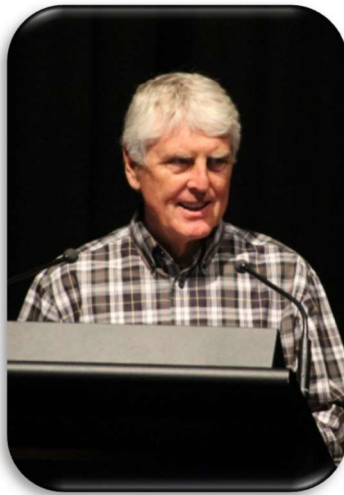


# COMMON DREAMS

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## CONFERENCE PAPER



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**KEYNOTE ADDRESS**

*Where Did All the Millennials Go?*

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### **Where Did All of the Millennials Go?**

This morning I would like to introduce you to a new generation. A generation that you have probably heard of but may know little about it. According to researchers this generation is the largest in the history of the US and other western countries, including Australia. This generation has already had an impact on our countries and will continue to have a greater one in the near future in all Western countries. This is one of the most researched generations in history and they have been called everything from one of the most talented generations that may actually “save our earth,” to the laziest, most narcissistic generation in history. I admit I am in favor of former and I hope you have some sense of this when I am done. I am talking here about the millennials, young people born roughly between 1980 and 2003. In short is a generation that has grown up with computers, cell phones, MySpace, Facebook, You Tube and Harry Potter to name just a few of the things that have culturally impacted them.

But let’s be clear. Millennials is a way of thinking. There are some young people between the ages of 1980 and 2000 who do not match much of the millennial thinking. And there are some people who are on either side of the somewhat arbitrary 1980-2000 numbers who function quite well as a millennial.

I’m not certain why someone as old as I am is trying to explain such a younger generation except that I have spent a lot of time studying and listening to them. I also happen to head up an organization that has three millennials or near millennials working for us. And as a team, we have been looking at the millennials for several years and trying to make recommendations to our member churches. We have been making changes to our website, in part in our attempts to reach this group. And this May, we are planning a **very**

**different kind of event** geared toward the interest of millennials. It will be a festival with speakers, workshops, lots of music, artists and a very spiritual closing. It will be multi-faith with some non-religious teachers. It is a huge gamble but we are trying something different.

So why my interest today in Millennials? I have been wondering why they seem to have no interest in attending our churches, even our progressive ones. We all know that our churches are dying. I used to say slowly dying but I am not certain of that term, “slowly” is appropriate anymore.

Many researchers have concluded that *“Churches are just one of the many institutional casualties of the internet age in which young people are both more globally connected and more locally isolated than ever before.”* (**How We Gather**-Casper ter Kuile and Angie Thurston).

A small fortune has been spent on bringing in consultants to help churches grow with little or no impact. It does not seem to matter if we call it church growth, church renewal, or Healthy Churches.com...while most churches will experience some growth with these consultants, with rare exception, it does not appear to be sustainable growth.

I suspect this information is not a surprise to most, if not all of you. As people who have some interest in keeping the churches or sacred communities together, it seems to me that we have some responsibility to try and figure out how to meet these young people where they are. Let me say this from the start. I do not believe there is anything we can do to coax or bend them to our existing system.

**So let’s first take a look at just a few of the characteristics of this young crowd.**

**A very large group.** I am making the assumption here that millennials are pretty much the same

across the western world. In the US millennials are roughly 75,000 million people strong. In Australia they will comprise 75% of the work force by 2025. That makes them the largest buying generation in history of our countries. Be assured that the marketing companies have figured this out. Have you noticed the TV ads pointed at young people? And in the newspapers?

I quote here from an Australian business blog. This is from one article of several devoted to the millennial conversation.

*Demographic shifts mean the millennial generation, those born between 1980 and 2000, will soon make up the majority of the workforce, so it is to them we should turn for guidance on what future workplaces will look like. Their aspirations, attitudes, demographics and tools will define the 21st century. Business Insider, Australia.*

Millennials have grown up immersed in the digital world – making them one of the **first generations to enter the workforce with a greater grasp of the fundamental technology than their bosses**. They understand its potential and limits and they have been fundamentally shaped by it. How they think, dream, learn, and work is steeped in the language and structures of the internet, as the workplace of the future will also be.

