

**Redefining Church:
Reaching, Retaining, and Assimilating Gen. Z and Millennials**

by

Elictia Hart

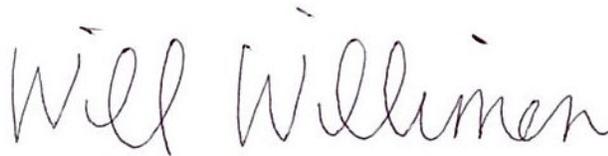
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Date: April 3, 2023

Approved:



[David Emmanuel Goatley], 1st Reader



[William Willimon], 2nd Reader



[William Willimon], D. Min Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry
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ABSTRACT

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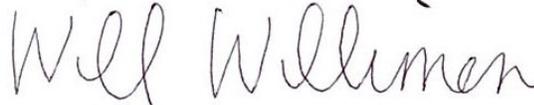
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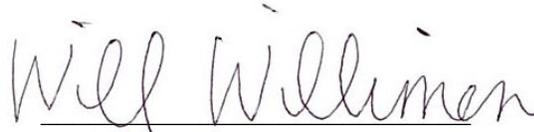
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Abstract

This project seeks to present a model that will strengthen national non-denominational churches' capacities for reaching, retaining, and assimilating Generation Z and Millennials. The central pillars of this project examine who Gen Z and Millennials are socially, psychologically, and spiritually, and identify strategies that churches nationally are utilizing to effectively reach, retain, and assimilate this demographic. This thesis uses an interdisciplinary strategy and engages pastoral leaders, consultants, and scholars.

Dedication

My heart is full of gratitude as I pen the last words of this composition of grace. I dedicate it to my always patient, ever-loving, and tirelessly generous husband, Jim, who keeps me grounded, and my exceptional twins, Micah and Jemma, who teach me daily about life, love, and endurance. I love you all infinity times infinity!

To my Lord and Savior, without whom none of this would have been possible. Your goodness and mercy are the reason I exist. Thank you for walking life with me daily, teaching me Your unfailing truths, and loving me in spite of me. May I always be a sweet aroma, pleasing and acceptable to You.

I love you, Heavenly Father, with every fiber of my being.

Finally, to the millions of people who work relentlessly to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout the world. I am humbled to labor alongside of you. May the Lord bless us and keep us; may His face shine upon us!

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Introduction

Generation Z and Millennials represented 42.28 percent of the United States population in 2020.¹ With this group comprising almost half of the U.S. populous, it is critical that churches strengthen their capacities for reaching, retaining, and assimilating those born between 1981 and 2012. As a senior pastor, I desire to accomplish Jesus's command to "make followers of all nations ... and teach them to do all the things" as He has instructed.²

Given that "every generation is shaped by major world events,"³ grasping the attention of this particular demographic is challenging as churches must compete with the attraction of contemporary global technology that is ever-evolving, social media, cultural influences (as well as other distractions/crises' in our world such as Covid-19 and terrorism). Additionally, woven into this demographics' intricate social, psychological, and spiritual fabric is the reality that "it is becoming less and less of a stigma to identify as nonreligious."⁴

¹ Statista, "Population Distribution in the United States in 2020, by Generation," June 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/296974/us-population-share-by-generation/>.

² Matt. 29:19-20 (New Living Translation).

³ George Barna, "New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence: Millennials in America," Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, October 2021, 5, www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/George-Barna-Millennial-Report-2021-FINAL-Web.pdf

⁴ Darren M. Slade, "Why Millennials Are Likely NOT Coming Back to Religion," Global Center for Religious Research, February 26, 2020, <https://www.gcrr.org/post/whymillennialsarentcomingback>.

With such influences, how might non-denominational churches become a counter-culture, redefining strategies for ministerial evangelism and retention that once worked but now seem inadequate for reaching this group?

Clearly, a solution is needed as churches, at least in North America, understand that “the unfortunate reality is that most churches are not growing.”⁵ If these trends remain non-denominational churches worldwide will undoubtedly die as older generations continue to age and pass on. This issue is the foundational component of the research for my thesis.

Methodology

I will examine who Gen Z and Millennials are, socially, psychologically, and spiritually, how the church is viewed through the eyes of this demographic, how technology has shaped them, and how this has impacted evangelical churches and their capacity for reaching, retaining, and assimilating them.

I will consult data and research findings from leading experts who have developed and honed methods and strategies for effectively connecting with this group. This will lay the groundwork for interviews, in which I will survey seven American evangelical

⁵ Kara Eckmann Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 15.

pastors who are effectively reaching and retaining this demographic. The targeted churches will have proportionately large student and young adult ministries.

After examining the targeted demographic, interviewing pastors, analyzing successful congregations, and reviewing the latest research on young adult participation in church, I hope to create a roadmap for churches that are struggling to reach, retain, and assimilate this demographic.

Outline of Thesis Chapters

My thesis unfolds as follows: **Chapter 1** investigates generally held social, and psychological insights of Gen Z and Millennials. Who is this group socially and psychologically, that ranges in age from 11–42 in 2023, and how can evangelical churches effectively reach, keep, and engage them?

Chapter 2 looks at the spiritual development insights of these two demographics while assessing some of the impact Covid-19 has had on the church with respect to Generation Z and Millennials. Additionally, I will research what parts of society have captured this demographics' attention and how that might impact ministry leaders' ability to connect with them? Finally, what does church mean and look like to these teens and young adults?

Chapter 3 describes some non-denominational churches that are effectively reaching Gen Z and Millennials. In researching these national assemblies, I will explore the theological temperament, generational and ethnic demographics, congregation's age,

and other aspects of these assemblies that are thriving with a proportionately large Gen Z and Millennial populous.

Chapter 4 assesses how these identified churches are effectively *reaching* Gen Z and Millennials. Interviews with national non-denominational pastors and ministry leaders will provide this data. I hope to find commonalities and/or differences in various contexts concerning systems of reaching the study group.

Chapter 5 examines what *retention* and *assimilation* plans these churches are utilizing once they have reached a Gen Z and/or Millennial. What protocol, discipleship programs, small groups, or spiritual formation classes are offered? I will seek to piece together why these systems are drawing people back to the attended church where they are getting plugged in, and what can we learn from them.

The **Conclusion** consists of analysis and summarization of the findings from the research obtained from studies, reports, and interviews I conducted. I then constructed a model called the Splash Effect which ties together what I have discovered in the research process. This model displays pertinent information to equip pastors or church leaders trying to reach, retain, and assimilate this large populous of people.

Chapter 1: Who Are Gen Z and Millennials?

Born between 1981 and 2012, Generation Z and Millennials range in age between 10–41 in 2022. While various organizations may place the markers for each generation differently and there are no “official” terms of classifying exact generational dates and their cut-offs, we will use the analytical findings of Pew Research Center and Beresford Research as the benchmark of our cohort delineations.¹

With these classifications in mind, Gen Z and Millennials made up almost half of the United States’ populous in 2020. Millennials comprised the largest percentage of the two groups at 21.3%, while Gen Z represents 20.35%.² These percentages placed Millennials at the top of the U.S. resident population in 2020, making them the largest demographic of any living generation at the time.³

Society’s influences have assisted in molding them in many ways. Studies show that developmental shaping through one’s external environment is true for any

¹ Generational timelines “look at Americans both by their place in the life cycle – whether a young adult, a middle-aged parent or a retiree – and by their membership in a cohort of individuals who were born at a similar time” (noted in Michael Dimock, “Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” Pew Research Center, January 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>; and Beresford Research, “Generations Defined by Name, Birth Year and Ages in 2022,” <https://www.beresfordresearch.com/age-range-by-generation/>).

² Statista, “Population Distribution in the United States in 2020, by distribution,” accessed May 22, 2022, <https://www.statista.com>.

³ Statista, “Resident Population in the United States in 2020, by Generation,” accessed June 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/797321/us-population-by-generation/>.

generation. Iman Ghosh explains that Baby Boomers were shaped by television's ever-evolving advances, the assassination of JFK, and the Vietnam War. Generation X was also impacted by war (Iraq, Afghan, and the Gulf), as well as computers. Gen Z and Millennials are no exception to these outside influences, as historical events and groundbreaking technological advances have played a role in forming them.⁴

For Millennials, Ghosh explains, the destruction of the Berlin Wall (1991), the Rodney King beatings and riots (1992), and the internet going live in 1993 were all pivotal world events. Millennials' lifestyles adapted to the explosion of the constant, always-on technological connectivity which on-demand entertainment and gaming offered. This demographic was between 12 and 27 years of age when President Barak Obama was elected in 2008. It was this election "where the force of the youth vote became part of the political conversation and helped elect the first black president."⁵

Generation Z felt the impact of the tragedies of terroristic activities from the Columbine High School attacks in 1999 and 9/11 in 2001. Pioneering technological advances like the iPod, Play Station, and iPhones (2001-2007) which targeted this younger generation, made indelible impacts.⁶ Building upon this innovative technology

⁴ Iman Ghosh, "Timeline: Key Events in U.S. History That Defined Generations," Visual Capitalist, May 7, 2021, <https://www.visualcapitalist.com/timeline-of-us-events-that-defined-generations/>.

⁵ Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations."

⁶ The very first iPhone came out when the youngest Gen Z members were just 10-years-old (2007). See Daryn Steed, "The Global Events That Separate Millennials from Generation Z," Weber State University, January 30, 2022, <https://signpost.mywebermedia.com/2020/01/08/the-global-events-that-separate-millennials-from-generation-z/#>.

was the launching of social media through internet apps like Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2007). Hurricane Katrina (2005), the worldwide economic crisis of 2008, and the election of President Barack Obama (2008) have all shaped our youngest generation.⁷

With outside influences stemming from historical events, society as a whole, and technology, how might these circumstances have impacted Gen Z and Millennials socially, psychologically, and spiritually? What morals and opinions do Gen Z and Millennials have on topics such as technology, marriage, children, academic affairs, and religion? We will look at recent studies and research that have “shown dramatic shifts in youth (and young adult) behaviors, attitudes, and lifestyles, both positive and concerning.”⁸

Social Insights: Technology

Technology has made massive strides in the last thirty-plus years, thereby impacting Gen Z and Millennials’ social lives in a profound way. “Their shared reality is indelibly shaped by five-inch computers carried around in their pockets and by the unparalleled access these devices give them to information, entertainment, people and ideas.”⁹

⁷ Barna, “New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence.”

⁸ Dimock, “Defining Generations.”

⁹ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z: Vol. 2: Caring for Young Souls and Cultivating Resilience* (N.p.: Impact 360 Publisher, 2021), 33.

Millennials grew up learning how to adapt to the world being available at their fingertips. They even offered their growing knowledge and assistance to older generations, helping them to weave the online revolution into the fabric of society. Such technological advances were a new concept to all generations, but it was Millennials who brought them to the forefront of society. From 2012 through 2019, Millennial usage of social media remained high and almost unchanged. Researchers found that 81% of Millennials used social media in 2012, and that increased to 85% in 2019.¹⁰ These statistics are pre-Covid. We will take a closer look at the impact of the pandemic on such usage. Still, current data is needed to further compare usage for this demographic.

Using this tech-savvy genius, some Millennials have started online businesses and benefited financially from the technology. Others have remained in corporate America but have become more likely to be job-hoppers (not remaining at the same job for long), a change from the days when workers often remained in a single job for their working life.¹¹ A recent Gallup report notes that more than 21% of Millennials say they have changed their job in the last year, adding that turnover costs the U.S. economy about \$30.5 billion annually.¹²

¹⁰ Emily Vogels, "Millennials Stand out for Their Technology Use, but Older Generations Also Embrace Digital Life," Pew Research Center, September 9, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/09/09/us-generations-technology-use/>.

¹¹ "Millennial News: Latest Characteristics Research, and Facts," Insider Intelligence, April 11, 2022, <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/millennials/>.

¹² Amy Adkins, "Millennials: The Job-Hopping Generation," Gallup Research, <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/231587/millennials-job-hopping-generation.aspx>.

Gen Z, on the other hand, are “digital natives, never having known a world without the internet.”¹³ The iGeneration has embraced Wi-Fi and high-bandwidth connectivity, so much so that kids, parents, teachers, and psychologists are wondering if they are spending too much time on their devices.

Studies differ in terms of the average amount of time these teens and younger twenty-somethings spend on their electronics. O’Hara’s findings maintain that they spend up to six hours a day online between internet usage and social media.

A recent study asked this group if they feel that they spend too much time on screens. More than half (60%—or three in five individuals) said “yes,” their generation does.¹⁴ Thirteen percent said screen time doesn’t matter. Interestingly, more than half of the Gen Z that participated in the study (53%) felt bad about the length of time they spend on screens. Yet, unlike other generations, Gen Z sees technology as having a positive impact on our world.¹⁵

Perhaps this aligns with one defining and critical aspect of the Gen Z DNA: this group has never known life without the on-demand, fast-paced accessibility of the World Wide Web. It is a way of life, almost an addiction of sorts, specific to this group. “Gen Z

¹³ Ross O’Hara, “Who Is Generation Z? Gen Z Faces Unique Barriers to Educational Success,” *Psychology Today*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/nudging-ahead/202012/who-is-generation-z>.

¹⁴ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z Vol. 2: Caring for Young Souls and Cultivating Resilience*, 34.

¹⁵ This report says 64% of Gen Z believe the internet will bring our world together. See Ad Tech Daily, “Generation Influence: Gen Z Study Reveals A New Digital Reality,” July 21, 2020, <https://adtechdaily.com/2020/07/21/generation-influence-gen-z-study-reveals-a-new-digital-reality/>.

has become the most Internet-dependent generation: 60% of Gen Z can't go more than 4 hours without Internet access before they become uncomfortable.”¹⁶

With technology continuing to move full speed ahead, obsolete items that were once worthy of praise for being at the forefront of advancement have now been laid to rest. Gen Z might be the first generation that requires an explanation of what an album, eight-track tape, or pager is. Most of this demographic cannot fathom that there used to be only four television channels, which went off the air at two o'clock in the morning. The fact that television was not on 24/7 is a stunning fact to many under 25. In fact, Gen Z has had “violence and porn at their fingertips via an object known just one generation before; a smartphone.”¹⁷

It is not just the 25-and under (Gen Z) group that has feelings about screen time. Parents are concerned about social media's influence and the amount of time their kids spend on devices. One report finds that eighty percent of parents are concerned about both the impact of social media and the time spent on their devices.¹⁸

It is important to note that this connectivity is a real source of communication for these individuals. A report in Ad Tech Daily notes that since 2018 Gen Z is even more dependent (7%) on the internet to access people and connections. Like O'Hara, Ad Tech Daily maintains that Gen Z utilizes Facebook to stay in touch with family and older

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Chloe Combi, *Generation Z: Their Voices Their Life* (London: Windmill Books, 2015), 1.

¹⁸ Barna Group, “ChurchPulse Weekly Conversations: Shane Sanchez and Alison Leamon on Student Ministry,” July 7, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/cpw-sanchez-leamon/>.

generations.¹⁹ When communicating with their peers, Gen Z prefers social media apps like TikTok, Snapchat, and Instagram.²⁰ YouTube has been crowned champion as the top social media app for teens 13 to 17-years-of-age, followed by TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat.²¹

With all the on-demand socialization, is there a way for church leaders to tap into this virtual communication sphere, and what impact, if any, will this have on reaching, retaining, and assimilating Gen Z? We will talk more about this in the *Spiritual Insights* chapter.

Lifestyle: Finances, Motivations & Diversity

Millennials have paved the way for Gen Z, technologically speaking, and as a result, have attained financial stability for portions of this demographic. Yet, just as the World Wide Web is constantly moving and shaking, so too are Millennials whose

¹⁹ Ad Tech Daily says Gen Z depends on the Internet primarily to access their friends (62%) and for entertainment (59%) (“Generation Influence: Gen Z Study Reveals A New Digital Reality”).

²⁰ O’Hara, “Who Is Generation Z?”

²¹ The report compares usage in 2022 to a study in 2014–2015. It finds 95% of 13–17-year-olds use YouTube, 67% utilize TikTok, 62% are Instagram users followed by Snapchat with 59% usage. Facebook has seen a sharp decline in usage since the 2014–2015 study, from 71% usage by teens to only 32%. Interestingly, TikTok has only been around globally since 2018. See Emily A. Vogels, Risa Gelles-Watnick and Navid Massarat, “Teens, Social Media and Technology 2022,” Pew Research Center, August 10, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2022/08/10/teens-social-media-and-technology-2022/>.

“financial status and tech-savviness have fundamentally changed how they live and work.”²²

Millennials are “driven by growth and lifestyle, [while] Gen Z is driven by growth and passion.”²³ Although these two groups are similar in many ways, Wilson says Gen Z’s motivation and drive to make a positive difference separate them from their older counterparts.

According to a 2020 report published by *Psychology Today*, Gen Z is passionate and motivated by a few key things, the first being money. This group was 6 to 13 years of age during the 2008 recession, and “it shaped their worldview when it comes to finances.”²⁴ As part of Gen Z’s drive to make a difference, this study notes that they are passionate about changing the world through diversity, equality, and the preservation of our environment.

With such a broad worldview and desire for change, education is heavily valued by Gen Z, even more than by generations before them. One may wonder if the fruit of a college-educated generation equates to “resourceful, creative, humble [people, possessing] the inner engines of a startup.”²⁵ Instead of working a regular nine-to-five

²² Andrew Meola, “Generation Z News: Latest Characteristics, Research, and Facts,” Insider Intelligence, January 5, 2022, <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/generation-z-facts/>.

²³ William Wilson, “How to Understand Gen Z Distinctives,” *Christian Post*, February 23, 2022.

²⁴ O’Hara, “Who Is Generation Z?”

²⁵ “Gen Z 2025: The Final Generation,” Sparks & Honey culture forecast, 2015, 2, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b553895697a98cf2cef2bc6/t/5bb92412f4e1fc3d3ba7df82/1538860063251/s%26h_2015_Q3_Gen_Z_w.pdf.

desk job, this demographic, according to Sparks & Honey, is looking to “create non-linear paths of education and work.” From online stores to working out of their basement, Gen Z has their eyes fixed on making money outside of the box. These entrepreneurs are start-up geniuses following right behind Millennials, who have taken their hard-earned dollars and now make up the largest share of homebuyers in the U.S.²⁶

Millennials are indeed all grown up. In fact, to date, in 2022, this group accounts for “43% of all homebuyers.”²⁷ They have aged out of their college years, with the youngest being 26 and the eldest turning 41 in 2022. Many in this cohort are now looking toward building their own families and careers and purchasing their first homes.

Millennials were at one time the most racially diverse of any generation to date. A 2021 report says that “more than four out of 10 Millennials are non-white,”²⁸ adding that more than 40% are foreign-born. In 2020 more than 1-in-10 married Millennials had a spouse “of a different racial or ethnic background.”²⁹ This same study specifies that “one in five Black and Hispanic millennials who are married have a spouse of a different race or ethnicity.”³⁰

²⁶ Michael Hendrix, “Millennials Will Reshape Our Landscape. Here’s How and Why,” *Governing*, February 17, 2022, <https://www.governing.com/community/millennials-will-reshape-our-landscape>.

²⁷ Tristan Bove, “Millennials Have Aged into the Housing Market at the Worst Possible Time,” *Fortune Media IP Limited*, March 24, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/03/24/millennials-biggest-homebuying-demographic-while-home-prices-soar-worst-time-compete-boomers-aged/>.

²⁸ Barna, “New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence.”

²⁹ Amanda Borroso, “As Millennials Near 40, They’re Approaching Family Life Differently Than Previous Generations,” *Pew Research*, May 27, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/27/as-millennials-near-40-theyre-approaching-family-life-differently-than-previous-generations/>.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Even as diverse as Millennials are, the title of the most racially diverse generation has seemingly shifted. Gen Z is now “the youngest, most ethnically diverse ... generation in American history.”³¹

Racial diversity is not the only thing shifting for Gen Z and Millennials. Borroso also mentions that Millennials are waiting longer to get married and have children than past generations. Many are focusing on careers and adapting to a society that is less stringent on the timetables of marriage and family.

Education

Gen Z has taken over classrooms worldwide, with most Millennials officially beyond academic endeavors. They are attentive students, valuing education “more than previous generations, and more of them are enrolling in college than ever before.”³² They have connected financial goals with education, but unlike generations past, they want to play a role in their scholastic journey. Being a hands-on generation, they desire to personally create their educational quest, from deciding on which textbooks they want to read to whose lectures they want to listen to. Nearly three-quarters (72%) of teenagers feel like colleges should allow students to have complete control over their courses and majors.³³

³¹ Meola, “Generation Z News: Latest Characteristics, Research, and Facts.”

³² O’Hara, “Who Is Generation Z?”

³³ Sparks & Honey, “Gen Z 2025: The Final Generation,” 8.

What is this group interested in studying? One report says STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). It further states that this demographic is not thinking about humanities like their counterparts were a decade ago.³⁴ Bewicke adds that from 2011 to 2018, the number of computer science degrees increased by 144%, healthcare degrees are up 50%, and physics diplomas went up by 37%. Gen Z is poised to impact our world by seeking academic degrees where their knowledge and skillset will be a valued asset.

Conclusion

The social component of Gen Z and Millennials helps one to better understand the habits of these 10–41-year-olds. We understand that technology is foundational to this group, with a sort of love/hate equation ever-present between one’s screen and fingertips. Education is a thriving element of the Gen Z culture, while Millennials have aged out of most scholastic endeavors. Each demographic’s motivations and skillsets may be specific to their generation, yet, both groups long for financial security and a certain quality of life.

One great distinguisher between Gen Z and Millennials and older generations is that these two groups are the most ethnically diverse of all living groups. Millennials first

³⁴ Henry Bewicke, “Gen Z Consumer Behavior: What You Need to Know,” *Talon.One*, May 7, 2022, <https://www.talon.one/blog/gen-z-consumer-behavior-what-you-need-to-know>.

held this title, and now, Gen Z has taken the crown. The bottom line, Gen Z and Millennials' passions are as vast as their DNA makeup and true to the chapter topic itself; they are social. And yet, this group is just getting started with life, love, and everything in between.

Psychological Insights

With a better understanding of Gen Z and Millennials' social insights, we turn to the inner makeup, or psychological development, of our focus group. Gen Z and Millennials have come of age in an environment with increased social media usage, violence, sexual harassment, and assault, not to mention the effects of Covid-19.³⁵ Such difficult societal norms have caused this demographic to look for ways to treat anxiety, depression, stress, loneliness, and other psychological stressors.

In October 2020, the American Psychological Association (APA) surveyed Gen Z and Millennials' stress levels. The study asked the groups to rank their stress level the month before the survey on a scale of 1 out of 10 (10 being the highest). Gen Z experienced the highest stress level, at 6.1, compared to Millennials, who put their stress level at 5.6 out of 10.³⁶

³⁵ Alicia Sparks-Akers, "Is Gen Z More Depressed?" Medical News Today, March 24, 2022, 1, <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/why-is-gen-z-depressed#reasons>.

³⁶ Cory Stieg, "More than 7 in 10 Gen-Zers Report Symptoms of Depression during Pandemic, Survey Finds," CNBC Health and Wellness Report, October 21, 2020, 7, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/10/21/survey-more-than-7-in-10-gen-zers-report-depression-during-pandemic.html>.

With such high stress levels being reported in these two generations, it's important to note that they, unlike older generations, are also more likely to report their mental health. Gen Z is 27 percent more likely than other generations to give an account of their mental status. Millennials, on the other hand, are 15 percent more likely to tell someone about their psychological symptoms.³⁷

Sparks-Akers believes that a particular element has added to mental health stressors in this demographic. She notes that active/mass shooter incidents have been on the rise since 2000 (which saw only one incident that year). This aligns with a 2018 American Psychological Association (APA) report stating seventy-five percent of Gen Z admit a significant amount of stress is caused by mass shootings that are taking place in vulnerable public spaces like schools, malls, etc.³⁸

But it is not just violence that is a source of stress. Some researchers are pointing at technology as an origin of mental health issues for Gen Z. Problematic social media use (PSMU) is associated with “challenges with impulse control, difficulties with goal-oriented behavior, procrastination, and stress.”³⁹ While social media use is generally a source of contentedness, “with three in five teens and young adults always or usually feeling informed,”⁴⁰ some say there is a negative side to the use of this technology.

³⁷ American Psychological Association, “APA Survey: Generation Z Stressed about Issues in The News but Least Likely to Vote,” October 30, 2018, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2018/10/generation-z-stressed>.

³⁸ Sparks-Akers, “Is Gen Z More Depressed?”

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z Vol. 2: Caring for Young Souls and Cultivating Resilience*.

This report also observes the parallel between higher screen time usage and feelings of isolation, insecurity, and self-criticism. Specifically, 23% of Gen Z feel isolated, 27% feel harassed and 25% say they are bullied. Even with these numbers, two-thirds (64%) of those interviewed in the study said they would feel incomplete without having their cellular device.

“The implications for Gen Zers having to constantly perform on social media are not totally defined yet.”⁴¹ Like Steed, Dimock notes that there is research that maintains youth behaviors have shifted both in positive and negative ways from past generations. While the youngest Gen Z in the cohort is only 10 years of age, only the future and time will truly tell how the age of connection will impact youth development. This is especially relevant as the National Institute of Mental Health says the human brain continues to develop until people reach the age of 25, which happens to be the eldest member of this group in 2022.⁴²

With Millennials turning 26 years old in 2022, there is some relatively new research on the impacts of brain development for this demographic that has seen continual technological usage over the years. “The brains of people in this generation are physically developing differently because of their almost constant interaction with

⁴¹ Steed, “The Global Events That Separate Millennials from Generation Z.”

⁴² Roberta Alexander, “Is Technology Causing a Lifetime of Pain for Millennials?” Healthline, April 22, 2020, <https://www.healthline.com/health-news/is-technology-causing-a-lifetime-of-pain-for-millennials-050415>.

technology.”⁴³ These changes can impact a person’s ability to communicate. Alexander notes that some suggest technology can even affect one’s personality, ability to work with a team, facial expressions, and more.

