Stop Worrying About the Millennials*: *And Learn to Love Them Instead

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Recommended Citation
Root, Andrew, "Stop Worrying About the Millennials*: *And Learn to Love Them Instead" (2015). Faculty Publications. 59.
http://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/faculty_articles/59

Published Citation

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STOP WORRYING ABOUT THE MILLENNIALS*
Millennial anxiety sabotages attempts to engage the next generation. 

Dietrich Bonhoeffer explains why.

By

Andrew Rom
WE ARE CERTAINLY concerned about millennials.

It began about the time this age cohort reached adulthood, with the 1999 publication of Saving the Millennial Generation: New Ways to Reach the Kids You Care About in These Uncertain Times. It accelerated when some polls in the mid-2000s began to suggest millennials' waning interest in church. Enter "millenial anxiety" as well as concern about their spiritual health or about the health of our institutions.

We find ourselves facing into "millennial anxiety" as well as concern about the "rise of the nones" (those who do not want departing millennials and nones become members? Are we worried more about their spiritual health or about the health of our institutions?

Over the past several months, as I finished writing a book on the youth and children's ministry of 20th-century theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, I've had the chance to rethink the church's approach to millennials. Bonhoeffer scholars and others have often overlooked the fact that most of Bonhoeffer's ministry from 1925 to 1939 was among children and youth. In fact, many of Bonhoeffer's most creative theological periods coincided with his direct interactions with children. For this reason, he provides a fountain of theological and practical wisdom that can free us from our own millennial anxiety and help us offer something of lasting value to our young people.

YOUTH PASTOR DOING THEOLOGY

Bonhoeffer entered children's ministry in Grunwalde as he typed the first pages of his doctoral dissertation. Sanctorum Community is laced with rich comments, rarely unpacked, about baptism and the church community "carrying" its youth. Bonhoeffer focused on young people during his internship in Barcelona as well as in Harlem, where he taught Sunday school to African American children in the Abyssinian Baptist Church. Even his deeply philosophical thesis for his habilitation (the highest academic qualification in many European countries) concludes with a section on children.

In the mid-1930s, Bonhoeffer sketched important lectures that became pieces such as "Christ the Center" and "Creation and Fall." During this period, he was elected as secretary to youth in the ecumenical movement. He also taught a confirmation class that was so rowdy, the older pastor leading the group had a heart attack not long after Bonhoeffer took over. Yet while balancing ecumenical work, university lectures, and preaching at the technical college, the youth ministry—the confirmation class—most deeply engaged Bonhoeffer. Even as the Nazis moved into power, Bonhoeffer wrote and presented lectures such as, "The Younger Generation's Conception of the Fuhrer." Because of this, I argue that Bonhoeffer is primarily not a theologian doing youth ministry, but a youth minister doing theology.

Bonhoeffer's era was not that different from ours—at least not when it came to anxiety over youth. In the 1880s, a national youth movement called Wandervogel ("rambling" or "hiking") had sprung up within Germany's middle class. Young people, frustrated and disengaged, decided it was time for adventure, so they gathered to wander the forests of central Europe. Like some 1980s Coke commercial, they congregated in suburban neighborhoods to walk, sing, then camp in the forests and countryside. The youth hostel, now ubiquitous in cities throughout Europe, was created to give young people a safe destination outside the city.

In the ensuing decades, the Wandervogel took new shape, but its spirit had permeated German culture. By the 1930s, everyone, especially Christians, was worried about the young and debated how to keep them involved, connected, and motivated in all sectors of society. This was the context for Bonhoeffer's only public radio address, "The Younger..."
"IT IS THE TASK OF YOUTH NOT TO RESHAPE THE CHURCH, BUT RATHER TO LISTEN TO THE WORD OF GOD."

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER
WHY BLACK CHURCHES ARE KEEPING MILLENNIALS

The reasons are rooted in history. By Morgan Lee

SHOULD BLACKS BE counted as millennials?
That's the question Thabiti Anyabwile, an African American pastor at Capitol Hill Baptist Church, asks when handwringing commences about young people leaving US churches.