One of our local food markets, part of a large chain, recently went through a major remodeling. And what a change. There are fewer number of selections throughout the store but a great deal more organic and local. The missing items have been replaced by high end foods. They have dedicated one huge area to prepared foods of every imaginable kind, including a huge Sushi bar. In another large section you can buy a variety of food products you put together, steam and in ten minutes actually make something delicious. They serve fresh coffee and/or wine... When I asked the former checkers how she like the changes, she said they were OK but they were obviously designed

for the “younger crowd.”

You can be assured these huge investments were made with serious study by experts who are looking at this very large market.

**They are connected.** This the first generation that is totally connected with friends and family. And how do they stay connected??? With these little computers we all carry around with us. We usually refer to them as phones. One book I read, The Millennials, Connecting to America’s Largest Generation, is co-written by a father and son. Both evangelicals, one a boomer and the son is a millennial. Even though they end up with similar views regarding this generation, it is hilarious how they differ in the ways they use their phones. Of course, the father mentions that his son has to help him update not only their phones but his other electronic equipment on a regular basis. Computer language is the millennials first language.

**An Optimistic Attitude.** One might think that with all of the problems we are leaving them, they might be bitter and angry. This does not seem to be the case. They recognize that earlier generations did screw up and did not do a lot of things that should have been done. But their attitude seems to be, “OK you messed up the planet.” (There is not exactly how they say it.) But they continue, “You have been good parents. We love you...now kindly move out of the way and let us fix this mess!”

I guess there is a sense that they know where we stand, they have confidence that only young people can have and they plan to do something about it...from the start.

**They are Relational.** For one thing their family is important to them. They like to stay in touch, *even* with **Facebook** for their families. I say even because they are past Facebook. They tend to appreciate their parents and still enjoy being with

them. Nearly nine out of ten, in one recent survey, showed that “their parent had a positive influence on them.” They want and recognize they need parental involvement. Unlike Boomers for example, they will go to their parents for advice. A significant number stay at home even into their thirties or until they get married. And sometimes being married does not stop them.

Millennials are relational beyond their immediate families. They seek and nourish healthy relationships at home, at work and beyond. They seek out friends and frequently have get together with them on a regular basis. Yes, they still have Facebook friends but that does not satisfy them. They would rather use Facebook Messaging, Instagram, Snapchat or KIK. They use these various connections to set up times when friends can get together and keep up with the latest. They hate to miss anything.

They tend to love big, playful and spiritual events. The Burning Man, Music Festivals, Ecstatic dance, large camping events and house parties. We will come back to this a little later.

**They are serious about work.** Yes, they want a fair compensation, including reasonable benefits, but there are other things that are more important to them. They want a balance between work and life. They generally do not plan on working 80 hour weeks to get ahead. They have no interests in staying in a job or career for forty years so they can retire and die. Their friends and family are a priority and they want to nourish those relationships. They will take a job with the understanding that nothing is permanent and they expect to have three or four different career changes in their life time. *They want clear expectations of what they are supposed to do and what they are expected to accomplish.* They would prefer to work in teams with a common goal and would like to have some fun. And they would like to know that they are heard. They can generally

smell fake so they would want transparent leaders.

Just as an aside, one of the people I interviewed for this study was a young woman by the name of Amy Hirsh Robinson. She started her company and works with companies to help them understand the Millennial Generation enabling her clients to take advantage of the amazing skills and talents of this generation. She has built a very successful company doing this work.

**Serious about money.** Believe it or not the millennials are thinking about money. Not money to spend on new cars and large homes but money that would allow them to retire. The average age of a millennial is about 25 but they are already thinking about the long term. They have in large part given up on our Social Security system. They have five, ten and fifteen year plans that demonstrates a maturity that seems strange to me when I think of where I was in the same time.

One blogger wrote an article recently called: ***The Stunning Evolution of Millennials.*** He was very excited about their success in raising over a billion dollars in assets in a few months in a company called Wealthfront. Now, I do not profess to understand the system, but this company uses algorithms for making their investments. But I assure you, the millennials understand them. Wealthfront and now several other investment companies plan on capturing somewhere around \$7 trillion of millennials dollars in the next five years, in large part from the millennials.