Yet, without this screen-time communication that seems to be a lifeline of sorts, who would Gen Z and Millennials talk to? Equally important, who do they seek out for authentic relationships and genuine guidance? Many parents are convinced that good peer relationships are what this demographic needs. But according to one study, this is not totally true. In fact, it suggests the problem is that adults are always pointing Gen Z toward their peers.⁴⁴ This approach contradicts what some Gen Z and Millennials are looking for, which is healthy relationships with parents and trusted adult mentors.⁴⁵

Millennials “respond to authenticity and seek people whom they believe to be genuine.”⁴⁶ This as “three in four Gen. Z (75%) believes their authority figures have their best interest in mind. Nearly half (44%) say they meet regularly with someone whom they consider a mentor.”⁴⁷ According to the APA, mentored individuals do better in their jobs and with life skills.⁴⁸

⁴³ According to Alexander, “Excessive use of technology, according to leading scientific publications, atrophies the frontal lobe, breaking down ties between different parts of the brain. Too much technology use also shrinks the outermost part of the brain, making it more difficult to process information” (ibid.).

⁴⁴ Kara Powell, “Guest Column: How Leaders Can Help Young People Make a Purpose Pivot,” Barna Research, July 26, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/powell-purpose-pivot/>.

⁴⁵ George Barna, “New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence: Millennials in America.”

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z Vol. 2: Caring for Young Souls and Cultivating Resilience*, 56

⁴⁸ American Psychological Association, “Introduction to Mentoring: A Guide for Mentors and Mentees,” 2012, <https://www.apa.org/education-career/grad/mentoring>.

Even with some research concluding that Gen Z and Millennials value genuine relationships with trusted adults, some Gen Z still feel misunderstood. “Many feel ignored, unheard, (and) disenfranchised.”⁴⁹ Perhaps, therefore, they struggle with small talk, often using their cell phones as a crutch.

Interestingly, eighty-three percent of Gen Z prefer face-to-face communication versus texting, phone, or email.⁵⁰ Yet, this same report says that Gen Z feels they lack adequate socialization for in-person dialogue. Perhaps this contributes to the findings that say one in four Gen Z and Millennials experience anxiety and loneliness.⁵¹

The idea of being accepted is critical for Gen Z; in fact, it is often associated with the feeling of affirmation.⁵² Acceptance/affirmation has created a demographic that is almost afraid to offend one another. Rather than offending and labeling others, which some feel can belittle individuals, the group often chooses to remain neutral in their stance on others’ personal choices. White calls such choices concerning one’s identity or sexual preference, sexual fluidity, meaning this group “refuses either the homosexual or heterosexual label ... the idea is that both labels are repressive.”⁵³ He further states that some Gen Z believe sexuality should be free from any restrictions, allowing people to simply follow their desires at any given moment. White adds that because this

⁴⁹ Combi, *Generation Z*.

⁵⁰ O’Hara, “Who Is Generation Z?”

⁵¹ Dimock, “Defining Generations.”

⁵² James Emory White, *Meet Generation Z* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017), 46.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 47.

demographic is so accepting in nature, this translates into “support for things such as gay marriage and transgender rights.”⁵⁴

Millennials are also redefining their own sexuality and “how to perceive and respond to the gender identity and sexual-orientation choices of others.”⁵⁵ Both groups, according to these reports, are open to new ideas about what family and marriage look like.

Conclusion

The mind is a powerful entity. It is greatly impacted by the things we see and hear. Our environment shapes our thoughts and perceptions, and humanity, in turn, responds to the future according to those impacts, whether good or bad. Gen Z and Millennials have lived through some challenging life experiences and are not afraid to talk about the impacts. In doing so these groups have lifted the negative connotation of mental health. To need help mentally is a new norm, and not seen as a negative thing, especially for Gen Z. It is a way of life, a life that has seen its share of psychological stressors leaving bits of debris in the path of these two generations.

Gen Z and Millennials can openly express themselves; this is a specific marker of these 10–41-year-olds. Without the ability to freely convey their feelings and emotions, Gen Z and Millennials seemingly get lost, frustrated, depressed, and retreat. Yet, this

⁵⁴ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁵ Barna, “New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence.”

much-needed expression is typically through a screen of sorts, adding to the dilemma, do older generations continue to avail themselves of this technology when psychologists have seen negative effects? Without phones, tablets, computers, and the like, where would this i-generation be? It is, after all, impossible to go backward. Thus, the quandary remains, how do we guide this demographic, psychologically speaking, and move successfully forward?

Chapter 2: Spiritual Insights

How can humans usefully process the massive amounts of data to which we are exposed daily? Gen Z and Millennials are fully versed in a world where everything worth knowing is stored above in a cloud somewhere.¹ They also are seemingly obsessed with this virtual oasis providing instantaneous information that is often unsubstantiated, with conflicting opinions, ideas, and observations.² Is this display of instant mass analysis and personal observations stirring up widespread spiritual confusion? Perhaps.

In this volatile spiritual climate, how then can pastors and ministry leaders reach, retain, and assimilate this target group in churches throughout the nation? Such pastoral concerns are validated in a study that records just over 50% of protestant pastors listing “reaching a younger audience” as one of the greatest challenges their church is facing today.³ The question might then become, what is keeping this target group outside of the church walls?

¹ “Computer Basics - Understanding the Cloud,” GCF Global, accessed November 15, 2022, <https://edu.gcfglobal.org/en/computerbasics/understanding-the-cloud/1/>.

² George Barna, “New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence: Millennials in America.” Cultural Research Center at Arizona Christian University, October 2021. <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/George-Barna-Millennial-Report-2021-FINAL-Web.pdf>.

³ “Just over one-third of pastors (34%) marks this statement as a top three concern for their church, with 12 percent noting it as *the* top concern” (“What’s on the Minds of America’s Pastors,” Barna: State of the Church 2020, Feb. 3, 2020, https://www.barna.com/research/whats_on_mind_americas_pastors/).

We have looked closely into the lives of Gen Z and Millennials and thus better understand who they are socially and psychologically. Still, peering into their world at times can seem so foreign. One thing many older adults might forget is that we, too, were once 10, 20, 30, and 41 years of age. We, too, were awkward teens, young adults, and older adults just hitting the milestone of forty, trying to find our way. In fact, the habits many late 40, 50, and 60-year-olds had growing up were very similar to that of the up-and-coming generations.

If we were to reflect on our younger years, we might recall we could be private and often unwilling to discuss our deeply person feelings on such things as faith and boyfriends/girlfriends. We aimed for success and were vocal about lighthearted matters and some of our likes and dislikes; in fact, we seemed to have an ear for views that differed from our upbringing. With a short attention span, we were quickly on to the next fad.⁴

While many of the attributes of growing up have not changed, the ways in which Gen Z and Millennials express themselves have. Perhaps that is why Dillon Smith, a Gen Z himself, pens, “we spend more time online, go outside less, and care about wildly

⁴ The Grow Team, “What Every Church Needs To Know About Generation Z,” Grow Curriculum, https://growcurriculum.org/what-every-church-needs-to-know-about-generation-z/?wickedsource=google&wickedid=CjwKCAjwKmaBhBMEiwAyINuWepSKu6K0p_CrHLzyW1zo7605ChyFuDa3eAxr20pcEf8g0ZY3bO25xoCeBIQAvD_BwE&wickedid=&wcid=18325295502&wv=3.1&utm_term=&utm_campaign=%5BPerf+Max%5D%5BNA%5D%5BNB%5D+Performance+Max&utm_source=adwords&utm_medium=ppc&hsa_acc=2251530998&hsa_cam=18325295502&hsa_grp=&hsa_ad=&hsa_src=x&hsa_tgt=&hsa_kw=&hsa_mt=&hsa_net=adwords&hsa_ver=3&gclid=CjwKCAjwKmaBhBMEiwAyINuWepSKu6K0p_CrHLzyW1zo7605ChyFuDa3eAxr20pcEf8g0ZY3bO25xoCeBIQAvD_Bw.

different things than our parents did when they were kids.”⁵ Understanding these complex dynamics, says the Grow Team, will allow ministries to peer into the lives of those they seek to invite into their worship services.

Church Attendance Declining

Studies show Gen Z and Millennials are not attending church as older generations did when they were their age. “American religious identity has experienced nearly three decades of consistent decline.”⁶ What’s most interesting, according to Cox, is that every generation is less religious than the generation prior, and that pattern follows suit with Gen Z.

Table 1 displays the progression from the Silent Generation, which is the eldest living generation (born before 1946), to Gen Z showing the pattern of increased religious unaffiliation.

⁵ Dillon Smith, “7 Habits of Generation Z Your Church Might Be Ignoring,” Carey Nieuwhof, <https://careynieuwhof.com/7-habits-of-generation-z-that-your-church-might-be-ignoring/>.

⁶ Daniel A. Cox, “Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America,” The Survey Center on American Life, March 24, 2022, https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/#A_Generational_Divide_in_Formative_Religious_Experiences.

Table 1: Generational decline in religious identity.

	Religiously Unaffiliated
Gen Z	34%
Millennials	29%
Gen X	15%
Boomers	18%
Silent Gen	9%

(Survey Center on American Life, March 24, 2022)

This decrease has left many parents, both self-identified Christian and non-Christian, across the nation worried. While Christian parents are *very* concerned about their children’s faith formation, both groups are at least “*somewhat* interested (80% Christian parents, 58% non-Christian parents) in ensuring their children have a healthy relationship with spirituality.”⁷ Seventy percent of parents are worried their children may leave the faith they were raised in as they grow older and prepare to leave home “amid the growing trend of church dropouts.”⁸

⁷ “How Concerned Are Christian Parents About Their Children’s Faith Formation?” Barna Research, March 30, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/christian-parents-concerns/>.

⁸ Ibid.

“Millennials and church are like oil and water; the separation is real. Disengagement is happening.”⁹ By the time Millennials were 15-years-of-age, 59% of those who grew up in church either disconnected or took an extended hiatus, notes Samuel.

The Unpopular Truth about Absolute Truth

Millennials are also leading the charge when it comes to “turning their back on the notion that absolute moral truth exists.”¹⁰ Fifty-six percent of millennials believe that there is no absolute truth. Instead, they believe that moral truth is up to the individual to determine on their own. The concept asserts that individuals base moral choices on unreliable sources like “personal emotions, past experiences, and the advice of other people.”¹¹

This view is shared by Gen Z, who also believe what is morally right can shift from circumstance to circumstance. “Moral relativism hasn’t just crept into the worldview of Gen Z; it is now the majority opinion.”¹² The interesting dynamic for both Gen Z and Millennials is that their openness on a subject is quickly squashed when faced

⁹ Charles Samuel, “2 Reasons Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church,” March 1, 2015, <https://www.charlessamuel.com/essays/millennials-leaving-church>.

¹⁰ Barna, “New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence.”

¹¹ “Close to six out of 10 young adults (56%) contend that ‘identifying moral truth is up to each individual’ (ibid., 44).

¹² Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z Vol. 2: Caring for Young Souls and Cultivating Resilience*, 2021, 52.

with pushing back on another person's viewpoint or beliefs. In other words, this demographic believes it is okay to think, believe, and stand for whatever you want, and if you want to change your stance, that's fine too. But it is not okay to *oppose or challenge* what someone else thinks and feels. The whole idea of *that's their business, and if they want to do that or think that, then that's fine with me*, is the consensus of this group. On one hand, some may conclude this liberality has no barriers, from marriage to religion to general morals, hence the term moral relativism. Everything is relative, and everything is acceptable. On the other hand, some may assert, this group is choosing to interrogate long-held notions, beliefs, and norms of generations past. Might they be approaching complex decisions with a nuanced or contextual consideration that perhaps their elders did not?

Another component to consider when talking about religious disaffiliation is how much variation, in terms of the percentage of people that have walked away from the church, there is between religious traditions. Of those raised mainline protestant and Jewish, 24% and 27%, respectively, have likely walked away from their faith; 21% of Catholics and 19% of Mormons have stepped away. Interestingly, "Americans raised in an evangelical Christian faith are much less likely to leave; only 11% say they no longer identify with their childhood faith."¹³

¹³ Cox, "Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America."

The Absent Generations

The moral relativism mindset is contradictory to most religions, where boundaries and morals are honored and upheld over time and place. For some Gen Z and Millennials, the black-and-white principles and absolute truths that ministries preach and the Bible pens are enough to keep some outside of the church walls.

According to Wendy Cloherty, the downward trend in church attendance for Gen Z is “truly a characteristic of their generation.”¹⁴ Proof, according to Milton Quintanilla, that over half of this demographic (66%) who “have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ do not attend church in person or online at least once a month.”¹⁵ Even more surprising is the number of Gen Z (61%) and Millennials (57%) who have made a personal commitment to Christ but are considered “non-practicing” Christians. Non-practicing is defined as those that “do not value their faith or attend church.”¹⁶

Darren Slade says that culturally, being a-religious is accepted, adding it is less of a stigma to be non-religious. At one time, Slade states, Americans felt like they had to

¹⁴ Wendy Cloherty, “Why Is Gen Z Disconnecting from the Church?” Point Loma Nazarene University, Viewpoint, June 18, 2018, <https://viewpoint.pointloma.edu/why-is-gen-z-disconnecting-from-the-church/>.

¹⁵ “According to the August edition of the “State of the Bible: USA 2022, [a] report from the American Bible Society, about 66 percent of Gen Z and Millennials who have devoted their lives to Christ do not go to church either in person or online at least once a month” (Milton Quintanilla, “Study: Many Gen Z and Millennial Christians Do Not Attend Church at Least Once a Month,” Christian Headlines, January 2022. <https://www.christianheadlines.com/contributors/milton-quintanilla/study-many-gen-z-and-millennial-christians-do-not-attend-church-at-least-once-a-month.html?amp=1>.

¹⁶ Quintanilla, “Study: Many Gen Z and Millennial Christians Do Not Attend Church at Least Once a Month.”

pretend to be religious so that they might fit in in certain circles. Today, that scenario has changed as “many of the world’s greatest scientists, philosophers, celebrities and even former clergy publicly identify as either agnostic or atheist.”¹⁷

Family Matters: The Effect on Church Attendance

Familial structure, according to Cox, is another defining reason Gen Z and Millennials are absent in worship services across the nation. One in four (23%) Americans are being reared in single-family homes.¹⁸ This family dynamic may be one of the causes that children are less involved in various religious activities. “In the US, Americans brought up in two-parent households tend to have higher rates of religious participation during their childhood.”¹⁹

Cox further states that 36% of children reared in single-parent homes attended church at least one time weekly, compared to those brought up in a two-parent home, where 55% say they attended service weekly. Cox surmises that if studies show two-parent homes are more effective in instilling religious beliefs, then the rise of kids brought up in single-parent homes could have major repercussions with respect to church attendance.

¹⁷ Darren M. Slade, “Why Millennials Are Likely NOT Coming Back to Religion,” Global Center for Religious Research, February 26, 2020, <https://www.gcrr.org/post/whymillennialsarenotcomingback>.

¹⁸ Stephanie Kramer, “U.S. Has World’s Highest Rate of Children Living in Single-Parent Households,” Pew Research, December 12, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/12/u-s-children-more-likely-than-children-in-other-countries-to-live-with-just-one-parent/>.

¹⁹ Cox, “Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America.”

Another reason that Gen Z has been absent in the church house is due to generational fallout. Some report that Gen Z have been shaped by their Gen X parents, who grew up amongst a series of crises. It was around this time (70's) that divorce rates spiked, and youth became *latchkey kids* “who craved security but rarely found it either at home or, as they grew up, in a more globalized, less-forgiving workplace.”²⁰

A study by Deseret News and Marist Poll says that only 21% of young adults report going to church once or twice monthly, concluding, “Generation Z will [not be] responsible for the death of the church ... It's not Gen Z, but their parents who are to blame.”²¹ Cox agrees, pointing specifically to a decrease in formative religious experiences (activities organized through a church or place of worship). He correlates consistent attendance with each generation. For example, more than half (57%) of Baby Boomers are reported to have attended church service with family at least one time a week when they were children. This as Gen Z and Millennials attended 40% and 45% of the time (respectively).²²

Another source of influence, says Graham, is specific to mothers and fathers. Moms are more likely to encourage and impact a household's religiosity. Fathers,

²⁰ Jennifer Graham, “Perspective: Young Adults Are Losing Their Religion. Are Their Parents to Blame?” Deseret News, April 23, 2022, https://www.deseret.com/2022/4/23/23013578/perspective-young-adults-are-losing-their-religion-are-their-parents-to-blame-gen-z-generation-x?_amp=true.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Cox, “Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America.”

meanwhile, can have an even greater impact. “There may be societal and generational implications when” fathers are involved.²³

Interestingly, the increase in single-parent homes has driven up the need for university scholarships. This has shifted the dynamic of Sundays. Sundays have grown into a sporting extravaganza with extracurricular activities no longer honoring the Sabbath. Many families began to seek after the potential of higher-education scholarships, and this has shifted the concept of Sunday activities belonging to the church. Now, quite often, such activities are in gymnasiums and on fields across our nation.

Race is also a dynamic that has affected church attendance. “The racial gaps are largest among the activities that take place at home.”²⁴ Cox notes 69% of Black Americans grew up saying grace and praying with their family at least once a week. This, while 42% of whites, 41% of Hispanics, and 31% of Asian Americans report the same in terms of childhood weekly prayer.

Black Gen Z and Millennials are more likely to identify as Christian (65%–67%) than other races overall in this demographic according to *Christianity Today*.²⁵ While “black Americans of all ages are more Christian than the rest of the country,” they are

²³ Graham, “Perspective: Young Adults Are Losing Their Religion.”

²⁴ Cox, “Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America.”

²⁵ Kate Shellnutt, “Black Millennials and Gen Z Becoming More Cynical Toward Christian Identity,” *Christianity Today*, April 15, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2021/april/black-gen-z-millennial-christian-church-trends-barna.html>.

becoming more cynical about Christian identity.²⁶ The report further states, Black Gen Z and Millennials are reevaluating their faith because it seems as if there are tensions between those who say they are Christian and yet either participate in Black oppression or do nothing to eliminate it. Discipleship is the key, the report goes on to say to spiritually forming this demographic. Having the difficult conversations and allowing them to voice their concerns, doubts, and frustrations is a component that ministries should utilize.

The need for increasing spiritual formation is not limited to the Black culture. Cox maintains this is a widespread need. There is a steady decline in religious education gained during religious activities or Sunday services. Sixty-one percent of Baby Boomers reported religious education being part of their childhood, whereas only 42% of Gen Z and 45% of Millennials have spent time gaining some type of religious instruction. These generational divides continue in Cox's research when he looked at hands on Bible stories or scriptures/prayer time with family. As Graham reports, just a little more than a quarter pray daily, compared to nearly 70% of Americans 60-and-older.

What Some Gen Z and Millennials Want from Church

We have seen the concrete decline in church attendance by Gen Z and Millennials, and while not conclusive, some of the reasons for their absence. So, what

²⁶ Ibid.

might provoke this tech-savvy, independent, success-driven demographic to step into a church today, and further, once inside, what are they looking for? Their answers, at least according to some studies, might surprise some.

Step into many evangelical churches today and you might find blacked-out sanctuaries, lights, and smoke that is reminiscent of a secular concert. Trendy hip jeans and t-shirts have seemingly replaced suits and dresses for Sunday attire. But is this what Gen Z and Millennials are really looking for? Charles Samuel says not entirely!

Instead, focus on what made walls of ancient, fortified cities come crashing down. Focus on what made psalmist awestruck. Focus on what made a father throw the biggest celebration the neighborhood ever saw just because his prodigal son returned home. Don't dress it up. Don't make it hipper ... than it needs to be. Focus on an unrelenting, ravishing love by an ever-present God.²⁷

Samuel says Millennials still desire to have a radical encounter with God that takes their breath away. He says churches should just strive to be authentic, noting the production elements help, but will not keep this group there for the long term. Others, call the smoke, lights, and jeans church model *cool church*.²⁸ Windle says this is no longer working for Gen Z and Millennials. Rather, says Windle, Millennials are reacting and chasing the surface-level changes when, as Samuel says, the things they should be chasing are never sought. Windle says a better website and better branding is not the answer. Cristina Rocha also notes the rise of what she calls *cool Christianity* where some larger churches

²⁷ Samuel, "2 Reasons Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church."

²⁸ "'Cool church'. It is a belief that if church were cooler, new generations would come." See Benjamin Windle, "Why 'Cool Church' Is No Longer Working with Millennials and Gen Z," Tithe.ly, May 20, 2022, <https://get.tithe.ly/blog/why-cool-church-is-no-longer-working-with-millennials-and-gen-z>.

are mixing fashion and celebrity to attract middle-class Gen Z and Millennials. Rocha argues that this creates an aesthetic formation for this younger demographic.²⁹

Still, some studies say that worship and the music experience overall is a vital component for Gen Z and Millennials who are practicing Christians. Styles vary from some older generations, who prefer more traditional hymns (66%–62%) for worship services, to Millennials, who gravitate toward lively charismatic music (30%).³⁰ This same study says it is not just the music that Millennials are looking for. For Pentecostal or charismatic churches, “glossolalia, or what is more commonly referred to as praying in tongues or prayer language, is important.”³¹ Over one-third of those surveyed (36%) believe this is an element that should be a part of weekly services.

Windle says Gen Z and Millennials want more DEPTH. “In a superficial culture, depth is attractive.”³² What does depth look like? Windle says this group wants Bible teaching and basic doctrine. Millennials are looking for “integrity, transparency, honesty, grace, and truth.”³³ This is the depth that Windle is describing. Nieuwhof adds that these

²⁹ Cristina Rocha, “Cool Christianity: The Fashion-Celebrity-Megachurch Industrial Complex,” *Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* (September 6, 2021), <https://www.tandfonline.com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/doi/full/10.1080/17432200.2021.1996942>.

³⁰ “Christian Millennials Are Most Likely Generation to Lean Toward Charismatic Worship,” Barna Research, July 23, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/worship-preferences/>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Windle, “Why ‘Cool Church’ Is No Longer Working with Millennials and Gen Z.”

³³ Carey Nieuwhof, “5 Things Millennials Are Looking For In a Church,” June, 13, 2021, <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-things-millennials-are-looking-for-in-a-church/>.

requests by Gen Z and Millennials are great in that they cost nothing financially, but the rewards will be substantial in terms of discipleship.

Practical life-help courses are also on top of the Gen Z, Millennial list when it comes to things they want in a church. Fifty percent of practicing Christians look to the church as a place to develop their gifts.³⁴ An interesting component of this study goes on to say that 1 in 4 Gen Z and Millennials define themselves by their gifts and talent, often introducing themselves with their accomplishments and accolades, so developing them is a strong desire.

Gen Z and Millennials also crave authenticity in relationships. Grow Curriculum, Nieuwhof, and Windle all point to the value of creating an authentic community that is relational, organic, and full of agape love. Relationships matter greatly to this demographic. In a previous chapter, I note that Gen Z specifically looks to older generations for mentorship; statistics support the need for these authentic, life-giving relationships. Older generations can answer some of the difficult questions that Kara Powell says this group is focused on: identity, belonging, and purpose.³⁵ If churches are able to teach on these topics, they will have an in with this group. One study supports this

³⁴ “Gen Z Are Leaning into Their Gifts—Will the Church Help?” Barna Research, January 5, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/gen-z-gifts/>.

³⁵ “ChurchPulse Weekly Conversations: Kara Powell on Engaging Teens’ Questions,” Barna, July 26, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/cpw-powell/>.

very claim as they report that 3 out of 4 Millennials say they are looking for a purpose in life.³⁶

Social Media = Social Ministry

The subject of social media, the church, and where Gen Z and Millennials might fit into this conversation is a real topic. Media is a key place for the church to utilize discipleship programs. Embracing social platforms is critical for student and young adult ministry.³⁷ With this generation being socially savvy, they will be able to step into church ministries and help raise the bar in terms of marketing and getting the church's message out on social media. Leaders must remember that is a way of life for this demographic, so utilizing their skills and allowing them to train and even lead teams is essential. "It's not social media anymore; it's *social ministry*."³⁸ According to Michael Mims, we should use this *social ministry* by utilizing practicing Christians to evangelize non-Christians.³⁹ Mims says we can't control all the data that infiltrates the web, but the church can create its content, utilizing our Gen Z and Millennials, to counter what everyone else is putting out. The church can collaborate with social media to reach the unchurched. It's essential

³⁶ Barna, "New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence."

³⁷ "ChurchPulse Weekly Conversations: Kara Powell on Engaging Teens' Questions."

³⁸ "ChurchPulse Weekly Conversations: Shane Sanchez and Alison Leamon on Student Ministry," Barna Research, July 7, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/cpw-sanchez-leamon/>.

³⁹ Michael Mims, "Can Social Media Bring Revival to Gen Z?" Leadership Network, June 13, 2022, <https://leadnet.org/can-social-media-bring-revival-to-gen-z/>.

because non-Christian young people are open to spiritual conversations. They are curious about religion, even more so than older generations.⁴⁰

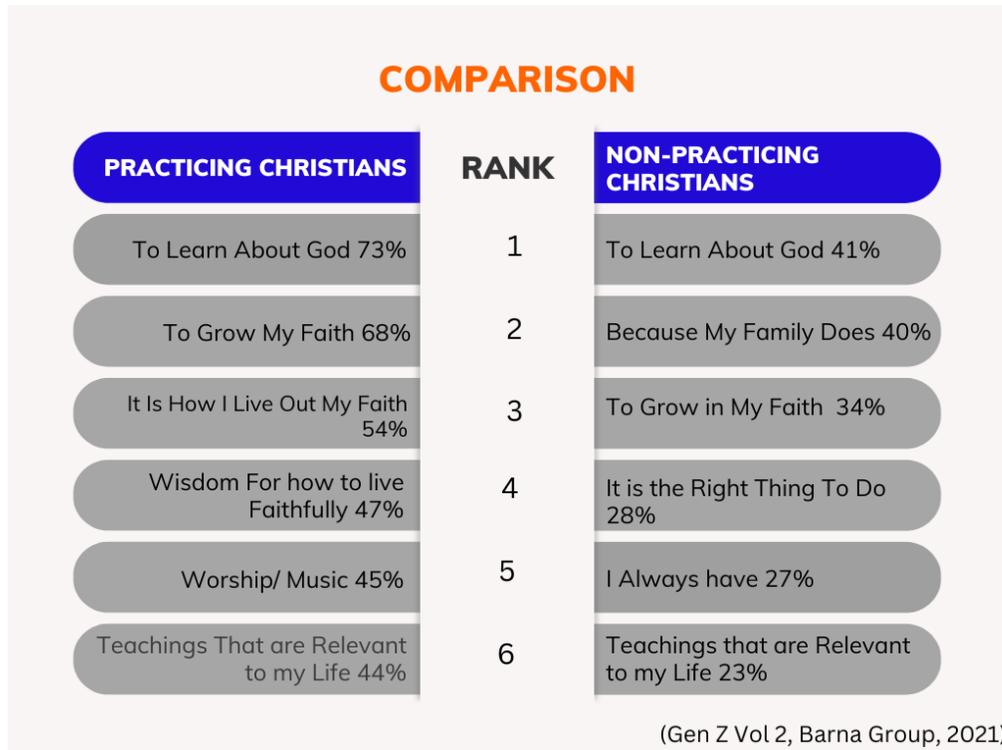
Why Some Gen Z Go to Church

Once Gen Z and Millennials walk into the church, what are they looking for? The answers are vast and, in some cases, surprising, as reflected in **Table 2**. According to an in-depth study done by Barna Research, 73% of practicing Gen Z Christians are more likely to attend church to learn about God compared to only 41% of non-practicing Gen Z Christians.⁴¹ The study continues by noting that 68% of practicing Christians want to increase their faith, and 54% believe it is a way to live out their faith. The second and third reasons non-practicing Christians attend church is that their family does (40%) and to grow their faith (34%). As noted earlier in the chapter, music is essential to practicing Christians. Forty-four percent of practicing Christians and just 23% of non-practicing Christians attend to hear teachings that are relevant to their life.