"Researchers describe millennials as a fairly privileged and special group, which is so far from the reality of so many African Americans," said Anyabwile. "When it comes to describing broad demographic trends, you're woefully in danger of building a profile based on the assumed normative experiences of majority culture."

At large, millennials are less religious than were earlier generations of Americans. In 2012, Pew Research Center released data showing that 32 percent of Americans ages 18 to 29 are religiously unaffiliated. This was an 11 percent increase over any other age group that year, and a 7 percent jump from the 25 percent of young people who responded this way in 2007.

Yet a deeper dive into Pew's study suggests whites are overrepresented among those who are not religiously affiliated. Anglos make up 66 percent of the US population, yet they compose 71 percent of those with no religious affiliation. In contrast, blacks make up 11 percent of the population but only 9 percent of the so-called "nones."

Black Protestants have retained the greatest number of millennials compared with Catholics, white mainliners, and white evangelicals, according to 2012 data from the Center for Public Religion. These traditions have seen their market share of millennials drop by 8.4, 7.3, and 2.2 percentage points, respectively. In contrast, black Protestant millennials have decreased by 1.5 percentage points.

The black church's unique history and culture help to explain why it is keeping millennials while other traditions are losing them. In the Antebellum Era, the black church was a place of "communal and spiritual encouragement" for slaves, says University of Albany professor Roxanne Booth. And during Jim Crow, the church was one of the few institutions that let blacks lead.

Consequently, the church "served more than a religion function," said apologetics pastor and researcher Carl Ellis. "There are institutional, social, and cultural reasons why people attend church. They're not all theological."

Today, while some blacks have further integrated into majority culture, many "still feel on the outskirts of community," said Bryant Parsons, a TrinIdiadian American MDiv student at Westminster Theological Seminary. "The church provides a safe haven.

"When you get to the black church, you're not always having to explain yourself," said Ellis. "It's the same phenomenon [as] why black kids sit together in the cafeteria. It's a place where ... everyone knows where you're coming from."

That sense of sanctuary could be one reason why many, believers or not, are comfortable with overt expressions of Christianity in black culture.

As an undergraduate at Howard University, Parsons noted that the school's annual gospel homecoming concert was well received.

"You don't hear from any black atheists complaining, 'Why are we having a gospel concert? Why are we doing something so blatantly Christian?'" said Parsons.

Another reason why such expressions are permissible may be the black church's "distinct cultural expression."

"If blacks saw Christianity as the same religion whites practiced, they would probably feel more alienated from it," said Parsons, citing worship and preaching styles as examples where the traditions diverge. "Blacks don't fear that Christianity is the white man's religion."

But the black church's distinct cultural role may be changing. Anyabwile notes that more and more historically black churches are moving from urban to suburban areas in order to expand. This could create a "mismatch between where the churches are located and where much of this demographic lives," he said.

Another demographic challenge: the paucity of women in church leadership roles.

"Increasingly the creative leadership that is emerging in the church, emerges with women," said Willie Jennings, a Duke Divinity School professor. "But women seem to be locked out of significant leadership roles, especially in older, more established black churches."

Others share his concern. In a 2010 article, "The Black Church Is Dead," Princeton University professor Eddie S. Glaude Jr. said that the black church had lost touch with the affliction of the black community.

"We see organization and protests against same-sex marriage and abortion; even billboards in Atlanta [making] the antiabortion case," he wrote. "But where are the press conferences and impassioned efforts around black children living in poverty, and commercials and organizing around jobs and healthcare reform?"

Ekemini Uwan, a contributor for the Reformed African American Network, suggests this shared suffering traditionally has brought the church together. "People typically look for refuge in the education system, corporate America, or politics," she said.

"Our lives have been rigged in such a way [that] we can't take refuge in these areas. We are constantly reminded this place is not our home."

Joy J. Moore, an associate dean at Fuller Theological Seminary, says the black church explains a worldview that aligns with the reality of its community.

"In the African American church, the narrative of Scripture has become our story. You know what you're facing when you encounter oppression, racism, and injustice Monday through Saturday, because you were given the capacity to recognize that oppression, racism, and injustice on Sunday," said Moore.

"Millenials are looking for the type of authenticity that lives beyond the worship hour."
Bonhoeffer with Students
In the Spring of 1932

church community.

