

Kurt Thiel Spring 2000
"The Millennial Generation"

The Following is a research paper by Kurt Thiel presented to Dr. Richard Peace in partial fulfillment of the requirements for "Modern Culture and Evangelism," a course at Fuller Seminary.

A. Characteristics of the Millennial Generation¹

From the start, I must say that there are varying results in attempts to characterize this generation. In my research, I found some common trends, though if anything can be said of this generation, it must be said that it is diverse! But as we are just beginning to see this generation come of age, I hope this paper will serve as a starting point. I welcome feedback, conversation, disagreement, and agreement! So, who are the Millennials?

The Millennials are the generation which follows Gen X. I choose to make the break between 1981 and 1982, so the Millennial Generation are those born from 1982 to 2001. Of course, there is blurring of the transition from Gen X to the Millennials, just as there was in the early 60's at the end of the baby boom and start of Gen X. What this means is that the Millennials entered high school beginning in 1996, and this fall (2000), we will see the first class in universities across the country. Much of what I was able to read about the generation gathered their research from high-schoolers, but we are also able to make suppositions based on bigger trends in culture, as well as observations of what kids are like today. I have a 10- and an 8-year-old, born right in the middle of the Millennial Generation. They are a long way from college, but what they and their friends are experiencing will surely affect who they are as they come of age over the next decade.

A good place to start in assessing this generation is by looking at Gen X. This will give us a starting point, and while the Millennials may end up being totally different, the early Millennials will certainly maintain some of the characteristics of Gen X. In Inside the Soul of a New Generation, Tim Celek and Dieter Zander give four main societal forces which flow in and around Gen Xers: Postmodernity, broken and blended families, the media, and the economy². In general, these forces will continue to frame the Millennial generation. However, as with all generational research, it quickly becomes dated, and some aspects of these forces will impact Millennials totally different than how Xers were impacted. For example, Celek and Zander state that the supply-side economics of the Reagan years and the recession of the late eighties and early nineties caused pessimism as Xers felt burdened in a worsening economy and increasing national debt. But now we are seeing the debt reduced, the economy is bustling, and Millennials are growing up in the most affluent time of history! I believe the other three characteristics of Gen X will continue to strongly impact Millennials.

While the divorce rate has leveled off³, broken and blended families are still quite common, with an increase in never-married moms and custodial fathers⁴. It is my sense that we will see a couple of trends in family relationships. As I just mentioned, broken families will continue to be a huge struggle for Millennials growing up today, but I also see a turning in how many families operate today. There has been a backlash to how kids were raised in the 60's and 70's, where we saw many families where both parents worked and kids were left at home to fend for themselves. Today's parents grew up in this period, and while it remains to be seen what the effects will actually be, there seems to be a serious attempt to give the kind of time and attention to kids that our parents didn't give us. Today I see both trends. Some kids are desperately struggling through broken families where they are brought up by the TV or older siblings or friends. But I also see more moms (and dads!) staying home, and a rise in family activities and cohesiveness in general. Many parents today know that there is more to life than money and work, and are putting more focus on their families.

Media and pop culture continue to be major influences today. Even as I have suggested that parents

¹ The Millennials are also known as Gen Y, Gen 2K, or Echo Boomers. I have chosen this term because I believe it is the most descriptive and potentially the least offensive.

² Pg. 41 states these, and in chapter 4-7, they take up each of these issues.

³ William Strauss on NPR's "Talk of the Nation," April 2000.

⁴ Ibid.

will spend more time at home, they don't seem to turn off the TV any more than when they were kids⁵. I'll say more about the influences of media later. The fourth main factor which carries over from Gen X actually began in the 60's but is equally prevalent today: Postmodernism. This shift in the way we view the world seems to be with us for the long haul. The Millennials buy into postmodernism wholeheartedly. This is seen in their virtue of tolerance. You may have your own views, your own reality, and that is fine until you try to tell someone else that their view is wrong. This plays out in diversity as well. Diversity is esteemed, both in individuals and in society. But one of the most striking effects of postmodernism has to do with how Millennials view religion and faith. There is no one way. Whatever works for you is fine. There is no capital 'T' truth, just small 't' truth. I'll speak more about religion later.

So I suppose we have a starting point by looking at these factors which may carry over from Gen X. The following are various facts about the Millennial Generation⁶:

1. Technology--Millennials are very well connected. This is the information age, and they will come out on top of the pile. This includes the internet, but also other forms of technology such as video games, music, TV, etc... Wendy Murray Zoba contributes that this adds up to a "technological haze" where youths' lives are filled with multiple images of speed, shock, and especially for boys, blood⁷. This connection to technology is most often a solo activity, thus increasing the isolation of Millennials. Dawson McAllister, in his book Saving the Millennial Generation, suggests that this may promote a problem for Millennials in discerning image from reality⁸.