⁴⁰ “5 Trends Shaping the Next Season of Next Gen Discipleship,”Barna Report, August 19, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/five-themes-to-frame-next-gen-discipleship/>.

⁴¹ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z Vol. 2: Caring for Young Souls and Cultivating Resilience*, 58.

Table 2: Gen Z on why they go to church.



What Some Millennials Believe

We have observed the reasons that Gen Z attends church services, and while more research may need to be done to determine such causes for Millennials, some have asserted what this demographic believes. A research report by George Barna takes a closer look at the faith views of these 26–41-year-olds.⁴² The survey asks respondents for their reaction to the religious terms “Jesus Christ,” “The Bible,” “Christianity,” and

⁴² Barna, “New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence.”

“Atheism.” Fifty-nine percent or six out of 10 have a positive perception of Jesus Christ. Only 1 in 6 have a negative perspective of Jesus. This as nearly a fourth are indifferent to Jesus and seemingly have no opinion.

In terms of faith, almost half (50%) of the Millennials polled were favorable in their view of Christianity; 24% had unfavorable views, while 19% were undecided about their feelings toward Christianity.

Fifty-one percent of Millennials who responded to the survey had a positive view of the Bible. Atheism “did not sit well with the generation.”⁴³ Only 25% had a positive view of being a godless follower, while 31% had negative feelings about having no religious beliefs.

⁴³ Ibid.

Table 3: Religious Views of Millennials

MILLENNIALS VIEW OF RELIGIOUS CONCEPTS

	JESUS CHRIST	THE BIBLE	CHRISTIANITY	ATHEISM
Very Positive	39%	29%	26%	8%
Mostly Positive	12%	12%	15%	7%
A Little Positive	8%	10%	9%	10%
Neutral	17%	21%	19%	31%
A little Negative	6%	8%	9%	11%
Mostly Negative	4%	5%	5%	8%
Very Negative	6%	9%	10%	12%

Barna Group, October 2021

Conclusion

The thoughts, perceptions, and feelings of Gen Z and Millennials and their spirituality is a deep well. While their views are vast, and their likes and dislikes run the gamut, what is easy to see is that this demographic has opinions, and they are not backing down. We know they are not attending church like their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. The reason some point to is widespread relativism and a moral gauge that

is empty of push-back. Gen Z and Millennials are okay with the status quo and whatever flies. Black and white lines are hard for them to condone. Some would rather live in a grey area where they do not have to judge others' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. For this portion of this group, neutrality is their middle name. Others have strong attachments to social and climate justice, becoming angry when they see such areas of concern dismissed.

There are specific asks from these two groups that will encourage them to step foot inside a church. Deep conversations about identity, purpose, and more are what Gen Z and Millennials are looking for. They want to have organic relationships with elders who are willing to speak into their life.

Social media is important to these groups that grew up and live life alongside screens. Incorporating social media is a must. In fact, Gen Z and Millennials desire to have their hands deep in the trenches of media and church ministries. Allowing and even engaging these groups will be warmly received.

The bottom line, Gen Z and Millennials know exactly *why* they go to church and what they believe. How might churches nationally benefit from understanding the hearts of these generations? It's worth considering the impact of digesting such information. To reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials, the church must look at their inner workings.

Covid Insights

The effects of Covid-19 have been felt by both Gen Z and Millennials. While we have not officially concluded the Covid era, for the purposes of this thesis, we will use what current studies and data are available to reflect on the impact as accurately as possible. That said, it could be premature to say in the short term what the lasting impression of Covid might be.

Both Gen Z and Millennials, as we have already noted, have grown up in a culture with great challenges, as well as some of the greatest technological advancements to date, all of which have assisted in the shaping of these two demographics. Covid added to the already diversified look of these generations compared to older generations, causing great challenges and disruptions to their norm.

One of the more concrete displays of such disturbances during the pandemic has been increased screen time. Both Gen Z and Millennials admitted to significant increases in their daily electronic usage during the pandemic.⁴⁴ How does this impact the church or those leading the flock? Considerably, according to this report that mentions some 85% of the pastors surveyed were concerned about the usage increase, adding that they desired more wisdom on ways to assist Gen Z and Millennials when it comes to navigating electronic usage. However, 86% did not have a set plan to help teach Gen Z and Millennials about wise tech usage.

⁴⁴ Barna, “5 Trends Shaping the Next Season of Next Gen Discipleship.”

Such stress has contributed greatly to depression, leaving Gen Z with “trouble thinking and concentrating and feeling very restless, lonely, miserable or unhappy.”⁴⁵

Why has this group been hit so hard? The study cites an uncertain future at a time when these individuals are just becoming independent in their adult status, and deepens feelings of fear and anxiety that accompanied coming of age during the upheaval of Covid-19.

This data may have contributed to alarming CDC statistics, which state that one in four young adults between the ages of 18–24 has considered suicide throughout the pandemic.⁴⁶ Feelings of helplessness and a complete shutdown of societal norms may have been enflamed, according to the study, by lockdowns, isolation, mandatory mask mandates, and more.

Barna surveyed a group of Millennials, asking how often they felt lonely in the past seven days. One in five, or 19%, admitted to feeling lonely all the time, while 25% said they were lonely for portions of each day, as, 21% said they felt lonely at least one day during the week. Only one in three had not experienced loneliness during this peak period of Covid.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ American Psychological Association, “APA Survey: Generation Z Stressed about Issues in the News but Least Likely to Vote,” October 30, 2018, <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2018/10/generation-z-stressed>.

⁴⁶ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z Vol. 2: Caring for Young Souls and Cultivating Resilience*, 17–18, 51.

⁴⁷ Barna, “5 Trends Shaping the Next Season of Next Gen Discipleship.”

The study points out that such statistics have caused young adults to seek more meaningful connections. We will talk more about what some of these connections are in the next section when we look at Covid's impact on church attendance.

Additional fallout of the pandemic, according to Steig, has left more than half (51%) of Gen Z pointing the finger at the pandemic, blaming Covid-19 for halting future planning of scholastic endeavors.

For Millennials, the pandemic was the second crisis of sorts experienced by the 26–41-year-old demographic who also lived through the global financial crisis of 2008. Many Millennials in the higher age bracket were settled into their careers as Covid hit, while the younger portion of this demographic were just getting started.⁴⁸ These age-related statistics also play into the findings discussed earlier in chapter one, citing how many Millennials have bought houses and have settled into family life.

Ultimately, all of humanity has experienced the impact of the coronavirus, but according to these studies, Gen Z has felt the emotional impact in ways that other generations have not. While the lasting effects of Covid are still being felt, for now, pressing past the halt in our social system, the effect of tragic deaths, and learning how to embrace life during this new normal are all a part of life for Gen Z and Millennials.

⁴⁸ “The Impact of Coronavirus on Millennials and Generation Z,” Euromonitor International, May 2020, <https://www.euromonitor.com/the-impact-of-coronavirus-on-millennials-and-generation-z/report>.

Covid and Church Attendance

After observing some of the impacts the Coronavirus has had on Gen Z and Millennials psychologically and practically, we will examine how the pandemic has affected the church and attendance. Such information is relevant as we look closer at studies suggesting why Gen Z and Millennials *do* and *do not* attend church and the spiritual implications surrounding such findings.

From August of 2020, pastors noted the difficulty of reaching kids and youth during Covid, understanding, “young people are questioning their place in this new reality.”⁴⁹ According to the study by Euromonitor International, pastors feel that the future of ministry to this demographic has and will continue to evolve post Covid. These ministers speak of the importance of discipleship and engagement with Gen Z and Millennials as the complexities of life continue to unfold.

These findings are critical as most congregations have opened their doors once again. However, with doors open, attendance—at least for the first part (through March) of 2023—has not really increased from the fall of 2021.⁵⁰ While Covid cases continue to decline and most restrictions have eased throughout the U.S., according to Nortey, “the

⁴⁹ Barna, “5 Trends Shaping the Next Season of Next Gen Discipleship.”

⁵⁰ Justin Nortey, “More Houses of Worship Are Returning to Normal Operations, but in-Person Attendance Is Unchanged since Fall,” Pew Research, March 22, 2022, <https://pewrsr.ch/3ulHpTa>.

overall share of U.S. worshippers who say their congregation is open to in-person services has not increased over the last six months.”

The study also says that about a third, or 32%, of U.S. adults said they typically attend services once or twice monthly. Of this group, the March 2022 study maintains 67% reported they attended in person in the last month, while more than half (57%) decided to watch services online during the same period. Interestingly, during the same monthly timeframe, the same study reports, of the Americans who typically attend in person, roughly one-in-five have opted to participate online instead of attending in person. This, as 12% of regular attendees reported that they had not watched nor attended service in this same month of research.

Ultimately, says Nortey, it is difficult to assess the impact of Covid on church attendance. The reasons given are that it is hard to know if the pandemic is over, if it will spike again, and if this plateau in attendance might rise/decline depending on the emergence of new variants or a gradual receding of Covid altogether.

The other reason it is difficult to assess Covid’s impact is that prior to the pandemic, there were no statistics distinguishing virtual attendance versus in-person attendance. Statistics have shown a massive drop of in-person attendance during Covid, yet Nortey maintains there’s a reason to believe online attendance is substantially higher now than it was before the coronavirus outbreak. Proof of this is a survey done in July

2020 stating that 18% of U.S. adults said: “that since the pandemic, they had watched religious services online ... for the first time.”⁵¹

With in-person attendance slowly growing and an increase of online watchers, it will be interesting to see if and how pastors are incorporating Gen Z and Millennials into the production aspects of online services. As we have observed thus far, the virtual world has a great influence on these 10–41-year-olds. However, a recent study believes the novelty of online worship has worn off.⁵² This is not without good news, as it reports that “now in 2022, younger generations especially are re-engaging in church, a shift that might potentially mark a new chapter in church attendance.”⁵³ We will delve into all aspects of the Covid impact further in my conclusion, as we observe what pastors and ministry leaders are doing to reach, retain, and assimilate these two groups.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Barna Research, “A New Chapter in Millennial Church Attendance.”

⁵³ Barna Research. (Barna Research, August 4, 2022), <https://www.barna.com/research/church-attendance-2022/>.

Chapter 3: Churches reaching Gen Z and Millennials?

Research shows that in 2022 there was a decline in church attendance by Gen Z and Millennials compared to generations past. Although Covid has left its indelible mark on the church as a whole, the decline in attendance by our nation's two youngest generations was in effect prior to the pandemic.

Yet, amid empty chairs and pews there is a church remnant that is welcoming Gen Z and Millennials into their foyers and gathering spaces weekly. Who are these—largely non-denominational—assemblies that exhibit the characteristics of Evangelicalism and who are Spirit-empowered, and are effectively reaching, retaining, and assimilating Gen Z and Millennials, and what might we learn from them?

As I break down the data, research, and interviews, I do it from a posture of being a former journalist. For nearly twenty-years, I was a news anchor, reporter, producer, and worked in every position in between. I was honored to work for some of the largest television networks both nationally and internationally. My vantage point, therefore, as I compile the information, is one that methodically identifies commonalities, differences, and distinct data critical to the overall research.

After closely observing the two demographics that churches are welcoming into their assemblies each week, the focus now shifts to the eight churches I interviewed that are effectively reaching this large group. To fully comprehend how they are reaching, keeping, and plugging in Gen Z and Millennials it is critical to understand some foundational truths concerning these houses of worship. To do so, I will look at these

assemblies in terms of geographic location, theological temperament, ethnic DNA, and finally, generational makeup?

Theological Temperament

What a church believes is often the first information a person seeks to find when stepping inside the doors and engaging with that assembly. Different Christian denominations have varying ways of interpreting scripture, and thus the theological makeup of a church can reflect the variance in beliefs, doctrinal adherence, and overall interworkings of their systems. In reviewing the central theological pillars that reflect the houses of worship interviewed for this research there are a few overarching non-negotiables that help to define them. However, before looking at theological makeup, it is important to understand what defines a non-denominational/inter-denominational church, as all but one of the assemblies I interviewed for this thesis identify as such.

What is a non-denominational church?

Non-denominational places of worship have always existed. Think back to biblical times, precisely the book of Acts, and the resurrection of Jesus which is when the church began. There were no denominations. These came later. Yet, traces of the origin of the church of Acts can be seen more recently in the in the Restoration Movement of

the 1800's "which supported 'no creed but Christ.'"¹ This movement wanted to remove labels that might separate different church groups.² The idea, says Clarence Haynes, Jr., was to identify churches in the way they were reflected in the first century. Turley furthers, the actual term non-denominational was initially utilized in the latter part of the twentieth century. This movement, however, is still prevalent in 2023.

Dr. Herbst Norton studied nondenominational churches identities. He maintains there are four traits or subtypes that are synonymous with modern (1945-2000) nondenominational churches. They are Bible churches, prosperity churches, Jesus people churches and seeker churches. He notes that scholars have looked at each subtype individually and alongside of the other movements. "Bible churches [are] an expression of fundamentalism or dispensationalism; prosperity churches [emerged] from the Pentecostal tradition; Jesus People churches [have] characteristic[s] of the charismatic movement; and seeker churches [are a] representative of evangelical megachurches."³

Norton looked closely at the connections of the subtypes and notes that although each trait developed from a confessional tradition or movement, they "developed toward a shared nondenominational tradition". He goes on to say common doctrine, a continued posture toward society and postwar era cultural factors aligns the four types of churches

¹ Rebecca Turley, "What Is a Non-Denominational Church?" ChristianMinistryEDU.org, April 18, 2022, <https://christianministryedu.org/faq/what-is-a-non-denominational-church/>.

² Clarence L. Haynes, Jr., "What Is a Non-Denominational Church, and Is It Right for You?" BibleStudyTools.com, September 3, 2021, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/bible-study/topical-studies/what-is-a-non-denomination-church-and-is-it-right-for-you.html>.

³ Herbst, R. Norton, "A History of Nondenominational Churches in Denver and Beyond, 1945-2000," (PhD. diss., University of Denver, 2018), 300–302, ProQuest (10793900).

with one another just as much as they were coming out of the movements that may have initially shaped them.

While each of these four kinds of modern congregations boasts a proud spirit of independence over and against denominational institutionalism, they do not stand independent of one another. They are deeply connected to each other by a larger trend whereby Bible, prosperity, Jesus People, and seeker churches together shaped and formed a recognizable nondenominational identity. By recognizable nondenominational church identity, I mean an identity that is positively defined by shared traits rather than a simple negative assertion: not denominational.⁴

Based on this, we might identify a non-denominational church by saying it is a house of worship that exists outside of an organization that is linked, say, by creed, practice, or geography. In other words, the church has no tie or link to a specific “religious organization, leadership, or hierarchy.”⁵ Haynes goes on to say this does not mean non-denominational churches do not have oversight. However, their beliefs and structure are “usually closely associated with a denomination.”⁶

Having defined what a non-denominational church is, it is worth noting here what a *denominational* church is as one of the churches interviewed is affiliated with one. Haynes sheds some insight by first looking at the generic term ‘denomination.’ He asserts, a denomination of any kind is a way of classifying and structuring a group of things—for example, money, cards, flora and fauna, etc. So, when looking at religious assemblies that belong to a denomination, it can be inferred that a particular church has

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Haynes, “What Is a Non-Denominational Church, and Is It Right for You?”

⁶ Ibid.

the same theological and structural DNA as the rest of the houses of worship under that specific umbrella.

That said, regardless of the denominational or non-denominational status of a church, each mostly has its own theological temperament. This was true of the churches I interviewed. However, general descriptive categories can be useful, and these I will illustrate below.

What is Evangelicalism?

We begin with Evangelicalism. Historian David Bebbington identifies four markers that classify an evangelical, maintaining, “there is ... a common core that has remained remarkably constant down the centuries.”⁷ The first characteristic is ‘conversionism,’ which is the belief that a person must be transformed through a ‘born-again’ experience followed by a life lived following Jesus.

The book of Romans helps walk a believer through this process. Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” All of humanity have sinful hearts, Bebbington continues, and sin has placed a divide or estrangement between humanity and God making it impossible to ‘win’ salvation. But Romans 6:23 gives the sinner hope, “for the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” As a pastor, I get to share the empowering news that God doesn’t want

⁷ Mark A. Noll, David Bebbington, and George M. Marsden, *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Grand Rapid, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), 37.

people to remain in a hopeless place, which is what the Bible bears witness too. It is written in the scriptures, says Pastor Karen Wheaton, that the Lord sent His son Jesus to die on the cross so that humanity might have abundant life.⁸ “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us . . . For whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”⁹ The Bible asserts that salvation is received as a gift and cannot be achieved by works or merit. Wheaton adds that Apostle Paul tells us humanity must simply believe, or have faith, that Jesus went to the cross for the sins of the world. This type of faith, according to Philibert, is a “call to unceasing conversion and transformation,” which moves beyond our feelings and emotions.¹⁰ “Acceptance by God, as [Martin] Luther had insisted, comes through faith, not works. Justification by faith, was one of the distinguishing doctrines of Evangelicalism in the eighteenth century.”¹¹ Bebbington goes on to say, this is the gospel found in the New Testament. This biblical principle is one that the churches I interviewed stand on. Elevation Church, a multi-site congregation that has their broadcasting church located in Charlotte, North Carolina, notes on their website:

The blood of Jesus Christ, shed on the cross, provides the only way of salvation through the forgiveness of sin. Salvation occurs when people place their faith in the death and resurrection of Christ as sufficient payment for their sin. Salvation is a gift from God, and it cannot be earned through our own efforts. Isaiah 1:18; 53:5-6; 55:7 Matthew 1:21; 27:22-66, 28:1-6 Luke 1:68-69; 2:28-32 John 1:12;

⁸ Karen Wheaton, The Ramp Church, Hamilton, AL, interview conducted by Elictia Hart, February 9, 2023.

⁹ Romans 5:8, 10:13.

¹⁰ Paul J. Philibert, *The Priesthood of the Faithful: Key to a Living Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 84.

¹¹ Noll, Bebbington, and Marsden, *Evangelicals*, 39.

3:16, 36; 5:24 Acts 2:21; 4:12; 16:30-31 Romans 1:16-18; 3:23-25; 5:8-10; 6 1 Corinthians 1:18 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 Galatians 2:20; 3:13 Ephesians 2:8-10 Philippians 2:12-13 Hebrews 9:24-28 Revelation 3:20.¹²

Secondly, Bebbington says ‘activism’ is another leading characteristic of evangelicals. The National Evangelical Association (NAE) defines activism as “the expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts.”¹³ Philibert maintains that Christians should be led of the Spirit and develop a spiritual maturity that would cause them to live a life full of service to God’s Kingdom. This sort of compassion, he continues, will cause the heart to seek justice and peace for all, giving them a desire to “devote their energies to sharing the good news of Christ’s kingdom.”¹⁴ Bebbington asserts that this desire to tell others of the gospel happens naturally after our own conversion takes place. Then we desire to see others receive the gift of salvation that we received. Bethel church in Goldsboro, North Carolina, states on their website (under the Core section), “Discipleship *Fully committing yourself to becoming like Christ and then imparting that into the life of someone else.*”¹⁵

Victory Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma notes on their beliefs page:

The church is a local community of believers unified through faith in Christ and a part of the bigger whole of the global church. It is committed to the teachings of Christ and to obeying all of His commands as it seeks to bring the gospel to the world. The church works together in love and unity, intent on the ultimate

¹² “Transformation Church,” accessed February 12, 2023, <https://elevationchurch.org/beliefs/>.

¹³ “What Is an Evangelical?” National Association of Evangelicals, accessed January 27, 2023., <https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

¹⁴ Philibert, *Priesthood of the Faithful*, 99.

¹⁵ “Bethel Church,” accessed February 12, 2023, <https://www.bethelchurch.info/our-core>.

purpose of glorifying Christ and making Him known to the world. (Eph. 4:11-13, Heb. 10:24-25, Acts 1:8)¹⁶

The third characteristic of Evangelicalism, says Bebbington, is ‘Biblicism,’ which explains devotion to the Bible as being one of spiritual truth. The NAE speaks of the Bible as the ultimate authority and being held in the highest of regard, with believers being obedient to its sayings.

Historically speaking, while John Wesley had no problem proclaiming that his doctrine of salvation came from one source, the Bible, opponents felt he had made the Bible his God.¹⁷ Indeed, in the eighteenth century, continues Bebbington, evangelicals also combed through their Bibles and were criticized, but in this case they were castigated for maintaining they were able to interpret the scriptures through the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Still, Evangelicals held their ground in the nineteenth century, spending hours daily reading and praying. “There was an agreement among Evangelicals of all generations that the Bible is the inspired word of God.”¹⁸

This historic doctrine aligns with the churches interviewed for this research who believe the Bible is the infallible and inspired Word of God. Transformation Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma states on their website, under their beliefs:

The Bible is God’s Word to all people. It was written by human authors under the supernatural guidance of the Holy Spirit. Because it was inspired by God, the Bible is truth without any mixture of error and is completely relevant to our daily lives. (Deuteronomy 4:1-2; Psalms 119:11, 89, 105; Proverbs 30:5; Isaiah 40:8;

¹⁶ Paul Daugherty, “Victory Church,” Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, February 23, 2023.

¹⁷ Noll, Bebbington, and Marsden, *Evangelicals*, 48–50.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

Matthew 22:29; John 5:39; 16:13-15; 17:17; Romans 15:4, 16:25-26; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; Hebrews 1:1-2; 4:12; 1 Peter 1:25; 2 Peter 3:16).¹⁹

Bebbington lists the fourth defining attribute of Evangelicalism as ‘crucicentrism,’ which highlights the doctrine of the cross. John Wesley notes that “nothing is of greater consequence than the doctrine of atonement.”²⁰ Note, this fourth characteristic is separate from salvation. Its sole focus is the reconciliation of humanity to God through the act of Jesus dying on the cross.

The great minister from the eighteenth century, Charles Spurgeon, known as the ‘Prince of Preachers,’ maintained Jesus bore the sins of the world on the cross. His suffering was such that Spurgeon said, “[we] will never be able to comprehend what Jesus suffered when the great flood of human sin came rushing down upon him.”²¹ This twentieth-century view was shared by Evangelicals and theologians who were criticized for their passion for such theology.

While Bebbington lists conversionism and crucicentrism as two separate characteristics, some Evangelicals today combine them into one defining attribute. New Season church in Sacramento, California, notes this under their beliefs section; specifically, salvation:

We believe that all people are created with dignity and great value in the image of God. That people were created to live in a thriving relationship with God. However, through our sin (failing to live by God’s moral standards), we break our intended relationship with God, and we experience the sad consequences of that

¹⁹ “Transformation Church,” <https://transformchurch.us/aboutus/>.

²⁰ Noll, Bebbington, and Marsden, *Evangelicals*, 51.

²¹ Ed Romine, “Spurgeon’s Evangelical Crucicentrism,” The Spurgeon Center, March 21, 2019, <https://www.spurgeon.org/resource-library/blog-entries/spurgeons-evangelical-crucicentrism/>.

broken relationship, both spiritually and socially. However, because of God's love for us, He sent His Son, Jesus, to rescue us from those consequences and to restore our broken relationship with God, through Jesus' death on the cross, a perfect act of redemption for each of us. We receive the free gift of forgiveness and are spiritually reborn through repenting (changing our mind and heart) of our sin and placing faith in Jesus alone.²²

As I have attempted to grasp the spiritual DNA of the churches I've interviewed, it is difficult to say whether all the churches interviewed align conclusively and completely with the aforementioned doctrine. This is in part because "evangelicalism is not a denomination in the usual sense of an organized structure, it is, a denomination in the sense of a name by which a religious grouping is denominated."²³ Therefore, it is possible that there may be some differentiation in interpretations.

Again, the aim of applying Bebbington's Evangelicalism classifications is to give some academic/historic reference as well as to establish some foundational and (for the purpose of this thesis) functional pillars. Thus, we may agree that "evangelicals take the Bible seriously and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord ... the Evangelical faith focuses on the 'good news' of salvation brought to sinners by Jesus Christ."²⁴

What is a Spirit-empowered Church?

What constitutes a Spirit-empowered church. This term is tossed around a great deal within the Evangelical community, says Matt Bedzyd, and is often used to define either a Christian or a church that "emphasizes spiritual gifts, experiences authentic and

²² "New Season Church," <https://newseasonworship.org/beliefs/>.

²³ Noll, Bebbington, and Marsden, *Evangelicals*, 20.

²⁴ "What Is an Evangelical?" <https://www.nae.org/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

emotional worship ‘encounters,’ and seeks to avoid “putting God in a box“ when it comes to the expression of faith.”²⁵ While there are a plethora of definitions and insights, simply put, a Spirit-empowered church, according to Alton Garrison, is a place that allows the Holy Spirit to lead and to be led of the Spirit one must know Christ.²⁶

Every spiritual discipline, every behavioral truth, every spiritual activity rings hollow without a growing relationship with Christ-and will eventually bring frustration, disappointment, or burnout. We can’t expect to operate in our own strength in order to accomplish God’s work on the earth.²⁷

Accomplishing God’s work as led by the Holy Spirit is the mandate of the leaders and pastors of the churches I interviewed. As Garrison notes, when individuals are Spirit-empowered, everything they do is a byproduct of their relationship with Christ, and this includes leading a church. In looking at the church leadership I interviewed, being Spirit-empowered leaders translates into raising-up a church that is led by the Spirit, or is Spirit-filled.