Bonhoeffer said youth ministry is first and foremost a theological task. It is not a sociological or cultural task or a church growth strategy. Of course, there are sociological and cultural factors to consider when ministering to youth. But Bonhoeffer would argue that youth ministry is first and foremost about the encounter of the divine with the human. Again, who could disagree? Except that youth ministry today often puts theology on a back burner. Youth ministry in North America became fashionable after a youth consumer culture emerged in the 1950s, and took shape in response to the mid-'60s youth countercultural movement. The binding of the counterculture youth movement with a consumer society (see Thomas Frank's book The Conquest of Cool) has embedded a "youthful spirit" deep within our cultural consciousness.

Different denominations and political camps have interpreted this spirited counterculture youth movement either romantically or immorally: Either a moribund church desperately needed to get young people for their spirit, or the youth work by reminding each other that youth are the future of the church, that we need them if the church is to survive and thrive. When such rhetoric becomes commonplace, Bonhoeffer believed, it means the spirit of youth has become more important to us than the work of the Holy Spirit. We talk as though the church's future depended not on the Spirit of Christ as much as on the spirit of the young.

Bonhoeffer called our fixation with youthfulness idolatry. He wanted to remind us that the future of the church does not depend on youth but only on Jesus Christ. He believed we can minister to youth only if our ministries are not about getting the spirit of young people into the church, but about encountering the Holy Spirit (especially through the Word of God) with young people in the

Bonhoeffer is direct and, as usual, passionate. Upon first read, no one would disagree. But his words reveal a hidden agenda: He was striving to shake up youth ministry and free the church from accommodating the youth movement.

Bonhoeffer knew that if the church of any age is to survive, it must disciple youth so that they constitute the church as they grow older. But he believed too many Germans thought the future of the church depended on getting spirited young people engaged in it.

The fact that it was broadcast at all shows the prevailing anxiety over Germany's youth. Everyone within and outside the church wanted to know how to capture the spirit of the youth movement.

We in the United States are 50 years past our own national youth movement. Teenagers and young adults grew their hair long, tie-dyed their clothes, and wandered to Haight-Ashbury, singing the folk and rock songs of their movement. And like Germany in the early 20th century, our society and churches have been figuring out how to respond ever since. Like Germany, our response has shifted from outrage to conflict to acceptance and back again.

Germany's response in the mid-1930s was to glorify youth, to do whatever it could to assimilate them into its structures and institutions. The Nazis assumed power in part because they knew how to engage the young. But Nazis weren't the only group that sought to capture the spirit of youth. They were just the most successful.

YOUTH CANNOT SAVE THE CHURCH

In the midst of this, Bonhoeffer wrote eight theses on youth work (I'll discuss only one here). We are not sure when they were written or why. But Bonhoeffer's thesis confronts and recasts our own millennial anxiety, shifting our perspective on youth ministry today.

Thesis One reads:

Since the days of the youth movement, church youth work has often lacked that element of Christian sobriety that alone might enable it to recognize that the spirit of youth is not the Holy Spirit and that the future of the church is not youth itself but rather the Lord Jesus Christ alone. It is the task of youth not to reshape the church, but rather to listen to the Word of God; it is the task of the church not to capture the youth, but to teach and proclaim the Word of God.

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Today we commonly justify youth work by reminding each other that youth are the future of the church, that we need them if the church is to survive and thrive. When such rhetoric becomes commonplace, Bonhoeffer believed, it means the spirit of youth has become more important to us than the work of the Holy Spirit. We talk as though the church's future depended not on the Spirit of Christ as much as on the spirit of the young.

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Different denominations and political camps have interpreted this spirited counterculture youth movement either romantically or immorally: Either a moribund church desperately needed to get young people for their spirit, or the
spirit of youth was shaped by America's conversion. Either way, much of North American youth ministry was shaped by the desire to capture and use the spirit of youth.

In fact, our anxiety about millennials and “the rise of the nones” exists in part because youth ministry in North America has been so successful. We’ve done a relatively good job of capturing the youthful spirit of 12- to 17-year-olds. But since many young people leave the church when becoming young adults (as many studies show), Bonhoeffer is right: We’ve been too focused on the youthful spirit. The strategies that captured them as youth no longer hold. These young people experienced only rooms full of teenagers and not a community of faith that crosses generations, let alone a community that dwells together on the Word, one that encourages us to care for one another in our unique humanity.

