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EMERGING ADULTS AND THE AMERICAN CHURCH: HOW BRECKSVILLE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH CAN RECAPTURE THE ATTENTION OF 18--29 YEAR OLDS

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EMERGING ADULTS AND THE AMERICAN CHURCH:
HOW BRECKSVILLE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH CAN RECAPTURE THE
ATTENTION OF 18-29 YEAR OLDS

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By

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For millennia, Christian churches have served as the cornerstone of communities, and have provided guidance and belonging for countless individuals. They have influenced people of all ages, races, and nations. However, today's American church faces a missing population – emerging adults. The goal of this essay is to identify this absent population and the core reasons for their absence, present leading experts' opinions on how to reverse this absence, and then apply this knowledge to a specific case study. Ultimately, churches must approach the absence of emerging adults both proactively and reactively, through 1) full congregational support, 2) intentional youth programming designed to develop mature faith among teens, and 3) an accepting, deep, and relevant young adult ministry program.

Part I: Characteristics of Emerging Adults

Before we begin, several key terms must be defined. The first is "church." Throughout the course of this essay, multiple Christian denominations will be considered, but the overarching "church" is to be understood as the universal Christian community of believers. When relevant, statistics and themes will be addressed specifically to the Mormon church, Black Protestant church, Conservative Protestant church, Mainline Protestant church, and/or Catholic church. However, without specific identification and notification, data should be applied to the more general understanding of the universal church. As we will discover, not all themes and beliefs about the "church" pertain to all denominations (anti-science, anti-homosexuality, etc.), but interview respondents were asked to respond to their

understanding of Christian churches in general, and so we must take their responses as overarching, non-denominational themes. In the final section of this essay, which applies the theoretical framework to a specific, concrete case study, this understanding of "church" will remain the same, while the specific church will either be referred to by its name, Brecksville United Methodist Church, or by "the congregation."

We must also take the time to define the population under discussion. Surely the conversation would look quite different if discussing Christians across every age group, only older adults, or only young children. However, for the purpose of this essay, we will focus our attention on a group commonly referred to as "emerging adults." Other common names for this cohort include "extended adolescence," "young adulthood," and "twenty-somethings."[1] While there is no set age range for emerging adulthood, researchers typically focus on individuals between the ages of 18 and 29. Specific studies, however, may focus on either the younger or older half of this range.[2] Throughout the course of this essay, data will be examined from numerous studies involving varying age ranges; for simplicity's sake, we will apply general trends and ultimate suggestions to the entire range of emerging adults.

Not only is it important to define the specific age/developmental period of our population, it is also crucial to identify the particular culture at hand. For the remainder of this essay, emerging adults (and their beliefs, trends, and data) will be

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[1] Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6.

[2] Ibid, 6.

[3] Ibid, 6.

[4] Ibid.

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discussed solely in regards to the American church. Emerging adults in America

experience and are influenced by many distinctive cultural beliefs, traditions,

expectations, and experiences. It would simply be inaccurate to apply these

American-based research findings to similarly aged individuals in other cultures.

Thus, we will focus our attention solely on the emerging adult population found

within the United States.

Emerging Adults: Social Factors

What differentiates emerging adults? What sets them apart from other

generations, and what has molded them to become this way? Why are they called

"emerging adults," a term that implies they are not quite adults but no longer

children? In his book, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of

Emerging Adults*, Christian Smith identifies four major social transformations that

"have helped dramatically to alter the experience of American life between the ages

of 18 and 30."[3] The first of these transformations is the exponential growth of higher

education. Smith attributes this sharp spike in part to the GI Bill, changes in the

American economy, and government subsidizing of student loans.[4] As more and

more students have prolonged their educational careers, the second major

transformation has begun – the delay of marriage. Over the last 60 years, the

average age of first marriage for women rose over 5 years (from 20.3 to 25.9 years

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[3] Ibid, 6.

[4] Ibid.

old), and the men's average rose almost the same amount (22.8 to 27.5 years old).[5]

As Smith points out, "Many youth today face almost a decade between high school graduation and marriage to spend exploring life's many options as singles, in unprecedented freedom."[6] This delay of marriage and having children has undoubtedly influenced the developmental trajectory of many emerging adults, creating a never-before seen period between adolescence and adulthood. Could this new period of prolonged exploration and self-discovery be negatively impacting faith development and/or religious commitment?