**Serious about Politics.** According to most pollsters it was the millennials who put Barack Obama over the top in his last election. If you had a TV and were watching the US Democratic Convention or if you followed the political events of our country you know that Bernie Sanders was supported by this growing bloc of millennials.

They worked hard, contributed on a regular basis and believed that they were going to win. They wanted a new kind of political movement. The

night that Bernie Sanders endorsed Hilary, there were dozens of people openly weeping all over that convention center. And I am certain it was happening all over our country. This group came very close to winning and I can assure you that in the next election cycle there may be a different outcome.

Or you might have followed the Occupy Wall Street or the Occupy Movement as it became called as it moved across the country. They were fighting for a more just world, a more fair distributions of resources...they were fighting against the 1% of the country that continue to get 90% of the income.

These were millennials friends and they have not gone away. **Do not see differences.** While there are some significant attitudes, depending on the areas where the millennials live, there is a general consensus among the millennials about sexuality and race. But this generation is all about breaking down barriers. They is a new normal of openness and diversity. They have no idea what the fight is about in our churches, regarding everything from how they dress to sexual identity. This group has never understood the LGBTQ fights that are still going on in our churches. They do not see things like skin color or sexual orientation as anything that should be debated by the church, government or in personal relationships, for that matter. They have no problems with mixed ethnic marriages, if there is a marriage at all. And maybe one of the most important changes has occurred in the workplace. They see no differences in a male or female boss. And as an aside, this has changed the way young men perceive their roles, the way they dress and the way they act.

**And finally, they are spiritual but not religious.** Without a doubt they are the most spiritual group of people we have seen or studied. Almost 90% of them believe in something bigger than them. They read, study and practice everything from meditation to Tai Chi. Much of their music would be consider spiritual as would their dancing. There

is a large national movement doing ecstatic dance. It is a free form of dance that encourages individuals to move to the music, in a form of prayer.

One of the research teams interviewed 1200 millennials across the country. They were surprised to learn how far this young people were from the historic understanding of who and what Jesus was. Although there were nearly 30 percent who claimed to be Christian, the most common response to the question "Is Jesus is important in your life" was:

"I see him as one of the pivotal figures of world history. He was one of the greatest men who ever lived."

When asked, "Do you believe Jesus was more than a man?" The same respondent stated: "No, he was just a man like Mohammed or Abraham Lincoln." As difficult as this was, the evangelical interviewer stated that this response was typical. This has been confirmed by several other researchers.

In other words, they tend to like Jesus and even his teachings but frankly the idea of someone dying 2000 years ago to for their sins is just is not getting any traction with them. They also do not like sitting in a church and listening to someone tell them how to live their lives based on a book that holds no meaning for them. There seems to be a real dislike for the institutional church. The common complaints were things like *irrelevant, tradition bound, too much focus on themselves and terribly boring.*

### **So is there a solution?**

Okay we already know we have a problem. All we have to do is look at our shrinking churches. But can we change the overwhelming falling numbers?

I recently came across an article from a blogger on millennials. The headlines was: **"You want millennials? Drop the announcements!"** If only it

were that simple...although I bet there are a lot of dying churches that would still be doing announcements during the service.

For over twenty years I did consulting work with churches to help them grow their church. There were a lot of consultants around in those days. Sometimes I would lead a three day event. A sponsoring church would invite clergy and leaders from churches in the area. We would usually have over a hundred people show up from ten or twelve churches. Or sometimes I worked intensely with one church.

In one of these cases after our workshop, I was preaching in the church the next day. I asked the pastor how far he would like me to go. He said he had been there for fourteen years. So "Go for it Fred." So I did. It was a pretty good size Episcopal Church in the outskirts of Detroit. I talked about the human Jesus, his teachings and how they could be used for a better world. I talked about the spiritual aspects of this teachings. Along the way I explained that a lot of things about Jesus that scholars no longer believed were necessarily true.

After the service I could not get to the back. There were at least 30 people surrounding me and including one woman who was in her eighties. She was crying. She hugged me hard and kept whispering thank you. Then she then said "Young man, I have been waiting to hear that sermon for over 70 years. Thank you." The rest of the crowd pretty much agreed.

Later when the pastor asked me over lunch what they said, I told him. He responded with, "If they knew what I really believed they would be shocked." But he had been there 14 years but he was afraid to tell his congregation what he believed.

In another situation I was asked if I could come and help a fledging church that had a new pastor. When I told them that they would have to cover

my costs of travel, hotel and incidentals, they said they would get back to me. And they did. They explained that one of their lay people had picked up the tab.

So off I go. I did a Friday night talk and an all-day event Saturday with a lot of enthusiasm. Toward the end of Saturday I was talking about some of the things I had instituted in my former church as examples of things we can change. I explained that we installed a large video screen in the sanctuary. I shared with them a wonderful story how my young Christian ed. director put together a wonderful slide show with our youth group. It was a compilation of music, poetry and art that the kids felt were spiritual.

Suddenly the woman who had paid for my trip said, "The day one of those things goes into our sanctuary is the day I leave."

I have worked with literally hundreds of churches over the last three decades. And I can honestly say that in spite of the wonderful letters and notes that I have received over the years, I do not believe I was able to help any of them in any lasting way. I have talked with hundreds, if not thousands of clergy.

The truth of the matter is our clergy are trapped. With our congregations are getting smaller and smaller they literally cannot make changes without the worry of losing a significant giver or givers. Add to that with, the current leadership, with the control of our denominations, with the built in fear of the individual congregates, with the crap they still teach in most of our seminaries, I don't believe our churches can really change.

I thought, at one point in my life, if young people heard a true, progressive talk about a human Jesus they could relate to, that they might stay. I still get lots of email and Facebook comments from the young people I pastored ten, twenty and thirty years ago. They are all now mostly married, have

families and they frequently let me know how much they appreciate what they learned while attending our church. Many write that they loved their church days and most have wonderful memories. However, I must admit that I am not aware of any one of them who is attending church on any kind of a regular basis today.

**One idea is to make church ready to side with the 99% and take some action.** Joerg Rieger and Kwok Pui-lan have argued in their recent book, *Occupy Religion*, that “the world is facing an unprecedented crisis.” They argue that “while living standards have increased for some, inequality is more pronounced today than ever before and affects more people than ever.” They also deal with the crisis in our environment arguing that it has been pulled into a “life and death struggle.” For these two, the Occupy movement is a testimonial of what the church could be about. While they are careful not to call it a theology of the multitudes, they still call it a theology in the making.

Clearly this kind of approach might be a real attraction to the millennials if a church were sincere about the movement with plans for definitive action. All too frequently, however, these kinds of actions cause splits in the church and these issues end up being the movement of the old activist, while the rest of the church goes through the motions.

### **Is there any hope?**

I think it is safe to say that while this huge group of people, while rejecting conventional religious affiliations, they are not giving up some of their spiritual feelings. In other words, when they say they do not have an interest in a faith community, millennials may mean they are not interested in belonging to an institution with a religious creed as the threshold. There is no doubt they are searching for spirituality and community in some combination. In fact many of them feel they could

not lead a meaningful life without it.

**So where do we go from here???** The first thing we need to do is **listen** to these wonderful young people. Get to know them and listen to their ideas. Listen to what they want and feel they need. It is a fascinating journey. I encourage all of you to do that. Not just a chat but seriously listen to what they are saying. They come from a different world than we do. They speak a different language than most of do. And they have different needs. Frankly they are finding ways on their own to create sacred communities and they are doing a pretty good job of it. Let me give you a few samples. I personally find this fascinating as I traveled the web.

One of the first ones that kept popping up is “**Juniper Path.**” Like **Headspace, Global Spiritual life, Search Inside Yourself**, Juniper Path brings the tradition of meditation to modern day life. “*It focuses on the rigor of ancient practices in new cultural packaging. It is committed to providing the wisdom and experience of a long-standing meditation tradition in secular form, tailored to contemporary culture, knowledge, sensibility, and psychology.*” It is designed for people to meet in small groups but also to follow the teachings and suggestions from their website. Its primary goals are for transformation and accountability.

