other generations and millennials was the emphasis on the church building. All four of these non-millennials talked about how important taking care of the building was. They recalled how when there was a need, such as when the carpeting in the sanctuary needed to be replaced, people stepped up to help. The representative from Generation X, who was raised at Grace Lutheran, told the story of how the congregation raised money very quickly to build the current sanctuary. None of the millennials I had interviewed earlier

mentioned taking care of the building as important to their church involvement. This was an interesting finding for me. While I believe millennials do appreciate the beauty of the church building, it appears from my research that relationships with other church members are more important to them

Quantitative Research

In order to gain a broader perspective of church involvement amongst generations, I distributed a questionnaire to all members eighteen years of age and older through the church's email list. Seventy-three persons responded. While the questionnaire consisted of twenty-two questions, I decided to focus primarily on four areas of spirituality: worship attendance, prayer, Bible and small group studies, and involvement in other church activities. Participants were asked how often they engaged in these different practices. To analyze the data, I conducted an independent t-test. Through this test I compared millennials with the other generations combined on these four areas of spirituality. The results surprised me. I began the research under the assumption that there would be significant differences between millennials and the other age groups in these areas. However, the results indicated that the only area where there was a significant difference between millennials and the other generations was in prayer. The other generations engaged in prayer more often than millennials. Perhaps the reason for this is that those who are active in churches tend to share similar spiritual views regardless of what generation they are a part of. The difference in prayer could be due to the fact that millennials, as I heard in the interviews, have less time in their daily lives for it. I will discuss this further later in this chapter.

Importance of the Findings

As I ponder the results, I am convinced that exploratory research was the most effective way to engage with millennials. This enabled me to listen to millennials, hear their stories, and learn why they are involved with a church or not. One important thing I learned is that those of us in older generations tend to use “we/they” language when it comes to conversing with millennials. I am as guilty as anyone in using this “subject/object” terminology. When I was able to meet with millennials on a level playing field, they seemed to be quite willing to be open and honest about their views. Having churched millennials go out and interview fellow millennials in their daily lives also, I believe, created non-threatening platforms to hold conversations. My research confirmed for me that churches need to listen to millennials first before creating programs intended to reach them. We need to meet people where they are before making assumptions about what they are looking for in a church.

The dependent variable for this research project was the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with God and the church. The independent variables that emerged were amount of time available and how actively involved millennials were with the church during their upbringing. Both churched and unchurched millennials indicated that they had very busy lives and that it was challenging to set priorities. Millennials who were active in a church made more efforts to be active than unchurched millennials due to the importance of church involvement that was instilled in them as they grew up. Unchurched millennials in general tended not to have been actively raised in a church.

As I coded the interviews, the issue of lack of time for millennials came up over and over again. Churched millennials participated in worship and other activities as much

as possible, but many indicated that time constraints made it challenging. Many of these people worked long hours and odd shifts. Many also struggled to find balance between work, family, and church obligations. Many expressed that they felt spread thin and there were not enough hours in the day to do everything they wanted. Many of them were tired on weekends and needed to catch up on sleep. Several of the churched millennials who had small children indicated that this further limited the amount of time they were available to participate in church activities.

What this tells me is that if the church wants millennials to be more involved, we need to be sensitive to time constraints. The readings I included in this research as well as the interviews I conducted suggest to me that short-term goals with limited time commitment would be possible effective ways for the church to engage with millennials. Many millennials are willing to invest their time, talents, and energies in order to make a positive difference in their communities. Therefore, if they are asked to participate in short-term humanitarian projects, they may be more willing to participate. Better yet, I believe it would be wise for churches to listen to millennials' ideas of what ministries can be done to make a difference in a community. Much of what I heard in my interviews matched what I read in my research: that it would be wise to allow millennials a place at the table when it comes to initiating projects. Also, I believe it would be wise to allow millennials to choose whom they would like to work with on teams. Finally, as I discovered that millennials do not like to be told how to do things, we need to focus instead on the final outcomes and results. In all of these ways, churches can work with millennials in their challenges with time constraints.

As I indicated before, how actively millennials were raised in a church had a huge impact on how involved they were now. Those millennials who were raised with attending worship frequently, attending Sunday school and confirmation, participating in church camps, and other activities were far more likely to be active in a church now than those who did not have these opportunities. This tells me that it is imperative for churches to continue to offer opportunities for young families to be involved. Christian education and youth activities, for instance, can provide valuable faith building experiences for children. These experiences can provide a solid foundation for church involvement later on in life. While I have observed a decline in numbers of children in our church participating in Sunday school and youth programs, and it is easy to get discouraged by this, we need not give up on these programs. I believe that it would be beneficial to listen to churched millennials who have children and learn what ideas they might have to conduct Christian education and youth programs in new ways. Perhaps ministries with smaller time commitments from volunteers could be effective. In any case, I believe that the church needs to find ways to listen to and partner with millennial families as we address challenges to church participation together.

Biblical, Theological, and Theoretical Lenses

Biblical Lenses

While I began my project with three biblical lenses, a fourth one emerged from my research. While all of these lenses were useful, the overarching biblical story that turned out to inspire my research was the story of Jesus engaging with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-35. This story in some ways demonstrates to me exploratory research. Jesus comes to the disciples and walks alongside them on their

journey, as opposed to coming at them. Jesus listens to them before he speaks. He asks them questions before trying to teach them anything. After allowing them to share their disappointments and frustrations, he then explains to them the meaning of the Scriptures. He meets them where they are as opposed to lecturing them from the start. He treats them as people rather than as objects that need to be fixed.

This story inspired me to approach millennials in a similar way. Through my conversations I was able to meet them where they were as opposed to coming at them with an agenda. As they are all on their own spiritual journeys, I believed it was my role to walk alongside them and listen to their stories. Instead of coming at them with my own agendas and ideas I was able to hear them out and understand better where they were coming from. I believe it would not have been helpful for me to come at them with my own assumptions as to why they were or were not involved with the church, or to try to force a new program on them. All too often I believe churches have mistakenly assumed we know what millennials are looking for without listening to them first. We as church have at times offered answers to questions that they are not necessarily asking. When we approach millennials as Jesus approached these followers, we are far more likely to be able to partner with them.

The first biblical lens I used was God's grace lived out in lives of faith. By grace I mean God's free gift of salvation given to us through faith in God's work through Jesus' death and resurrection. In my research I used a passage from Ephesians chapter two, which proclaims that we are made right with God by grace through faith and not by our own works. I looked at my research with millennials through this lens because I needed to remember that we are all on the same level before God. All of us are sinners who

cannot save ourselves. God is the one who saves us. This focus upon God's work and not my own helped me to engage with millennials as brothers and sisters in Christ as opposed to sinners who needed to be fixed. The concept of grace, God's undeserved gift of salvation, kept me humble throughout the research process. We all fall short of what God expects of us, but through grace God is able to use us for His work. By grace we can build relationships between generations and build each other up in our faith journeys.

The second biblical lens that I viewed my research through was marks of living the Christian life. The passage I studied was from Romans 12:9-21. The commentaries I read emphasized that all Christians have been given gifts from the Spirit, but the gifts are to be used for the good of the community. As I conversed with millennials, I was reminded that all have gifts to contribute to the church. However, I believe all too often we as a church try to fit millennials into our mold of what a Christian should be. What I mean by this is that the church often has ministries that have always been done a certain way and expect others to jump in and keep things the same. The problem is that age groups such as millennials may not see things the same way. Millennials may have different ideas that could challenge traditional church practices in a healthy way. I believe that my research affirmed that in the church we are all in this together. We are all a part of God's mission. We can live together regardless of generation at peace and in harmony with one another. The important thing is for us to listen to one another carefully.

The third biblical lens I used was Deuteronomy chapter six. This passage is a famous confession of faith for Israel. This passage emphasized that God's people believe in one God, whom we shall love with all of our heart and soul and mind. Everything starts with God. What especially was helpful to my research was the focus of this passage

on teaching the faith to our children. One of the most important factors as to why millennials were or were not involved with a church was the amount they were exposed to the faith during their childhood. If they were raised in a home in which church involvement was a priority, they were far more likely to be involved in a church today than those who had little or no church involvement as a child. This leads me to believe that it is extremely important for churches to provide opportunities for Christian education and faith building even when numbers are down. As I indicated earlier, it is easy to get discouraged and be tempted to give up on Christian education. However, my conversations with millennials affirmed that ministries for children are still desired, but perhaps in different ways. Churched millennials desire their children to have just as strong of a spiritual foundation that they had growing up. I believe that we need to work with them on how to accomplish this.

Theological Lenses

The first theological lens I used was the grace of God. I learned from the start of my work with millennials that I needed to approach them with humility. All of us are in need of God's underserved love and mercy and need to treat each other this way. One of my major learnings in the D. Min program has been that we are not on a mission from God; rather God's mission has a church. God is already at work in the lives of millennials. The church, therefore, needs to find ways to partner with millennials in their spiritual lives. For instance, several of the unchurched millennials I interviewed expressed interest in finding ways to improve our community. This could provide the church opportunities to work with them on common goals. When it comes to the churched millennials, the church can listen to their ideas and find ways to empower them

to share their gifts. Grace is all about God at work and not us. God can use all generations to work together to build his kingdom. We need to simply trust in him.

Next, I viewed my research through the lens of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. This doctrine comes from the work of Martin Luther, who emphasized the idea that all believers have equal access to God. All believers are equal before God, and do not need a priest to intercede for them. While some have misinterpreted this doctrine to promote individualism, this doctrine is rather about all Christians being an important part of the church regardless of their status in the world. This doctrine was very relevant to my research as I believe strongly that millennials need to be included as equals in the church. While many of us in older generations desire younger generations to be involved more, we often fail to listen to them, or try to pressure them into doing ministry our way. One thing that stands out from my research is that millennials do not like to be told what to do or how to do things. The church, then, needs to listen to them and build relationships of trust. Millennials are seeking authentic relationships. I believe that if we work with them as equals in the church as opposed to trying to get something out of them there is much potential for spiritual growth for all of us.

The final theological lens I used was witnessing to God. The reason I chose this lens is because this project is about what we can learn about the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with the church. I began this research intending to find ways to listen to millennials and connect with them. This is what witnessing is about, in my view. Throughout the D. Min program, the emphasis is upon joining in with what God is up to in the world. Missional church theology is not about bringing God to people: God is already at work in people's lives. I soon discovered that the best way to witness to

millennials is to listen to them. The interviews allowed me to sit down with them and hear their stories. I must admit I sometimes would slip into the mindset of “how can we get millennials involved in the church more?” However, when I put this aside and met them where they were, I was much more likely to build trust with them. My research revealed that millennials are looking for authentic relationships. What I have learned is that what the church needs to focus on is building relationships with millennials rather than trying to mold them into the church members we think they should be. Millennials can tell if people are simply trying to get something out of them. If we focus upon building authentic relationships with them, I believe God will produce fruits. We need to let God work in millennials’ lives.

Theoretical Lenses

While the focus of my study was upon millennials who lived in or around our community, I felt it would be helpful to look at a variety of studies. This gave me a broader perspective of why millennials in general are or are not involved with a church. The first theoretical lens I used was studies of millennials. There have been numerous studies conducted by secular sources on the viewpoints of millennials. The studies that I read did provide much useful information for my study. For instance, studies indicate that many millennials tend to have an individualistic approach to faith. Many millennials do not believe in moral absolutes. They believe each person should practice their faith in whatever manner works for them. Studies also indicated that millennials in general have a distrust of institutions, and do not respond well to other generations telling them what to think or believe. This was useful to my research, as it opened my eyes to the fact that the church needs to listen to millennials first before planning programs that we think meet

their needs. In my interviews it was affirmed that millennials are looking for authentic relationships within the church. However, the church needs to partner with them as opposed to imposing our agendas on them. Many millennials shared with me good ideas about how to meet their needs in worship, for instance. We cannot assume we know what millennials are looking for. We need to listen to and find ways to include them in leadership roles within the church.

A second theoretical lens was spiritual practices of millennials. The results of my research verified much of what I read about the spirituality of millennials. For instance, many of the churched millennials I interviewed indicated that they appreciated more traditional and ancient forms of worship. The reason for this is that they were comfortable with worshipping in the familiar liturgies that they grew up with, and the more formal worship gave them an awareness of something bigger than themselves. This is not to say that these millennials do not appreciate some newer hymns or music, but many of them are not drawn to the informal praise worship that is practiced in many larger churches. This refutes the common notion that churches need to abandon older, traditional styles of worship in order to attract millennials. It seems to me that when it comes to worship planning, perhaps churches could invite millennials to be a part of the process. Working together across generations could produce creative ideas as well as help churches build on their strengths.