The third social transformation is the change in domestic and international economies. High school and college graduates are no longer able to count on a stable, lifelong career, unlike what was typical for their parents and grandparents. Emerging adults are now faced with more frequent job changes, an unstable economy, and an ongoing need for training and continuing education.[7] In other words, emerging adults approach careers, and other life events, with a general psychological orientation toward maximizing options and delaying or avoiding commitments. This overarching tendency to avoid commitment may very well play a role in the difficulty many emerging adults have with religious commitment or identity.

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[5] Ibid, 5.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid, 5.

And finally, emerging adulthood is shaped by the increasing willingness of parents to help support their "twenty-something" children financially.[8] Unstable careers, declining economies, extensive education (and the associated debt), and delayed marriage contribute to this social shift. While still dependent on their parents, many emerging adults find it difficult to establish themselves as adults, and choose to enjoy the comforts of parental support rather than struggle through low incomes and high expenses. As a result of these four social transformations, adulthood – the end of schooling, a stable job, financial independence, and new family formation – is achieved later and later in life.[9] As we will come to realize, these cultural shifts play an important role in the religious and faith development of emerging adults.

These four social changes are not the only cultural factors that influence the spiritual lives of emerging adults. Members of this developmental period are also characterized by many other themes that are important to identify at this time. The most prominent theme of emerging adulthood is a sense of transition. Transitioning from school to work, from one physical location to another, and from long-held childhood friends to personally selected social groups are just a few of the changes taking place during this time.[10] Some various other themes typically experienced by emerging adults include improving relationships with family members, having little to no money, having no regrets, recognizing the difference between right and wrong,

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid, 34.

accepting people's differences, emphasizing individuality and individual rights, being uncertain of one's purpose, hooking up/casual dating, living with significant others before marriage, and viewing the act of settling down as something to be done later in life.[11] While many of these themes do not appear to have a direct correlation with the spiritual or religious lives of emerging adults, they do provide important background knowledge on why many emerging adults struggle to commit to a particular religious affiliation.

Emerging Adults: Religious and Spiritual Beliefs

Now that we have a general understanding of emerging adulthood and the cultural influences and themes of this developmental period, let us move on to examine the religious and spiritual beliefs held by this population. A brief overview of the data collected by the General Social Surveys (GSS) between 1990 and 2006 found that emerging adults are considerably less religious than older adults in terms of frequency of prayer, church affiliation, religious service attendance, and religious identity.[12] However, other religious measures paint a colorfully different picture. When considering belief in life after death, a literal understanding of the Bible as the Word of God, or self-identification as a religious liberal, emerging adults appear almost identical to other age groups.[13] Furthermore, "today's emerging adults are hardly different at all from those of prior decades when it comes to daily prayer,

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[11] Ibid, 41-64.

[12] Ibid, 89.

[13] Ibid.

Bible beliefs, and strong religious affiliation."[14] So what is causing the recent and growing concern among many church leaders and devoted Christians about the apparent mass exodus of young adults from churches? What has sparked the countless conversations centered on "the rise of the nones" – that is, the seemingly drastic increase in survey participants answering "none" when asked what religion they practice?

Individuals concerned with this phenomenon commonly become concerned in response to particular data. Research shows that Conservative Protestants, Mormons, and Black Protestants are less likely to fall into the "none" category, but that Mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations are dealing with a serious decline in emerging adult participation.[15] In one longitudinal study, teenagers (ages 13-17) were asked to classify themselves according to religious denomination. Teenagers who identified as Protestant (not specifically Conservative, Mainline, or Black) or Catholic showed the highest rates of change just 5 years later. 7% of Protestant teenagers ultimately classified themselves as "Not Religious", while 6% of Catholic teenagers made the same change.[16] The next highest percentage change was only 0.4%, seen among Jewish emerging adults. Meanwhile, the Not Religious category grew an incredible 13% over the course of those 5 years.[17] In a self-reported study, Conservative Protestant churches retained 64% of their emerging

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[14] Ibid, 95.

[15] Ibid, 91.

[16] Ibid, 104.

[17] Ibid.

adults, while 15% of teenagers in this category moved to the Not Religious identification as they transitioned into emerging adulthood. Mainline Protestants retained only 50%, while losing 24% to Not Religious. Black Protestants retained 55% and lost 11% to Not Religious, while Catholics retained 66% and lost 20%.[18] These statistics show that Mainline Protestant churches have both the lowest retention rates and the highest losses to the Not Religious category. Beyond simple self-identification, we must also examine the religious practices of this population. Between adolescence and emerging adulthood, there is a 22.4% decrease in weekly or more than once a week religious service attendance. There is a 9.4% increase in responses categorizing faith as not very important or not at all important in daily life, and there is a 6.5% increase in individuals answering "no" or "don't know/unsure" to whether or not they believe in God.[19]

Other data indicate declines in even more aspects between teenage and emerging adult years. Declines are seen in the importance of religious faith shaping daily life, degree of interest in learning about religion, religious service attendance, daily prayer, recognizing a weekly Sabbath, participating in religious choirs or music groups, attending a religious education class, and others.[20] Mainline Protestants are significantly more likely than the average to believe that Jesus was not the Son of God, but rather just an important teacher and humanitarian.[21] Only 17% of Mainline

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[18] Ibid, 109.

[19] Ibid, 112.

[20] Ibid, 114-116.

[21] Ibid, 121.

Protestants reported participating in a religious mission trip or service project, and only 32% of that same group reporting having made a commitment to live for God.[22] These statistics show that, regardless of historical tendencies, the current emerging adult population in America is increasingly less religious than they were during childhood and adolescence and hold religion as less important to their daily lives than before.

Beyond the statistics, there are also several important themes that emerged through extensive interviews with emerging adults. First, these interviews revealed that many emerging adults do not view religion as a threatening topic of conversation. While many previous generations may have considered religion to be a private, potentially controversial, or not politically correct topic, emerging adults are more than willing to discuss their religious and spiritual beliefs. However, this is not a result of immense comfort or extensive knowledge on the topic. Rather, emerging adults are comfortable discussing religion with others because of their lack of investment. Religion is not a personal-enough topic to cause discomfort or avoidance, and thus poses no threat of disagreement or conflict.[23] The second theme is that the shared central principles of all religions are good. Emerging adults typically do not differentiate between various religious traditions, but see them in terms of their shared morals and teachings. It matters less what religious tradition one follows, and more what morals and principles he/she holds.[24] Lastly, and on a

[22] Ibid, 126.

[23] Ibid, 144.

[24] Ibid, 145.

related note, emerging adults tend to view religious particularities as not as important as general teachings. The differences in tradition and practice between Christian denominations are far less important than the foundational Christian beliefs and teachings.[25] These themes show that emerging adults are not as concerned with the particular religious or denominational traditions as they are with the general moral teachings, and that they lack much personal investment in their own religious beliefs and convictions.

Part II: A Missing Generation

It is important to begin this section with a disclaimer and a distinction. While I present specific reasons for a decrease in religious affiliation (particularly a decrease in Christian affiliation), these reasons are a general summary of data collected through surveys and interviews, and are not comprehensive or universal in nature. Each individual possesses a particular, case-specific set of reasons for his or her decision to identify as a religious none, and those interested in studying these findings must be conscious of this inability to generalize any particular reason or set of reasons to one individual. Matters of faith, as with many other aspects of life, must be approached on a case-by-case basis. Unfortunately, for the purposes of our research and analysis, we must use these trends and generalized themes as best we can. We must also define the distinction between disaffiliated and unaffiliated individuals. When discussing religious nones, disaffiliated individuals should be

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[25] Ibid, 148.

understood as those who previously identified as Christian but no longer do.

Meanwhile, the term unaffiliated is to be understood more generally, as those who

simply do not currently belong or identify with a particular religious community.

With this in mind, let us begin to examine the general answers to these important

questions: are today's emerging adults actually more absent in the church than

previous generations of 18-29 year olds? If yes, why? What are emerging adults

identifying as their reasons for leaving or avoiding the Christian church? For those

raised in a church community, what experiences or beliefs might make them more

likely to disaffiliate than others?

Increasing Trends

It is important that we begin with the most basic of these questions before we

continue. Are emerging adults actually less religiously affiliated than other

generations? In his essay, "The Rise of the 'Nones': Does Education Explain the

Decline in Religious Affiliation?" Victor Sensenig argues that "each generation since

the Greatest Generation (born from 1913-1927) has lower rates of religious

affiliation than the previous generation."[26] As can be clearly seen in the figure below,

the percentage of each generation that is religiously unaffiliated has steadily

increased from generation to generation.[27]

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[26] Victor Sensenig, "The Rise of the 'Nones': Does Education Explain the Decline in Religious Affiliation," *American Journal of Education* (2012): 335-340.

[27] Ibid, 335.
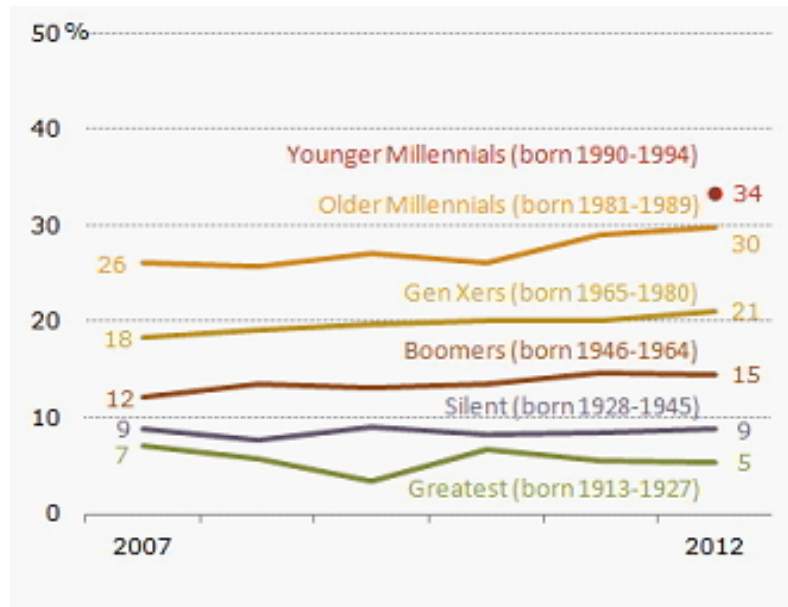
According to this data, collected by the Pew Forum in 2012, it seems a valid
conclusion that millennial emerging adults are considerably less religiously
affiliated than older generations. Furthermore, research shows a 43% decrease in
religious participation between teenage years and emerging adulthood.[28] This
means that not only are emerging adults less affiliated than previous generations,
but that they are also less likely to be affiliated as emerging adults than they were,
themselves, as teenagers. While it is important to note that these statistics only
capture the level of self-reported religious affiliation and participation among
individuals, they provide sufficient evidence (along with the previous statistics in
Part I) that millennials are, in fact, less religiously affiliated than any other
generation and are less religiously active than they were earlier in life.

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[28] David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011), 22.

Six Dominant Themes

Now that we've determined that yes, there is an abnormal absence of emerging adults in the church, we must consider some of the reasons for this absence. David Kinnaman, President of the Barna Group, summarizes the six most common themes found throughout his research in his book, *You Lost Me.* These themes generalize the reasons emerging adults most typically give for leaving or avoiding the church. These six themes were uncovered through the analysis of hundreds of generational studies, consultations with experts, academics, pastors, and parents, as well as hundreds of thousands of interviews conducted over a 27-year span, including nearly 5,000 new interviews specifically conducted for this project. Along with *You Lost Me,* this research generated eight new scientific national studies. As Kinnaman explains, "Our research has been tailored to understand eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds, asking them to describe their experience of church and faith, what has pushed them away, and what connective tissue remains between them and Christianity."[29] Ultimately, this research showed that, in general, emerging adults find the church to be overprotective, shallow, against science, repressive, exclusive, and hostile toward doubt and questions.[30] In the following paragraphs, each of these six themes will be explored, in hopes to set the stage for the ultimate question – what can we (universally and specifically at the Brecksville United Methodist Church) do about it? Before we can offer solutions, however, we must have a better idea of those very things we need to address.

[29] Ibid, 21.

[30] