

From the Pastor's Desk

Dear Friends in Christ,

I meet with millennials often in my work as a priest and as a pastor. I have coffee with them. I have a meal with them. I really enjoy getting with young adults. They are full of life and they are searching for answers just like the rest of us.

I was having coffee with a millennial the other day (millennials, by the way, are those born in the late 80s to 2000 or so, so it's rather a wide-open term for those who have followed what used to be referred to as Generation X). The young man and I had a nice conversation, talking about many different things. A young man or woman doesn't always want to talk religion but sometimes about life in general. I guess I am a person they can bounce things off of and get advice from in their life journeys. So over coffees or meals or just sitting in my office, I have a lot of excellent, intelligent and profound conversations with these amazing adults.

What are millennials looking for? What are they seeking?

Well, in the end, they are looking for and seeking the very same things we older adults are looking for and seeking: answers to the mysteries of life, who God is in their lives, what their Roman Catholic Faith means in this very secular world, how they fit into the puzzle of living.

Jonathan Aigner, who writes a blog for evangelicals, says that a decade ago, he and his wife were a young newlywed couple in the process of launching their adult lives. They had started out as Baptists and then Methodists and then as they travelled through college and grad school, they began shopping through the denominational "delicatessen" of their big city.

One Sunday they were intrigued by a Presbyterian Church, drawn by the "rad mid-century mod architecture and freeway-convenient urban setting," and went in. Inside, they noticed some other millennials, but most of the parishioners were older. The older parishioners looked at the couple when they entered and the whispers came from both sides of the church. After the service, the couple was met with sales pitch after sales pitch: Can you join our choir? Come to our Bible Study! Join us for the lunch social after food pantry shift!

The couple understood that these good folks loved their church and longed to have this young couple help them raise their church from its ashes.

In a real way, these good people were, as the author notes, "bowing at our altar," the altar of the millennials.

It seems everyone these days has an opinion on what a church needs to do to engage the "coveted" millennial generation and their families: create a cool website, serve good coffee, preach self-help courses masquerading as a topical sermon series, expand your connections ministry, make church more convenient, have "cool worship" music, make sure the kids have fun, fun, fun, even though we are making precious few of those little ones.

It's a church marketing trend I do not buy into at all. In my conversations with young adults, I find them searching, sometimes frustrated that their fellow millennials aren't going to church. But they come to worship and I tell them that is enough. They must take care of their own spirituality and encourage their friends and family members to do the same.

As an observer of culture over almost 30 years as a priest, and watching other churches – even Roman Catholic – trying to be "relevant," whatever that is, I join the voice of Mr. Aigner: "Stop!"

Stop all of it. Stop trying. Stop marketing. Stop targeting.

Do you mean we are to stop evangelizing? Do you want us to close up for good? Don't we have to reach these young people before it is too late? Shouldn't we have cool worship services?

Mr. Aigner says absolutely not, and I agree with him. He is not telling us to stop evangelizing. I meet with young adults all the time. I've got coffee stains on my teeth to prove it and I enjoy meeting with them!

But look around, he says. "There's a big box Wal-Church in almost every town now, at least a McCongregation dedicated to making Jesus easy again. They pride themselves on it, actually.

They have something for everyone, at least everyone who matters. Especially the ubiquitous 50-something young adult pastor with skinny jeans, a dad bod, and that unmistakable Just for Men hue in his sideburns who desperately wants us to believe he's a hipster." This goes on in Farmington. I have heard the horror stories!

Those churches all claim they're reaching the millennials, or at least making an attempt. But studies show they simply aren't. With all the strategies, all the initiatives, all the campaigns, millennials are still leaving the church, and faster than ever before.

In speaking to millennials, I'll let you in on a little secret: they can't stand churches like that. Young adults don't want to be looked on as a commodity or as a special interest group. Millennials are not some special interest group that has left the Church because they didn't get their way. So let us not be like jilted lovers, wanting answers. Instead, we as the Church, must understand that millennials are not some unique species. They are, in the end, us. They, like the rest of us, need Jesus. They, like us, need the Gospel message.

The Church is most authentic when we live our mission in the hope of Christ, that hope which overthrows evil regimes and sets captives free. We as Church must put our confidence, all of us – millennials and the rest of us – in the absolute knowledge that Christ's work is finished, that the Church's mission from age-to-age, generation-to-generation, doesn't change.

Let us all worship together as if our lives depended on it. Invite these wonderful young adults to join us, not as honored guests, not as a coveted demographic, but as brothers and sister. Let us feast on God's Word and let us dine at Christ's table. Teach our young adults the drama of the Church calendar, the discipline of the Mass, and the joy of our ancient melodies. Many millennials are trying to follow Jesus on their own and it is tough. It just isn't working.

Following Jesus is a scary prospect, Mr. Aigner reminds us all. It is a costly endeavor, a daunting task. That's where our Church comes in. These young adults need us, just like their parents did, just like your own children and grandchildren will, too. We need to be a community of faith that reminds us who we are and Whose story we live out.

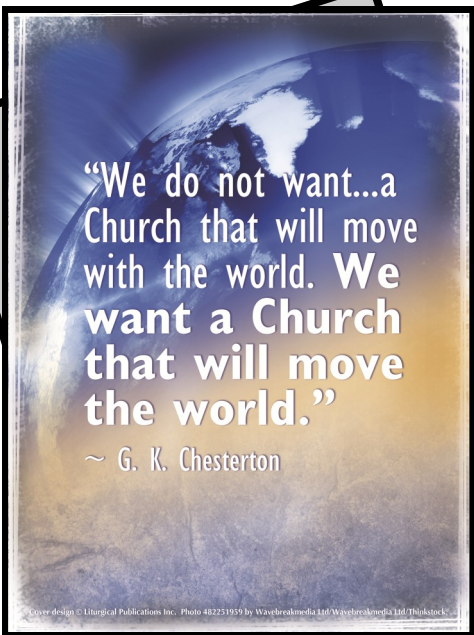
Now I can't promise that the millennials will come flooding back through our doors and sink into our pews. There is no silver bullet. But it is the start of a necessary process.

I have never been one for being "relevant." I'm just me and you are just you and I think that is why our Masses are very full. We are who we are. This is the real Church, not some community trying to be "relevant." Look around town at those who are trying to be relevant. "Father, they have car shows. Father they sell sandwiches and coffee during services. Father, they have a rock band." Well, guess what? We are Church and we are truly relevant because we are Christ's. That is enough. So no car shows, no sandwiches and coffee during Mass, no rock bands. . . are needed.

I find those whom we call millennials, these great young men and women, to be thoughtful and wanting that which is real. They grope their way through the darkness like the rest of us. And the Light is here in this Church for me and you and them. We must choose wisely.

I will continue to have coffee with these young men and women who seek the truth like me and you. I will have a lunch or dinner with them and talk and laugh and hear their heartaches and hopes. And like Jesus, I will do this one person at a time, never panicking, never buying into some new program. No, the Church of 2,000 years, the Church founded by Christ, is enough. It's time to be uncool, it's time to be our beautiful selves. It's time to be the Church.

Sincerely in Christ,
Rev. Tim Farrell,
Pastor



"We do not want...a Church that will move with the world. We want a Church that will move the world."

~ G. K. Chesterton