Another way that I discovered millennials express their spirituality is through community service. Many of the millennials I interviewed indicated that they would like to help out in service projects, however lack of time prevented them from participating in as many projects as they wished. They want to make a difference in the community and

believe that working with other people could build relationships. Several stated that participation even in short-term projects such as decorating the church for Christmas made them feel like they were a part of a church family. Even helping out in simple ways such as ushering or greeting gave them a sense of being a part of something bigger than themselves.

The final theoretical lens was generational theory. As a part of my research, I read different works comparing characteristics of different generations. The quantitative portion of my project helped compare how often churched millennials engage in certain spiritual practices as compared to the other three churched generations. The independent t-tests compared how millennials compared with the other generations when it came to worship, prayer, Bible or small group studies, and participation in other ministries. The results indicated that the only area millennials differed with the other generations significantly was in frequency of prayer. This tells me that at least at Grace Lutheran Church millennials are not significantly different than the other generations in how they express their faith. The fact that they may pray less in their daily lives may reflect a difference in lifestyle choices. However, millennials repeatedly told me that they enjoyed interacting and working with other generations. As one put it, “You are who you hang out with.” This tells me that millennials are very interested in building relationships with others. It seems to me that finding ways to bring different generations together is an effective way to join in what God is up to in the church and community.

Generalizability and Limitations of Research

While I believe that I learned much about why millennials in our community are or are not involved with a church, I also wonder how millennials who live in other

contexts would have responded. Our bedroom community of 1000 people is a very different context than, for instance, a large urban setting. Many of the millennials in the church I interviewed grew up in our community, or in close proximity to it. I wonder if millennials who live in larger cities many see things differently. The millennials who grew up in our small community have a strong sense of family in our congregation. They take comfort in knowing almost everyone who attends worship regularly. While I was able to collect more data by having the churched millennials interview fellow millennials outside of our community, I still believe that my samples were rather small. All told, thirty-three millennials were interviewed, and fifteen millennials responded to the questionnaire. This may make generalizing my findings difficult.

Secondly, I wonder if I should have also included unchurched millennials in the questionnaire I sent out. The questionnaire I designed was sent only to members of Grace Lutheran Church. While unchurched millennials obviously would not participate in worship or church activities often, it may have been helpful if I would have collected data from them on other spiritual practices such as prayer. The questionnaire results indicated that churched millennials pray less than other generations, but it would have been interesting to see how unchurched millennials would have responded. From the readings I used during my research it was mentioned that millennials who are not part of a church do not necessarily engage in spiritual practices less often than churched millennials. Perhaps a larger sample would have given my findings more substance.

Questions for Future Research

When I began this research, the pandemic of COVID-19 had not yet begun. I was able to meet with the churched millennials in focus groups as well as individually in

person without any restrictions. Fortunately, I was able to collect all of my data from millennials before in person worship and all other activities were suspended. As Grace Lutheran Church began conducting worship virtually, along with most other churches, it may be interesting to explore in the future how this shift has impacted millennials' worship participation. Are millennials watching worship online more often than they actually attended worship in person? As I accepted another call after I collected the initial data, I was not able to follow up with the millennials of Grace Lutheran on their worship frequency online. Perhaps in my new congregation I can pursue this question in depth.

A second possible question for future research could be how older millennials compare to younger ones in church involvement. What I mean by this is that the term "millennial" encompasses a large age range, that is all those born between 1981 and 2000. As I worked with the seven couples I interviewed, two of them were in their thirties and the other five in their twenties. I did notice that the older millennials who had children tended to have a stronger sense of obligation to attend church regularly and were able to offer advice to the younger millennials on child rearing and handling finances. While this was great to see, it makes me wonder if the age group labeled "millennial" may be too large to clump together. Those older millennials who have children are at a different place spiritually than younger ones, so therefore have some different priorities. It may be interesting to explore the differences in perspectives between millennials in their thirties and those in their twenties, and perhaps see if the younger millennials will become more like the older ones as their life circumstances change.

Summary

This research project was well worth my time and effort. It was a pleasure to get better acquainted with millennials both inside and outside of the church. While the results of my research did not produce that many surprises, nonetheless it was beneficial to listen to millennials and learn where they were coming from. The churched millennials indicated that what keeps them coming back to church is the sense of continuing to build upon the faith foundation they were raised with, and the sense of family they feel when they attend church. This tells me that building authentic relationships in the church is essential to their involvement. This affirms for me that the best way for the church to participate in God's mission is to partner with millennials as opposed to targeting them. I discovered that millennials both inside and outside of the church do appreciate working together with other age groups if given opportunities. I believe the church needs to continue to find ways to listen to millennials and allow a place at the table for them to share their stories and perspectives.

The greatest challenge for church involvement of millennials I discovered was time constraints. Both churched and unchurched millennials indicated that they were stretched thin when it came to making time for church involvement. Churched millennials found ways to attend worship and other activities as often as they were able, even if it was not as often as they wished. Unchurched millennials tended not to have any particular aversions to the church but did not see the need to invest time in becoming part of one. What I learned is that the best way to engage millennials is not to lecture them but to join them as they deal with spiritual questions. Millennials do not tend to participate in activities out of duty or obligation, but rather out of a sense of making a positive

difference in their community and forming authentic relationships. It seems to me that it would be beneficial for churches to listen to millennials more, and value their input in making decisions about how to live out God's mission. On a practical note, I learned that millennials are far more likely to make short-term commitments than longer ones. This tells me that the church needs to work with them on this and not make unrealistic demands of their time. Finally, I believe the church needs to allow millennials to take more ownership of church activities. We are all on the same team and can learn from one another as we all seek to live out God's mission for the church.

EPILOGUE

As I entered the Doctor of Ministry program almost four years ago, my intention was to grow intellectually and spiritually. I felt flat emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. I needed a new challenge to reinvigorate me. While I entered the program with no idea of what area to study, I am grateful to have learned the basic tenets of missional church theology. These include joining in with people where God is already at work instead of bringing God to them and recognizing that mission begins with the triune God and not with the church. It was refreshing for me to understand that it was not up to me to “fix” the church but to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit to work. The studies of the Trinity expanded my understanding especially of the concept of *perichoresis*: the loving interpersonal relationship between the three persons that is lived out in relationship with the world.

When it came time to choosing a research topic, I believe the Holy Spirit opened up to me the possibility of working with an age group that is often absent from the church: millennials. Throughout my twenty-five years of ministry, I have heard older members of churches lamenting the fact that fewer and fewer people in the twenty to thirty something age group seem to be active in churches. They repeatedly ask, “Where have the young people gone? How do we reach them?” Fortunately, I was able to bring together seven couples in this age group to begin a process of discerning what they are looking for. This inspired me to learn more about why millennials are or are not involved

with the church. Starting with this group of churched millennials, I was further inspired to reach out to millennials outside of our church walls to find out where they are spiritually. I am grateful that both millennials inside and outside of the church were willing to sit down with me and share their perspectives. When I met them on a level playing field, as opposed to coming at them with an agenda, I found that they were very willing to share their life experiences as well as ideas on how the church can connect with them. While I admit it was difficult at times to get beyond the “us” and “them” mentality, I really felt that I learned as much from them as they did from me. I worked hard at seeing millennials not as objects to be fixed but rather as partners in ministry. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to get to know them better.

After I had collected all of the data, several changes quickly occurred in my life. First of all, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, which altered how we were able to worship together or have any sort of gatherings. This prevented much follow up with the group of millennials. At the same time, I entered a call process with a church that had been without a pastor for two years. After two interviews I was offered the call and chose to accept it. I believe God opened this door to me in order to apply what I have learned in the Doctor of Ministry program. It turns out that in the new parish I have a number of active millennials to work with. Some are a part of the staff and others are on the church council. I am grateful that God has provided another opportunity for me to join in where he is already at work. It is my hope and prayer that God will continue to use me as I partner with millennials and all other generations in carrying out God’s mission.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

Part I

1. Are you:

Male

Female

2. Current Marital Status

Married

Widowed

Divorced

Separated

Never Married

3. On average, how many times do you attend worship services in this congregation?

Usually every week

Several times a month

About once a month

Several times a year

Once a year or less

4. Which one of the following statements describes your church experience prior to becoming a member of this congregation?

I have always been a member of this congregation

I was a member of another Lutheran congregation before I came here

I was a member of a church in another Christian denomination

5. In what year were you born? Please complete the year.

6. What is the highest education degree that you have earned?

8th grade certificate

GRE

High School diploma

Trade certificate

Associate Degree

Bachelor's degree

Master's degree

Doctoral or other Professional Degree (M.D., J.D. etc.)

Part II Engagement in Practices

Please indicate how often you engage in the following practices. (Select One)

7. Worship

Once a Week

Several Times a Month

Once a Month

Several Times a Year

Once or Twice a year

Never

8. Prayer

Daily

Several Times a Week

Weekly

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

9. Meditation

Daily

Several Times a Week

Weekly

Monthly

Several Times a Year

Never

10. Bible or Small Group Studies Inside or Outside Congregation

Weekly

Once a Month

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

11. Volunteering in Our Church Ministries (ex: usher, greeter, altar guild, property, church council, funeral luncheons, teaching Christian ed etc.)

Weekly

Once a Month

Several Times a month

Several Times a Year

Never

12. Physical Exercise (running, walking, yoga etc.)

Daily

Weekly

Several Times a Week

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

13. Listening to Friend or Co-Worker

Daily

Weekly

Several Times a Week

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

14. Artwork (painting, drawing, crafts etc.)

Daily

Weekly

Several Times a Week

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

15. Random Acts of Kindness

Daily

Weekly

Several Times a Week

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

16. Reading (books, internet articles, etc.)

Daily

Weekly

Several Times a Week

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

17. Music (playing an instrument, singing)

Daily

Weekly

Several Times a Week

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

18. Gardening

Daily

Weekly

Several Times a Week

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

19. Playing with Children

Daily

Weekly

Several Times a Week

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

20. Journaling

Daily

Weekly

Several Times a Week

Several Times a Month

Several Times a Year

Never

21. What Additional Practices Do You Engage In?

22. What Practices Do You Find Most Meaningful?

APPENDIX B

IMPLIED CONSENT FORM FOR SURVEY

November 1, 2019

Dear Members of Grace Lutheran Church,

You are invited to participate in a study of spiritual practices of millennials and other age groups of our congregation. I hope to learn what spiritual practices people are currently engaging in. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an adult member (18 years or older) of Grace Lutheran Church.

If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. Your return of this survey is implied consent. The survey is designed to study spiritual practices of different age groups within our congregation. It will take about fifteen minutes. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to study how different age groups live out their relationships with God and the church. Any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relationships with Luther Seminary. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any questions, please ask. If you have additional questions later, contact Pastor Chuck Thompson; email email@dmin.com or phone number xxx-xxx-xxxx. My advisors, Dr. Dan Anderson and Dr. Al Luedke can be reached through email at email2@dmin.edu and email3@dmin.edu.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Rev. Charles R. Thompson

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Listening to Millennials: An Exploration of the Relationship Between Millennials and the Church

You are invited to be in a research study of involvement or lack of involvement in church of the millennial (ages 21-38) age group. You were selected as a possible participant because you are of this age group. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Pastor Charles Thompson. This study is being conducted by me as part of my Doctor of Ministry thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary. My advisors are Dr. Daniel Anderson and Dr. Alvin Luedke.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is: to learn about the involvement or lack of involvement of millennials with God and the church.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things. Allow yourself to participate in an approximately one-hour long interview.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has possible risks. During the interview, possible personal information and experiences may be shared with interviewer. However, all information and experiences will be kept anonymous and confidential.

I am grateful for your participation; however, there will be no financial or other compensation.

Indirect benefits to yourself/or the general public of participation are improved understanding of the relationships between millennials and the church.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. All data will be kept in a locked file in my office at Grace Lutheran Church; only my advisors, Daniel Anderson, Dr. Alvin Luedke, and I will have access to the data and, if applicable, any tape or video recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed due to the small number to be studied.

Indicate one of the following

a. Raw data will be destroyed by June 4, 2024. (Federal guidelines specify a minimum of 3 years for retention of data.)

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary and/ or with other cooperating institutions. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is Pastor Charles Thompson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at email1@dmin.com.

Phone: xxx-xxx-xxxx.

Advisors:

Dr. Daniel Anderson
email2@dmin.edu

Dr. Alvin Luedke
email3@dmin.edu

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date _____

Signature of investigator _____ Date _____

I consent to be audiotaped (or videotaped):

Signature _____ Date _____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date _____

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR MILLENNIALS CONNECTED TO A CHURCH

1. How long have you been part of a church?
2. What originally brought you to a church?
3. In what ways do you participate in your church?
4. What keeps you coming back to your church?
5. What has helped you feel included in your congregation?
6. How has your participation in your church helped you feel closer to God? What challenges, if any, have you encountered in your involvement?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR MILLENNIALS NOT CONNECTED TO A CHURCH

1. What experience or contacts, if any, have you had with a Christian church?
2. What do you know about Grace Lutheran Church?
3. What are your impressions about the Christian church?
4. Where do you find spiritual fulfillment in your daily life? That is, what practices (prayer, meditation, hobbies, exercise, etc.) do you enjoy engaging in?
5. What are your concerns for the Moriah community?
6. Do you believe the Church can be helpful in addressing these concerns? Why or why not?
7. Is there anything you would like to add?

APPENDIX F

PROTOCOL FOR FIRST CHURCHED MILLENNIAL FOCUS GROUP

For this session, I invited the seven millennial couples I have previously interviewed to come together to brainstorm on how to approach two to three millennial friends, family, or coworkers to ask them about their involvement or lack of involvement with a church. When I interviewed them prior to this meeting, I gave them the following three questions to ponder asking their peers before we meet as a group:

- A. Do you currently attend worship at, or participate in activities in a church? Why or why not?
- B. If you participate in a church, what draws you? If not, what prevents you from being involved with a church?
- C. What kinds of practices (prayer, meditation, exercise, yoga, etc.) do you engage in on a regular basis that provide you with a sense of spirituality, if any?

My intention was to run these questions past the group and see if anyone has additions, subtractions, or other suggestions. I encouraged them to approach people casually: not as a formal interview. I suggested they approach people by explaining that they are helping their pastor out with some research he is conducting on spiritual views of their age group. I suggested that they emphasize that this is exploratory research, that is, seeking to understand where people are coming from. I asked them to write up a short summary of what they heard.

APPENDIX G

PROTOCOL FOR SECOND FOCUS GROUP OF CHURCHED MILLENNIALS

After the group of seven couples completed their conversations, I gathered them together to share what they heard. As I previously asked them to write brief summaries of their responses, I asked them to present them to the group. I guided them by asking the following questions:

- A. What did you hear about church involvement?
- B. Did you hear anything that surprised you?
- C. What might we learn from the responses we heard?

APPENDIX H
CONFIDENTIALITY FORM FOR MILLENNIALS CONDUCTING
CONVERSATIONS

At the first focus group of churched millennials, I asked them to sign the following form before they engage in conversations with peers:

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this activity. To protect the confidentiality of anyone you converse with, I am asking you to sign this confidentiality statement:

I understand that as I will be conducting conversations to assist with the research of Pastor Charles Thompson, a student in the Doctor of Ministry program at Luther Seminary for his thesis project, I need to keep all information received and any personal experiences anonymous and confidential. Any information that is obtained in connection with this study that can be identified with an individual will remain confidential and will not be disclosed. The only individuals who will have access to any information are Pastor Charles Thompson, email@dmin.com, and his advisors Dr. Daniel Anderson, email2@dmin.edu and Dr. Alvin Luedke, email3@dmin.edu.

I agree to the terms of this statement.

Volunteer signature

APPENDIX I

PROTOCOL FOR CHURCHED NON-MILLENNIALS INTERVIEWS

1. How long have you been part of our church?
2. What originally brought you to this church?
3. In what ways do you participate in this church?
4. What keeps you coming back to our church?
5. What has helped you feel included in your congregation?
6. How has your participation in your church helped you feel closer to God? What challenges, if any, have you encountered in your involvement?
7. Is there anything else you would like to add?

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