Related to technology is the place of media in the lives of Millennials. TV (meaning one that is turned on!) seems to have established a permanent place in homes throughout the world. Parents of Millennials were brought up on TV, and this shows no sign of abating⁹. I wonder if while Late Boomer and early Gen X parents have good intentions about their parenting, this is not translating to fewer hours in front of the tube. There is a wealth of TV shows and movies aimed at youth today, but are they real representations of Millennials? Dawson McAllister states that TV shows are filled with violence and heightened sexual issues¹⁰, but are these accurate depictions of the lives of viewers? Bill Strauss says "No," but it is clear that they enjoy the themes¹¹. I think this points to the fact that youth today are being drawn into the world of older generations faster than previous generations were. You often see 8 to 10-year-olds watching movies and TV shows where teens are dealing with issues that normally are dealt with by college students and beyond (need I mention the 13-year-old girls who watched "Titanic" 7 times?).

I guess the big question I have is not whether Millennials' lives are saturated with media, but what are the effects? For example, does watching TV sit coms with multiple sexual innuendoes or liaisons increase the likelihood that teens will have sex? Or does playing violent video games increase the likelihood of them acting out violence? While there will always be examples to the affirmative, my sense is that there is a separation between reality and what the media portrays as reality. I believe teens know that what they see on TV is not exactly reality (even on the news), but the difficult part is figuring out how these images play out. I think teens would say that they aren't affected by these images¹². Perhaps all that can be said is that the media

⁵ See "Kids These Days," by Jennifer Lach. American Demographics, 4-2000.

⁶ I tried to read as much as I could to assess this generation. Resources were several issues of American Demographic Magazine, Newsweek Magazine, and several books. I will footnote sources as much as possible, however, many things come from my own observations, or are a combination of several things I read. All of my sources are recorded in the bibliography.

I borrowed this idea from Jimmy Long in his book *Generating Hope*, IVP: 1997 (pp. 114-131).

⁷ Zoba, pg. 50.

⁸ Dawson McAllister, Saving the Millennial Generation, pg. 7.

⁹ See "Kids These Days," by Jennifer Lach American Demographics, April 2000.

¹⁰ McAllister, 34-35.

¹¹ From interview on the April 30 NPR "Talk of the Nation."

¹² This thought is gleaned from teen interviews on NPR (April 30) and in

adds to the sense of "electronic haze" as Zoba coined it.

2. Morality--This is a slippery issue when we try to nail down the morality of Millennials. On one hand, their postmodern worldview causes them to be tolerant and accepting of different conceptions of morality. McAllister comments that it is worse to a Millennial to judge someone else's sin than it is to sin yourself¹³. In other words, the definition of sin is relative, but it is always wrong to judge someone else. So defining Millennials' morality is difficult. On the other hand, indicators such as teen pregnancy, violent crime, and smoking all are on the decline¹⁴. Millennials don't want to be told what is morality, but they are acting more responsibly than previous generations did at their age. This is good news! Some of this may be seen as a backlash to the revolution of the 60's. The Boomers lived it, Gen X bore the brunt of it, but now the Millennials are free to make their own choices. In terms of sex, we must also note that the fear of STDs are a major cause of concern of Millennials, and this certainly affects the number of teens who venture out sexually. There seems to be a move away from sexual activity before marriage to waiting until one finds the 'soul mate' and being a virgin until one's wedding night¹⁵.

3. Parents and Family--As I mentioned before, I see that the trend of broken and blended families will continue, but I also see signs of the strengthening of the family. My son's baseball team illustrates this point. Some of the boys are obviously coming from broken and or blended homes. Often there is no one in the stands cheering for them. On the other hand, there are those kids who always have the whole family out there cheering their son/brother on. Some families are obviously making it a priority to be a cohesive unit. And while in past generations, teenagers wanted to get out of the home as quickly as possible, today we see more kids staying around home. Sometimes this is economically necessary, but I think there may also be a shift in the way kids view their parents. They actually like them, and often turn to them for advice and support¹⁶.

4. Economy and Work--As I said before, the economy (in May 2000) is booming and there is an optimism among young people that was absent in the heart of Gen X. In fact, many Xers are now the young millionaires who started companies or work in the technology industry. Advertisers are targeting Millennials and the generation seems to have ample money to spend on their products. But where is this money coming from? Certainly, parents are kicking in, but a huge number of teens are working as well. In a CBS News survey of 1,000 12th-graders, they found that 71 % of those contacted work part time¹⁷. Volunteerism is also on the increase, with 75.3 % of college freshmen saying that they performed some volunteer service during their last year in high school¹⁸.

5. Spirituality--There is a genuine desire among Millennials to develop their spirituality. Again, this may be seen as a backlash or (put more positively) a pendulum swing from previous generations. Indeed, this trend started with Gen X, who, while often not growing up in churches (their Boomer parents left in record numbers), they began experimenting with diverse religious experiences. Indeed, just as kids are growing up in 'blended' families, we can say that Millennials are growing up with and seeking out a 'blended' faith. Postmodernism is a key element here. The belief that there is only one way to God or only one true belief system is seen as intolerant and hard-headed. John Leland states "Rather than seek absolute truths in doctrine, they cross denominational boundaries, savvy consumers in the broader marketplace of belief systems."¹⁹ But there is a strong desire for spiritual fulfillment. McAllister states, "Though the concept of truth has taken a beating in recent years, Millennials long for spiritual nourishment and meaning."²⁰

Newsweek Magazine (May 8, 2000).

¹³ Pg. 91.

¹⁴ Strauss, April 30 NPR "Talk of the Nation."

¹⁵ See "Y Not Love?," by Helene Stapinski. American Demographics, Feb. 1999.

¹⁶ See "The Next Baby Boom," by Susan Mitchell. American Demographics, Oct. 1995, Pg. 29. Also see April 30 NPR "Talk of the Nation."

¹⁷ Quoted in "Insight on the News" by August Gribbin, Jan. 31, 2000.

¹⁸ From the 1999 UCLA study of the American Freshman.

¹⁹ From "Searching For a Holy Spirit." Newsweek Magazine, May 8, 2000.

²⁰ Pg. 78.

6. Ethnicity/Diversity--This is a major issue for Millennials. The postmodern virtue of tolerance means that everyone, whether that is a person of a different race, religion, or sexual preference (or whatever) has a right to be who they are and meet together with others in their interest group. While previous generations dealt with the issue of whether it was acceptable for people of different races to marry, today we see the reality of a whole new generation of multi-racial kids hitting the scene. Previous generations grew up largely in segregated communities and schools, but today's kids will increasingly rub shoulders with kids from other races and multi-race kids. "Thirty years ago, only one in every 100 children born in the United States was of mixed race. Today that number is one in 19. In states like California and Washington DC it's closer to one in 10."²¹ But as we see continued racial violence, coupled with attitudes in today's youths that racism isn't a big issue²², I wonder if there is a growing gap between the reality of the world Millennials live in, and their perceptions of how accepting and diverse they really are. I suppose this is the flip side of tolerance. Millennials want it to appear (and they truly believe) that all have rights, but there is also a blindness and a limit to this when confronted with the stark realities of a world where racism is still alive and well. They are growing up in a diverse and multiethnic world, but will they truly be able to benefit from and bless this diversity?

7. Other Thoughts--There are a few other observations I have made about Millennials, which don't seem to adequately fit in the above categories. Millennials are highly relational and are "strongly peer-driven."²³ There is more of a team culture. Heroes seem to be few, and identity is gained through the group. McAllister sees the new 3 R's in education to be "Rules, respect, and responsibility."²⁴

There is a dichotomy, which arises in my mind in the relationship between Millennials' use of technology and their stress on relationships. On one hand, Millennials are spending huge amounts of time alone on front of the computer or playing Nintendo, but they are also seen as more relational. Perhaps this can be chalked up as another piece of the "image vs. reality" pie.

Millennials also like change, and want to know 'why' something is, not merely 'how' to do it. Earlier generations tended to accept what was handed to them, while Millennials won't take it unless they are satisfied with the 'why' behind the 'what.'²⁵ This is seen in parenting, where today's parents are giving kids much freedom to set their own course. Perhaps this is part of the reason why teens say they have healthier relationships with their parents²⁶.

B. POINTS OF CONTACT

This section contains the "points of contact" between Millennials and Christianity. The instructions (for this paper) are to list these concepts, then in the next section, suggest "methods of communication." I must admit that this was a very difficult thing to do. Often in ministry, the method and the message are so closely intertwined that we say, "The method is the message." This is all the more true with Millennials. If either our message or our method is not seen as authentic and real, then no connection will be made. Trust is hugely important, and trust is often first gained by our method. But for the purposes of this paper, I will attempt to separate them.

One great point of contact is between Christianity and the Millennials is their connection to and desire for spirituality. Millennials are looking for something, which will answer their deep questions in life.

²¹ Lynette Clemetson, in "Color My World." Newsweek, May 8, 2000.

²² For example, the UCLA Freshman study noted that the percent of students who are committed to "help promote racial understanding" declined for the third year in a row, and the percent of students who believe "racial discrimination is no longer a major problem in America" rose to its highest level in the 10 years that the question has been asked.

²³ Sharon Begley. "A World of Their Own." Newsweek, May 8, 2000.

²⁴ Pg. 27.

²⁵ From Strauss on NPR and 1996 paper by Geri Rodman, "New Rules, New Challenges."

²⁶ CBS News poll (Gribbin) stated that "85 % [of 18-year-olds] claim they have a good or excellent relationship with their parents."

Of course, Christians know that the ultimate answer is in Christ, but what message do we use to communicate this? By taking up 'spirituality' as a topic of interest, we can present a deep spirituality based on a deep relationship with God through Christ. Of course, as I mentioned above, our model of this spirituality will be necessary for the message to be received.

Another key point of contact is in the felt needs of Millennials. For example, we can take a key theme/need like 'hope,' develop a message where hope is defined, illustrated, and nuanced, then relate it to the lives of Millennials. Other words, which may be used, are love, justice, family, friendship, forgiveness, or freedom.

Friendships (or relationships) are another good point of contact with Millennials. Millennials value quality friendships. The message to be communicated can be "What is a True Friend?," or "What does it Mean to be Married?" In a talk like this, Christian themes such as reconciliation, forgiveness, sacrifice, and love can be drawn out.

I also wonder if some of the more experiential aspects of the Christian faith will prove to be good points of contact with Millennials. Sacraments such as baptism and the Lord's Supper may be attractive to Millennials because they provide a connection between experiencing God, total involvement, and the Millennial. When I say this, I am not thinking of a tradition communion service where the elders in suits pass around the elements, but where all participants are invited to the table (or many tables) to re-enact and remember when Jesus broke the bread and shared the cup with his followers.

I have more points of contact to discuss, though I think they will fit the confines of this project better under methods of communication.

C. METHODS OF COMMUNICATION

I want to make several points about our method of communication with Millennials, and then suggest a structure or two, which can be used to reach Millennials with the gospel. I like Celek and Zander's 4 R's for ministry to Xers, which I think are still quite relevant as we reach out to Millennials: Ministry must be real, rousing, relevant, and relational²⁷. First of all, we must model everything we are talking about with Millennials. This is crucial in order to build trust and to give a picture or example of what we are communicating with our words, and it is part of what it means to be real and relational.

Next, as we communicate, story continues to be a key method of communication. And the best stories are real stories from our own lives. Millennials accept these stories as true, because they are real experiences we have lived out. We may teach about a concept, but until we communicate the concepts by way of story or illustration, we will not connect. Scenes from movies and TV and the news may also be used here, but even what we share from common images in the media will be best heard when related to real experiences Millennials or we have actually experienced.

Speaking of experience, when teaching Millennials, the more experiential or participatory we can make the event, the better. Do you want to communicate the good news in justice or love or self-sacrifice? Then why not sponsor a weekend trip to Mexico to help build houses for the homeless. This ties into the Millennials' commitment to volunteerism as well as their desire for experience. And all along the way, we have opportunities to discuss the personal realities of justice, and servanthood, and faith. The more students are involved with the activity, the more heart they will give it and the more they will take home from it.

Music is also a great way to connect with Millennials. Actually, music has always been a key point of contact with pop culture and the deeper realities of life. Music can be used to move people in the affect realm. I recently saw a student group combine a Biblical drama with Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide." The audience was affected by in the drama, where the actor was considering Jesus, and the moving lyrics of "I've been afraid of changing..." It was a good combination of secular music with Christian themes. Of course, music can be an effective form of communication as well by using a Christian song to connect to a secular theme or need.

Further down the music road is Christian worship. When Millennials are there for good music (I am assuming that the music really is good!), it is not such a great step from popular music to songs about God's answers for life and even praise and thanks. Millennials do not have a big problem with singing to God.

At some point, we must engage Millennials with the actual biographies about Jesus. Forget "Bible studies," but invite Millennials to "investigative discussions concerning the firsthand biographies/stories of Jesus." And then be sure that they are really discussions based on an encounter someone had with Jesus (i.e. the woman at the well). Once students are discussing the Bible (you know, those biographies), we can move to stories where someone was confronted with following him or not. Give Millennials opportunities to

²⁷ See Inside the Soul of a New Generation, pp 97-108.

respond to Jesus at this point.

So, I suppose my strategy for a specific university student group would go something like this:

1. Staff and leaders (and as many Christian students as possible) start by being intentional about living their life of faith in front of others. Find ways to get to know non-Christian students. This should be a natural for Christian students living in student housing, but also can be done through classes, sports, clubs, and various student hangouts.
2. Design events where the goal is to be relevant for non-Christian Millennials where the music is good, a topic is discussed which is current and important to the audience, discussion is encouraged, and people (Christians) are friendly and engaging. Plan specific follow-up such as Jesus discussion groups or coffee with Dan (Dan M., IVCF staff at UCD, is willing to meet with any student for a cup of free coffee and discussion in the coffee house in the days following the event) or a weekend trip to serve homeless at a rescue mission or build a home with Habitat for Humanity.
3. Make the discussion groups time-specific so they go (for example) 1 hour for 4 consecutive Thursdays, so the Millennials know what they are getting themselves into. And as I said before, be sure they are well led to actually be discussions focusing on the words and actions of Jesus and his friends. At the last meeting, it may be appropriate for the leader to tell his story of coming to faith and promise to come by and visit each member for their feedback to the group.
4. Have several different events throughout the year culminating in some end of the year party or trip where some sort of closure can be made. Most Millennials will not be ready to respond on the spot to a presentation of the gospel. It will be a process, so plan ahead by having successive events where students can continue to move toward Jesus. The goal should be to get the students to take the next step towards Jesus, rather than drawing a line in the sand and challenging them to "receive Christ now." But with these events, have clear points where students can begin following Christ if the Holy Spirit has led them to that.²⁸ Ideas for events would be a weekend mission trip as I suggested previously, or a camping or backpacking trip, or a karaoke bar. The goal of all these are to establish meaningful contact between Millennials and the Christian community.
5. Develop a presence of the web. This can be through individual students setting up web pages that take up a variety of issues from spirituality to music to contemporary music. Link the sites to a quality page describing your group's goals and activities. Staff should make their Email addresses available to any who have questions about the faith, or to those who are struggling with difficult issues in their lives.
6. Bathe every activity and relationship in prayer. If you truly believe that it is the Spirit who draws non-believers to Christ, then it is fruitless to do a lot of activity without asking God to come and move among your friends.

CONCLUSION

As I mentioned at the start, this paper is only a start of something new: Who are the Millennials and how do we effectively reach them with the gospel of Christ? I have tried to point out a few of their characteristics as well as to suggest some ideas for outreach to them. I invite any feedback and response (kurtko@mindspring.com).

Quick Reference Sheet:

Who are the Millennials?

1. Born 1982-1999
2. Around 70 mil.
3. Parents: half Boomers and half Xers

Starting Point: Zander's 4 points:

1. Broken/Blended families
3. Media

²⁸ I generally see evangelism in this way. Pointing people to Jesus, but being there to walk with non-believers to the next point. However, if this is all we do, then we may never get to asking them if they are ready to follow Jesus. So, we must always be ready to help students into a relationship with Christ, but at the same time, be prepared to walk at their pace.

2. Economy

4. Postmodernism

- A. Family and friends are essential in Millennials' lives. They like their parents, are likely to stay home longer, but gain their identity from peer groups
- B. Millennials see themselves as spiritual, but not religious. They may have a "salad bar" faith. There are no absolutes.
- C. Some major trends depicting morality are down (teen pregnancy, violent crime, smoking), but does this mean they are more moral, or just smarter?
- D. World, what world? Lots of spending and optimism. Many teens are working to pay the bills. Volunteerism is up.
- E. Millennials are connected technologically. They are into information. They know this better than anyone, so eventually will come out on top. Does this create some isolation and haze?
- F. Media continues to play a huge role. Teens are up on music, TV and movies, but without heroes.
- G. Their world continues to become more diverse, and they are part of this, but how much is lip service? Virtue of tolerance.

Big Issues:

Involvement

Spiritual, but without absolutes

Info/Media/Entertainment

Family and Friends

Image/Reality Clash

Points of Contact/Bridges to Millennials

Media/Movies/Music

Spirituality: Involvement and Community

Story/Experience

Crises

Friendship & Process

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