Such leadership, Garrison points out, often looks to “the church in Acts 2 [which] was a Spirit-filled church led by disciples who were Spirit-baptized and Spirit-directed”; these churches believed and operated in the gifts of the Holy Spirit as noted in 1 Corinthians 12:27-31.²⁸ As the Apostle Paul notes:

All of you together are Christ’s body, and each of you is a part of it. Here are some of the parts God has appointed for the church: first are apostles, second are prophets, third are teachers, those who do miracles, those who have the gift of

²⁵ Matt Bedzyk, “A Portrait of a Spirit-Filled Church,” Emmanuel Community Church (articles), January 1, 2020, <https://eccelmira.org/articles/a-portrait-of-a-spirit-filled-church/>.

²⁶ Alton Garrison, *A Spirit Empowered Church* (Springfield, MO: Influence Resources, 2015), 65–70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 69–70

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 139

healing, those who can help others, those who have the gift of leadership, those who speak in unknown languages.

Speaking in unknown languages happens when a believer is baptized in the Holy Spirit—a point observed by Lifegate Church in Independence Missouri:

We believe in the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, (as promised by Jesus Christ) to all believers and is received subsequent to salvation. Believers are entitled to and should expect, and earnestly seek the promise. Evidence of the Baptism, (according to scripture) is an uncompromising love for others, a boldness to witness the testimony of Jesus Christ, and an earnest desire for Christian service. Speaking in other tongues, (as the Spirit gives utterance) is also evidence of the Baptism. (Matthew 3:11, Luke 24:49, Acts 1:8, 2:4, 2:38-39, Acts 19:1-7).²⁹

Transformation Church talks about the Holy Spirit by saying:

His presence assures us of our relationship with Christ. He guides believers into all truth and exalts Christ. He convicts people of their sin, God's righteousness, and the coming judgment. He comforts us, gives us spiritual gifts, and makes us more like Christ. Evidence of the Holy Spirit is seen in the fruits of the Holy Spirit, speaking in unknown tongues, gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc. (Genesis 1:2; Psalms 51:11; 139:7 ff.; Isaiah 61:1-3; Joel 2:28-32; Mark 1:10; Luke 1:35; 4:1; 11:13; 12:12; John 15:26; 16:7-14; Acts 1:5, 8; 2:1-4; 13:2; Romans 8:9-11, 14-16, 26-27; Galatians 5:22-23; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 12:1-11; Ephesians 1:13-14; 2 Peter 1:21; Revelation 22:17)³⁰

“The true church of Christ is the Spirit-filled, indwelt, baptized, empowered, illuminated, sanctified, and sealed assembly of the restored people of God under the saving rule of the risen Lord Jesus.”³¹ Philibert says, as believers, who are part of the Kingdom of Christ, we should walk out our role as a priestly servant alongside Christ, loving God, and loving people. He adds, this should be our witness to the church body:

²⁹ “Lifegate Church,” <https://lifegatekc.org/what-we-believe/>.

³⁰ “Transformation Church,” <https://transformchurch.us/aboutus/>.

³¹ Bedzyk, “Portrait of a Spirit-Filled Church.”

“The formula for a living church: a Body of Christ everywhere and always alive in the Holy Spirit for the sake of a world incandescent with love.”³²

The Churches: Their Ethnic and Generational DNA

Having looked at the spiritual temperament of the churches interviewed; we pivot to glimpse into some of the specifics of each congregation. First, I will look at the churches in the study, their location, weekly attendance, senior pastor and any defining DNA that is pertinent to this research. This will be followed by an account of each worship assembly’s ethnic makeup, and finally, a look at the generational makeup of each church.

Churches Interviewed

Before we unpack the ethnic and generational data from each of the churches it is critical for us take a closer look at each individual entity. I will refer to **Table 4** as we observe a small portion of the unique DNA that makes up each worship assembly, and will begin with the church that has the largest in-person attendance on Sunday mornings and then work down in estimated attendance numbers and statistics through the listed churches. It is important to note that although each church varies in size, the impact each makes with respect to the Gen Z and Millennial demographic is significant.

³² Philibert, *Priesthood of the Faithful*, 136.

Table 4: Churches Interviewed Effectively Reaching Gen Z and Millennials

CHURCHES UNIQUE DNA

Effectively reaching Gen Z and Millennials

ALL NUMBERS ARE APPROXIMATE

1 **ELEVATION CHURCH: CHARLOTTE, NC**
PASTOR STEVEN FURTICK

- 14,000-15,000 weekly in-person attendance
- 21 churches in the network
- 2.55 million Subscribers on YouTube

VICTORY CHURCH: TULSA, OK
PASTOR PAUL DAUGHERTY

- 5500 weekly in-person attendance
- 13,000 watching online weekend services
- 108,000 Subscribers on YouTube

2

3 **TRANSFORMATION CHURCH: TULSA, OK**
PASTOR MICHAEL TODD

- 2500 weekly in-person attendance
- 20,000 watching Sunday's live online
- 1.41 million Subscribers on YouTube

NEW SEASON: SACRAMENTO, CA
PASTOR SAM RODRIGUEZ

- 3000 weekly in-person attendance
- 2 church campuses

4

5 **FORWARD CITY CHURCH: COLUMBIA, SC**
PASTOR TRAVIS GREENE

- 1100 weekly in-person attendance
- Relocated into a new facility in Feb. 2022
- Nearly quadrupled attendance in new building*
- *815 new members added in 11 months

THE RAMP: HAMILTON, AL
PASTOR KAREN WHEATON

- 1000 weekly in-person attendance
- Has 10 youth/kids conferences annually
- 3 church campuses

6

7 **BETHEL CHURCH: GOLDSBORO, NC**
PASTOR DANIEL WEEKS

- 700 weekly in-person attendance
- 120 new members added in 2021
- Goldboro population was 32, 749 in 2021*

*<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/goldsborocitynorthcarolina,waynecountynorthcarolina/PST04522>

LIFEGATE CHURCH: INDEPENDENCE, MO
PASTOR BRIAN GALLARDO

- 300 weekly in-person attendance
- 125 new members added in 2021

8

Elevation Church has been around since 2007 and has twenty-one campus churches, with their broadcast (main) location in Ballantyne—a suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina. According to Kevin Torres, Director of Youth over three locations (Triangle Region: Raleigh, Durham, and Morrisville), Elevation is non-denominational, and has about 14,000–15,000 people (combining all churches) that attend their Sunday morning worship experiences.³³ According to Elevation’s ‘quick facts’ page on their website they also have 65,000 people that are a part of their ‘efam’ (or online family/viewers).³⁴ Torres also says they also have a large YouTube following, with 2.55 million subscribers, and recorded approximately 755,000 unique users (the number of unique users that click on that particular link) in 2021. Steven Furtick—Grammy-award winning songwriter and producer, and New York Times best-selling author—is the senior pastor of Elevation.³⁵ He and his wife Holly are the founders.³⁶

³³ Kevin Torres, Elevation Church, Charlotte, NC, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, January 4, 2023.
³⁴ According to this website, Elevation has an average of over ‘26,000 attendees/week’ (Elevation Church, <https://elevationchurch.org/quick-facts/>).
³⁵ “Elevation Church,” <https://elevationchurch.org/leadership/>.
³⁶ “Liberty University Online Academy: Q & A with Holly Furtick,” February 9, 2021, <https://www.liberty.edu/online-academy/blog/qa-with-holly-furtick/>.

Next on the list of churches interviewed is Victory Church, which is located in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Victory has three weekend services: one on Saturday evening and two on Sunday morning. They average about 5500 in-person attendees according to Pastor Paul Daugherty.³⁷ Daugherty's parents, Billy Joe and Sharon, founded the church, which is located across the street from Oral Roberts University, 42 years ago. Victory has 108,000 subscribers on YouTube. Pastor Paul pastors alongside his wife Ashley.

Transformation Church is also located in Tulsa, Oklahoma and is a non-denominational church according to their founding pastor, Bishop Gary McIntosh.³⁸ McIntosh says the church opened its doors in 1999 and was initially named Greenwood Christian Center. McIntosh said he pastored the church until he handed it over in 2015 to Michael Todd, who renamed the assembly Transformation Church. Lead Executive Pastor, Charles Metcalf says Transformation has about 2,500 in-person attendees on Sunday morning and approximately 20,000 watch the service live online.³⁹ However, the large viewership does not end on Sundays, says Metcalf, "there'll be about 300,000 people that have watched the sermon, in one week." He adds the weekly online numbers can depend on the sermons as well and often average between 150,000–250,000. Some series lend for more viewers than others, as expressed in the 300,000 number.

³⁷ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, February 23, 2023.

³⁸ Gary McIntosh, Transformation Church, Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 22, 2022.

³⁹ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church, Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 22, 2022.

Transformation has 1.91 million subscribers on YouTube. Michael Todd, and his wife, Natalie, are the lead pastors of the Transformation church.⁴⁰

Our third church, New Season, is located in Sacramento, California. Samuel Rodriguez is the Senior pastor, alongside his wife Eva, the Executive pastor. New Season has been around for twelve-years and is affiliated with the Assemblies of God according to Rodriguez.⁴¹ They have two campuses in California, the main location is in Sacramento, and a second campus is in Downey, just outside of Los Angeles. New Season's two campuses have an in-person Sunday attendance of 3,000. Pastor Sam is also the president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, which serves over 42,000 churches. He is also a movie producer, Dove recipient, and periodical presidential advisor.⁴²

Forward City Church is located in Columbia, South Carolina. On any given Sunday the non-denominational church, which has been around for just six years, welcomes about 1,100 people through their doors. Executive Pastor Keisha Young says they had about 285 people in the last service at their old building, which was in February of 2022.⁴³ They relocated into their new building that same month. In less than a year, Forward City has almost quadrupled their attendance according to Young's numbers.

⁴⁰ "Transformation Church," <https://transformchurch.us/aboutus/>.

⁴¹ Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, Sacramento, CA, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 1, 2022.

⁴² "National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference," <http://nhclc.org>; "New Season Church," <https://pastorsam.com/about/>.

⁴³ Keisha Young, Forward City Church, Columbia, SC, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, January 3, 2023.

Five-time Christian music Grammy nominee, Travis Greene, and his wife, Jackie, are the lead pastors of Forward City.

The Ramp Church headquartered in Hamilton, Alabama is just eleven-years-old, but founding pastor Karen Wheaton says, “it started really more as just a youth movement” back in the fall of 1988.⁴⁴ The Ramp also has ten conferences annually, with the main emphasis being on kids, teens, and young adults. Wheaton adds that people come from about twenty-four states to attend each conference, which averages about 1000 attendees. The Ramp Church is non-denominational and has three campuses which average 1000 people total weekly. Wheaton’s husband Rick Towe is the CEO of The Ramp.⁴⁵

Bethel Church is a non-denominational assembly in Goldsboro, North Carolina. The city of Goldsboro, according to Senior Pastor Daniel Weeks, is part of Wayne County, which is known for agriculture. In 2021, the population of Goldsboro was 32,749 according to the website census.gov.⁴⁶ In this smaller community, Bethel Church added 120 new members in 2021, and currently welcomes about 700 congregants each Sunday. Bethel has a long-established history, as it has been around for fifty-six years. Pastor Daniel has been shepherding the church for about twelve years.

⁴⁴ Karen Wheaton, The Ramp Church, Hamilton, AL, interview conducted by Elictia Hart, February 9, 2023.

⁴⁵ “Karen Wheaton,” <https://karenwheaton.com/about/>.

⁴⁶ “QuickFacts: Goldsboro City, North Carolina; Wayne County, North Carolina.” Accessed, February 25, 2023. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/goldsborocitynorthcarolina,waynecountynorthcarolina/PST045221>.

Lifegate Church is located in Independence, Missouri, just outside of Kansas, City. Lifegate has about 300 attendees on any given Sunday. The congregation added 125 new members to the congregation in 2021. Brian and Jillian Gallardo are the founders and lead pastors of Lifegate.

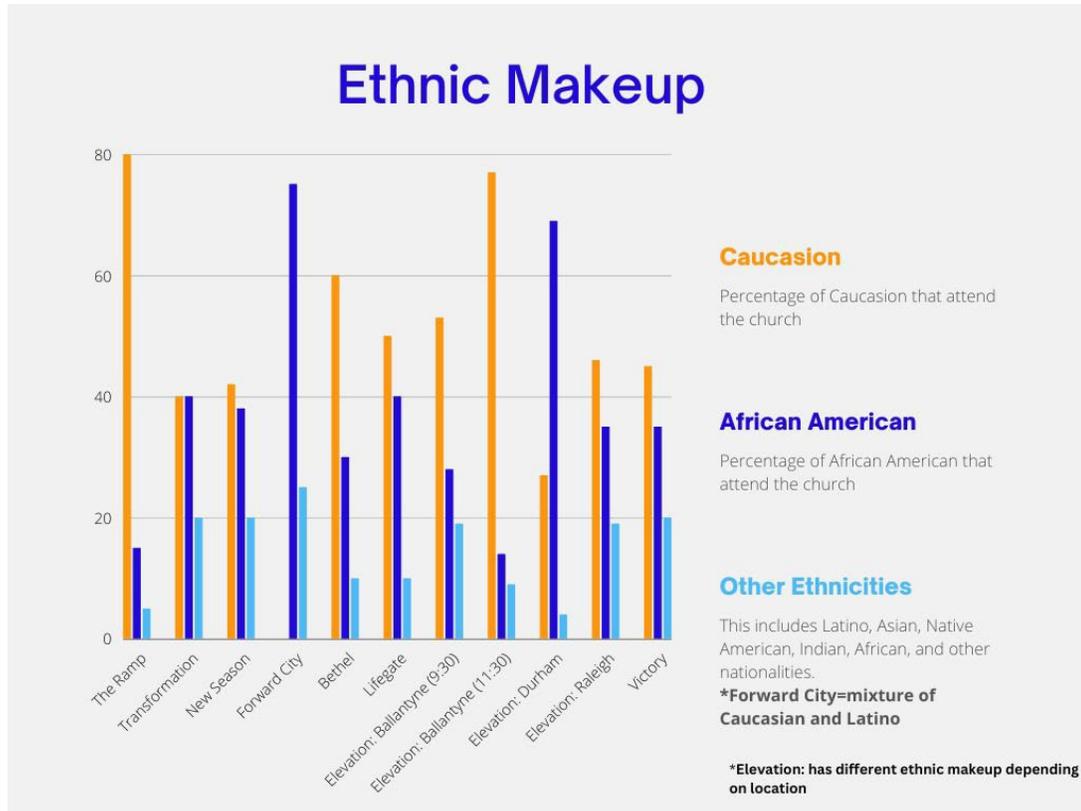
Ethnic Makeup

We look next at the ethnic makeup of the churches interviewed. Visual data is provided via **Table 5**. After assessing and analyzing the information, it is clear many of the churches interviewed are fairly ethnically diverse. The two dominant races of each assembly are Caucasian and African American, with other races/ethnicities such as Asian, Latino, Hispanic, and Native American combining to complete the percentages that make up the rest of the congregations. Additionally, most of the congregations, albeit small percentages in some cases, have a fair representation of peoples from other parts of the world.

Transformation, Victory, New Season, and Lifegate have a nearly equal balance of Caucasian and African American attendees, as well as a number of other races. Transformation is 40% Caucasian, 40% African American, and 20% mixture of Hispanic, Asian, and other ethnicities. Victory is diversly made up of 45% Caucasians, 35% African Americans and 20% Latino and African. New Season, meanwhile, has an ethnic populous consisting of 42% Caucasians, 38% African Americans, and 20% Latino,

Asian, and Native American. Lifegate, is made up of 50% Caucasians, 40% African Americans, and a 10% combination of other ethnic backgrounds.

Table 5: Churches Inverviwed Ethnic Makeup



There are a couple churches that are more predominantly Caucasian or African American. Bethel is predominantly Caucasian, with 60% of their population representing this demographic. They have 30% of African Americans in attendance, with a 10% mixture of other ethnicities. Like Bethel, The Ramp is predominantly Caucasian; specifically, 80%. They have 15% African Americans and a 5% Asian, Hispanic, and Latino community. Forward City has a large African American populous—75%—while the remaining 25% of their congregation is a mixture of Caucasians and Latinos.

Elevation’s ethnic makeup varies greatly “depending on the campus.”⁴⁷ Looking at its broadcast location in Ballantyne, North Carolina, according to Torres, the community is reflective of that surrounding community in their congregational makeup. There are two services: the 9:30 service is about 53% Caucasian, 28% African American, and 19% Asian and Hispanic; the 11:30 service looks a bit different with about 77% of the populous being Caucasian, 14% African American, and 9% Asian and Hispanic. The Elevation Durham campus looks different still with about 27% of its demographic being Caucasian, 69% African American, and 4% Asian and Hispanic. Finally, the Raleigh campus has roughly 46% Caucasian attendance, 35% African Americans, and 19% other

Generational Makeup

Having grasped the racial DNA of each church, we look now to the generational makeup of these churches effectively reaching Gen Z and Millennials. With the core of this research highlighting the Gen Z and Millennial demographics, some churches provided numbers solely for these two groups, while others provided additional information.

Table 6 looks at the Generational DNA of each church interviewed. The generations are broken down on the chart, with Gen Z and Millennial percentages noted in blue and totaled in a bold blue. I will review these percentages only as they pertain

⁴⁷ Kevin Torres, Elevation Church, Charlotte, NC, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, January 4, 2023.

specifically to this research. (Note: Transformation church, which has a very large weekly online demographic, provided generational makeup of its virtual viewers.)

The generational percentages provided for Elevation’s Ballantyne (broadcast) location display a high percentage of Gen Z and Millennials. Specifically, 28% of the population is Gen Z, while 35% is made up of Millennials, according to numbers facilitated through campus pastor, Jonathan Josephs, and Campus Support Director (Ballantyne), Courtney Smith.⁴⁸ Totaling these percentages puts Elevation’s Ballantyne location at 63% of the overall congregation between the ages of 11 and 42 years of age. Additionally, Smith says, about 37% of the Ballantyne congregants are over the age of 43, and so are Gen X, Boomers, and the Silent Generation.

Victory Church’s Gen Z and Millennial generational make up is nearly identical to Elevation’s DNA. According to Daugherty, 15% of the congregation is 10 and under, while 30% are Gen Z. Millennials makeup 34% of the church body, and Gen X, Boomer and the Silent generation round out Victory’s population sitting at 21%.⁴⁹ Gen Z and Millennials constitute 65% of the people that attend the Tulsa church.

Continuing to observe generational attendance data, 45% of Transformation’s in person attendance is made up of Gen Z and Millennials; specifically, 15% Gen Z and 30% Millennials. This accounts for nearly half of their church population. Those numbers increase greatly when looking at their massive weekly online viewership, which they call

⁴⁸ Jonathan Josephs and Courtney Smith, “Elevation Generational Percentages,” February 23, 2023.

⁴⁹ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, February 23, 2023.

“Transformation Nation.” According to Executive Pastor Charles Metcalf, 25% of this online audience is Gen Z, while 50% is Millennial, making their weekly virtual audience makeup about 75% Gen Z and Millennials.⁵⁰

New Season too has a large demographic of Gen Z and Millennials. Sixty-eight percent of their overall population is made up of these two generations. Breaking down that number, Pastor Rodriguez shares that 20% of New Season’s populous is Gen Z, while 48% represents the Millennial demographic.⁵¹

The next two churches are dominating in the Gen Z, Millennial attendance lane. Seventy-five percent of Forward City church’s population is made up of Gen Z and Millennials. Pastor Keisha Young notes that number is calculated with 30% of their church makeup being Gen Z, while Millennials make up 45%.⁵²

The Ramp, like Forward City, has a predominant populous of Gen Z and Millennials. In fact, The Ramp matches Forward City, with the overall percentage of Gen Z and Millennials attending their church at 75%.⁵³ However, The Ramp has a large concentration of Gen Z (55%), whereas Forward City has just 30%. The opposite is true for Millennials, as The Ramp has only 20%, while Forward City has 45%. This makes The Ramp’s Gen Z population the largest of all of our interviewed churches.

⁵⁰ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church.

⁵¹ Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, Sacramento, CA, interview by Elicia Hart, November 1, 2022.

⁵² Keisha Young, Forward City Church, Columbia, SC.

⁵³ Karen Wheaton, The Ramp Church, Hamilton, AL.

Bethel's overall percentage of Gen Z and Millennials total 65%.⁵⁴ This breaks down to 40% Gen Z and 25% Millennials. While this research is specific to Gen Z and Millennials, I want to point out Bethel's large Alpha population⁵⁵(25%), as this is the youngest generation alive to date. Looking at the big picture, this means 90% of those attending Bethel are under the age of 42 in 2023.

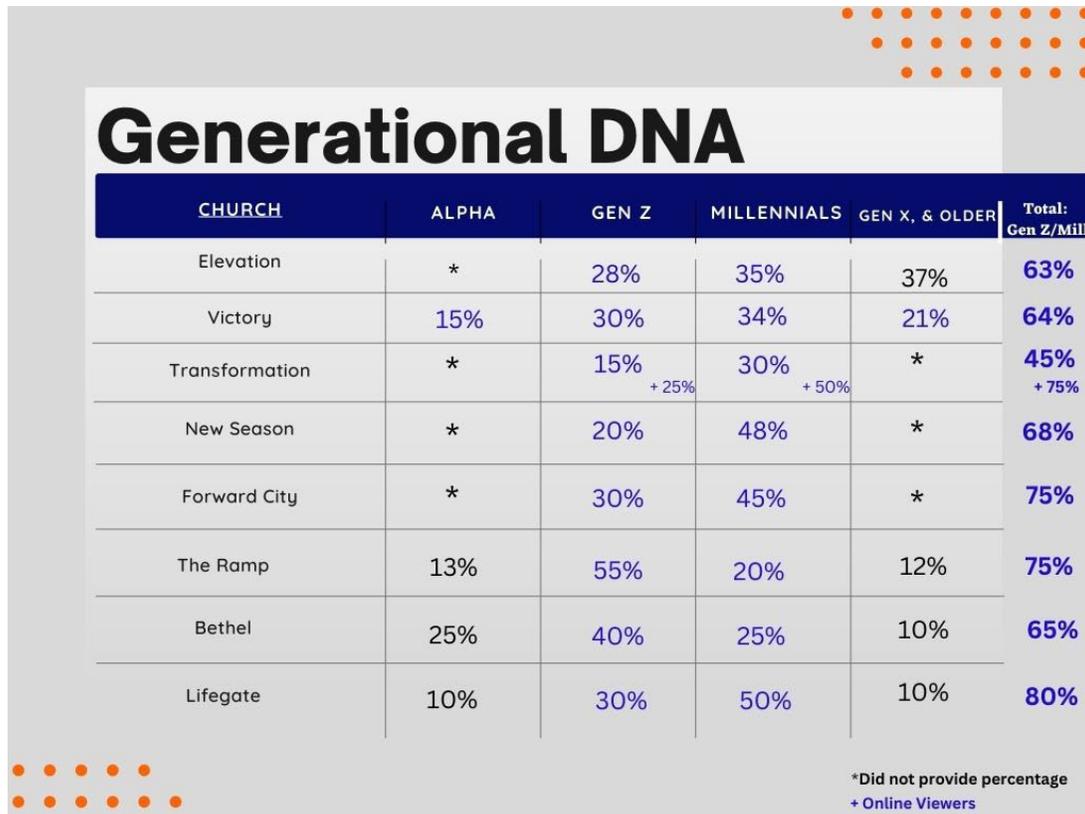
Finally, the church with the largest overall population of Gen Z and Millennials is Lifegate. Eighty percent of the people that walk through the church doors each week are between the ages of 11 and 42.⁵⁶ Breaking down this large population by generational category, note that 30% of this demographic are Gen Z, while 50% of Lifegate attendees are made up of Millennials. The Millennial percentage is the largest of all of our interviewed churches.

⁵⁴ Daniel Weeks, Bethel Church, Goldsboro, NC, interview by Elictia Hart, November 4, 2022.

⁵⁵Generation Alpha is made up of people born — or yet to be born — between 2010 and 2025.“ This overlaps the dates given for Gen Z, but Pew Research says, “Generational cutoff points aren't an exact science. They should be viewed primarily as tools...their boundaries are not arbitrary.” Josh Howarth, “Generation Alpha: Statistics, Data and Trends (2023).” January 13, 2023. <https://explodingtopics.com/blog/generation-alpha-stats>. & <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>. January 17, 2019.

⁵⁶ Brian Gallardo, Lifegate Church, Independence, MO, interview by Elictia Hart, November 30, 2022.

Table 6: Churches Interviewed Generational DNA



Generational DNA

CHURCH	ALPHA	GEN Z	MILLENNIALS	GEN X, & OLDER	Total: Gen Z/Mill
Elevation	*	28%	35%	37%	63%
Victory	15%	30%	34%	21%	64%
Transformation	*	15% + 25%	30% + 50%	*	45% + 75%
New Season	*	20%	48%	*	68%
Forward City	*	30%	45%	*	75%
The Ramp	13%	55%	20%	12%	75%
Bethel	25%	40%	25%	10%	65%
Lifegate	10%	30%	50%	10%	80%

*Did not provide percentage
+ Online Viewers

Conclusion

Looking at the seven churches interviewed, the data supports the notion that they are effectively reaching Gen Z and Millennials. All but one of these worship assemblies’ combined Gen Z/Millennial population makes up more than half of their overall church body—from Lifegate’s massive Gen Z/Millennial population (80%) to The Ramp and Forward City welcoming 75% of the demographic into their houses of worship weekly. These churches are followed by New Season and Bethel, who have 68% and 65% of 11–42-year-olds respectively attending their assemblies weekly. Victory and Elevation have

Gen Z and Millennial totals of 64% and 63% respectively. Transformation, while hitting the 45% mark of combined Gen Z and Millennial in person attendance, has an even more compelling online viewership in terms of the focus groups. Finally, 75% of Transformation Nation, which refers to the online viewers, are made up of Gen Z (25%), and Millennials (50%).

The numbers support the premise that all eight of the churches (located across the country) that were interviewed are effectively reaching Gen Z, and Millennials, and they are doing this independent of one another.

Additionally, while each church strives to be multi-racial and diverse ethnically, some are more diversified than others. Transformation, Victory, and New Season are the most diverse churches in our pool. Others are working to expand their multi-racial/ethnic percentages.

The unique DNA of each of the churches interviewed strengthens the research as each congregation contributes varying strengths, strategies, and systems that collectively give great insight into reaching, retaining, and assimilating the focus group.

Chapter 4: How are the Identified Churches Reaching Gen Z and Millennials?

