



LOST FAITH

Millenials are less religious than
any previous generation.
What does this mean for the
City of Churches?

BY BETH BEHRENDT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RUTH YARO

For years, the expectation has been simple: You're an adult, you belong to a religion (probably the same one you inherited at birth) and you take your kids to church, just like generations have done before you.

However, Millennials—those born between 1980 and 2000—aren't totally on-board with this traditional practice. According to a recent study by the Pew Research Center "fully one-in-four members of the Millennial generation are unaffiliated with any particular faith." That means Millennials are half as affiliated as Baby Boomers were as young adults.

In fact, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University reports one-third of Millennials raised Catholic (the largest religious group in the U.S.) left Catholicism before reaching adulthood.

Many factors contribute to this. For one, religious exposure during Millennials' formative years has been markedly different from prior generations.

The Pew study reported over a quarter were

LEFT: Emmanuel Lutheran Church on West Jefferson Boulevard.



Music connects Millennials to their faith.

raised by parents who practiced different religions from each other, with another quarter raised by one parent with no religious affiliation. (By comparison, 89 percent of Baby Boomers were raised by parents who both practiced the same religion.)

Jessica Sharpe, 33-year-old mother of two and director of alumni relations at the Canterbury School, was raised in a Christian household and went to church every Sunday. "But I'm not religious now," she said. "Belonging to a church is not a priority."

Alex Waters, a 24-year old technical support specialist at Sweetwater Studios, feels similarly. "I don't belong to a church now, nor do I feel I ever will. My attendance and relationship with anything I consider a higher being is more of a personal endeavor than one celebrated with others."

AVERSIONS TO CHURCH

"Millennials don't want to be told what to do. They want to have

the experience themselves—whether it's work or school or religion—then decide where they'll take that," said St. Michael's Lutheran Church's Missional Pastor Shawn Davis.

Millennials also tend to have strong, and mostly negative, views on religion—in particular the Christian environments in which many were raised. Many find church hypocritical, judgmental and restrictive.

Sharpe, for example, disagrees with the political alignments of many churches. "It seems basic Christian values aren't portrayed at church, and there's a lot of hypocrisy," she said.

Waters, for example, has not found a church he feels "truly doesn't judge any one, a place where each and every member shows love and affection for those in need, without feeling obligated. Religions shun homosexuals for wanting to join congregations instead of welcoming them to worship.

"I do appreciate there being a place where people can feel safe and worship for something greater than themselves," said Waters.

SPIRITUAL DESIRES

Millennials hope for a church to be realistic and accepting, but also engaged in issues in the greater community or world at large.

"This generation has grown up with a knowledge of issues of global and social injustice like no generation before... They look for churches that take action. They are tired of churches that don't walk the walk, or talk the talk," said Sunrise Church's Senior Associate Pastor Mark Hammond.

Tom Hallman, Christian emphasis director for the YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne, observed that engagement in local issues is also a key draw for Millennials, who want to see their city and neighborhoods flourish.

"In Fort Wayne, there are many efforts to attract them to live and work downtown. These economic investments pay close attention to what Millennials want: welcoming places to connect, diverse and inclusive

organizations and opportunities to personally grow and help others. If churches don't also share these as central commitments, Millennials will look elsewhere for communities that nurture purpose and meaning."

Sharpe concurred: "Even though I wouldn't say I'm religious, I believe I'm spiritual. My faith doesn't have to be based on where I attend."

CHURCHES REACT

"There's no doubt that the young unmarried, or the married and childless, are not in the pews," acknowledged Leigh Shaw, director of Christian education at Peace United Church of Christ. And the situation in Fort Wayne mirrors the rest of the country.

"For local Millennials and their participation in local congregations, the data is on track with national trends," said Hallman.

"There's a sense of a missing generation," concurred Shawn Davis, missional pastor at St. Michael's Lutheran Church. So, many churches are revisiting their programming and style

Young congregant attends service.



of worship to appeal to Millennials.

"At Sonrise, I began a Wednesday-night gathering for [young adults] to come join us," said Hammond.

"We discuss topics that are relevant to where they are in life, like career choices, relationship issues, sexuality, temptation, forgiveness, service, identity, how to live out our faith and much more."

Davis described St. Michael's program, called The Bridge, which is mostly targeted internally to young members of the congregation who have not been engaged before. "The

"Are we talking about keeping people in our church? Or are we talking about keeping people with God? The first is a business model; the second is being a pastor. Churches should give up the idea of capturing the Millennial market. You can't evangelize to a demographic. Get back to the idea of ministering to the individual."

Eggold pointed out that churches can't rely on Millennials sticking with a particular church if it isn't meeting their needs. "Millennials are drawn to a place where they can connect with other people. To them, the

are waiting longer to consider getting involved with a church. "In my 20s, church was the last thing on my mind. I stopped going as soon as I went to college. After college, you're so busy trying to earn money and figure out who you are and what you want to do. Then weekends are all about socializing and resting."

Tompkins agreed, "Even though I hadn't gone to church for a while, it felt wrong to me not to go. When we decided to get married and knew we'd have kids, we decided we'd get back to the church. My husband and I hopped around to different churches—'dating' them—to find the one that fit us. We were looking for a church that was open, affirming and welcoming."

Hallman, however, pointed out that parenthood is not necessarily enough. "From my experience, churches with strong children's programs tend to draw Millennials with children. But the attractiveness of these programs does not always overcome the frustration they may have with the church's literal interpretations of the Bible, or its not being inclusive."

FORT WAYNE WORSHIP

Fort Wayne was nicknamed the "City of Churches" in the late 1800s. As primarily European immigrants arrived to support the flourishing industries, the city quickly became the regional stronghold for the Catholic, Lutheran and Episcopal faiths. Today, with over 350 churches in the city, 54 percent of Fort Wayne residents describe themselves as religious. Of these, the majority are Catholic, followed by Lutherans, Baptists and Methodists.

goal isn't to increase the numbers, but to increase their engagement," he said. "We're letting the group develop its own culture and rhythms that are different than a traditional church. We're trying to engage differently with them, to focus on authenticity."

Emmanuel Lutheran Church's Senior Pastor Thomas Eggold suggested that there is much more to be done. "The church doesn't do a great job in its culture or in its programming to be welcoming to singles, because church culture is often mainly geared to families. I can say that we are talking about the Millennial issue, but not very well," he said.

Shaw wondered if churches are even asking the right question. "Is the motivation genuine?" she questioned.

denomination isn't important; the connection is more important than the worship style or theology."

FAMILY MATTERS

Another contributing factor to Millennials lack of involvement with religion is the relative delay in "settling down"—e.g., committing to a career, getting married, having kids—compared to previous generations.

"I get it," said Charlotte Tompkins, a 31-year-old dance instructor and mother. She and her husband have joined a congregation and are committed to raising their daughters in a religious tradition, but she understands why many of her peers

RELIGIOUS TEACHINGS

Local Catholic schools have increased enrollment in recent years due to the availability of vouchers (which supported almost two-thirds of Bishop Luers High School enrollment last year). Whether these educational issues will draw Millennial families to local parishes remains to be seen.

Many Millennial parents are not exposing their kids to traditional religious practice. "We believe our school life is providing good character instruction, and we enrich that with our actions at home," said Sharpe.

Sharpe admits to struggling a bit with what to tell her kids when they have "big" questions, "but I think it's okay for them to understand that you don't always have all the answers."

She accepts not knowing, and would rather admit that than give an answer she doesn't fully believe in. 