

“THE MILLENNIAL PASTORS ARE COMING!”

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A new generation of students has begun attending seminary: the Millennials. They were different in college, they are different in seminary, and they will be different as pastors and church leaders. When Andy commented recently about these exciting young seminarians at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS), Ed Janzen, chaplain at Conrad Grebel University College, replied, “just wait, there are more wonderful students to come!”

But as we interact with the Millennials exploring and preparing for church leadership, we wonder if our churches will adapt to the unique perspectives and approaches which they will bring to ministry. What can congregations do to prepare for Millennial leaders, whether laypersons from within or pastors called from beyond?

First we must ask, “Who are the Millennials? How are they different from previous generations of young people?”

In *Millennials Rising* (2000), authors Neil Howe and William Strauss suggest that North American young people born between 1982-2001 tend to be realistically optimistic, to be less violent, to value relationships with adults, to appreciate social and religious institutions, and to be less sexually charged than previous generations of youth and young adults. Having grown up in a pluralistic, global context, and having been subject to high standards of behaviour at school and at home, this generation is tolerant yet self-confident, values teamwork yet is independently competent.

How might this generation be different as pastors and church leaders? And most importantly, how might the church prepare for their arrival?

Call and Pastoral Identity

A major issue for any new pastor is that of clarifying call and solidifying pastoral identity. This task is more complicated for most young adults, who may still be establishing their personal identity. Many young adults coming to seminary have experienced an “outer call”(people have affirmed their gifts for ministry) but they may still be trying to align that with an “inner call” or sense that ministry is indeed what God is leading them toward. Until both the outer and inner calls are in place, and until the pastor owns their identity in ministry, the pastor might feel that he or she is just “playing” a role.

In addition, today’s young adults have a more fluid sense of vocation than people in previous generations. Millennials expect that they will change careers during their lifetime and the wide array of vocational choices before them can be almost paralyzing. One seminary student described the vocational decision not as “What will I do with my life?” but “What will I do *next*?”

As young adults enter pastoral ministry their congregations can play a vital role in nurturing their pastoral identity. We can affirm the specific gifts and the personal qualities we notice which make them effective pastors. It is important to give young pastors opportunities to experience and reflect on all the facets of congregational ministry, rather than compartmentalizing their gifts and roles (for example, expecting ministry only with youth).

Also, congregations can make sure that several people (mentors, spiritual director, etc.) are tending and helping to clarify the pastor’s sense of call. If the congregation explicitly acknowledges the continuing

nature of the faith journey, Millennials will feel freed to continue with their faith exploration. This will strengthen them for ministry in a global, complex world.

Mentoring and Collaboration

Young adults value having mentors. As children and youth, Millennials learned about relationships and the world in a highly structured fashion and under constant adult supervision. In school they worked more frequently in groups. They are a generation with “helicopter parents,” hovering and managing their children’s lives. University and college educators have observed that since 2000 parents of students have been much more involved in students’ on-campus lives (for example, by communicating daily by cell phone and e-mail). They have also noted that millennial students are more likely to look to teachers for relationships and role models, not just information. Millennials will seek mentors who listen and help them discern, not just tell them what to do.

Because vocational discernment is now often protracted, mentoring relationships are significant later into life. In the 1950s most young adults had completed education and were settling into a career by their early twenties; today this does not often happen until late twenties or early thirties. To complicate things, young adults appear to have endless vocational options on paper, while in reality, career markets can be fickle. The period of vocational discernment is both prolonged and complex, suggesting that mentors play valuable roles in many young women’s and men’s lives.

Congregations need to be patient and affirming, understanding that vocational formation is still occurring. We can encourage and honour mentoring relationships with elders and older pastors, recognizing that while this generation values the wisdom of their elders, it does not mean they will uncritically adopt the wisdom they receive.

Since young adults value mutually accountable relationships and transparent ecclesial structures, the CEO model of team ministry may not be effective in best utilizing and engaging their gifts and passions. Congregations can prepare for Millennial leaders by developing collaborative team ministries that are not centered around the lead pastor.

Authority

Most people assume that young adults, by nature, will react against the authority of others. But Millennials are less likely to challenge authority than previous generations, unless authority is misused or uncritically exercised (for example, an authority figure who seems to think there is only one correct perspective, or is not aware of dynamics of race, class, gender, etc.).

Millennials in the church value the office or role of pastor, and want it to have integrity. Just as they look for authenticity in mentors, they want to have continuity between what they profess and how they live. They are also more willing to embrace their own authority, but they hold it humbly, tentatively. They do not assume that theirs is the only voice or perspective.