Having a clearer picture of the churches interviewed, I will shift to the insights shared by these individual houses of worship. I've grouped the data gathered from my research into the three categories: reaching, retaining, and assimilating (Gen Z and Millennials).

Exploring the concept of reaching Gen Z and Millennials is a broad endeavor, yet the data obtained point to what the pastors and leaders of each assembly have observed about the two generations. These observations assist the ministry leaders in creating and establishing the various strategies and systems their churches utilize when targeting this audience. They reveal what it takes to operate as Christian leaders welcoming Gen Z and Millennials into their services.

Reaching: Understanding Gen Z and Millennials

A recent Sunday morning, I was whisked inside the back doors of a church. I was a guest there to interview some pastors for this research. We went up an elevator and thus began a tour of a former convention center renovated to house Transformation Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Before my feet were even in the vicinity of the front door, the music, the laughter, and the overall energy (I don't like to use this word, but the atmosphere was electric, truly energized) told me there was something special happening all around me. With each turn of the corner, each new person, all teams, and Transformation volunteers and staff

(who it was hard to distinguish between, as all seemed happy to serve regardless of pay) were beyond kindhearted, filled with the love of God, excited, and eager to meet me—even if they did not even know me. Yet, with each hello, it was as if I was reuniting with an old friend.

This was my vantage point as a senior co-pastor who has spent many days in churches all around the world. I couldn't help but think that if this was my initial observation and feeling, what might it feel like to walk in these doors for the first time not being as *churched* (familiar with the interworking of being in a Christian Evangelical church) as I am.

A few things stood out as I observed people filtering into the extremely large foyer area. From the moment people walked through the front doors, the staff and volunteers have their eyes set on them individually. You could not walk in and not be seen. The atmosphere is one of celebratory fun, exuberance, and excitement. Balloons, loud music, and Transformation volunteers and staff adorned in t-shirts, hoodies, and TC (Transformation Church) lettermen jackets all smiled, greeting all who walked in.

However, while the greetings may feel spontaneous, the truth is, according to Executive Pastor Charles Metcalf, a lot of methodical exploration, time, and passion has gone into such acts of welcome, as well as the outreach that results in enquirers and congregants who walk through those doors. Transformation has researched and specifically envisioned a target audience, and it is possible that someone, as a first-time guest, is part of the group they hoped to attract. “We talk about it like if you had a target and you had a balloon full of paint, and you hit the target, that would be the target, but

then there will be the splatter effect of that,”¹ Metcalf says. Thus, they purposely look to attract a specific person. Indeed, they have created a character: “His name is Stormy, he is a twenty-eight-year old culturally relevant guy that was looking for peace, that had a kid, and wasn’t married ... we knew if we could get him, then the girls he used to talk to and sleep with, they are thinking, woah, he has changed, and he’s raising his kid. His mom and grandmother, who have been praying for him to come to church [notice], and he’s super influential, and so all of his homies eventually are like, what’s he doing?”²

What’s most notable about this entire narrative is that Transformation’s leaders know precisely who they are trying to reach. They understand their target’s lifestyle, some of the things they have been through, parts of their familial dynamics, and what they are searching for in life.

While this approach used by other churches I interviewed may not be as specific as Transformation’s Stormy example, there are similarities. They understand these two generations and thus feel equipped to reach them.

“I’m a Millennial and Z fan; I have this crazy idea that these generations will do greater things than my generation. I call them the Elijahs ... in our church, we speak about cultural reformers and societal architects, [and] innovation, ingenuity, and creativity.”³ Pastor Sam Rodriguez describes his view of these two generations,

¹ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church, Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 21, 2022.

² Ibid.

³ Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, Sacramento, CA, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 1, 2022.

explaining that when he's attempting to reach this group externally or in a church service, this is his approach; to genuinely affirm, love, build up, and relate to them.

“I know they [Gen Z and Millennials] love community. I know they love getting together. I know they love worship and prayer. I know they're hungry for the supernatural. I know they don't want just a shallow encounter with God.”⁴ This demographic can find anything on Ted Talks and TikTok, says Daugherty, this group is looking for an experience that includes revelation from God's word, genuine friendships that they can build, the opportunity to give of themselves and be a part of something that's making a global impact.

Elevation Church's Triangle Area (Raleigh, Durham, and Morrisville) youth director, Kevin Torres, says Gen Z are bold and willing to take risks, but if they step out and do not see results quickly, they will often retreat, and the effect can cause low self-esteem/self-confidence, which he believes is the root of confusion, be it with identity or other problems.⁵ Identity, Torres says, is the struggle that some youth may have, for example, concerning their gender. This topic arose organically with nearly every pastor I spoke with regarding Gen Z.

There is such an openness, says Torres, which generates ample dialogue from Gen Z and Millennials surrounding the topic. He adds that there are no longer the social stigmas that were once attached to this subject matter, at least in the eyes of this

⁴ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, February 23, 2023.

⁵ Kevin Torres, Elevation Church, Charlotte, NC, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, January 4, 2023.

demographic. It is a real thing that Torres says he's in the middle of every day as a youth director for three Elevation campuses. "My role is to speak life ... [to be] somebody who is reflecting the love of God. That is the foundation of what I base every conversation [on]."⁶ He adds that he is not dismissive when having these profoundly personal conversations; instead, taking the time to understand one's feelings is essential without compromising God's truth concerning the matter. He says it is critical to create a safe space for discussing difficult subjects: "With that safety, we offer resources and processes ... if a student expresses self-harm, we have processes for that, or if we see abuse happen, we have processes for that."⁷ At their youth events, he adds, they always have a counselor present to assist if needed.

Pastor Charles Metcalf also understands the importance of creating a safe environment. He says that historically, in particular churches, there were situations that kept people from attending. For example, there were certain things you couldn't be doing and come to church, like smoking, drinking, or struggling with homosexuality. He said those barriers kept people from feeling accepted, "and one thing we say all the time [at Transformation] is, 'you can belong before you believe/behave' because that's how Jesus did it, and I think there are a lot of things in church that are cultural and not in the Bible said by Christ." Like Elevation, Transformation is creating a safe place for people to come because "until they feel safe with the version of themselves that they are, they

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

won't be open to hearing how Christ can transform them.”⁸ It's progression and not perfection, says Metcalf.

Elevation understands this progression and is always looking for ways to care for its youth. They view it as a partnership with parents. They want to disciple youth well and resource parents just as well, says Torres, and for this to transpire concurrently.

This is the exact approach Pastor Daniel Weeks has used in the past. When ministering to Gen Z on specific topics, Bethel would inform parents beforehand. They would notify them that the church would be teaching on subject matters that were real-life issues like sexuality and gender identity. They would invite the adults to join them by standing in the back of the room. “I believe that coming to this generation in a harsh, rigid way, just telling them ‘abortion’ is murder’ [for instance ... is like] ... Boom, you're done.”⁹ Weeks is passionate about transparency and being aware of others' feelings. He says that sometimes when a person responds in a cut-and-dry way, the genuine openness that the one sharing may have had shuts down. He says it immediately cuts the person off who is asking the questions, and people can get hurt. He goes on to say that the harsh imperatives (which sometimes have a role to play in certain situations) can close down conversations—especially those that are questioning—and this is part of the enemy's strategy to make the one questioning feel alienated or as though the person answering them is against them if they disagree with them.

⁸ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church, interview.

⁹ Daniel Weeks, Bethel Church, Goldsboro, NC, interview conducted by Elictia Hart, November 4, 2022.

Weeks encourages leaders to recall the things they wrestled with when they were younger: “sometimes when we speak to this generation, we want them to get from ‘one message,’ what it took us twenty years to understand ... [God] changes some things instantaneously, but sanctification is a *process*.”

Pastor Steve Holder handed Bethel Church over to Weeks in 2020. Holder has been in Ministry for nearly forty years and is currently the Global Leadership Pastor for Bethel. He points to the Bible, saying it takes patience to connect with younger people: “Jesus was like a youth pastor, and he had to work out a lot of stuff ... so I think sometimes we fail to realize that it [can be] both instantaneous and a process of deliverance and development.”¹⁰ He adds that this could be why this generation and some past generations are challenging what they are being taught, which is a tradition, versus biblically validated truths.

Teaching the Bible is essential to Victory, which is why they use methodical strategies to reach these two demographics.¹¹ Each Wednesday, they welcome about 350 teens (11–17 years of age) for youth services. Weekly, their staff targets lunchtime at public and private schools, where they invite kids to church. During certain seasons they run bus routes to schools up to fifteen miles away, picking up teens for service. They have special outreach events like a prom night, massive slip-n-slide parties in the summer, camps, big retreats, and conferences.

¹⁰ Steve Holder, Bethel Church, Goldsboro, NC, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 4, 2022.

¹¹ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, Tulsa, OK, interview.

For young adults/college age (18–25), they have a Thursday night service. This service is relevant to their age, dealing with topics that interest them. After service, says Daugherty, they hang out a lot. This is the community aspect that this demographic is seeking, he says.

Nearly every leader I spoke with agreed that these two generations desire community: “they want spaces where they can be able to get together and just get to know each other. Whether online or offline, this is something that is very big for these demographics.”¹² Daugherty agrees with Young, saying that on Sundays, youth and young adults serve and sit together (if not with their families). Youth have a special section they can sit in as well during the service. After service, young adults have what they call ‘hangouts.’ Simply put, this is community.

Community, but not just any community. Getting to know one another in a true, real, authentic, and genuine sense is foundational for these two generations. Time and time again during the interview process, the common thread weaving throughout each interview was that both of these generations could smell an imposter, a non-genuine person, or a so-called fake church a mile away. If there is any inkling of such at a church, I’m told Gen Z and Millennials want to have nothing to do with that assembly.

Being a part of the right community is essential. Pastor Karen Wheaton has seen “the effects of [today’s] culture on the minds and the lifestyles of this generation.”¹³ She

¹² Keisha Young, Forward City Church, Columbia, SC, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, January 3, 2023.

¹³ Karen Wheaton. The Ramp. Interview conducted by Elicia Hart. February 9, 2023.

says the impacts and changes in behavior have occurred swiftly and drastically in the last fifteen years, adding that the youth were not affected by this “numbing addiction” to their phones (then) like they are today.¹⁴

Wheaton maintains that porn, cynicism, and technology have led to a spiritual stupor. Weeks too, believes media, in general, has a lot to do with the psychological and mental health issues that 11–42-year-olds see playing out in the form of violence daily. He believes this has caused “security walls [to go] up in our world today that prevent us from interacting on various generational levels.”¹⁵ Still, Weeks, like Wheaton, has seen God step in and use pure relationships with others and God’s presence to touch even the hardest, wounded hearts and most rigid exteriors.

Pastor Brian Gallardo, like Wheaton and Weeks, has seen both generations’ positive and negative aspects. He says millennials are extremely opinionated, pointing at social media as the source of this mindset that often chooses to voice an opinion rather than listen and learn. Gen Z is also strong-willed, Gallardo adds. Some in this demographic can tend to be judgmental and, at times, have a problem with authority.

Still, he says, both generations are incredibly passionate and faithful to causes. He maintains that this sort of heart can transform others. “If you can get a couple of them [Gen Z and Millennials] on fire for God, radically sold out, they can change the world. If

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Daniel Weeks, Bethel Church, Goldsboro, NC, interview.

you can get them plugged into a cause that they really believe in, they're not going anywhere. When they're done, they're done ... when they're in, they're in."¹⁶

Perhaps this is why Rodrigues calls Gen Z the redemptive generation. "They are the least spiritually restricted, rigid, fully committed generation in American history to a denomination or even a worldview. Nevertheless, [Gen Z] has great spiritual potential because it is open to truth."¹⁷

Reaching: Defined by One Word

When asked to give one word to describe why their church has been successful at reaching Gen Z and Millennials, one specific word (or a variation of it) was repeated time and again. That word: **authentic**. Other synonyms were used as well, such as [being] real and genuine.

Weeks says he's been told, "Pastor Daniel, you're raw, you're real, you tell it like it is."¹⁸ He says the realness comes out in messages where he never portrays himself above others. He wants the congregation to know he sees eye to eye with them.

Along with authenticity, other words mentioned by the pastors were "passion," "patience," and "presence," as in the presence of God. What is most fascinating is that these three words were used by each minister when it came to relating to Gen Z and

¹⁶ Brian Gallardo, Lifegate Church, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 30, 2022.

¹⁷ Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, interview.

¹⁸ Daniel Weeks, Bethel Church, interview.

Millennials authentically. They described being one's *authentic* self as they *passionately* and *patiently* lead these 11–42-year-olds into the *presence* of the Holy Spirit.

For these spiritual leaders, the root of authenticity is passion, patience, and ultimately presence, or as Metcalf puts it, power, the same power that drew people to Jesus in His time.¹⁹ Transformation is a church that is authentic, genuinely themselves, with lots of humor, and not afraid to be imperfect—and people are open to that, says Metcalf. But it is not just that, he adds, there's something present that transforms your life. He gives an example: when “my friends who are atheists come to our church they are breaking down crying and emotional ... they feel the presence. For us [church leadership], it's the authenticity, it's the engagement, getting you [in your present state], but when you get [to church], we are going to teach the bible; Jesus is the only way.”²⁰

Wheaton agrees that leaders with patience can help shift the trajectory of an individual's life. She says The Ramp is patiently walking out life with these generations. Patient ministers lead by example while Gen Z and Millennials are watching. “They are listening to you pray, they hear your voice, you are leading them, teaching them how to hunger for God, how to make God the center, the priority, and be everything in your life so that His presence is not just available in a corporate space, but it's what you are living out every day.”²¹ We set an example of what it looks like to pray, live a Godly lifestyle, and worship in the presence of God.²²

¹⁹ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church, interview.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Karen Wheaton, The Ramp Church, interview.

²² Ibid.

Pastor Brian Gallardo agrees, adding, “it’s going to take a collective togetherness of the older and younger. This generation doesn’t know how to pray; they don’t know how to get a hold of God. They need the older generations to see them at the altar, on their knees praying, crying out to God.”²³ Daugherty adds that authentic, genuine, and patient love combined with community is what will “help this generation feel like man, I’m part of something special.”²⁴

Rodriguez realizes that as pastors, we must be patient, understand them, and then use the scriptures, “engaging them with the truth of Christ, with love, and that’s how we change the world.”²⁵

Reaching: The Efficacy of Outreaches

Reaching the world is the goal of the churches interviewed. So how is the word getting out to the public that these assemblies exist, and what enables them to effectively reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials?

Some might assume everyone has heard of Elevation or Transformation; however, that is a false assumption. Everyone has not. So they, like most other churches, still attempt to reach unchurched people. No matter the size of the congregation, every church I spoke with understands the need to walk out the mandate of Christ, which is to go into the highways and bi-ways and share the love of Jesus.

²³ Brian Gallardo, Lifegate Church, interview.

²⁴ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, interview.

²⁵ Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, interview.

The methods by which churches reach out have changed significantly over the years. Tent revivals that lasted weeks were once impactful, as were Sunday night services, according to Paster Holder, and for some, he adds, midweek services have come and gone.

When these methods worked, it was great, but then “at some point, something shifted, and we remember this, it was like people didn’t just come to church anymore because they were supposed to come to church or because there was a gathering, no matter who was brought in to speak.”²⁶

Pastor Karen Wheaton recalls when Christian television was a mainstay in homes worldwide. Millions were reached via television programs on various spiritual networks, but that has also shifted. Today Wheaton and The Ramp reach the multitude by hosting ten annual conferences mainly geared at reaching Gen Z and Millennials. Wheaton says, on average, nearly 1,000 people attend each conference, with people coming to each gathering from upwards of twenty-four states each conference.

She adds that reaching Gen Z and Millennials looks extremely different from even five to ten years ago. Many assemblies reach people through major event-type outreaches and partnerships like feeding the hungry, clothing the homeless, and seasonal celebrations like Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Harvest-type events.

Pastor Keisha Young is pleased with the success of Forward City’s strong partnership with its local school district. They have adopted several schools within a ten-

²⁶ Daniel Weeks, Bethel Church, interview.

mile radius that is made up of mainly very impoverished neighborhoods: “our ability to come in and partner with the elementary school, the middle school, and the high school helps a lot and goes a long way. It creates a funnel.”²⁷ Young explains that the funnel happens when some school events are hosted at the church. This opens the door for youngsters to see the church facility and meet some of the church staff, which, in turn, creates the opportunity for them to ask questions, ultimately piquing enough interest for many of the kids to return for a service, and many times they bring their parents.

Elevation, like Forward City, has educational partnerships with the goal of linking arms with existing organizations. They partner with organizations that match the church’s values, says Torres. “You won’t really see our ministry go off and create a food bank or go off and create a program. It’s more like finding ways to bring our church people into a place where we can partner and back an organization, whether its finances ...” or human resources, which Torres says is the most meaningful for the Elevation members.²⁸

He says whether it’s assisting with a school or food banks, it is not so much about inviting people to church, but rather, the church having a presence there and others becoming aware of the church because Elevation is there serving in love.

One might also find Lifegate Church out in their community with outreaches like Love Week, where they serve somewhere in their community daily for a whole week, and Trunk-or-Treat. Like Torres, Pastor Brian Gallardo says these are great opportunities to

²⁷ Keisha Young, Forward City Church, interview.

²⁸ “Elevation Church,” accessed February 24, 2023, <https://elevationchurch.org/quick-facts/>.

pray and encourage people while serving others. However, Gallardo says, such events do not typically add new church attendees to the Lifegate family.

Bethel, on the other hand, has a thriving weekly outreach for those battling addiction. This has been a springboard for adding new members to the congregation. But it's not just those in-house sessions that have been effective, says Holder. Because Bethel has embraced the idea that 'everyone is a minister' according to the word of God, they have seen great success in reaching others. "We drill it into them [the congregation] that you don't have to wait until Sunday morning for Pastor Daniel or Pastor Steve to lead them to the Lord. You can do it right there in your break room, your classroom, or on the ball field."²⁹

"One of the attractions [for Gen Z and Millennials people looking to attend] Victory is that we have a ton of opportunities for people to serve and show compassion" through outreaches and missions work.³⁰ Daugherty says Victory takes the concept of outreach very seriously, adding that more than half of the church budget goes towards local and global outreach and missions.

One of their significant outreaches was founded and initially overseen by Pastor Paul's father, Pastor Billy Joe. The Tulsa Dream Center was inspired by Tommy and Matthew Barnett out of Los Angeles.³¹ This outreach, says Daugherty, requires staff and budget to help feed the hungry, reach the underrepresented, and run a school and after-

²⁹ Steve Holder, Bethel Church, interview.

³⁰ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, interview.

³¹ "The Dream Center," accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.dreamcenter.org/>.

school program. Ample teens and young adults are involved in serving at the Dream Center.

Outreach for Victory is fruitful in terms of adding to the congregation. Those looking to serve make their way to the church first, begin attending and walk out the biblical mandate alongside the church community, to love and care for the poor.

Reaching: Smoke, Lights, Sneakers, and Music

Not only have the exterior practices of reaching people shifted, so too have some of the interior touches of assemblies nationwide. Today, if you walk into many non-denominational, evangelical churches, you might see blacked-out walls, smoke, and LED screens during the worship service. This is combined with loud, passionate praise and worship music heard throughout the sanctuary.

The latest attire, meanwhile, in many instances, is a mixture of t-shirts, hoodies, jeans, edgy sports jackets, and high fashion garb that are many times complemented by the latest sneakers (once known as tennis shoes) or a blingy high heel of sorts. But does all this gear and internal décor have any impact on reaching, retaining, and assimilating Gen Z and Millennials?

According to the leaders I interviewed, the short answer is “no,” well, kind of. It is a bit more complex than the simplicity of the definitive “no.” “I think it draws, I think it hinders . . .,” says Gallardo, talking about the smoke, lights, and LED effects.³² He adds

³² Brian Gallardo, Lifegate Church, interview.

it is vital to have an excellent presentation, referring to the scripture Proverbs 11:30, "... he who wins souls *is* wise." Torres understand this wisdom. He says Elevation has special youth worship nights called Rhythm Nights that are tailored intentionally and specifically toward youth. "Our goal is to have this experience that is new and fresh in a way. We believe there is a lot of energy and boldness in our kids today that have to be matched in a certain way. Not to necessarily draw them in for them to feel like, 'I'm at a concert,' but [knowing] that's how they express themselves."³³ At the end of the day, the motive of creating this experience "is for youth to worship God freely."³⁴

Excellent done praise and worship music is an element of service imperative to the pastors I interviewed. While styles may differ and range from gospel to contemporary Christian and everything in between, creating an atmosphere for people to have an intimate encounter with the Lord is critical, according to Young, Rodriguez, and Gallardo.

Elevation music is a thriving and critical element of their church, says Torres. It is not uncommon to walk into many churches across the world and hear an Elevation Worship song being sung. Pastor Steven is an intricate part of this thriving ministry producing many songs. Elevation been nominated for a plethora of awards and won one Grammy in 2023.³⁵

³³ Kevin Torres, Elevation Church, interview.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ "IMDb," accessed, February 25, 2023, <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm10450116/awards>; Elevation Worship Awards. <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm10450116/awards>.

Wheaton, a psalmist herself, is passionate about “letting those kids worship in absolute freedom without saying you have to do it this way”—that’s the key to having a transformative breakthrough, and it begins with the music.³⁶ Still, the Christian music that is popular today is not the music of old, and for some, that can be challenging.

Every generation comes out with quote-unquote, something new like right now it’s the LED wall, that’s the big thing, before that it was movers [lighting] and smoke machines. Movers are not being used as much today in church culture like they did five to ten years ago. You go back fifteen years ago, and you have cloth as a background; you go back twenty years ago, and there’s a forest on the platform, trees and flowers everywhere. You go back forty years ago, and there was a sign up on the side of the platform that says how many people are in attendance and what the Sunday school offering was. Every generation does it, and the older generation doesn’t like it.

It’s like, our lives change; we change what we drive, we update our phones, our cars, we update our hairstyles, and our clothes. Everything is an upgrade in life, and I don’t think it’s a bad thing to do that in church, either. I ‘do’ think it’s a bad thing to put all of our stock there.³⁷

Church can’t be antiquated. It must be presented well, says Gallardo, adding that just because your Sunday service has smoke, lights, and a blacked-out sanctuary, it doesn’t mean you are conveying a relevant message or that the power of God is present. If one’s worship service and the message preached are not done excellently, even a room filled with smoke and lights will not fix it. Metcalf is on the same page with Gallardo, adding there is an element of a draw with all of this, but he understands it is possible to have it and still not transform someone’s life.

³⁶ Karen Wheaton, The Ramp Church, interview.

³⁷ Brian Gallardo, Lifegate Church, interview.

“It’s just wineskin, and in the next ten years from now, it’ll be virtual reality ... so technology will change; [however,] the requirements to gather physically as a church will never change. We will always gather; that’s what makes us a church.”³⁸ He adds that the church, by definition, is ecclesia, a physical gathering. The methodology and generational church nuances, including technology, change every five, ten, and fifteen years, says Rodriguez.

A sanctuary filled with dim lighting and smoke is a draw for Forward City. Young says it helps people feel comfortable because they may be used to this atmosphere from being at a concert or something similar. While she acknowledges that not everyone may like the dim lighting, leadership feels like it creates an atmosphere for people to have an intimate/personal time of worship.

Daugherty understands that there are factors that go into creating a church experience but does not believe that is what is actually reaching 11–42-year-olds. He senses we are in a season of “experiencing the after-effects of investing too much into technology.”³⁹

Yet, he acknowledges that as a kid twenty-five years ago, he was often bored out of his mind with the way church service felt. He says his youth pastor began to integrate technology, and as he puts it, this “engaged his senses to lean in ... [and engage with what was going on in service].” He recalls growing up with Pastor Michael Todd and

³⁸ Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, interview.

³⁹ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, interview.

creating music together with him. He says the two would ask each other, “how do we make the church experience engaging for our age bracket that had stopped going to church for several reasons.” What were the reasons? He says, 1) church felt irrelevant; 2) it felt boring; 3) it was the same old songs and same old preacher, often with very little warmth, not to mention the florescent lighting was cold.

Thus, Daugherty’s goal became to try and create a place where those intangibles were favorable in terms of impacting people’s senses when they walked into a room. This included warmer, dim lighting, like concerts had at the time. He believes that because his generation (Millennials) enjoyed this concert-type atmosphere, this ultimately took over and led to youth groups adopting such practices. Eventually, this style of decor and atmosphere found its way into main services across the nation. Yet, he believes “twelve [-year-olds] all the way up to thirty-eight [-year-olds] are coming back to a place [where] the technology doesn’t matter if the presence of God is not there.”⁴⁰

God’s presence is critical to the Transformation leaders, who welcome His Spirit while embracing the concert-style atmosphere. Pastor Charles Metcalf notes that he and Pastor Michael (Todd), as Daugherty is referred to, are creatives, so Transformation is a genuine reflection of those leading it. “I think things should be a genuine reflection of who you are because people relate to authenticity more than they do a certain way of doing things.” Maybe ten to fifteen years ago, LEDs might have been more of a draw, but Metcalf says today there’s almost no place you go that isn’t interactive, adding even

⁴⁰ Ibid.

McDonald's has LED walls. For a long time the church was not up to speed technologically, and things looked and sounded terrible, but today things have come a long way, he notes. He refers to Revelation 4, saying the Bible talks about walking into the throne room of heaven and there being lightning, lights, and flashes of lights. He refers to a conversation he had with someone that said the Bible does not say anything about lights and such, to which he gave this scriptural reference and said there's a light show when you walk into the throne-room. He quotes one of Michael Todd's sayings, "When excellence and anointing come, the Kingdom of God is present."

What about wearing sneakers, hoodies, suits, heels, and what the church is calling 'merch' or merchandise sold by some of the assemblies? Does this somewhat casual attire help with reaching and retaining this demographic?

"I would say [this has had a] major [impact], major with millennials and Z especially. I was there in the transition, and it was not easy. Somehow, we thought ties and suits or dresses were 'church' clothes. You grew up, you had school clothes, church clothes, and play clothes, and that was just the way it was, even though there was no biblical precedent for that, other than the term modesty."⁴¹ Which is precisely all Rodriguez had to say about attire, "[It's] minutia, it's irrelevant, as long as its modest, modesty trumps everything; modesty, modesty, modesty."⁴²

⁴¹ Gary McIntosh, Transformation Church, interview.

⁴² Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, interview.

Yet, McIntosh has seen the clash of church attire and historical convention. It's been such a tradition, one that was very hard to come against, says McIntosh, who went through the stages of a significant clothing shift with Transformation. But today, he adds, the word is simply, "come"—just come as you are.

