

EVANGELIZING MILLENNIALS: STUDYING MILLENNIALS TO UNDERSTAND HOW  
RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH FRIENDSHIP EVANGELISM ARE THE BEST WAY TO  
BRING THE GOSPEL TO THEIR CULTURE

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## ABSTRACT

If you look online, in a library, even on a newsfeed, you'll very easily find resources that are dedicated to studies of the current millennial generation. Millennials are a hot topic of study right now as they become an area of concern for organizations, marketing specialists and others. But millennials are such an area of interest because the culture in which they have evolved makes them different from generations before them. That includes being religiously different. The paradigm of culture that surrounds them makes them an important topic of study for the church as much as it does for secular organizations, because the millennials are leaving our pews empty. The purpose of this paper is to look at different studies concerning millennials to show that friendship evangelism based on relationships is the best way to bring them the gospel.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the United States Census Bureau, the population of the millennial Generation (millennials) in 2015 was 83.1 million.<sup>1</sup> When you look online at the United States Census Bureau U.S. and World Population Clock<sup>2</sup> and do the math, that makes up just over 25% of the United States population (25.4%). That number makes millennials the largest generation to date, outnumbering even the Baby Boomers in 2015 by more than 7 million! By now, that difference may be even bigger.

That is a large number of people. That is a large number of people who are going to affect the future. This large number of people who are going to affect the future are also a very different people culturally from those who have come before them. For this reason, millennials have become a hot topic for many organizations in the last couple of decades, especially since the turn of the century, when the oldest millennials would have been graduating high school and entering into the world and workforce as adults.

Ever since the first decade of the millennium, books have continued to pour out, books such as *unChristian* (2007), *You Lost Me* (2011) and *Effective Generational Ministry* (2016). Organizations like Forbes Magazine, Time Magazine, and CNN have done many studies on the millennials. University specialists have done research and studies on millennials. Being a generation unlike any other, people want to know the millennials' likes, dislikes, shopping

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<sup>1</sup> Available from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>

<sup>2</sup> Available from <https://www.census.gov/popclock/>

patterns, and spending patterns. They want to know how to connect with millennials via technology, how millennials think, and how they connect with other people both inside and outside of their culture. Organizations like the ones mentioned need to understand millennials. It's their job to know and understand. And they've learned a lot.

When the data is looked at, it is clear that millennials are a unique group of people. One could almost say from what they have learned that millennials have created a paradigm shift in society. If people, companies, organizations and marketers want to reach out to, interact with and gain the trust of millennials, they need to overhaul their strategies and ways of thinking to be successful in their fields.

What does any of this have to do with Christianity and the church? Everything. By no means is the church trying to sell a product or trying to make a profit from its people. But the church does have something to offer the people, and the people need it—the gospel. While the church aims to share the gospel with everyone, right now, millennials make up the largest group of people it has to reach within this country. And, unfortunately, it seems that in many places no matter how much the church tries to change things to attract millennials and “sell” the gospel, the millennials “aren't buying it.”

According to the November 2017 WELS Connection, WELS's baptized membership has decreased 14% and communicant membership has decreased 9% in the last 25 years since its peaking in membership in 1990 (these are the years that millennials should have been filling our pews, but they are not and there lies we see the problem in numerical form). One of the biggest reasons the November 2017 WELS Connection provided is the “back door losses,” where people were once members of the WELS, but have slowly become inactive and drifted away or become

members of another Christian church.<sup>3</sup> And a large portion of back door losses are younger members.<sup>4</sup>

And this is not just a problem for the WELS. As already noted, WELS communicant membership is down 9% since its peak, the Lutheran church Missouri Synod is down more than 15%, the biggest Presbyterian denomination in the United States (Presbyterian church USA)<sup>5</sup> is down almost 50% along with the Episcopal church.<sup>6</sup> Even the Catholic church in the United States has seen an 11% drop in the number of young people (ages 18-29) since 1987, so that “[t]oday, almost half of U.S. Catholics are over 50 years old.”<sup>7</sup> And for those people who claim to adhere to a church body, participation has been declining for a half-century.<sup>8</sup>

The millennials are a whole quarter of the population. They are the next people to fill our pews. But if we can’t evangelize in an effective manner to them, our pews will remain empty. If the church is going to be successful in reaching out to millennials, it needs to learn about and understand millennials just as much as other organizations in the world do. It is imperative. We need to be proactive and can’t just wait for them to come to us. Christ tells us to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15). It is our job to go out and go to them.

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<sup>3</sup> Back door losses, according to the November 2017 WELS Connection have averaged about 8,000 losses per year since 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan R. Hein. “A Demographic Study of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.” 2017, 11.

<sup>5</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Largest Presbyterian Denomination Gives Final Approval for Sam-Sex Marriage,” *The New York Times*, March 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/us/presbyterians-give-final-approval-for-same-sex-marriage.html>, n.p.

<sup>6</sup> Available from the November 2017 WELS Connection. <https://vimeo.com/album/79546>

<sup>7</sup> Victoria Sgarro. “Who Are U.S. Catholics? Numbers Show a Surprising Shift,” *National Geographic*, September, 2015, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2015/09/150917-data-points-how-catholic-population-has-shifted-in-the-united-states/>, n.p.

<sup>8</sup> Hein, 18.

And so we want to be able to evangelize them in an effective manner as we go out, understanding their perspective and views and imitating Paul's words from 1 Corinthians, "Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible . . . I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:19, 22b-23).