In short, youth cannot save the church, for the church is not simply an institution that needs new members (even enthusiastic ones); the church is the body of Jesus Christ in the world.

**MILLENNIALS AS PEOPLE FIRST**

WHILE FEW MIGHT disagree formally, this theological commitment rarely leads us to new youth ministry practices. North American youth ministry leaders often passionately say that loving the youthful spirit is exactly where it all starts. “Youth ministry is about loving kids,” they plead at conferences. Blogs tout the spirit of millennials, as per one recent post: “I am very passionate about the millennial generation. I know much has been said pessimistically about this generation, but I hold to the belief that the millennials are poised to change the culture for the good in this country and impact the world.”

But this love is rarely driven by theological concerns as much as by ministry goals that treat youth as a project. One millennial writing for OnFaith reacted to an all-too-common expression—“As youth group leaders, we’re just here to love on those kids”—saying, “It may just be semantics, but being loved on feels very different than being simply loved. The former connotes a sudden flash of contrived kindness; the latter is simpler… but deeper. It suggests that the relationship is the point, not the act of love itself.”

Of course, we needn’t stop loving young people. Bonhoeffer did not say that concern for youth is bad. It is actually of utmost importance. The problem in the millennial conversation is that we are tempted to move away from loving and encountering concrete persons who happen to be (so-called) millennials, and instead chase after an abstract collective called “the millennial generation.” In loving the youthful spirit of millennials, we actually love not the young person in his or her particularity; instead, we love what having the young person’s youthful spirit in our churches can get us. We love the idea of having millennials in our church, but may not be ready to love the particular young people that come to us in their concrete humanity.

Bonhoeffer was particularly sensitive to this. He saw how the National Socialists used the spirit of the youth movement for their own gain, without much concern for the youth themselves. They wanted young people’s passion without their humanity.

Instead, the church that truly seeks to invite and welcome the young is driven not by youth at all, but by the desire to discover the revelation of Jesus Christ in the concrete and lived experience of young people. We invite them to struggle, along with the rest of the church, to discern the presence of Christ in their midst.

For instance, I know of a church that for many years lived with millennial anxiety, pleading with young people to read their Bibles, hoping their youthful spirit would avoid corruption and find a home in the church. The church invested money and resources to this end, seeking new programs and strategies every year.

Then one of the ministers realized that they were working so hard to get young people to read their Bibles, no other adults from the congregation were reading the Bible with them. So instead of looking for the next curriculum or program, the leader created a space for youth (ages 14 to 22) to read the Bible with older members of the congregation (even up to age 82). Each week, in groups made up equally of the young and the older, they read two chapters of the Gospels and then discussed three questions: What do you find interesting? What is confusing? And where are you in this text?

In such reading groups, the young were no longer “millenials” or young bodies that represented “the spirit of youth,” but concrete persons. And the not-so-young were no longer those anxious to capture the youthful spirit as much as those seeking with concrete young people to dwell in the Word and encounter the Holy Spirit.

**NEITHER MILLENNIAL NOR BOOMER**

THIS IS BUT one example of what youth ministry inspired by Bonhoeffer might look like. There are surely others, many of which we’ve not even imagined yet, partly because we’re stuck in a paradigm created by millennial anxiety.

But our ministry with youth cannot be about getting millennials to come and stay so that they might do good things or revitalize the church or even evangelize the world. If these things happen, we rejoice. But as Bonhoeffer articulates in this first thesis, the church’s ministry to the young is primarily about encountering the living Word of God in the context of the whole church. If acts of justice, church revival, and evangelism are to happen, they will not run on the gas of youthfulness. If they happen, it will be the act of God through the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit calls young people to love the world as they are loved by Jesus Christ in the context of the whole church.

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 in the lives of the young, confessing our confusion and telling our own stories of God’s work in our lives. That’s when the Holy Spirit binds and unites us, calling us beyond our generational divides. For in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, millennial nor boomer.

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