The whole conversation speaks to safety: "People already feel separated from God, and the church sometimes adds layers; can't wear these clothes, they don't understand some of the words we are saying, [when] it's really about saying, just come."⁴³

Pastor Keisha Young, too, agrees that attire of ones choosing has "made the barrier of entry a little lower [easier] in people's minds."⁴⁴ She adds that even in the [corporate/secular] office, people are not dressing up like they used to. It's just a shift all around, one she thinks simplifies things when it comes to attending church.

Be it lights, smoke, jeans, sneakers, or suits, Gallardo raises one question. "Is there oil on it?" He defines oil as "the presence of God." All that truly matters, he adds, is if God is present in the service. Metcalf and McIntosh agree, "It's [that lights, smoke are] a tool that can be used, but there's not transformative power in it."⁴⁵

This thought is shared by every pastor and leader I interviewed. You can dress up a sanctuary or a human body in whatever way you desire, but at the end of the day, God, "if Your presence does not go with us, we are not going. Your presence is the only thing

⁴³ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church, interview.

⁴⁴ Young, Keisha, Forward City Church, interview.

⁴⁵ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church, interview.

that will distinguish us [the church/believers] from the rest of the world and everybody else. Your presence is the priority,” says Wheaton.⁴⁶ Daugherty sums up this heavily layered conversation by adding:

At the end of the day, if the presence of God is in the room, whether there’s fog, or LED screens or [old school] pews or fluorescent light on, [if] we’re white people or black people or old people or young people. If God shows up, God shows up, and I think that’s what this next generation wants. They just want God to show up. What they are against is fake, and manufacturing, and conjuring up something that is not real.⁴⁷

Reaching: Social Media and Word of Mouth

Understanding what is and is not important to these leaders regarding outreaches and cosmetic influences within the church is important, especially as these assemblies are looking to impact their communities and the world. What methods are they using to attract outsiders, and are they effective? According to the leaders I interviewed, social media and word of mouth are powerful tools.

It is no surprise that social media is a resource that churches are finding imperative for reaching Gen Z and Millennials. Perhaps because it is basically free, easily accessible for both the church and the recipient, and the reach is massive, “there are 4.65 billion social media users on the planet. That’s 58.7% of the global population.”⁴⁸

Who is using social media? In 2023, younger generations are the most active, with a heavy concentration on 18–29-year-olds, reports Statista. “Conversely, adults aged

⁴⁶ Karen Wheaton, The Ramp Church, interview.

⁴⁷ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, interview.

⁴⁸ Shelly Walsh, “The Top 10 Social Media Sites & Platforms 2022.”

65 and older represent the highest share of the unconnected population in the United States.”⁴⁹

The most used social media app ‘worldwide’ in 2023 is Facebook with an average of 2.95 million users monthly, while YouTube is a close second with 2.514 million people jumping on the site each month.⁵⁰

Although Facebook is the top social media platform globally, it is critical to note who is using what app when trying to reach a specific demographic. Gen Z’s social medial platform of choice seems to be YouTube, followed by Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and then Facebook.⁵¹ There is a downward trend in use of Facebook according to an NBC news report, because younger users are downloading alternative platforms. “As Facebook’s popularity sinks, YouTube has become the dominating platform among teens, who are also using social media apps like TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram.”⁵²

According to a Pew Study, in 2021 YouTube is dominating usage within the researched demographic for this study.⁵³ Although the breakdown in **Table 7** is not exactly reflective of the generational numbers employed in this study, it gives an overall idea of who (age demographic) is utilizing which online platforms.

⁴⁹ Ani Petrosyan, “U.S. Internet User Demographics - Age Groups - Statistics & Facts,” Statista, January 27, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/topics/2576/us-millennials-internet-usage-and-online-shopping/#topicOverview>.

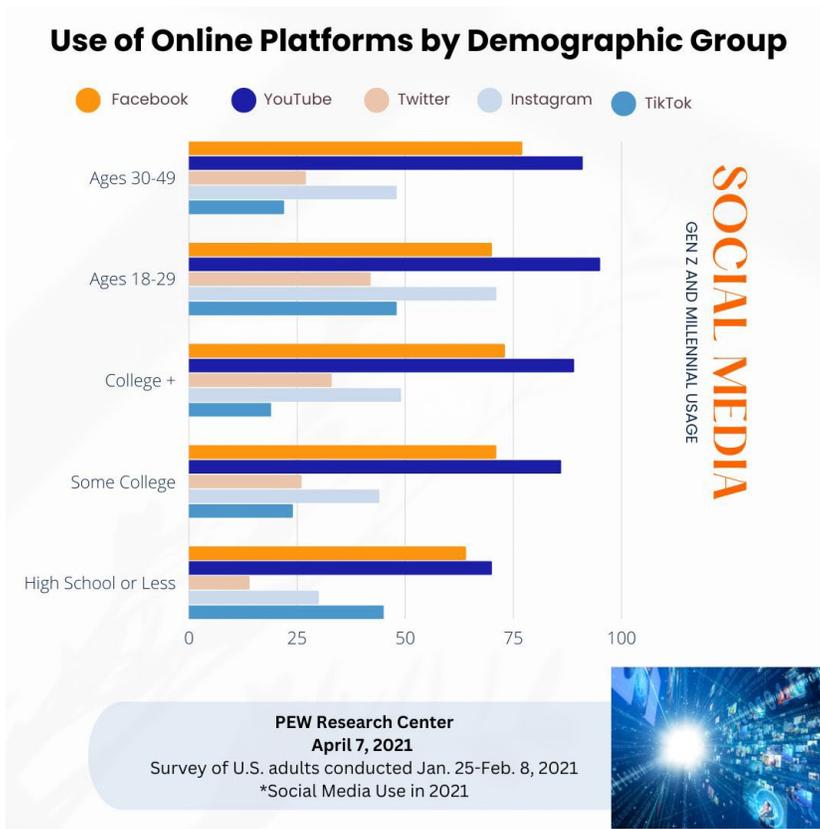
⁵⁰ Statista, “Most Popular Social Networks Worldwide as of January 2023, Ranked by Number of Monthly Active Users,” accessed March 25, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/>.

⁵¹ Ellyn Briggs, “Gen Z Is Extremely Online,” Morning Consult, December 12, 2022, <https://morningconsult.com/2022/12/12/gen-z-social-media-usage/>.

⁵² Kalhan Rosenblatt, “Gen Z Is over Facebook, Pew Research Center Finds,” NBC News, August 10, 2022, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/gen-z-facebook-pew-research-center-finds-rcna42429/>.

⁵³ Pew Research Center, April 7, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/04/07/social-media-use-in-2021/>.

Table 7: Online Platform Usage by Demographic



According to the study, social media users ages forty-nine down through just under high school age are using YouTube more than any other platform. Facebook follows YouTube but thereafter, every age group except high school and under use Instagram the most. TikTok follows Facebook in this age bracket. From there, the results vary depending on the age.

The question then, are the churches interviewed for this research utilizing the platforms that PEW says the targeted demographic is using (11–42-year-olds)? McIntosh,

the founder of Greenwood Christian Center (which was renamed Transformation when he handed over the pastorate to Michael Todd), says “yes.” “When we started, Michael did all of the social media himself, before we had two, three, four employees in that department, he did it all himself, he created it all himself. That’s what blew it up ... Relationship Goals.”⁵⁴ McIntosh is talking about Todd’s sermon series from 2017 entitled “Relationship Goals,” which was posted on YouTube and went viral. Ultimately, the series turned into a New York Times bestselling book.⁵⁵

This innate ability to reach the multitude is evident on social media as Transformation’s YouTube channel has amassed 1.91 million subscribers.⁵⁶ Yet, according to Metcalf, in the enormous scope of things, 1.91 million is not that many people if you consider there are 8 million people in the world. He says it’s easy to think this way if you are sitting in a different position than other people, but if you look at it that way, it is easy to get complacent.

About 20,000 people tune into Sunday services live.⁵⁷ Then, any given message could get anywhere from 150–250,000 viewers within the first seven days. It depends on the series, says Metcalf, who co-labors with Todd coming up with each sermon every week, “what we spend the most time on every single week is writing the sermon because

⁵⁴ Gary McIntosh, Transformation Church, interview.

⁵⁵ Michael Todd, “Relationship Goals: How to Win at Dating, Marriage, and Sex,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/books/best-sellers/2020/06/14/advice-how-to-and-miscellaneous/>.

⁵⁶ “Transformation Church,” YouTube Channel, accessed February 25, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCYv-siSKd3Gn9IsliO95gIw>.

⁵⁷ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church, interview.

we know if we can feed people well, the word of God, that is the thing that nourishes them.”⁵⁸

Yet, more than social media, more than anything else, he says, the emphasis is on the word delivered each week, which is ministering to lives. These intentionally thought-out messages that go out on social media are reaching hundreds of thousands.

Elevation, like Transformation, understands social media all too well, with 2.55 million subscribers on their YouTube channel.⁵⁹ Torres says that in 2016, a good deal of resources was put into the online ministry to create a great experience. “Since this shift, [the] online [presence] has been the biggest reason why people are aware of Elevation Church.” He adds that many people who visit a campus mention they found out about the church while watching Pastor Steven on a video clip or a social media outlet like YouTube or Instagram.

Regarding the online experience or ‘E-Fam,’ says Torres, you understand that Elevation is larger than Pastor Steven. You begin to see all of the ways the church is influential in their communities and how they are impacting the lives of those that are part of the large church community called Elevation.

The Praise and worship that Torres described earlier is also reaching the world. It is not uncommon to hear an elevation song being sung in many churches on any given

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ “Elevation Church,” YouTube (blog), n.d./, accessed February 25, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@elevationchurch>.

Sunday. Elevation Worship has 4.82 million subscribers on their YouTube channel.⁶⁰

This extensive reach between sermons and worship makes it easy for people globally to feel empowered by this community, and this adds to the large their influence, says Torres. “You can find ways to get connected and not physically be present, and I think that experience is what has led to a lot of the growth we see now.”⁶¹

New Season, like Elevation and Transformation, has grown through the world wide web. “Social media has been the primary conduit on which we have grown our church.”⁶² New Season has almost 2000 subscribers on YouTube, while Pastor Sam has nearly 45,000 subscribers.⁶³

Forward City, meanwhile, polls their first-time guests to see how they heard about their church. The top two ways their first-timers hear about them are via social media and word of mouth. Instagram is their primary platform: “it helps that our pastor has about a million or over a million followers and his wife, I think she has maybe close to 200 ... [and] the church which should be around like 60 or 50 [thousand followers].”⁶⁴ Facebook is a secondary platform, and Young says they are just beginning to use TikTok to reach the Gen Z populous.

⁶⁰ “Elevation Worship,” YouTube, n.d., accessed February 25, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@elevationworship>.

⁶¹ Kevin Torres, Elevation Church, interview.

⁶² Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, interview.

⁶³ “New Season YouTube Channel,” n.d., accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@NewSeasonWorship>. <https://www.youtube.com/@NewSeasonWorship>; “Sam Rodriguez YouTube Channel,” n.d., accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/user/RevSamuelRodriguez>, <https://www.youtube.com/user/RevSamuelRodriguez>.

⁶⁴ Keisha Young, Forward City Church, interview.

Gallardo says word of mouth is the way most people hear about Lifegate, which has about 684 subscribers on YouTube.⁶⁵ Holder and Weeks say most people hear about Bethel through word of mouth, social media, and website searches.

Bethel has nearly 1000 subscribers on its YouTube channel.⁶⁶ Wheaton and Daugherty add that most people hear about The Ramp and Victory through word of mouth, like “[through] friends, people talking, inviting their neighbors, their family members and co-workers.”⁶⁷

The Ramp has 14,300 subscribers, while Wheaton has 38,800 YouTube Subscribers.⁶⁸ Victory, meanwhile, has 108,000 YouTube subscribers. Daugherty adds that the church uses all social media platforms (Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Twitter) to reach these 11–42-year-olds.

Elevation, Victory, Transformation, and Forward City, have each obtained a social media following in various ways. Three of these pastors are Millennials (Daugherty, Todd, and Greene), while Furtick is just a year off from being included in this generation, so he is technically Gen X. Weeks too is a Millennial, while Gallardo, Rodriguez, and Wheaton are part of wiser (if you will) generations. Outside of the church, Rodriguez and Wheaton have a favorable YouTube following.

⁶⁵ “Lifegate Church,” YouTube, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@LifegateChurch>.

⁶⁶ “Bethel Church,” YouTube, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@bethelchurchnc>.

⁶⁷ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, interview.

⁶⁸ “The Ramp Church,” YouTube, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@RampChurchHamilton>; “Karen Wheaton,” YouTube, accessed February 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@KarenWheatonMinistries>.

That said, does the age of the senior pastor matter when trying to reach Gen Z and Millennials effectively? According to Metcalf, 'passion' is what matters, and that passion manifests practically. He notes you can't say you are passionate about reaching Millennials and wear a suit every Sunday and say, "I'm not going on social media' no, you don't want to reach Millennials, and that's cool. Just know you are not going to ... the key is you have to be open to change."

Daugherty agrees. He surmises that more than 'age' being a factor, it's a mixture of personality and a willingness to embrace what is needed to reach that generation. He goes on to say that it can sometimes be difficult for Boomers or older generations to shift their thoughts and methodologies, adding that they are almost intentionally saying, "I got saved in the Jesus movement, and this is who I am, and there's a side of that to me [that is] limiting what God could do through you to reach Gen Z. So, I wouldn't say that an age is not able to [reach Gen Z and Millennials], I'm saying it seems like within the older bracket I've encountered less flexibility to adapt to the different ways that I think young people are searching for God."

The motif regarding pastors' ages and ability to reach this demographic is being painted and has definite parallels among the interviewees. McIntosh asserts that you have to know whom you are trying to reach. You must listen to them, understand what they are looking for, and start meeting those needs. Rodriguez agrees, noting that those looking to

reach Millennials and Z's need to know how to speak to their heart, "every message that we post, that we preach, that we sing, must be inspirational."⁶⁹

Meanwhile, Wheaton has demonstrated that she knows how to effectively reach Gen Z. Proof; more than half of The Ramp, 55%, is comprised of 11–26-year-olds. The key, says Wheaton, is knowing this group, really knowing them and walking with them in their darkest moments while pointing them to the 'only' person that can change an individual from the inside out, Jesus.

⁶⁹ Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, interview.

Chapter 5: How Are the Identified Churches Retaining and Assimilating Gen Z and Millennials?

Reaching Gen Z and Millennials is a challenge for the churches I have interviewed, but once members of these two generations have entered our places of worship, what strategies, systems, and methodologies are being used to *retain* and *assimilate* them? It is not enough to simply welcome Gen Z and Millennials; we need to ensure this demographic comes back to the church and is involved in church activities.

First, it is important to establish the difference between a church simply retaining a person as opposed to assimilating him or her. A person can attend a church and continue to come back for days, weeks, and even years. This would classify as a person 'retained' by a church; they are an attendee only. A person who has assimilated is a person that is involved with the church, be it by taking classes offered, joining some small group, volunteering (serving) on a team, etc.

According to a Barna study, research shows the benefit of church assimilation. The study noted that Gen Z who regularly attend church and are engaged (assimilated) beyond just attending worship services: 1) experience Jesus, 2) have cultural discernment, 3) have meaningful inter-generational relationships, 4) are vocational disciples (walk in their God-given purpose), and 5) they have a counter-cultural mission,

living differently from cultural norms.¹ For these reasons, churches strive to assimilate Gen Z and Millennials.

This chapter will examine how churches might utilize social media to help retain guests and attendees. For the remainder of this research, when documenting ways to retain and assimilate people, it should be understood that the demographic referred to includes anyone from a first-time guest to someone who has attended for some time.

In terms of assimilation, I will explore various techniques/programs utilized by the churches. Additionally, I will survey the systems and technology used behind the scene, both administratively and corporately, for engagement/retention. I will also note methodologies and protocols for welcoming first-time guests and the types of follow-ups the interviewed churches have implemented. Finally, I will review some effective discipleship strategies that the churches employ.

Retaining: Social Media and Systems

Social media is an integral component of reaching Gen Z and Millennials, but does such media uphold its value when attempting to retain individuals at church?

“Not here,” says Pastor Keisha Young, “our retention is based upon the community. I think the draw may be [social media’s cool factor initially], but I think the thing that keeps many people is [they] feel the Lord when [they’re] here, and [their] life

¹ Barna Group and Impact 360 Institute, *Gen Z Vol. 2: Caring for Young Souls and Cultivating Resilience*, vol. 2, 2021. 62–63.

has changed, and [they] have met people who want to do life with [them]. I think this has been our greatest asset of retention.”²

As Young states, social media may have been part of an initial draw for those looking to attend Forward City. But in terms of keeping someone committed and ultimately assimilated, social media would not be considered the dominant tool utilized by most of the church leaders interviewed. Most leaders described using various social media platforms to communicate activities, share inspirational sermon clips and scriptures, and communicate with their assemblies. Weeks says they use certain apps that post across social media platforms simultaneously and find that very valuable.³

Metcalf says social media is a tremendous tool to assist with retention. He says the average person attends church once a month, so the impact would be small given that a single service would occupy only two hours of a person’s time in a matter of four weeks. “If you did something two hours out of a month, that wouldn’t transform, so our goal and opportunity is to engage with people more in the middle of their week.”⁴ He believes social media, text messaging, and podcasts are all hugely important ways to engage people throughout the week. This absolutely helps with retention. He says the goal is to get them to engage where they are, to “engage on a bigger level, which hopefully some of them will get into a small group, or [begin] to serve.”⁵

² Keisha Young, Forward City Church, Columbia, SC, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, January 3, 2023.

³ Daniel Weeks, Bethel Church, Goldsboro, NC, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 4, 2022.

⁴ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church, Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 21, 2022.

⁵ Ibid.

Along with social media, there are a plethora of systems that the churches I spoke with are using to assist with accomplishing numerous tasks within the tabernacle. I have compiled a few of them in Table 8.

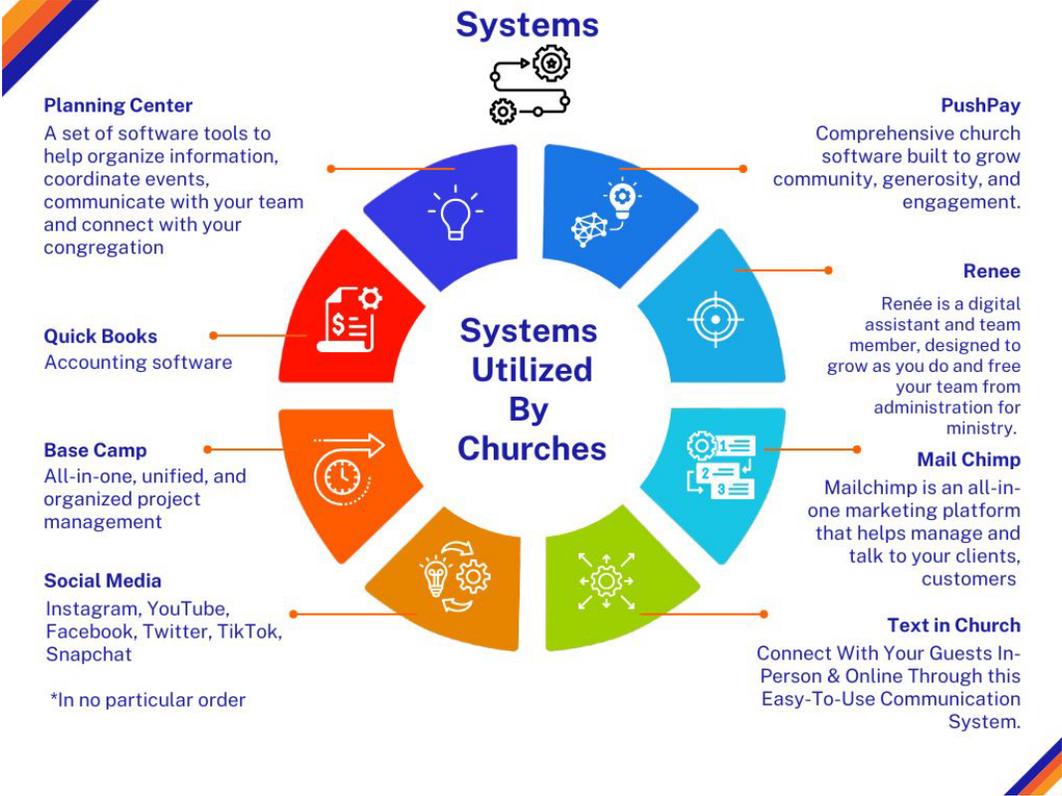
This list is by no means conclusive, as there are dozens of different systems, software, and apps that these churches are signing onto daily and weekly. However, the table gives some sense of the tools and modes of connecting mentioned throughout the interviews.

Just as social media apps are constantly updating/changing and one-upping their competitors, so are the numerous software systems and technical apps that churches use. “[It is] ever changing. We were just discussing our membership software. We’ve changed three times, and we are about to change a fourth time.”⁶ Shifting technical services is not uncommon with growth. Leaders shared that various systems are easier than others to use, which plays into the dichotomy of either keeping what you are using or shifting to something more favorable.

Before looking at the chart, note that many of the ministry leaders interviewed could not immediately recall some of the more technical systems/software and apps used for sound, lighting, media, and other aspects of the church interworking.

⁶ Gary McIntosh, Transformation Church, Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elictia Hart, November 21, 2022.

Table 8: Systems Utilized by Churches



Planning Center, Quick Books, Base Camp, PushPay, Mailchimp, Text in Church, and social media platforms were all mentioned and used for anything from accounting to marketing and project management. Note that descriptions of each system are written on the graphic.

As McIntosh mentioned, Transformation is trying its fourth membership software. It’s called Renee, “in its best form, it is Siri for church engagement. So, I can send a text message to this thing called Renee, saying ‘I want to get into a group,’” and then you will

get a response like here are some groups.⁷ Metcalf says it can also prompt people to take an assessment helping to determine where they are in their spiritual journey and much more. He and McIntosh admit they are still trying to grasp the whole concept, adding that, for now, the technical teams are running with it.

Retaining: Welcoming First-Time Guests

Having a plausible membership system is critical for the churches interviewed as one of the main focuses is their welcome procedure for first-time guests. The weight of this system is consequential, meaning churches will likely be able to welcome back first and second-time guests if done with intentionality and sufficiency. While each church described its methodology, some accounts were in-depth. That said, each description below is not meant to be complete or concise; instead, they represent some systems in place to welcome first-time guests. I will begin with Forward City as their procedure is somewhat thorough.

Looking at their growth in the last eleven months, we might assume their welcome procedure is knitted pretty tight. After all, they have almost quadrupled their attendance in this less than a year. I asked Executive Pastor Keisha Young to walk me through their approach from the time someone pulled into their parking lot. She obliged.

After someone parks, the ‘Guest Experience’ team, a bunch of high-energy folks in the parking lot and lobby, holding signs and cowbells, greets everyone with

⁷ Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church., interview.

enthusiasm and genuine kindness. The all-important question for this team, as they have seen such a large influx of new people, is, “Hey, is this your first time here?” This question is posed by not only individuals serving in the parking lot and lobby, but there is also a special tent set up at the far-right door that says, ‘First Time Entrance.’ In short, by the time an individual has entered the church building, there should have been three opportunities for a Forward City team member to ask if they were new.

If the answer is ‘yes,’ the process proceeds to step two, where the guest is taken to the ‘Connections Team.’ At this point, the first-time guest has been bestowed a new title: VIP. They receive a wristband that signifies to all staff, volunteers, and other members that this person is a first-timer. Young says they constantly have to rotate the color of this wristband, so individuals do not take advantage of the perks.

At this point, the Connections Team collects contact information from the VIP, who is then taken to the connections area, where fruit, muffins, and snacks are provided. Then about ten minutes before the sanctuary doors open, they are escorted through a special side entrance to the VIP section. As VIPs, they are the first individuals in the sanctuary. When the main doors open, people know to greet them, recognizing that these are first-time guests. There are special liaisons if VIPs have any questions or concerns to report.

During the service, the VIPs are acknowledged and greeted. After service, the VIPs are asked to return to the connection center for a special homemade cookie ‘made with love.’ At this juncture, they are officially invited back again.

Each VIP will get an email and a text message thanking them for coming to Forward City. In the email, they are asked for feedback regarding their experience. Young says Forward City is serious about this; the aim is to gather information about each VIP's encounter as this assists them in helping to improve their systems continually.

Young says guests also can plan their trip online. If they do, this gives the Connection Team time to prepare a special snack pack that reflects their preferences on their online questionnaire. They will also be greeted by the team in person when the protocols listed above commence.

If someone is returning for a second time, they will check in at a different station and receive a second wristband meant for second-timers. For this visit, they will have regular seating and acknowledgment during service. After service, they are gifted a coffee mug. The follow-up from here is a card informing them about 'all things ministry.' It's an invitation to get involved and participate on some level. Now, says Young, you are family.

At this point, the connections team is responsible for getting the second-time guest assimilated or plugged in. They will follow up with phone calls and encouragement until this happens. Young says that because of the collected data they will know the person has been there at least twice, maybe three times, "So we know you have been dating us, so it's their responsibility as the Connection Department to get people in."⁸ Once someone joins a team, that team leader will begin connecting the new team member

⁸ Keisha Young, Forward City Church, interview.

with the rest of the group. The immediate goal is to build community, making that new person feel seen, a part of the community, and loved.

Young says that periodically, they pull data to see if people have fallen through the cracks. This subset of people will be invited for dinner (capping the number at twelve). At this dinner, which includes church leaders, they'll inquire about possible things/reasons that the invitees have not assimilated at the church. This is all done in a loving environment, with the goal of making the attendees feel special while creating community and lending an ear to see what leaders can do to assist them in joining a team. "It's our way of saying, 'let's talk.'"⁹

This special dinner—called 'A Seat at the Table'—happens quarterly. Young explains that the focus group will also pull groups together that consist of people that have rapidly become plugged in. They are intentionally honing in and seeking information to equip leaders better as they aspire to assimilate people in the future. The goal with a group of quick assimilators is to see what happened in the experience of those who got involved rapidly so they might duplicate this for others moving forward.