The question, then, is how can we best accomplish this purpose of sharing the gospel by becoming all things to millennials? Studies done by both religious and secular organizations can help us understand millennials. But from studies done by organizations of a religious nature, we learn that many millennials have preconceived notions about the church and Christians that can turn them from the church if we do not overcome them. Using both those Christian studies and studies from secular organizations, we can discover what we can do to evangelize millennials so that we can overcome their preconceived notions, giving us a chance to share the gospel before they write us off. **The goal of this paper is to use those studies to demonstrate that we "can remove some of the barriers to evangelizing millennials through patient friendship making by not only the pastor, but also lay people. To help lay people in that endeavor, this paper will also encourage churches to promote friendship evangelism opportunities among their congregations to help them learn how to make lasting friendships with millennials.**

This paper does begin with a few assumptions. First, the millennials in discussion refer to mainly white millennials, as many other cultures within the millennial age group seem to retain those of the millennial Generation at a higher rate. Second, while there are a few different date ranges for millennials, the dates assumed for this paper capping the ends of the millennial

Generation are 1982 and 2000.<sup>9</sup> Third, not every individual of the millennial generation will fit exactly with what is described in this paper. There is no possible way to make a broad stroke description of an entire generation without having outliers or different opinions on the matter. The information and problems provided in this paper apply only to those millennials who fit most of studies done.

## DESCRIPTIONS OF MILLENNIALS

The first part in becoming all things to all people is to understand who the people are. Not just their names and homes, but their culture and worldview. The first part of becoming all things to millennials is to understand who they are. To understand them, it is important to understand the world that shaped them. The following descriptions of millennials looks at them from different categorical perspectives and not only describes who millennials are, but describes, really, how they have developed according to the circumstances around them.

### **Technology**

Technology in today's modern world almost appears to change exponentially, with new applications and devices for every occasion on the market. Millennials know this. How could they not? This is their life and always has been. Millennials have grown up with digital resources always available to them and always changing around them. It is a part of their lives. (It was maybe not as readily available to the older millennials when they were younger, but even they grew up amidst an upcoming paradigm shift and always saw it in action.) In fact, they are so connected to their technology and what connects them to others that 83% reportedly sleep with

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<sup>9</sup> Different sources cite different date ranges for millennials. This is the date range recognized by the United States Census Bureau as of 2015 and which is available at <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>



their cell phones!<sup>10</sup> It is for this reason that they would be labeled as, as Daniel P. Horan puts it, “digital natives.”<sup>11</sup> This technology revolution that millennials have been born into has a significant impact on their culture.

First, people have never been so connected before. With the introduction of cell phones and social media, you can stay connected to people no matter how far away they are. You can talk to them. You can text them. You can snapchat with them. It can be as if they are right there with you. And it’s practically instantaneous. These types of connections are a part of life that people (especially young people) have come to love and, perhaps, even crave. Look at Facebook, for example. In the last year, Facebook has reportedly come close to reaching 2 billion users!<sup>12</sup> That’s almost 30% of the world’s population in just fourteen years!

The connectivity that millennials have become accustomed to is so important (dare one say that it has even become necessary at this point from their perspective?), that they not only use their connectivity through social media and other avenues for keeping in touch. It has even become a way of making decisions and creating influence. For example, the most important thing that millennials want to know about a company before working there are the company’s cultures and values, and they are likely to follow it on social media to figure that out.<sup>13</sup> When trying to find a job, millennials will be influenced by the social media or the communication that

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<sup>10</sup> “Engaging Millennials in Ministry: National Research Study of Effective Ministry Models,” Siebert Lutheran Foundation, September 2015: 6.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel P. Horan, "Digital Natives and the Digital Self: The Wisdom of Thomas Merton for millennial Spirituality and Self-Understanding," *Merton Annual* 24, (November 2011): 83-111.

<sup>12</sup> Seth Fiegerman. “Facebook is Closing in on 2 Billion Users,” <http://money.cnn.com/2017/02/01/technology/facebook-earnings/index.html>, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Lisa Roepe. “Millennialize Your Recruiting,” *HR Magazine*, (2017): 46.

their potential employers use. It is for this reason that many organizations have begun using social media and the latest communication practices in the hiring process. They relate to millennials what an organization is about to influence potential candidates for a job:

“From an HR perspective, social media is about creating an aura that you are the employer of choice,” says Dan Schawbel, partner and research director at research firm Future Workplace Recruiters in New York City. Use social media to show your company’s personality, values and culture. “Millennials will look at your social media to see if they want to work there.”<sup>14</sup>

Even before the actual hiring of an applicant, HR workers have begun to use texting as a preferred mode of communication with millennials, because it is personal and immediate, and if you do not respond in a quick manner, you’ll lose them.<sup>15</sup> Millennials are used to getting responses, news, answers and more very quickly. “This generation has entered early adulthood fully steeped in technology, popular culture, social media, and a constant, 24-hour news cycle with short blasts of streamed information delivered on their phones, computers, laptops and tablets.”<sup>16</sup> Millennials are in a world that is moving at a fast pace and they have gotten caught up in it. Companies and organizations are trying to keep up with that fast pace, too. For example, Frank Amerndariz, Manpower’s regional vice president in Phoenix, says:

Manpower has streamlined its outreach to job applicants by using text messaging and website chats. . . . When a person applies for a job, he or she may opt in for a preferred form of communications. . . . Increasingly, text messaging is the top choice for candidates because of its immediacy. “If it’s a difficult process, it’s not going to be attractive to this generation,” he says. Slow response times can be irritating. . . . “You lose millennials when you do not respond right away.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Roepe, 47

<sup>15</sup> Roepe, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Siebert, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Roepe, 47.

## Diversity

Another characteristic of the millennial Generation which has become a norm is its diversity. Millennials have grown up in world where the norm is that there really is no specified norm. Things are constantly changing and there is always new information, from technology (as mentioned earlier) to the threats evolving in the world to historical discovery. There is always new information. Culture itself is about diversity. There are multiple cultures within the one culture that is the millennial generation. All these things have led millennials to come to accept that different is okay and that change is expected. In fact, different and change are even good. “It’s in vogue to be different, under the radar, and independent.”<sup>18</sup> This is the world they know. The social norm is really that there is no norm. This diversity has left the millennials open to acceptance of many things, such as ethnicity, lifestyles, truth, religion and more.