One of their participants, Lawrence Levy, states: “*We need a path-spiritual teachings, a spiritual way of life that is not an affront to what we’re learning in science and to our norms like gender equality. It has to blend with who we are because this is a path to make us the very best that we can be in our world-right here where we are sitting.*”

One of the more interesting ones for me is something called **The Dinner Party**. The Dinner Party is a young community gathering of 20-30 young people who have experienced a significant loss. There are others like it, **Good People Dinners, Deliberate life, Civil Conversations Project** but

this one seems to be better organized. It is following the Alcoholics Anonymous model in many ways and it is having positive impact on lives. These gatherings bring people together for conversation that tend to be more intimate and personal than every day chit chat. They take on subjects like death, racism, and loneliness that ensures that connections are made more quickly and participant have the experience of being seen, truly seen. Some of their groups are identify as Christian. These folks make the dinner explicitly sacred utilizing communion bread and wine. Other groups are encouraged to bring a level of spirituality into thegatherings.

**CTZNWELL**, like **The Feast**, **Kunto** and **Off the Matt**, is attempting change the world from the inside out by mobilizing the well-being industry. Their main function is to increase the interest in the practice of personal transformation through meditation, the participant connects the dots between these practices and the politics of social and environment well-being.

From their webste: *We engage in deep transformational work around our values; and are led through relationship to issues like access to healthcare, food justice, living wage, climate change and education. From there, we partner with campaigns led by the people most directly affected and respond in conscious and creative disruption and reimagination of our world. We aspire to move and unify our community at a scale that will have an impact at a systemic and global level.*

And finally, one of the closet things to church is something called **The Sanctuaries**. Like **Sunday Assembly**, and **Bodi Spiritual Center**, the Sanctuaries is a diverse arts community with a soul in Washington, D.C. It goal is to bring together a multi- racial and multi-spiritual community of “citizen artists.” Events like **Soul Slams** and **Community Huddles** allow people of diverse

spiritual and artistic backgrounds to share their perspectives, do creative projects and engage in honest conversations. They develop creative skills to do social justice in the city and foster partnerships with other organizations.

Like other new communities they are building on the assumption of diverse spiritual and non-spiritual expressions. Besides the Huddles and other activities, they meet in large groups on Sunday morning. They assume a spectrum of spiritual and religious inclination and build from there, with a loyalty to fostering spiritual growth but not necessarily to a church like community format. They are primarily run by volunteers but they do have at least one ordained pastor leading services. There stated goals are personal transformation, community and social transformation.

*“I definitely appreciate the love that I get from everybody-from all walks of life. To just be able to come and be themselves and genuine. The Sanctuaries allows people to open up and there’s no other place where people could do it, just given how life has become. Everything is hustle and grind, no time, no money, and stress. The Sanctuaries is a safe place that I can go to and share what I do, creatively.”*

I could go on for hours but I think you have the idea. There are literally hundreds if not thousands of the groups like these, specifically designed for millennials, (although my guess is that most of us would be welcomed if we showed up.) All of the ones I featured today have extensive, welcoming websites and with few exceptions, they are designed to be recreated in another physical area. They may even offer programs that you can do at home. I thought of my national denominational offices that continue to make drastic cuts, and reductions of employees and wondered what they think of this shift.

I do not think we have to worry about the



millennials coming to our churches. It seems clear they have made a decision and it is one most of us should have seen coming. I would love it if more people, like the one young woman I quoted, could explain why she thinks Jesus was one of the most important person in history. But frankly that is more of an idle question of a former minister and someone who has studied that one subject for over fifty years. Her response would be for me not the young lady.

Friends, let's face it. People will always want to be together in some form of meaningful gathering. They may not call it sacred but they will want ritual, community and some belief in a something special. Maybe we can have some influence on how they do that.

**Angie Thurston and Casper ter Kuile in the closing pages of their extensive article write:**

*We would hope these organizations and the hundreds like them, would see themselves as part of a broader cultural shift toward a deeper community. By consciously coming together, we wish for them to form the DNA of a fruitful movement for personal growth and social transformation. We suspect that something will fill the opening left by faith institutions and wish for it to be a network of organizations that meet millennials with love, depth and rigor.*

I hope you embrace this new group. Sit down a talk to them and listen to them. Go to one of their festivals. Let them talk about their dreams and hopes for the future. But most of all love them. They have a tough road ahead of them.

You might be surprised.