Ultimately, says Young, it's all about the experience. Forward City equates it with Disney, adding that they want to be intentional about every touchpoint, "no matter if you're riding the shuttles at Disney, or standing in line for food, there's some type of

⁹ Ibid.

awe, wonder that's baked into it. We want people to feel at home, we want them to feel that genuine love.”¹⁰

They ensure all teams are ready to serve, staying off their phones, and excited to assist first-time guests and everyone walking through the doors. They also try to put themselves in the shoes of those attending for the first few times, thinking, “if I were this person,” what would I need/have needed to get connected? All these processes ensure guests feel the essence of who Forward City is.

What about strategies employed by other assemblies? Karen Wheaton says, The Ramp uses QR codes and cards on chairs for first-time guests. The cards can be turned in at the information booth, and they receive a follow-up phone call. Wheaton admits this is not their strong suit; they continually work to improve this system. “This is an area we’re not the strongest; we can do better. Many churches have it so wonderfully put together, [saying] meet us in the back; we have snacks and people for you to talk to; we are not there yet. We should be, we could be, but it’s just not quite there.”¹¹

New Season says the connection can be made online and in person. In service, ushers personally hand them a card. The guest will receive a free copy of Pastor Sam’s books and a complimentary coffee when turned in. If they accept the Lord that day, they get a free Bible. A volunteer is connected to that particular guest and will follow up in whatever way agreed upon, whether via text, phone call, or email. New Season also

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Karen Wheaton, The Ramp Church, Hamilton, AL, interview conducted by Elictia Hart, February 9, 2023.

offers (with zero obligation) to briefly visit guests' homes and pray for families.

Rodriguez says the goal in all of this is to establish lasting relationships.¹²

For Transformation, there are numerous ways of welcoming first-time guests. Pastor Charles Metcalf says there are multiple points of entry, "It depends on where you are. So, if you give your life to Christ at the end of the service, [a first-time guest can] text a specific number." He says they'll get a text back saying congratulations and ways to get involved, if that person is looking for that. They will also get a video daily for the next five days, explaining what it means to be saved and what happens when you give your life to Christ.

Whether a person is looking for community, salvation, or serving, they are given ways to attain information successfully. The same happens for baptism and community. Additionally, at the end of service, people are given information about ways to be a part of the Transformation community. This would be the entry point Metcalf is describing.

Once guests text with the intent of gathering information on a particular topic, they will be linked to the Connections Team [a staff person], which will then facilitate a personalized plan specific to the inquiry. All of these are possible virtually as well as in person. For instance, Bishop Gary McIntosh says a person can be part of a virtual and in-person community: "We have Zoom Belong groups all over the world ... the biggest connection, however, is getting involved."¹³ The bottom line is, "There's a wide net of

¹² Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church, Sacramento, CA, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 1, 2022.

¹³ Gary McIntosh, Transformation Church., interview.

entry, and then we are pretty much trying to figure out where you are in your journey of following Jesus, and here's your next steps.”¹⁴

Victory has a Dream Team outside welcoming first-time guests. Pastor Paul Daugherty says music is playing in the parking lot, where multi-generational, multi-ethnic people are welcoming guests. Golf carts transport guests from their cars to one of the multiple entry points.

Once inside, music in the foyer and tv monitors read “New Here.”¹⁵ A person can then use the QR code, enter their data, and learn more about Victory. There are also people in the lobby with signs if guests want to talk with someone and get more information.

At the beginning of service, guests are welcomed and told where to learn more about Victory and various programs. After praise and worship, guests are welcomed again and encouraged to get more information about the church.

Lifegate is updating its first-time guest protocols. They will be building a room called Guest Central. At the conclusion of each service, all first-time guests receive a heartfelt, well-presented gift and can meet the pastors and some leaders and spend a few minutes in Guest Central getting to know them and connect relationally. In the upcoming days, they will receive a handwritten postcard thanking them for visiting. They will also

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, Tulsa, OK, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, February 23, 2023. See <https://victoryfamily.church/about/>.

get an email the following week. When Lifegate's Next Steps class (membership class) comes around, the guest will be contacted once more and given the information.

Every guest experience at Elevation church is intentional. A standard is set, says Torres, to make sure there are parking lot teams and greeters.¹⁶ Signs in the parking lot direct first-time guests to turn their hazard lights on. They will then be directed to a VIP parking lot near the building entry. Once outside the car, they are directed inside, where teams will welcome them further.

Walking into the doors of an Elevation church, you may have a feeling of a sense of familiarity, says Torres, although it might be a different location. That's because although elevation is made up of one church in many locations, each location has its own flare. The Guest Experience Team (volunteers) is ready to welcome first-time guests, answer questions and assist in directing them, "it is not necessarily meant to be like hand holding; we intend to create a space for people to walk in and for them to know that 'this' is the opportunity for you to get plugged in. Not the moment 'after' the experience, this moment right now."

Guests are handed a pamphlet providing general information about Elevation, frequently asked questions, and ways to assimilate. Torres says the pamphlet is intentionally oversized so people cannot just put it in their pocket, "the whole intention is

¹⁶ Kevin Torres, Elevation Church, Charlotte, NC, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, January 4, 2023.

to have something that is easy to identify for our volunteers so that we know you are a first-time guest ... so everyone is aware.”¹⁷

The team walks them to the eKid ministry (if they have children) or sanctuary, where they are handed off to an usher who will help them find a seat.

During service, the VIPs (guests) are welcomed and reminded that they have the option of connecting either via the form given or digitally. They are then asked to turn in that form at the connections area after the worship experience and receive a free t-shirt. VIPs will get a text message from the Guest Experience team, thanking them for coming and asking how Elevation can serve them, whether giving more information about the church or telling them how they can sign up to attend an e101 (a volunteer orientation) class. Additionally, the team member will wrap up a call asking if that new person has any prayer requests, expressing care for the person they are communicating with.

Assimilating: Volunteering, Discipleship, and Small Groups

There is a fine line for the churches interviewed between welcoming first-time guests and pointing them toward assimilation. As soon as someone steps inside the doors, most of the leaders interviewed say their teams are eager to provide information about their churches, small groups, and discipleship and help them learn more about a relationship with Jesus.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Young says they have recognized a common denominator for new attendees, “they want to grow, they want to meet people, and they want to change their lives.”¹⁸

How are the churches interviewed helping guests accomplish these desires?

Assimilation.

Gallardo says, “assimilation to me is what helps to build a healthy church. God is not going to send you people if you don’t assimilate them well and be kind and loving to them.”¹⁹ One easy way for someone to get plugged in (assimilated) is by serving on a team.

Regarding volunteerism, most of the churches interviewed provide content about their ministry teams so visitors can get plugged in if they desire. This is woven into the welcoming of first-time guests in many ways, especially if the guest expresses interest in connecting that way.

(Let me emphasize again that there may be protocols not discussed in the interviews that take place in the overall process. As noted in the section above, some churches have a class for new individuals preparing to serve, while other churches point people directly to ministry leaders who help them begin their training and prepare to serve at that point.)

¹⁸ Keisha Young, Forward City Church, interview.

¹⁹ Brian Gallardo, Lifegate Church, Independence, MO, interview conducted by Elicia Hart, November 30, 2022.

Assimilating: Tools and Effective Methods

What's the key to assimilating Gen Z and Millennials? For Rodriguez, "Leadership. Offer them leadership but don't wait for them to become 25, 30, 35, 4.... We assimilate when we put them in leadership positions, and we trust them" not when they are older, he says, but when they are 15, 16, 17.²⁰

There must be mutual honor; that's how we assimilate. He attributes it to the Bible, saying he feels Elijah recognized and valued Elisha and what was coming to his life. It's that mutual honor that needs to take place, says Rodriguez, not later, now, adding, we must let the Elishas accompany us (Elijahs) to Gilgal, Bethel, Jericho, and Jordan. We train them up in positions at the church now, showing we trust them, believe in them, and are there for them. This is discipleship in action.

The leaders I spoke with believe such discipleship is recognized as a foundational component of helping other believers walk out their God-given purpose. This is helping to spiritually form the lives of those attending and serving in their churches.

However, before proceeding, I want to navigate what can be perceived as a fragile line between the idea of discipleship and belonging to a small group. First, both typically happen within a smaller gathering. However, the distinguishing factor would be the intent behind the group. If the group's goal is spiritual maturity, one would want to gear the group for a spiritual formation pathway. "It is important to develop a spiritual pathway that helps unbelievers move into connection, an embrace of the gospel, depth, and

²⁰ Samuel Rodriguez, New Season Church., interview.

mission. Once this pathway is established, it will help your church define the purpose for each ministry.”²¹

Biblically speaking, Jesus and his twelve disciples are the ultimate examples of discipleship. “Jesus’ small group understood their mission and unfolded it together. They were not just committed to growing together but also to reaching others. (Mark 3:14, Matt. 4:19).”²²

At times being a disciple can be conflated with being a member of a small group, and this, says Brown, is why pastors often get frustrated when small groups are not assisting in the spiritual maturity department. “The problem is fairly simple: the small group is not designed to produce deep maturity.”²³

“There is a place for both small groups and discipleship groups.” Brown goes on to say that most churches use small groups to welcome people into their church and create community. He adds that this is a vital component of a spiritual formation pathway, but it would be highly challenging for a small group to create community while trying to form someone into a leadership role. **Table 9** shows some of the critical differences according to Brown.

Keep in mind that this Table 9, and list described below is according to the author and not the perceptions or thoughts of the ministry leaders interviewed. This information intends to explain potential differences between small groups versus discipleship groups.

²¹ Ryan Brown, “12 Key Differences: Discipleship Groups vs Small Groups.”

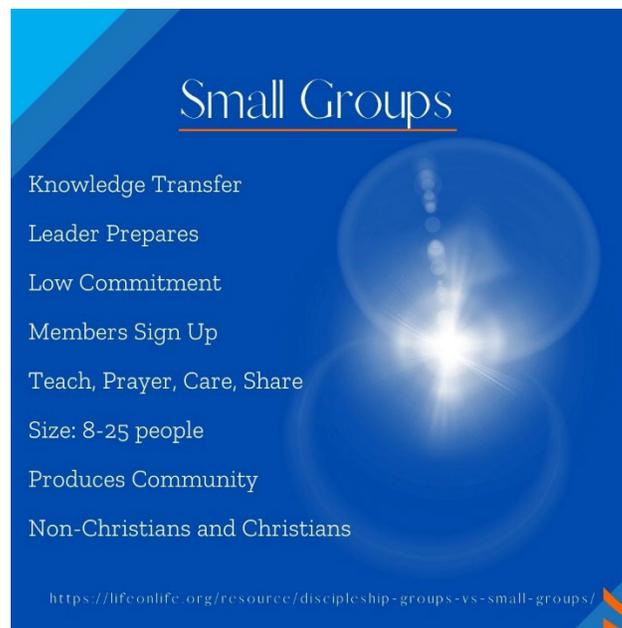
²² Justin Gravitt, “Why Do Small Groups Exist?,” n.d., accessed February 27, 2023

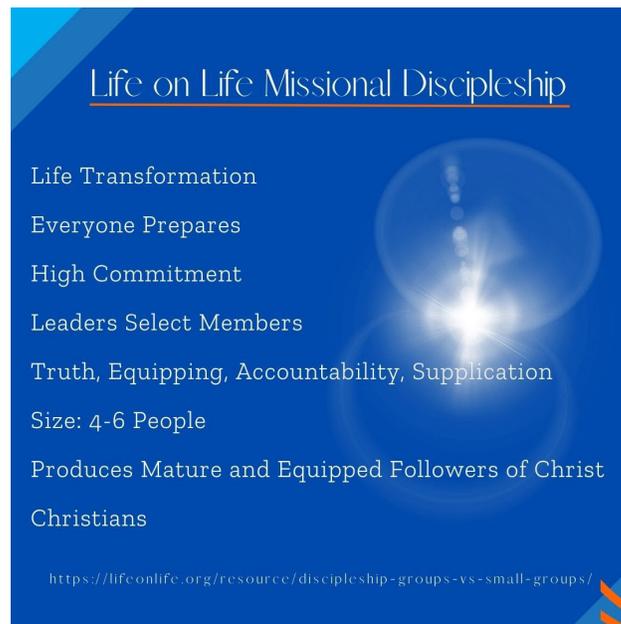
<https://discipleship.org/blog/why-small-groups/>, 3. <https://discipleship.org/blog/why-small-groups/>.

²³ Brown, “12 Key Differences: Discipleship Groups vs Small Groups.”

According to **Table 9**, ‘knowledge transfer’ versus ‘life transformation’ is the first noticeable difference between a small group and discipleship. Secondly, according to Brown, in a small group, only the leader prepares, whereas, in a discipleship group, everyone prepares. In a small group, the commitment is low versus high in a discipleship group. Next, people sign up in a small group, whereas leaders select attendees in a discipleship group. Brown lists the other differences, from agenda, group size, and who should be part of the group.

Table 9: Eight potential differences between a small group and a discipleship group





(With this data in mind for informative purposes, I will now return to the leaders interviewed for insight on small and discipleship groups.)

Forward City has been critically intentional about combining discipleship and community in its small gatherings. Their methodology is effective, says Young, who adds they do not have midweek services, rather, each team meets on Thursdays. For the first half hour to 40 minutes of this meeting, the group is disciplined by their team leader, and they utilize some curriculum (emotionally healthy discipleship or learning who the Holy Spirit is). “On all of our teams, from the leader themselves, they are disciplining their team lead, and the team lead is helping to disciple the team at large. This is built in, and you

should be growing spiritually and not just serving.”²⁴ This includes discussions and real conversations. For the next 20–30 minutes, each team prepares for Sunday. Whatever needs to get set up, arranged, and/or created/made is done together in the community, as well as laughing, finding companionship, and simply doing life.

Pastor Daniel Weeks says they are working on their biblically based discipleship program, admitting they are not great at getting people into circles (spiritual formation groups). He adds that they want these successful circles or spiritually forming groups “for the purpose of real true discipleship,”²⁵ as these are very important to their church body.

They have weekly youth meetings focused on becoming a biblical man/woman; having a Jesus centered in life. Yet, they want to do more, so they are employing someone to head up their discipleship ministry.

Where Bethel is successful is with community/theme-based small groups. Weeks says it is important to do life together. Community and building solid relationships are imperative with these two demographics. Weeks says they have small groups for everything from racquetball to food groups that meet outside of the church building, anywhere from once a month to a few times a week, whatever works for the collective.

Bethel’s solid theme-based small groups have significantly impacted lives, but this was not always true. “There was a point in the church’s history that we started cutting back programming to give people time to have these life-giving relationships.”²⁶

²⁴ Keisha Young, Forward City Church, interview.

²⁵ Daniel Weeks, Bethel Church, interview.

²⁶ Ibid.

He says programs begin to compete with one another. Advising other churches struggling with theme based small groups for community building, he encourages other leaders to “ask yourself the question, ‘are we programming so many things that our people don’t have time to do life together?’.” He would also ask the pastor to consider who their small group is and whom they are doing life with, and if they are not in a small group, start there. He adds, it’s biblical: “This is like a mandate, and it works, and it’s better than doing life alone.”²⁷

In terms of implementing small groups or discipleship groups, Young admonishes ministries to start small with solid leaders. They need to understand the demographic needs and ensure they cater to them. If its community/theme based, do life; if it’s word-based, try utilizing the Sunday service messages, and know who is teaching biblical principles. Also, understand “what is your ‘why’ for small groups, why are you even doing them. For us, we know that community is one of our pillars ... knowing your why and what your people need and then marry those two together.”²⁸

“When it comes down to it, it’s the Gospel; it’s Jesus that grabs them.”²⁹ With this understanding, Lifegate has Wednesday night discipleship classes. These classes are relational, where youth and young adults can ask questions in a safe environment. What has always worked for Lifegate is small group, pointing at one-on-one relationships and community. “I think in our church culture, I find it to be that everything has to be a

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Keisha Young, Forward City Church, interview.

²⁹ Brian Gallardo, Lifegate Church, interview.

presentation and big, and that's really not where discipleship is done. You can't call yourself a disciple just for Sunday morning services; what are you doing Monday through Saturday.”³⁰

Rodriguez says you can inspire, inform, and impart on a Sunday, “but you can't really equip in a measurable way” from the pulpit Monday through Saturday. He adds it all about understanding, it's the Macro (large crowd) on Sunday, Micro (small gathering) the remainder of the week. Their discipleship classes teach you to live “holy, healthy, happy, humble, hungry and honoring life, and with that light, they can change the world.”³¹

Elevation understands this. That's why their youth meet once a week outside of Sundays. Torres says they have video content specific to spiritual formation taught by Pastor Holly Furtick and other pastors. These discipleship meetings utilize these messages. The eGroup (the name of any Elevation small group) first worship, then view the virtual message, followed by exploration and conversation.

“Small groups almost should be happening naturally at a church.” Torres is referring to small groups for connection as well as discipleship. He says that for youth specifically, this is Elevation's largest focus. Creating small group structures has happened naturally because they have a clear focus on allowing youth to activate their

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

faith. He adds that you will naturally form a gathering if you see a clear vision of what the small group intends to accomplish.

Metcalf says Transformation, like Bethel, feels they haven't done a great job of discipleship, adding they are just now growing into what their model looks like. Their discipleship happens through their belonging groups, community, and various leaders: "but I can say, we are not doing an amazing job with it."³² But that will soon change. According to Metcalf, one of their biggest goals for 2023 "is something we're going to create called digital discipleship." He adds that this will be like a master class where people could go to a platform and find a six-week course on "ways to grow your faith." McIntosh adds that this would be available globally for the entire body of Christ.

The Ramp focuses on a shared mission when discipling his demographic. "Raising these kids up to know God, walk with God, stand on the word of God, understand His word, hunger for His word but then to share a mission."³³ This shared mission is reaching their school and their friends. Wheaton says that as part of the discipleship, they try to arrange prayer walks and other events to engage them with one common goal "so they could find their purpose within a corporate purpose."³⁴ She says this is huge when disciplining this group.

Victory's discipleship groups have a longstanding history, initially dating back to when Pastor Billy Joe was at the helm in 2001. Pastor Paul describes being involved in

³² Charles Metcalf, Transformation Church, interview.

³³ Karen Wheaton, The Ramp Church, interview.

³⁴ Ibid.

those groups in college. He explained that they were specific to men and women and took place weekly, outside the regular church hours. He and his wife were both single at the time but were tremendously impacted by both groups. He says it was genuine discipleship circles. Men would lead his class each week and teach on purity, creation, or the gifts of the Spirit among other topics, for about fifteen minutes. At some point, these discipleship circles halted.

Fast forward to today, with Pastor Paul as the lead pastor looking for a life-changing discipleship program. He thought, “if we rebrand this [discipleship circle] and we really promote this, I think this could become a really powerful discipleship tool, not just for our church but other churches.”³⁵

The church gave everyone who wanted to take these courses a scholarship, so they didn’t have to pay for any books, and childcare was also available. Daugherty said the groups went from having 30 men and 40 women on a Tuesday night to having 300 men and 300–400 women on a Tuesday night, broken up into small groups throughout the church. He says they are coming upon eight years of these discipleship circles: “it’s been a really powerful and effective tool.”³⁶

Daugherty explains the inter-workings of the courses are as follows: it’s twelve weeks of discipleship, and they graduate. Leadership asks them to stay with the group for the next semester and become a discipleship hub leader, overseeing a small group circle.

³⁵ Paul Daugherty, Victory Church, interview.

³⁶ Ibid.

After that, they become a coach in charge of three or four circles and meet with those leaders during the week over coffee.

I know some people are against programs because [they say] programs don't change people, but I was changed by a program that was focused on disciplining men, and I believe in it. Yes, you need relationships, you need organic mentors, and organic friendships, but you also have to have a starting point, and so we offer the starting point of men's and women's discipleship track.³⁷

Conclusion

At the end of the day, the churches interviewed showed explicitly that they want to retain their first-time guests. Not only do they desire for them to return, but they would also like to see them assimilated.

Social media and various systems and methodologies are routinely employed throughout the churches, from front offices to the inter-workings of the sanctuary—all with the goal of retaining and assimilating guests.

One element that all leaders interviewed agree on is their desire to see all plugged in or assimilated in one way or another. Although not intrusive, there is a systematic and intentional approach to offering such opportunities as soon as a first-time guest walks in the door. Whether it's volunteering, signing up for some type of class, or getting assimilated into a small group or discipleship circle, leadership understands that when people get involved, the opportunity to have a life-changing encounter with Jesus increases, and ultimately this is why they are in ministry.

³⁷ Ibid.

Such encounters with Christ often happen when effective discipleship is offered. Some churches are flourishing when it comes to discipleship circles, whereas others are doing well within their small-group community. These small groups range from theme-based activities to bible study groups. They are rich in authenticity and lay a foundation for building community. Nevertheless, while community is critical, ministry leaders agree that it is imperative to spiritually form parishioners; without true discipleship, it is easy for individuals to fall away from the Lord and, ultimately, the church.

Conclusion: Analysis and Findings of Data

James 1:5 says, “But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” The defining principle in this passage maintains that if we need wisdom, ask God. As I assess all the data and findings obtained throughout this research process, I ask my Heavenly Father to press it down and shake it together so that His Kingdom may greatly benefit.

As I sought to identify ways that non-denominational churches could effectively reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials, a few defining and existential characteristics began to surface.

With studies stating Gen Z and Millennials represent nearly half of the populous in 2020, churches should be taking note. The message is quite clear, if assemblies are not reaching this demographic, churches will begin to diminish. How do non-denominational, Spirit-led churches keep this from happening? What I discovered is simple, it just requires a splatter of intentionality.

Below I offer a systematic analysis of my findings, which then informs my strategic model for ministry leaders wishing to reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials.

Analysis: Understanding Gen Z/Millennials and Being Authentic

According to my research, the top criterion for effectively reaching, retaining, and assimilating Gen Z and Millennials is authenticity. According to the interviewees, the key

to unlocking relationships, building community, and communicating effectively with this group is being authentic, genuine, real, and transparent.

Data demonstrates that the sort of genuine transparency—mentioned again and again in various ways by the pastors I interviewed—is exceptionally effective in reaching Gen Z and Millennials because it offers the recipient safety, righteous love, and patience. Without it, reaching, retaining, and assimilating Gen Z and Millennials is merely a thought that might ultimately end as an unfruitful stratagem.

Along with this intangible authenticity, every Spirit-led ministry leader I spoke with discussed the number-one goal when trying to effectively reach Gen Z and Millennials. In short, the presence of God and, ultimately, salvation. As Spirit-empowered leaders, they understand the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, hence the need to create a place for God's presence to move.

Gen Z and Millennials are frequently desensitized by the media platforms they use and the treatment they experience as objects of commercial enterprises, having seen far more than most other generations alive today by simply pushing a cellular button. Still, they are passionate, inquisitive, brilliant, and vocal, even sometimes silent. They are eager to create their own space in this world, with ingenious ideas that sometimes cause separation from older generations.

In line with generational separation, church music, and attire can potentially cause division and should be part of a conversation for churches seeking to reach these 11–42-year-olds. Church leaders should recognize that everything from fashion to music has

changed over the years, and according to churches reaching them, there needs to be changes at worship assemblies as well.

Such changes have not stopped with music and attire. Traditional church interiors and exteriors have shifted. On any given Sunday, you can pull up to many non-denominational, evangelical, Spirit-led churches and find people already outside waiting to greet you. There is often music blasting and a party-like atmosphere, all happening before entering the building. Once inside, foyers are filled with people, music, balloons, coffee, and more.

Step inside the sanctuary, and the lighting will often be dimmed; the platform might have smoke and LED screens adorning the walls. The praise and worship are loud, and the worship is demonstrative and expressive. This atmosphere is created in hopes that those in attendance will experience a tangible encounter with the Holy Spirit. .

The subliminal message at any of these churches: ‘Welcome, we have fun here, we authentically love people, we are loud, and most importantly, passionate about Jesus ... join us!’

While new esthetics, music, and attire will not retain this group solely or indefinitely, studies show that Gen Z and Millennials respond favorably to these elements. Perhaps this is why the pastors interviewed think being relevant in these ways is critical to reaching these two generations.

Meanwhile, some of the pressing concerns of these two groups are related to technological issues and cultural influences and how they affect them. Additionally, violence is prevalent in our society, as are mental health issues that permeate schools,

homes, work, and church. Questioning one's gender identity has also become a social norm and is one often thought about among Gen Z.

Alongside these existential issues lies the cultural belief held by many that it is not okay to question someone's values, morals, or beliefs. Schools, places of employment, shopping venues, and everywhere in between must acknowledge others' desires. Studies show moral relativism is predominant among this demographic, and questioning the value-set of another person, as mentioned, is not okay in their eyes.

What is not new is that somewhere deep down, these 11–42-year-olds desire to thrive in life, want to leave their mark, and be seen, heard, and honored. Foundationally and at the root of their existence, they are like any other generation growing up, maneuvering through awkward teenage years, grappling with the latest technology, trying to graduate from various academic entities, searching for a job, getting married, having children, laughing, crying, and doing their best to figure 'it' all out. But just what is 'it'? LIFE. This is where churches can step in, as churches long to declare that the fullness of life, or abundant life, is what Christ desires humanity to have. Encapsulated in this principle is the ministerial narrative to love God and love people.

At age five, a neighbor invited me, a young, only child born to young interracial parents, to go to church with them. Any invitation was an honor, and with permission from my parents, I obliged. This is the first recollection I have of going to church.

The Capp family lived two houses up on my cul-de-sac. Although they had no children my age, their home felt safe, and they were kind, loving, and always attentive. They had two teenage daughters, one of whom I considered my friend, although she was

older than me in years. Her name was Carol. I always knew she was special, and although no one ever told me anything was ‘wrong’ with her, I recall thinking in my young mind that she did things slowly. As I grew older, I realized she had special needs. She did not walk very well and her speech was choppy; however, she communicated beautifully with this five-year-old who loved her companionship.

The Capp family took me to church often and gave me my first Bible. I spent many, many years ringing their doorbell and visiting Carol. They watched me grow and knew me well, showing me abundant life and agape love. Although they may not have known it, in my adolescent mind, they were safe, they felt genuine, and—while I may have never told them—I, too, loved them.

Such real love can move hearts, and when a heart is softened, lives can be transformed. Imagine if authentic love became systemic in our society. How many lives might be altered in a glorious way? Gen Z and Millennials are screaming for Christian leaders to be real, patient, and passionate about seeing their lives shift. They want mentors and holy friendships to walk with them on their journey, hearing them out without discounting their real feelings but not compromising when sharing God’s unfailing Biblical truths.