## Ethnicity

Ethnically, millennials are the most diverse generation in American history, with only 61% of millennials being white (compared to the generation before millennials being 70% white) and the rest being 19% Hispanic, 14% Black, and 5% Asian.<sup>19</sup> And that’s not all. There’s still the 1% which contains more ethnic backgrounds. Along with ethnic diversity and background comes a mix of cultures, worldviews, religions and other things. Millennials did not have to learn about different races and cultures and ethnicities, they were born into it, making it natural for them.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> David Kinnaman and Gaby Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity. . . And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 19.

<sup>19</sup> Elisabeth A. Nesbit Sbanotto and Craig L. Blomberg, *Effective Generational Ministry: Biblical and Practical Insights for Transforming Church Communities* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic), 170.

<sup>20</sup> Sbanotto and Blomberg, 170

They have friends, acquaintances, neighbors who are of different backgrounds, different histories, and different religions.

### Truth

With diversity comes acceptance and toleration. This is not a negative statement, but just a statement to show that there has been a progression. In this ethnically diverse society, millennials have learned to accept the different cultures that come with the acceptance of different peoples. The elements of these different cultures would include language, dress, food, and also religion and practices. Now, what Christianity might see as wrong, most millennials do not have a problem with. They have learned to accept as okay, normal, and maybe even good what others want to do with their own lives. There almost seems to be a “to each their own” mentality among millennials. Things like homosexuality, abortion, cohabitation and more things are all okay if that is what someone wants to do. What is right or wrong (truth) is relative and personal.<sup>21</sup> And this has caused some struggle for millennials.

The concept of what is true is something that millennials have had to struggle with. Truth is something that, for millennials, is always free to change. “For Xers, there was a time in their lived experience when someone or something was seen as the holder of truth. . . . But, for millennials, there has never been a time in their lived experience where the broader culture generally agreed on someone or something as a truth holder.”<sup>22</sup> Sbanotto and Blomberg, the

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<sup>21</sup> This paragraph is by no means to express that any of the listed sins are new. And by no means is it to say that the acceptance of sin anything new. The point this writer is trying to convey with this paragraph is that millennials (the emerging society) have become fine with certain sins because the culture of the country in which they have been born has no norm. Normal is expressed in whatever the other person says is normal. What they have come to know is that what others may say differently from you cannot be scrutinized as wrong, because people are just different. Difference is the new norm.

<sup>22</sup> Sbanotto and Blomberg, 181.

authors of *Effective Generational Ministry*, used eggs as a simple but effective example to illustrate this point. How many times have millennials seen news articles arguing life threatening effects of cholesterol in eggs, only to turn around and read an article touting eggs as a healthy source of protein. . . It's representative of millennials' experience with "news," "truth," and "facts."<sup>23</sup> That is an oversimplified example, but the point can still be seen: the truth for millennials is always changing. This is only made more difficult with the wide ethnic and societal diversity that exists among millennials. Because with the truth shifting and always ready to change, they do not know what the truth is and will be more ready to accept multiple things as true or accept as true whatever the latest “truth” is.

This has also caused the millennials to become more skeptical and inquisitive than most. When truth is personal and changing all around someone, as it is with millennials, it leads to many questions on things like policy, procedures, exceptions, purposes, etc.<sup>24</sup> This is not a negative trait. It is not *supposed* to be a direct challenge to authority. They are genuinely curious. They want to learn, not necessarily challenge.

## **Relationships**

### Community and Individualism

Millennials, like all people, need relationships. That is not new. But the way in which millennials seek out and build relationships has changed from relationship building in the past. While their need for relationships may be the driving force behind much of what they do, underneath their relationship connectedness lies fierce individualism.<sup>25</sup> They want to have close relationships

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<sup>23</sup> Sbanotto and Blomberg, 181.

<sup>24</sup> Sbanotto and Blomberg, 181-182

<sup>25</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, 22.

with other people of a group in which they fit. But they still want to be able to maintain their individualism within the group. The goal is to avoid getting so absorbed by the group that they no longer are their own person. In fact, it really is the need and the respect of others' needs to be an individual in the group that unites them as a similarity.<sup>26</sup>

This role of individualism in building relationships within a group (or within a community) is not viewed by millennials in the same way that the Boomers and Gen Xers viewed it. The idea of what a community is has almost flipfopped. Communities do not define who a person is, but who a person is defines what the group is. Instead of being part of a community and letting that community define who they are (or letting others define who they are by seeing them as part of that community), millennials define themselves who they are and then they can search out various communities accordingly.

This kind of individualism can seek to be part of different communities at the same time where the different likes of an individual are found. Elisabeth Sbanotto and Craig Blomberg describe it well in their book. They write:

The best word to describe millennials in community is one they use themselves, “tribe.” For this generation, they do not first primarily associate community with large organizations or institutions with whom they have affiliation (like Boomers), nor do they shun the idea that they might be like some other collective that they themselves haven't selected (like Xers). Instead they readily connect themselves with various smaller groups in which they find shared interests or characteristics. . . . Community for this cohort involves choices and options, allowing them to identify with various smaller groups simultaneously—and without long-term commitment, if they so choose. They may have a tribe from dance class, a tribe from their professional association, a tribe for their hiking and backpacking excursions, and so forth.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Sbanotto and Blomberg, 171.

<sup>27</sup> Sbanotto and Blomberg ,15-186

In other words, instead of joining a community and finding out who they are within the community they've joined, they join different communities based on who they think they are as an individual. And even in these tribes, individualism is important. Even in a tribe of similar interests, they want to be welcomed for who they really are, not just for a specific like or dislike.

This is why, even when joining a tribe based on a particular individualistic trait, one of the important things they look for in a tribe is the willingness to listen. Millennials like to be heard and feel as though their thoughts and opinions are considered. They want to feel welcomed for who they are. Once they begin to see that the group really does care about them, then they will start conforming to their beliefs and practices. Perhaps, even, it is not just about listening to them, but just hearing them. Being listened to does not mean that they need to be followed. They will express an opinion or a dissenting voice and expect others to do so as well. They then expect that the collective will choose the best suggestions and move forward from there. Being heard is of more importance than being right or being followed.

This kind of communication within a community allows for both the community connectedness and the individualism which millennials look to cross together. As they enjoy being part of a community where they can hear and be heard by others, that is also when they can find a deep-rooted sense of belonging to a group that works for a common goal. Millennials do not only want to be part of a group that has a singular purpose, but they want to be part of a group that collaborates to achieve that common goal.<sup>28</sup> They want to be part of something bigger. They do not just want to watch something bigger happen, but they want to be a collaborative part of it (again, even if that means their ideas are only heard with fairness and not followed).

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<sup>28</sup> Akanksha Sharma, "DESIGNING Learning for Millennials," *TD: Talent Development* 70, no.6 (June 2016): 63

## Social Media and Change

Because millennials build relationships via different communities, they have more numerous friendships and a wider range of friendships. And while one would think that more relationships would mean more fulfillment and happiness, having more relationships can actually bring more stress and unfulfillment for a millennial.

This stress begins with the expectation of change. We must remember that millennials are accustomed to change in the world. They are always ready for it and expecting it, even when making relationships. When they enter relationships, they are still expecting change, but not always a good change. They fear that at any given time the community they have entered may change and that they no longer may be part of the community, whether it is their choice or not.<sup>29</sup> And on top of that, most millennials are accustomed to a relationship which is based on social media. Relationships which happen mostly through social media make it hard for any individual to maintain a deep, intimate relationship with anyone in any of their tribes. These kinds of relationships, therefore, often contribute to what would only be an outward or superficial relationship.

For this reason, millennials, knowing it or not, crave personal relationships on a communal level that is more than just mere outward show. They want relationships where they can be truly, honestly accepted for who they are. They want relationships which are deeply rooted in more than just outward similarities. Sbanotto and Blomberg talk about how they can unknowingly be lonely with only social media. They write:

Although millennials have more of the benefits of increased social contacts through various tribes and technological resources (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, etc.), their actual level of connection is decreased along with their sense of safety. As such, community for millennials is something they deeply seek. . . But they do not bring with them the sense of

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<sup>29</sup> Sbanotto and Blomberg ,186.



safety and security that previous generations had. . . From the perspective of older cohorts, the community relationships that millennials had may be wider and more numerous, but they are seen as far less intimate. And, from a millennial perspective, they see themselves as "lonelier, and more isolated individually."<sup>30</sup>

## MILLENNIALS AND CHURCH

That is a very quick and broad description of millennials. One can go into so much more depth when studying millennials. One can find books, papers, and studies on just one of the topics above. However, the main substance of information is there so that we can take a look at the most important part: millennials and the church.

It would seem that America is now a post-Christian society. Many non-Christian religions are increasing in number. Those who do claim to be affiliated with a Christian church are often not actively participating. And the number of "unaffiliated" (those claiming no religion, the "Nones") is growing faster.<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps that is true. Perhaps God is taking his Word from a disinterested nation and taking it to where the swine will not trample on the pearl of his Word (Matthew 7:6). But the church doesn't stop. We continue to learn the most effective way to share the gospel in our circumstances. With an even larger generation than the last coming forward and being the field ripe for harvest, we have an incredibly large opportunity to share the gospel.

Sharing the gospel with millennials certainly has challenges. But there have always been challenges to sharing the gospel. What can really make sharing the gospel with millennials not only challenging but even frustrating is that the church theoretically has everything that millennials want. Yet, they do not seem to come. And trying to solve that predicament has

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<sup>30</sup> Sbanotto and Blomberg, 187.

<sup>31</sup> Hein, 18-19.

challenges that the church needs to overcome by study and with patience. In this work of sharing the gospel, the opposition that we face is kind of narrowed down to two things.

First, we must fight what this writer calls “apathy toward organized religion” (in his article “Candy Machine God, or, Going to Church without Going to Church: Millennial and the Future of the Christian,” Chad Lakies calls this apathy “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism,” which will be the term used below). Millennials do not view religion the same way that generations before have viewed religion. To millennials, doctrine and denomination are not as important in religion, including in Christianity (this will be explained below). Instead, they think religion is about being spiritual, that is, at least having some sort of recognition of something that is bigger and greater than we are on this earth. If you do not belong to a specific congregation or denomination, there is no problem with that. It ultimately doesn’t matter. No matter what you believe, being spiritual (as defined above) is the important part.

Second, we must fight certain preconceived notions and assumptions that people have about Christianity. Unfortunately, people see Christians’ flaws and it causes them to create negative perceptions that keep them from giving us a chance to share the gospel.

### **We Have What They Want**

Let’s review what millennials are looking for. What millennials are ultimately looking for is a sincere, deep-rooted relationship within a community that still allows them to be the individuals they are. Within this community, they want to work together for a common goal, especially one that aims to help others.

In the church, people can be both an individual and someone who is part of a larger group that cares about each other very deeply and sincerely. The church has opportunities that exist to put the faith into practice with each other and use various gifts from the Lord in numerous ways

for a common good. Individualism. Community. Working together for a common good or need. That fits so much of what millennials are looking for in the world. What millennials want in this life is how Scripture describes the church in many places.

The church has always seen its members as individuals who are special on their own. And that already starts in the eyes of Jesus. In John 10, Jesus says, “The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. . . I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me— just as the Father knows me and I know the Father” (John 10:3, 14-15a). Jesus looks at each and every individual in the church as an important part of his kingdom. He even calls each of them by name. People like it when their pastors can remember their names. How much more important and personal to think that our own Savior always knows each of us by name and leads us personally as our Good Shepherd?

What’s more is that each person also plays an important part in the church. Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 describes spiritual gifts. There are many different gifts and each member can be recognized for their own gift. Every gift is valuable for the church. Each with their own gifts, each individual member of the body is important in its function. Paul says, “If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be. . . The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I do not need you!’ And the head cannot say to the feet, ‘I do not need you!’ On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor” (1 Corinthians 12:17, 21-23). Each individual member of Christ’s church is as important as the others. Each gift and person is indispensable to the body of Christ. And there need not be any fear of rejection from this community. Paul makes it very clear that we need each and every

one of us, and Jesus makes it clear that he wants each and every one of us. That's why Jesus was willing to go after just one little sheep in the Parable of the Wandering Sheep (Matthew 18:10-14).

The church is also very diverse in terms of backgrounds, culture, peoples, and ethnicities. Revelation 7:9 says, "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb." And with people of different backgrounds, the church can be diverse in styles and events and with different worship components. For anyone to say that the church is not concerned about individualism and diversity would just be false!

Yet, there is an obvious sense of community within the church, a stronger community than what someone will find outside of the church. Paul writes to the Corinthians, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:13). Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 12 that the body of Christ should have no division, but equal concern for one another (verse 25). In fact, he says that there is such a tight knit sense of community as one body that, even if one suffers or rejoices, they all suffer or rejoice (verse 26)!

And most importantly, we have an unchanging truth. Above, it was said that change is a constant for millennials, and change can cause stress for them as they live with superficial, social media-sustained relationships. In the church, each relationship is as deep as the love of Christ, and the truth never changes (Luke 21:33). The gospel truth will remain forever the same, and the power of the gospel will always enrich our hearts with true love for our neighbor. Anyone in the church can rest assured that they will always be accepted—they and their individual gifts and person. And when they come to know that truth, then all other "truths" that are subject to change

do not have to cause them stress again. Truths that will change will mean nothing compared to what they will learn in the church. But, there are some unfortunate circumstances that are keeping the millennials from coming to grasp that message. We may have what they want, but if they think it is not important to be a part of it in a communal way or that Christians are not as good as they claim to be, evangelizing can be difficult.

### **“Moralistic Therapeutic Deism”**

In “Candy Machine God,” Chad Lakies describes what the new religion among young Americans is. He borrows the term “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” from a book called *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian Smith, the lead researcher behind the National Study on Youth and Religion (NSYR).<sup>32</sup> The idea of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is that moralism (being a good person) has good consequences, the church is to be therapeutic concerning your situations in life, and God is distant but benevolent. In other words, it is right to do good to all and it will come back to you in a positive way some day.<sup>33</sup> If you are having trouble, go to church to be lifted up. Then you can feel better about your troubled situation and keep being moral. And if you need God and really want to go to him, he will be there for you. If you choose not to go to him, it is not a big deal.

Lakies writes that this unfortunate attitude has been passed down from the millennials’ parents. From studies that Lakies makes mention of, he shows that this Moralistic Therapeutic Deism evolved over time from Evangelicals. Evangelicals in the past have tried to make their

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<sup>32</sup> Chad Lakies, “Candy machine God, or, Going to Church Without Going to Church: Millennials and the Future of the Christian Faith,” *Missio Apostolica* 21, no. 1 (May 2013): 15.

<sup>33</sup> Christian Smith describes in his book that the new faith (or the goal) of life is to be happy. Moralism will make you happy because it has positive consequences as you resolve problems and get along amiably with other people.

message more relevant to hearers by focusing on the needs of the individuals. Thus, church just became therapeutic.<sup>34</sup>

This “definition” of millennials’ religion today fits with the research, which describes millennials as spiritual. According to the research, it is not Christianity they oppose, but it is having to be part of an organized religion. According to the Siebert Foundation, 77% of millennials reportedly believe in God (while only 64% believe in the absolute existence of God). But 74% say that there is more than one way to interpret their faith, 59% believe that other religions may be true, and (of the ones who claim to be Christian) 60% say that they are either indifferent or spiritual but not part of a religious group.<sup>35,36</sup>

The data shows that religion is important, but church is not. For one, millennials are not very fond of institutions. Second, as we see millennials join communities based on the idea of tribes, we also see that practice from them as they often attend worship in one community and go to worship in another community the next time. But they do not believe that they must become a member of that community or congregation. They are more interested in living out the gospel in general in their lives instead of just staying committed to a single congregation and its community. Consider what this interviewee from the Siebert Foundation’s research said,

“The number one thing I have learned is that young adults think about church engagement as a spoke on a wheel. Traditionally, denominations and churches have been

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<sup>34</sup> Focusing on the needs of individuals from the pulpit is important. But it must be done through the lens of the gospel, offering power from the gospel to live this life with help from the Holy Spirit and the comfort of Christ. The problem is when this help for the individual becomes a social gospel.

<sup>35</sup> Siebert, 7-9.

<sup>36</sup> Millennials are often called “nones,” because they do not adhere to a particular church body. However, it is important to note that “none” does not mean they are not religious, but that they just are not part of an organized body or religious organization. According to the Pew Research Center only 6% of millennials claim to be atheist or agnostic (available from <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>) (which is unfortunately 6% higher than the church would like it to be, of course!).

at the center. Now, young adults say God, community is the center.’ [Being unapologetically Lutheran and Christian, she goes on to say,] ‘We have to change. I want my denomination to exist in the future, though the kingdom of God will exist regardless. We have to expand our definition of church. . . it may look more like the Book of Acts than people joining and giving to a congregation.’<sup>37</sup>

So, it would seem that many of the millennials are spiritual and like the idea of the church, but they do not seem to like the idea of having to go to a church.

### **Preconceived Assumptions About Christianity**

The second battle we face is one that might have already been brewing by the time we got there. That battle is against the assumptions and preconceived notions that people (especially millennials) have about Christians. David Kinnaman is president of the Barna Group (The Barna Group is an evangelical Christian polling firm based in Ventura, California). In his book, *unChristian*, he points out from his research that these negative opinions are not just gathered from television or from a select few. From his research, he found that most millennials have firsthand experience with Christians and their faith. According to Kinnaman, most of the negative perceptions of Christians come from their firsthand experience.

Kinnaman writes that 59% of millennials outside the church had their negative views influenced by experiences at church, and 50% were influenced by some sort of relationship with Christians. There was 40% who were influenced based on what their parents told them.<sup>38</sup> While trying to find the real origin of these negative perceptions, Kinnaman polled millennials ages 16-29. He found that many millennials outside the church find it mostly to be hypocritical (saying one thing and doing another), too focused on getting converts, antihomosexual, sheltered, too

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<sup>37</sup> Siebert, 16-17.

<sup>38</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, 31.

political, and judgmental.<sup>39,40</sup> Others, like Armand Boehme, found that some do not like church because they were hurt by someone in the church. Therefore, they do not feel that church is a safe place to discuss doubts and uncertainties, that they receive half-baked answers to tough and involved questions, and that the church only preaches at them instead of communicating with them.<sup>41</sup>

These attitudes will shut millennials down and keep them from listening. They do not think Christians care about them on a personal level, but only as a number. Instead of wanting to convert them out of love, our conversations are seen more as “persuasion sessions,”<sup>42</sup> and one third of millennials outside the church believe that Christians do not show genuine interest in them during these “sessions.”<sup>43</sup> One millennial from Kinnaman’s studies was recorded as saying, “Christianity has become bloated with blind followers who would rather repeat slogans than actually feel true compassion and care. Christianity has become marketed and streamlined into a juggernaut of fearmongering that has lost its own heart”<sup>44</sup>

These are many of the views expressed by David Kinnaman’s studies, and, unfortunately, it reflects on the Savior. Many believe that Christians no longer reflect the love that Jesus taught

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<sup>39</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, 29-30.

<sup>40</sup> These views of millennials outside the church already seem like a major issue, but more than that, a large proportion of young Christians *within* the church find it also to be antihomosexual (70%), judgmental (87%), hypocritical (saying one thing and doing another)(85%), old-fashioned (78%), too involved in politics (75%), out of touch with reality (72%), insensitive to others (70%), boring (68%), not accepting of others faiths (64%), and confusing (61%). While I do not have any numbers for WELS, I fear this is something that is a bigger problem than it may seem.

<sup>41</sup> Armand J. Boehme, "The Church and the Culture of the Millennials: The Best or Worst of Times?" *Missio Apostolica* 21, no. 1 (May 2013): 103.

<sup>42</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, 33.

<sup>43</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, 77.

<sup>44</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, 15.



about in the Bible. It seems we do not reflect him anymore but only a desire to put names on our rosters.

### HOW CAN WE EVANGELIZE TO MILLENNIALS?

“[God] wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:4). “I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible . . . I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Corinthians 9:19b, 22b-23). Both of these passages are true. Both apply to the church. Jesus became all things to all people to save all. Paul became all things to save who he could. The church needs to learn who people are that it might become all things to all people.

Now, the leaders of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod are much smarter than this writer. They have had much more experience, are much more intelligent, and are conducting studies better than this writer has probably researched. There is no doubt that they are learning how the WELS can become all things to all people that people might be saved. However, this writer is convinced that this large generation of people—a people who have concerns about losing tribes, about changing truth, about being open and real, and about feeling loved and legitimately cared for—what this people needs are relationships. All of what they crave starts on a personal level. All of the things they dislike about the church could be changed by just one person who is willing to listen and create a relationship and gain rapport with someone who needs it. Friendship evangelism gives them a chance to voice their concerns, ask their questions, and have a conversation with a Christian in a safe place without feeling like they must go up against an antihomosexual, out-of-touch, irrelevant, hypocritical or judgmental church.

What does friendship evangelism look like? There can be a lot of components and multiple levels to friendship evangelism. There are the personal relationships that are made between members and the people of their everyday lives. There is training that can take place at a synodical level with professional help to learn about friendship evangelism. There are little things that can be done just within a congregation on a Sunday morning to show guests and visitors that they care on a friendship-like level. There are multiple levels to friendship evangelism that can be effective if an effort is made and it is made a priority. All of these can be very effective if they are made a priority and an active effort is made.

### **Congregational Solutions**

On a congregational level, a church needs to appear friendly and personal. The best chance to show how friendly and caring a congregation is would be on Sunday morning as guests come through the front door. Greeters are there to intentionally appear friendly. It is their job to shake hands and say hello. But this is a job for more than just ushers. Every member of a congregation should be taught how to look for guests and visitors, making it a priority to say hello and welcome them.

There are books even written on this topic and for training greeters and ushers to help people feel welcome. Northwestern Publishing House provides, for example, *Welcome to Our Church: A Handbook for Greeters and Ushers* by Annette Schroeder. The principles in a book like this could be applied to all members, not just those who are signed up to be greeters and ushers.

It would be impractical to expect everyone in your church to buy and read a book. It would also be impractical to have every member drown a visitor with handshakes and hellos

every Sunday. That would be overwhelming. Much like a rotating schedule for ushers and greeters, the ideal would be to find a handful of members who are naturally friendly and warm and put them on a schedule. Personally, describe to them the point of having a friendly church for guests and visitors and ask if they would be willing to serve on a rotational schedule, not as a greeter, but just someone to welcome guests in general. This would be someone who is an extra smile outside of the greeters who would intentionally look for visitors and make a point of saying hello (and preferably even more of a conversation would follow).

First, this would involve multiple people in a congregation in a natural way of using friendship evangelism. Second, millennials do not like hypocrisy, but want authenticity.<sup>45</sup> That is not to say that greeters and ushers are hypocritical. But having members besides those meant to stand in the narthex and say “Hi” can help add an authentic feel to the friendliness of the church. And with a rotational schedule, it wouldn’t be the same people every time.

This sounds like a simple task but getting people to step out of their comfort zone and go up to strangers on a Sunday morning can be daunting to many people. By intentionally seeking out and asking those who would have a natural knack for such a purpose, a base would be started, and they can help encourage others to intentionally greet visitors and guests.

### **Personal Relationships**

The personal relationships which congregational members have is the biggest and most important component of friendship evangelism. The relationships on Sunday morning are only a component, but they are not nearly as deeply rooted as pure friendship evangelism between two acquaintances. And it also only applies to those millennials who have come on Sunday morning.

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<sup>45</sup> Siebert, 13.

Friendship evangelism is probably the most effective at reaching the largest number of people in a single week (outside of canvassing door-to-door, perhaps, where a congregation can knock on thousands of doors in a week if they push hard). It is the most effective at offering a gospel invitation instead of just offering for people to come visit your church. And above all, it is the most personal. If Christians are going to overcome the negative notions that millennials have about Christians, personal relationships are the most effective way to do it.

In his demographic study of the WELS, Pastor Hein narrows down the obstacles overcome by friendship evangelism to two main points.

First, FRAN<sup>46</sup> outreach will typically include a gospel witness effort. A newspaper ad can invite someone to visit your congregation. It probably will not proclaim law and gospel. But when a member of your church shares Christ with a friend or relative or neighbor, that is exactly what happens. And God's Word is powerful.

Secondly, more than any other type of outreach, FRAN outreach removes an obstacle that many prospects have to their visiting your congregation – the fear of not knowing anyone. If they come because of FRAN outreach, the prospect *does* know someone.<sup>47</sup>

If millennials want to see that Christians really care with a deep-rooted love, there is no better way than to hear it from the lips of one who they work with, who they go to school with, or who lives next to them. This style of evangelism offers the opportunity to share the gospel with trust already established between two people. Millennials can know that their friend sees them as more than just a name on a church roster. Millennials can have a chance to openly discuss and ask questions without feeling like an organization is about to pass judgment on them. Millennials have the chance to see someone who is more transparent and honest about their

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<sup>46</sup> FRAN Evangelism is a term used by Pastor Hein to refer to friendship evangelism. FRAN stands for friends, relatives, associates, and neighbors. The term FRAN helps members to categorize whom they wish to talk with, witness to, and invite to church.

<sup>47</sup> Hein, 16.

flaws. The preconceived notions that millennials have about Christianity may not completely be gone. But they are less likely to dismiss listening to someone they have already established a relationship with than a general Christian population trying to tell them what they need to believe.

Friendship evangelism is not only more effective because it is personal, but the one witnessing is more knowledgeable about the situation. They have a better chance of knowing a person's spiritual background, a person's physical and spiritual needs, and even maybe a more effective way of approaching a person based on the personality or demeanor of the one to whom they wish to witness. As Kinnamen puts it, it is not only telling them about Jesus, but creating an environment in which relationships facilitate spiritual formation.<sup>48</sup>

Spiritual formation takes time. One might even dare to say that this is the biggest benefit to friendship evangelism. The time put into it is natural as one converses with a close friend or acquaintance. The friendship can offer many opportunities to do the work of an evangelist. David Valleskey speaks of friendship evangelism in his book, *We Believe—Therefore We Speak*. He summarizes the benefit of the time which friendship evangelism naturally has worked into it. He writes:

[A] setting of friendship allows for an unhurried and repeated sharing of the gospel. You do not have to say it all at once, if the circumstances do not seem to warrant it. You do not have to force the situation. The Lord willing, you will have more than one opportunity to point your friend to the cross. . . . What has to be carefully planned and structured in a congregational setting can happen naturally friend to friend. . . . [F]riendship permits a person to observe a Christian in action at close hand over a period of time—for months, even years. As you let the light of your faith shine. . . . in time your friend may be led to ask questions about the source of your joy, or strength, or hope, or patience, or courage, or whatever he may have observed in you. . . . You can point your

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<sup>48</sup> Kinnaman and Lyons, 83.

friend to the source and power of your life—forgiveness of sins and new life through Jesus Christ.<sup>49</sup>

Over time, friendship evangelism allows someone to see their friend’s ups and downs and highs and lows. What a perfect window which opens! In those moments, those friends do not want to go to a stranger. It does not matter how much spiritual training that stranger has had. People want to go to a friend.

### Synod Resources

The Wisconsin Synod has been working on this already. While friendship evangelism is more natural than most evangelism styles, the synod does have resources available to aid in helping teach congregations how to do friendship evangelism. Churches can find two main resources from the synod on the WELS website. The first one is the School of Outreach provided by the WELS Commission on Evangelism. This is a four phase, two-day workshop. The two days are scheduled several months apart to help congregations set up an intentional plan to implement an outreach strategy. The second workshop hits especially on friendship evangelism. Two of the three goals are goals that congregational members can participate in and benefit from in their roles for friendship evangelism.<sup>50</sup>

These are meant for whole congregations to participate in. And when these Schools of Outreach are coming to a congregation’s area, it is only in the best interest of the congregation and, ultimately, God’s kingdom to participate in them. Over 200 events have taken place through

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<sup>49</sup> David Valleskey, *We Believe—Therefore We Speak* (Milwaukee, WI: Northwestern Publishing House, 1995), 114-115.

<sup>50</sup> “School of Outreach: General Information,” <https://evangelism.welsrc.net/downloads-evangelism/school-of-outreach/> n.p.

this School of Outreach, having served over 1,344 congregations (this number would include congregations who have attended more than once).<sup>51</sup>

Currently, if a pastor or pastors would like one of these Schools of Outreach to take place in their area, they are directed to contact their District Evangelism Coordinator or the Director of the WELS Commission on Evangelism to schedule a session. What would be wonderful is to see this opportunity utilized by every congregation. It would be beneficial for the WELS not only to create a schedule for these events based on the invitation of pastors, but on a rotating schedule set up by the Commission on Evangelism itself. Make it intentional. Make it more available to more congregations on a regular basis. Again, many congregations have attended more than once. If the synod were to make it intentional in that way, perhaps more congregations would have a chance to attend and many congregations would have the chance to refresh what they have learned before.

This School of Outreach also offers one more benefit, and that benefit is for the millennials. If millennials like gathering in a community around a common good and want participation in something greater, this could do it. It is a terrific way to show millennials that we as a church body do participate in something greater and offer opportunities to personally partake in that work. Further, it is not uncommon for multiple congregations to attend a single School of Outreach event. This kind of gathering allows for millennials to see the bigger picture of which they are a part and also be part of many tribes and relationships outside of their own congregation.

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<sup>51</sup> “200<sup>th</sup> School of Outreach,” <https://wels.net/200th-school-of-outreach/>, n.p.

The WELS also offers help in the area of friendship evangelism through Martin Luther College. Martin Luther College offers online courses as part of their Evangelism Certificate Program. For just over \$300 dollars per credit, an actual course in friendship evangelism can be available for anyone.<sup>52</sup> An individual may not be able to pay for this out of his own pocket, nor should he. The goal of having a lay member go through such a course would be for evangelism purposes. It wouldn't, therefore, be unreasonable for a church to put aside some money in an evangelism budget. Knowing that Martin Luther College has their Certificate Program scheduled through the Fall of 2022, it would not be unreasonable to plan accordingly and send even just a couple of people through evangelism courses every year.

To this writer's understanding, many people are still unaware of these Schools of Outreach or even the friendship evangelism courses. One seminary professor once said in class that lay members want to help more than we think. And Pastor Hein's research would agree with that statement, stating that "there is strong evidence many WELS members would be open to doing more FRAN evangelism if they had the training."<sup>53</sup> If it is the case that many are unaware of these opportunities but would like to help, then informative materials should be made available to lay members at church. This could help to better encourage members to participate in these opportunities and help make them known. If nothing else, doing this will open up a discussion and dialogue about the work of evangelism for the congregation.

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<sup>52</sup> There are, of course, entrance requirements for these courses. One wishing to take these courses at Martin Luther College must 1) hold congregational membership with good standing in WELS or in another denomination in fellowship with WELS 2) be a pastor, staff minister, staff ministry certificate student of the WELS or denomination in fellowship with WELS, or have your pastor send in a pastor's recommendation 3) have a high school diploma or higher 4) and have the ability to take online courses by having a computer and internet access. But it seems unlikely that anyone wanting to sign up for these online courses would not meet these requirements.

<sup>53</sup> Hein, 22



## Cons of Friendship Evangelism

There are some obstacles to friendship evangelism. First, for the most part, members of a congregation do only come into contact with so many people during the day. Eventually, they would have to reach out to new groups to keep working friendship evangelism. Unfortunately, it could almost seem like a pyramid organization, where an employee needs to gain employees under them to keep their business actually growing.

Further, some people might feel uncomfortable sharing their faith with their close acquaintances. They may either feel that they do not know someone well enough (such as a work acquaintance) or they may be worried about any negative effects it may have on their relationship.

No negative aspect to evangelism should be ignored. However, these overall are minor setbacks. As for needing to know more people to share the gospel with them, this does not mean that the gospel stops spreading. The person with whom one shares the gospel will know other people. And they will have an opportunity to share the gospel with people that the original witness may never have imagined! Further, one who is nervous about sharing their faith should never be put down. It can be hard. The point about the time which friendship evangelism can utilize can also benefit those trying to witness. They also will have time in that friendship to grow in their faith and build up the courage and strength to share the gospel. The confidence with which someone will listen to a Christian when they are a friend is often a two-way street with millennials. As long as you share your faith in love, they will most likely listen without condemnation. That is exactly what millennials are looking for, so they will mostly likely treat their friends the same way.

## CONCLUSION

Numbers in WELS regarding membership are declining. No one questions that unfortunate trend. If these trends continue for the next two decades, “in 2036 WELS would have a baptized membership of 257,220, a loss of 106,777 members from WELS’ current baptized membership (a 29.33% decline). At that time, WELS would have a communicant membership of 212,421 members, down 77,442 from the current membership (a 26.71% decline).”<sup>54</sup> Is this the WELS’ fault? By no means. However, we as a church do have a wonderful opportunity not only to turn those numbers around for WELS, but for the church!

This is by no means our doing completely. We do not talk people into faith. The Holy Spirit does the hard work and converts people when they hear the Word. But we can learn a lot about millennials and reach a large generation to do our part in aiding the Holy Spirit as we help to turn the church around. ““Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation!” our Savior says (Mark 16:15).

This is not passive. We participate actively in the mission of the church. We are active in this mission as we learn about culture around us and work with our circumstances to reach as many as possible with the gospel. They are such a large window of opportunity for us. And there is no good reason to think that we should just sit by and come to the acceptance of a post-Christian world.

“Behold, I am coming soon,” says our Lord (Revelation 22:12). We do not know how soon that is. Now is the opportunity to learn what people need so that we can become all things to all people like Paul had become. Millennials are the ones we need to reach. We have reached previous generations before (and continue to do so), but the world is changing. Millennials have

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<sup>54</sup> Hein, 28.

changed with it. They are beginning to be the new challenge for evangelism. Let us, then, take advantage of that opportunity we have by listening to the studies of millennials. For a generation who needs deep-connected relationships with honesty and community which recognizes individuals, we have what they want! Millennials crave the gospel whether they know it or not! Friendship evangelism can reach them effectively with the gospel, and it can be a fairly simple (not always easy, but simple) tactic! With God's help, we can reach a large generation with the gospel, and by our work blessed by Christ, we can become all things to all people that we might save some.

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