The attempt by young pastors to draw in the voices and gifts of many people may not be valued by congregational members who expect their pastor to exercise authoritative leadership. In Janeen’s first year of ministry (at age 25), she led an adult Sunday school class on worship. When she invited members of the class to suggest issues for the summer sermon series, an older man responded, “If you don’t know what to preach about, we hired the wrong pastor!” How much more helpful it would have been had the member responded, “You may get a variety of ideas from us, but we trust your choices and decisions.”

Congregations can prepare for Millennial leadership by examining expectations of authority figures, reevaluating patterns of authority within the church, and making space for more collaborative approaches.

Truth and Scripture

Like it or not, absolute truth is no longer assumed by most young adults. Integrity and truth exist, but they exist by what is lived and what is done, not by touting some abstract universal principle. Millennials also value story and metaphor, and the arts as a way of seeing truth. Scripture is true and relevant for young adults when Christians apply it in healthy ways to their context, and live it humbly, in other words.

As pastors, Millennials will promote open dialogue, mutual encouragement and mutual accountability. One young adult recently commented: “We want to contribute to the church now, to engage with all generations about the issues that are divisive and to be taken seriously by those who have been in leadership for many years. It is because we value the church that we challenge the church. If the church remains closed to such challenges, or tells us to wait, some Millennials won't stick around.”

The church can embrace Millennials by practicing a humble thirst for reading the Scriptures in community and by living God's justice and mercy in our everyday lives. We can engage in authentic dialogue where the hope of convincing others of our perspectives is matched by the possibility of being won over by theirs.

Intimacy, Singleness and Sexuality

Intimacy, singleness and sexuality are important issues for young adults. Many young adults entering the ministry will be single. Church life is typically family-oriented, often making it awkward for singles of any age, especially those entering a community without already-established relationships.

Dating someone from within the congregation can be complicated by expectations for the role of pastor and by public attention to the relationship. Dating outside the church can be equally challenging, since prime time church life overlaps significantly with prime time for social life.

An overarching challenge is that the church officially maintains a 1950s sexual morality but otherwise functions in a 2000s economy and culture. In the past century the average number of years between when young men and young women are biologically sexually mature and when the church condoned sexually activity (that is, in marriage), has increased from between 2-5 years to 15 years on average. The delay in marriage is attributed to socioeconomic factors, such as pressure to be comfortable financially and on a career track before taking on the responsibility of marriage and family.

But sexuality may not even be the core issue. Many Millennials would say intimacy, a category that includes sexuality but is not reduced to it, is more important. Young adults value intimate relationships with both genders, marked by genuine caring, honesty and openness. Some of them are attracted to living in intentional community in order to develop deeper connections with others.

The church can help Millennial pastors by talking more frequently and more openly about intimacy, singleness and sexuality. Congregations need to acknowledge and address the tensions most young adults feel between biological and cultural impulses to be sexually active on the one hand, and traditional Christian prohibitions to sex outside of marriage on the other. Specifically for single Millennial pastors, this may entail beginning conversations about what behaviours may be appropriate (e.g. co-habitation).

Congregations can also empower single young adult pastors to protect personal social time, and not expect them to be engaged in church activities most evenings and weekends. Finally, the church can expand our understanding of intimacy beyond physical contact to include spiritual, emotional and intellectual communion.

Inclusion and Accountability

Today's young adults tend to be more tolerant of differences. Having experienced more diversity, they expect and even value it. They are able to be with people who are different from themselves without

automatically adopting their behaviors or cutting off the relationship.

For many young adults in the church, inclusion of marginalized people is a justice issue. Young adults who are alienated from the church often cite the church's judgmental attitudes and actions as the reason. And yet, young adults value accountability within the community. They want a place in the church to talk about the lifestyle choices they face and evaluate them from a faith perspective. But they are asking for conversation, not condemnation.

Congregations can expect that some conversations which Millennial pastors initiate may feel unsettling to some members. We can withhold anxious reactions, and remember that young adults are still forming their viewpoints and testing them through conversation.

A Samuel Generation

God is blessing the church with a "Samuel generation" of young leaders who desire to hear and follow God's voice. Just as Samuel relied on Eli to help him discern God's voice, Millennials are seeking guidance from elders and mentors. When Eli encouraged Samuel to listen to God's message, Eli allowed for the possibility that Samuel would hear a new, uncomfortable Word from God. Like Samuel, this generation values the faith tradition, but is not afraid to challenge those parts of the tradition which no longer promote faithfulness and justice. May God give us grace to embrace the gifts and perspectives of the coming generation of pastors.

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