The disciple John informs us that the thief does not come except to steal, kill, and destroy. “I [Jesus] have come that they may have life and that they may have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). Understanding the enemy’s assignment to steal, kill, and destroy helps aid and equip ministers as they strive to pack the correct ammunition to

counter such dark behavior. The great news, as heirs of Christ, is that we will ultimately win all battles, be it here on earth or in heaven, once our earthly journey is complete.

So, what can non-denominational churches nationwide do to reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials?

Analysis: Systems and Methodologies

If anyone suggests systems and methodologies are obsolete in worship assemblies in this post-modern era, they have deceived you. According to the ministry leaders interviewed and the data collected, various protocols are needed and highly advantageous for churches desiring to reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials.

Understanding Gen Z's and Millennials' love language is the beginning of escorting them inside church doors. Social media and word of mouth are the top ways these two generations learn about churches, according to the churches interviewed. Research also shows YouTube is the heavy-hitting virtual platform that Gen Z and Millennials utilize, noting Instagram and TikTok are also popular among Gen Z.

What is being posted on these platforms? Short clips of sermons that are biblical nuggets meant to drive a viewer to watch the entire sermon. Scriptures, inspirational sayings, as well as information on events. This has become the home of daily devotionals historically held in one's hand and read privately. Today, these devotionals/inspirational posts are viewed by hundreds and, in some cases, thousands. With that, people also can watch on-demand church services if that is of interest.

In many cases, the church bulletin handed out on Sundays is also available outside of the church walls. It is common to get the latest church information on social media sites, including dates, times, and event details. The great news is that all of this is available to any church, and without spending a dime if a church desire to.

Churches use many digital platforms, apps, and systems administratively and systematically within various ministries. The list of available tools is endless. It comes down to knowing what a particular house of worship needs and what the various systems offer.

It is worth noting that, as with any technology, systems continually update, and old platforms may not have the functionality or appeal they once did. Churches should not become antiquated in their thought process concerning the methods and tools they use. Instead, they should continue to approach things with the understanding that the ultimate goal is to serve the body of Christ utilizing online structures and remaining fruitful.

Accessing social media should be a regular occurrence for churches looking to reach this group, but it should not stop there. Gen Z and Millennials are tech-savvy and can easily run or assist in this department at most churches. Research and the interviewed leaders maintain that you are behind the curve if your church is not active on social media. To reach this 'always online' generation, it is imperative for churches to jump on the world wide web.

It is not just social media getting Gen Z's and millennials' attention and increasing church attendance nationwide. These houses of worship have some of their

most fabulous advertisers sitting in chairs week after week. Interviewed leaders state that churches should try to create a culture of intentionality when rallying Gen Z and Millennials to invite others to church. Research shows that people come when they are invited by someone they know or when they have seen someone's life impacted.

The expectations don't stop there; it is imperative that the church has systems in place to welcome those guests when they arrive. The ministry leaders interviewed described numerous systems and protocols that have effectively retained and ultimately assimilated people into their assemblies.

A common component integrated into many welcome protocols is having people in parking lots and foyers eager to greet guests. From tents outside welcoming first-time guests to signage telling them to turn their hazard lights on, there are planned ways to ensure all new people are specially cared for. This intentionality translates inside with Connection Teams, Dream Teams, and other welcome teams prepared to go the distance making everyone, especially guests often called VIPs, feel seen.

VIPs are given anything from QR codes to pamphlets, wristbands, and sometimes, a snack, t-shirt, and books. Volunteers are prepared to answer questions while showing the VIPs how they can get connected. The goal is to make them feel special and part of the community while gaining knowledge about the church they are visiting.

The building is buzzing, full of anticipation of what is to come. Teams behind the scenes have been at the church for hours preparing, organizing, and laboring to create an excellent experience while looking to honor the Lord. These teams are filled with volunteers of all ages and ethnicities. Families file through the doors heading to kids'

clubs, while youth and young adults are finding their friends to ‘hang’ with. For staff and volunteers already assimilated, there is an awareness and great expectation of what the Lord might do in the service that everyone anticipates.

Small groups meant to further this sort of community are a mainstay of the churches interviewed. Some have theme-based groups, like sports groups and foodie groups. At the same time, others combine discipleship and community. Still, others have specific discipleship groups meant to solely form believers spiritually. Gone are the stationary individuals, simply handing out bulletins from one spot. Dismissed are the quiet, empty foyers, now filled with bodies adorned in the latest church merch or trendy attire, balloons, picture walls, loud music, and laughter.

Traditions of old are fading, not that those things are bad; instead, methods and systems have changed, say the pastors interviewed. However, even with the shifting of methodology and techniques, the one thing that will never change is the message which is the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Analysis: The Goal is God’s Presence and Salvation

While systems have their place in effectively reaching, retaining, and assimilating Gen Z and Millennials, one thing stands alone. The presence of God trumps a person’s authenticity, every system in place at a church, every small group, and every message preached by the minister.

The necessity of God's presence was explicitly expressed throughout every interview, usurping systems and methodologies, strategies and protocols. If experiencing God's lifegiving presence is not the goal of every gathering, ultimately every good intention to retain and assimilate this group might fall by the wayside. This is the one component that cannot be duplicated by humanity, cannot be fabricated or purchased, and can't be accessed on-demand from a social media platform. Yet, it is the one thing every church should desire every time they open their doors.

God's presence.

In the presence of the Holy Spirit, transformation happens, lives are changed, people can be healed, hearts can be mended, and situations shift. In the presence of God, there is liberty and joy unspeakable. Ministers desire to see someone's 'natural' life changed by God's 'super' ability to step in. He puts His 'super' with humanity's 'natural' and 'supernatural' occurrences take place.

The Spirit-empowered ministers I interviewed said that in God's presence, the miraculous occurs because God is a God of transformation, miracles, signs, and wonders. Romans 12:2 (Passion Translation) says, "Stop imitating the ideals and opinions of the culture around you but be inwardly transformed by the Holy Spirit through a total reformation of how you think. This will empower you to discern God's will as you live a beautiful life, satisfying and perfect in His eyes."

The Holy Spirit is our helper, according to the Bible. As we develop our relationship with Him at home, in church, and in everyday life, He will lead and guide us. As part of this growing relationship, God asks that we worship him with our whole

hearts; the Bible says, “let everything that has breath praise the Lord” (Psalm 150:6). As each ministry leader I interviewed proclaimed, it is all about getting people into the presence of God for this type of worship to take place. They desire to create an atmosphere for God’s presence to come. It is in this place that the lost are found.

How does one get into the presence of God? The Bible, God’s inspired Word, gives readers a clue. It says, “Enter His gates with thanksgiving and His courts with praise” (Psalm 100:4). We, as believers, have countless reasons to be thankful even though we may not feel like it. We should have gratitude mainly because of Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer. He paid the price for humanity’s sins on the cross. His burial and resurrection power give all that believe in Him eternal life.

As non-denominational, Evangelical, Spirit-filled churches, the desire is for those in attendance to receive the gift of Salvation. This is a gift; there is nothing anyone can do to earn salvation. No amount of Scripture read, or volunteering to feed the homeless, nothing can earn a place in heaven.

The Bible says, “for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). It goes on to say that in this fallen place, whoever believes in their heart and confesses with their mouth that Jesus is Lord will be saved. This is what salvation is; faith that God sent His only son, Jesus, to walk the earth for 33 years, where He did many miracles, then went to the cross to bear the sins of the world and ultimately rose again.

Conclusion: The Splatter Effect

After reviewing the data this thesis presents, I have developed a model based on what I have learned. I am recommending a strategy for churches to utilize that are looking to effectively reach, retain and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials that I call “The Splatter Effect.”

This concept has a few defining attributes that necessitate the presence and action of the *Holy Spirit*, the need for careful *Preparation*, and the expenditure of *Energy*, in order to have an *Impact*. I will first explain the concept, then explain the effects naturally and spiritually.

1. **HOLY SPIRIT:** Before stepping into any church-related endeavor, consulting with the All-Knowing One, the Holy Spirit, is critical. This is how one leads from a Spiritually empowered posture. In the case of my thesis, when attempting to reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials into one’s church, the target should be to lead them into the presence of the Holy Spirit. This becomes the central focus.

The involvement of the Holy Spirit does not end after understanding He is your target, we need His guidance at all times and if allowed, the Spirit will infuse Himself into every aspect of the operations to come. Indeed, the Holy Spirit should be your confidant, your Helper, and your ultimate resource. Every aspect of the church’s endeavors should be infused by the Spirit.

So, if we are trying to effectively reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials at our church, we need to understand that the target is not the demographic themselves but rather getting them into the presence of the Holy Spirit.

2. PREPARATION: Ponder with me for a moment a notion: if someone wanted to intentionally hit a target with a balloon filled with water or paint, they would need to prepare the balloon and have strategies in place to ensure that the preparation goes well.

First, you would get the balloon, stretch it, get the water or paint and use a funnel system in order to fill the balloon. Next, you would tie it. And then you would need to make sure the target you are going to aim at is in place.

Additionally, you must evaluate the distance between your location and the target to estimate the energy required to hit the target. This is essential in order to successfully carry out the intended process. At this point, the systematic preparation is complete.

***Scientifically:** Studies show preparation matters. Ministry leaders should take the time to adequately prepare. Taking care of things beforehand “can prove to be one of the most valuable skills that you can master in avoiding the build-up of stress and anxiety as deadline dates approach.”¹*

***Spiritually:** Before any systems are in place, church leadership should discern the Lord’s plans for their worship community. This is what being Spirit-empowered looks like. Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, ministry leaders should systematically prepare ways to reach Gen Z and Millennials.*

To reach Gen Z and Millennials you will consider what social media platforms you will use, and in what ways you will utilize them. You will determine how you will

¹ Carole Spiers, “The Importance of Preparation,” November 25, 2017, <https://executivesupportmagazine.com/the-importance-of-preparation/>.

encourage church members to invite others; perhaps you will come up with invitational campaigns.

If you choose, you will consider building esthetics (lighting, smoke, LED screens), and creating a culture that is receptive of current fashion. You will set up systems for reaching, retaining, and assimilating first-time guests. You will decide if this includes music, what this looks like inside and outside while determining what you will call guests (like VIPs). You will determine the tangible climate of your assembly as you create connection and follow-up teams.

You will need to decide how you can create a safe environment for your youth ministry and figure out how much parental involvement you will want when it comes to this teams. You will also need to determine if you will have outreach/missions programs; what they will look like comprehensively.

Additionally, you will set up methodologies utilizing various software and operating systems to be employed from the front office to the interworking's of the sanctuary.

All of this is part of the Spirit-led preparation.

3. ENERGY: You have evaluated, strategized, and prepared to get the balloon from where you are to the intended target. There's a bit of effort/energy required of you. You must intentionally throw the balloon with the objective of hitting the target. Essentially you are transporting this watery paint liquid from where you are to the ended area or target.

Scientifically: *The liquid in the balloon would appear to be in a solid liquefied state, meaning it is all together, not separate drops. However, depending on how hard this balloon is thrown and the surface it hits, what was once seemingly a solid-liquid can splatter into droplets. Transportation (or a spreading effect: splatter) happens through droplets, according to Dr. Lydia Bourouiba of MIT.²*

Spiritually: *Once someone has attended your church, the goal becomes getting them assimilated in some form. This can take ‘energy’ and effort. Teams should lovingly (authentically/genuinely) assist in helping guests become acclimated; you are trying to create a safe atmosphere conducive to learning about Jesus and receiving Him as Savior while producing a sense of community.*

Part of the energy required is understanding the needs that your new guests. Creating places so that retention happens. You want them to feel seen, heard, loved. You will assist in creating a space for organic community to take shape, while spearheading systematic approaches for various ages to come together and talk about applicable subjects.

Part of the energy necessary at this juncture will assist ministry leaders in describing the various discipleship circles, small groups, or opportunities for volunteering in some capacity. All of which need to be in a solidified stage prior to

² Karin Heineman, *Making A Splash—High-Speed Video Shows How Far One Drop of Water Really Goes*, YouTube, Inside Science, accessed March 1, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIJQaSmpI_c. (:36-:54)

opening them up to congregants. This is what a Spirit of excellence looks like. You do not want to expend energy creating something as you go.

Again, all of these elements take energy from the staff and volunteers and the person stepping into these new programs.

4. IMPACT: Once the balloon has been thrown and energy has been expended, an impact should occur. If thrown at a high enough velocity, the balloon would burst when it hits the target. Once this happens, the liquid disperses, making it difficult to contain the paint in a tiny, concentrated spot; this splatter can seemingly get everywhere. This is the Splatter Effect.

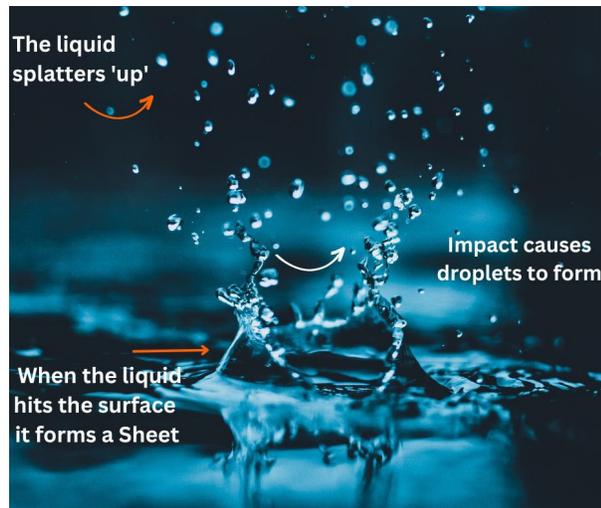
***Scientifically:** Scientists say when an object travels at a certain speed, the ultimate impact is determined by the rate of speed (kinetic energy) and surface energy, according to Dr. James Sprittles.³ The harder a balloon filled with paint strikes the target, the further the splatter of the balloon's contents will go.*

*According to Dr. Bourouiba, in just a few milliseconds, hundreds of smaller droplets are formed and eject when the impact occurs.⁴ She adds the impact creates a sheet and splatters 'up' away from the target. (**See Table 10**) And it does not stop there. It produces more drops that make more drops, and so on.*

³ James Sprittles, "We May Just Have Solved the Great Mystery of Why Drops Splash." *The Conversation: Academic Rigor*, March 22, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/we-may-just-have-solved-the-great-mystery-of-why-drops-splash-74858>.

⁴ Heineman, *Making A Splash*.

Table 10: Causes of Splatter



***Spiritually:** As the church attempts to get a guest plugged in, the overarching goal is to get them to the target, God's presence. In the presence of God, transformation happens, or impact in this case. This may happen quickly or take a season, but once a life is impacted by the Holy Spirit, much like when the paint hits a target, there is a spiritual splatter that occurs.*

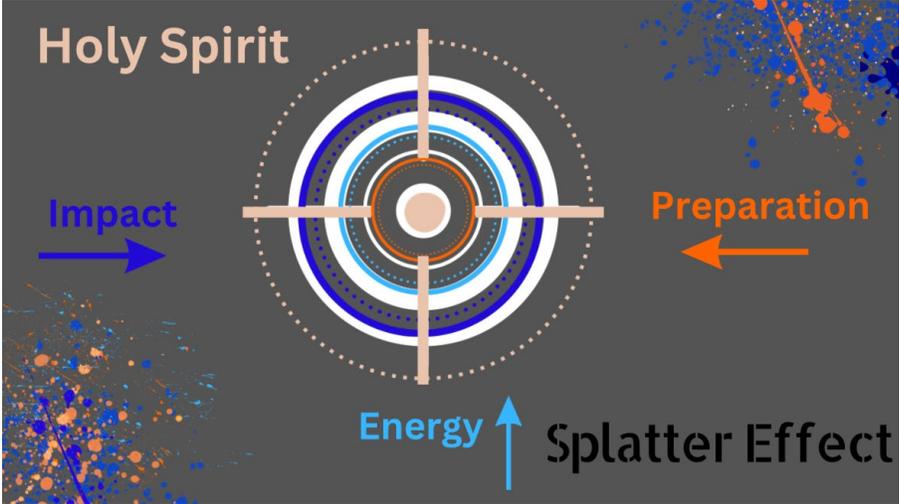
The first thing that happens—scientifically—is a sheet forms, coming up and away, yet still connected, to the initial impact. The sheet is reflective of the individual who has had an encounter with the Holy Spirit. Whether immediately, or in time, that person's life is impacted, causing them to reflect on sinful ways and life choices; perhaps beginning to treat themselves and others well, desiring to be free from their addictions, among other things. The goal then becomes moving up and away, if you will, from that historically negative behavior.

Beyond the sheet, droplets form. The number of droplets depends on the impact. These drops are not connected to the sheet. They would be viewed as lives impacted by the individual that has had an encounter with the Lord.

Each droplet is spiritual fruit; the impacted person now wants to tell his or her co-workers about Jesus and the church; the person's family takes notice; their neighbors are paying attention; their boyfriend/girlfriends ask to come to church with them; the effects are innumerable.

There has been an impact, and as science maintains, the greater the impact, the farther the splatter. Much is true spiritually. A life impacted in the presence of God can cause splatter, that splatter representing the other lives that are impacted by that person who encountered the presence of God and is now transformed. I call this the Splatter Effect.

Table 11: The Splatter Effect:



Holy Spirit

- The target and intention of ministry leaders is to welcome the Holy Spirit to every service with the goal of leading all in attendance into the presence of God.
- Not only is God's presence the target, but being Spirit-led in all things means the Holy Spirit encircles and is weaved into the fabric of a Spirit-Filled church.

Splatter Effect



Holy Spirit

Weaved into the fabric

The target

Encircles

Splatter Effect

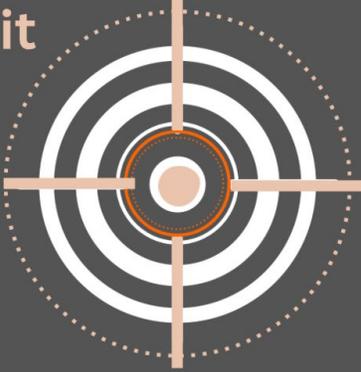
Preparation



- Be Spirit-led when preparing to reach Gen Z & Millennials
- Utilize Social Media and word of mouth to reach Gen Z & Millennials
- Have welcome and connect teams/procedures in place
- Have follow-up protocol's in order

Splatter Effect

Holy Spirit



Preparation ←

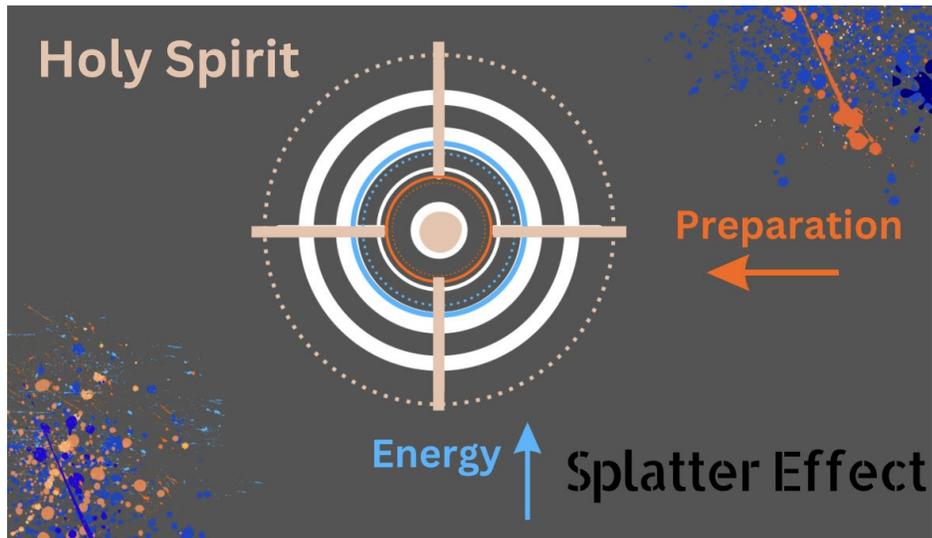
Splatter Effect

Energy



- Be Spirit-led when creating community
- Encourage authentic community through joining small groups
- Encourage spiritual growth by taking a discipleship circle
- Offer connection by volunteering

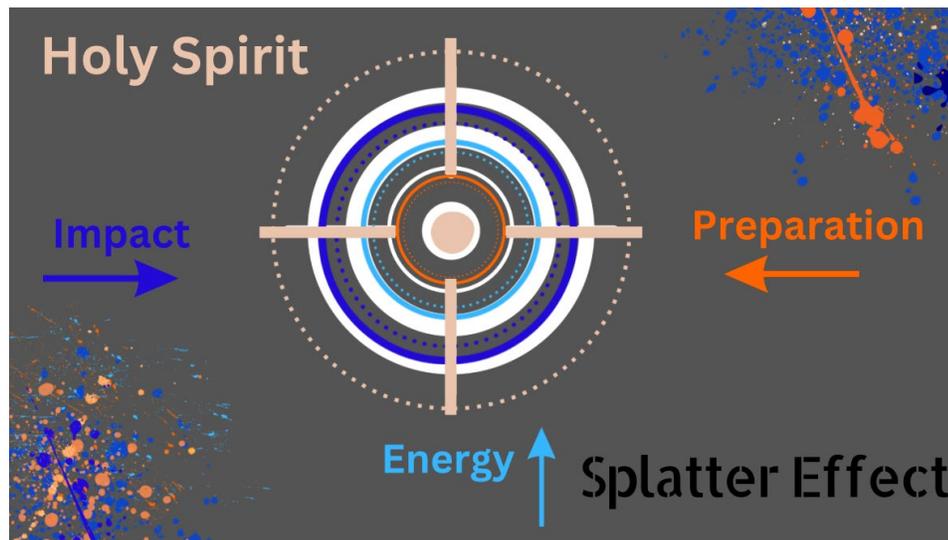
Splatter Effect



Impact

- Create a culture where the Holy Spirit has liberty to touch lives
- Once a life is impacted, they will begin touch other lives
- Family, friends, colleagues, neighbors and others will be impacted.
- Those impacted may impact other lives further.

Splatter Effect

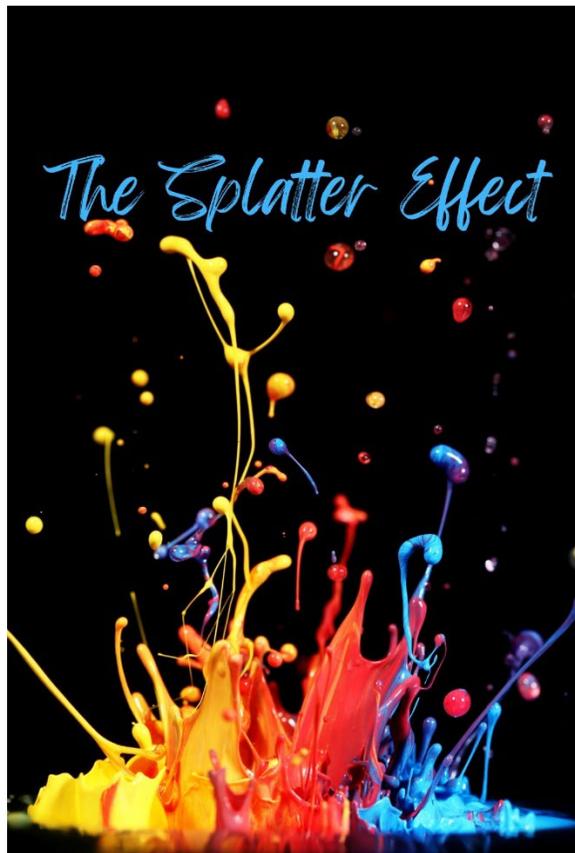


As I began this research, the focus was the ‘target’ audience. Often this is the case when we are trying to accomplish something, be it at church or even outside of the church walls in the secular arena. Our eye is on the very thing we are looking to do. In this case, my target or focus was on ways to effectively reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials. While it is wise to understand who or what you are trying to reach, it should not be the sole focus. I propose that often one’s focus might be in the wrong place.

As mentioned in the above concept, from the beginning until the fulfillment of reaching, retaining, and assimilating Gen Z and Millennials, the eyes of spiritual leaders should be on the Holy Spirit. As we prepare to welcome, keep, and plug in this demographic, we should do so with their—and our—posture leaning toward the Lord.

Systems and protocols should be walked out by ministry leaders that are Spiritually-empowered. Utilizing the effective systems and methodologies mentioned church leaders can then aim to reach, retain, and assimilate Gen Z and Millennials. Once

this happens, the goal is to introduce every individual who walks through our church's doors to Jesus. Once they are impacted by the presence of God, this causes a splatter. The splatter drops that come from the impact are representative of others' lives that too have been touched by the individual initially transformed by God. This is what I call the Splatter Effect.



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Biography

Elicia Hart grew up in Seattle, Washington. Elicia studied Communications/Broadcast Journalism at the University of Washington, where she received her B.A. She obtained her M.A. in Christian Ministry at Oral Roberts University, where she graduated with a 4.0 cumulative GPA garnering a "high honors" distinction.

Elicia is completing her Doctorate of Ministry (DMIN) at Duke University. Her research centers on strengthening national non-denominational churches' capacities for reaching, retaining, and assimilating Generation Z and Millennials. The central pillars of her work examine who Gen Z and Millennials are socially, psychologically, and spiritually and identify strategies that churches nationally are utilizing to reach, retain, and assimilate this demographic effectively. She has used an interdisciplinary approach, engaging pastoral leaders, consultants, and scholars to assist her in developing a model geared toward serving ministry leaders trying to effectively reach, retain and assimilate these two demographics.

In addition to her academic accomplishments, Elicia is an award-winning broadcast journalist, speaker, author, and pastor, along with her husband, James Hart, at Eagles Nest Worship Center in Omaha, Nebraska, a multi-generational, multi-ethnic congregation.

As a television journalist for CNBC, ESPN, and Entertainment Tonight, Elicia traveled the world covering major events for almost two decades. She then combined her broadcast experience with her passion for ministry by hosting Live Your Journey, a television show that ran from 2016-2019 and reached more than 250 million global viewers on TBN Salsa and Faith Broadcasting Network (FBN). In 2018 she published Redefining Red: Turning Your Red-Light Moments into Green-Light Victories (Thomas Nelson/Emanate Books).

Combining her academic endeavors and ministry experience, Elicia speaks at numerous secular conferences and ministry events annually. Her passion is to share the Gospel message worldwide. She has done so in Brazil, Burkina Faso, Sweden, Nepal, the Caribbean, Hong Kong, Latvia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Zimbabwe.

Elicia and Jim are the proud parents of teenage twins Micah and Jemma.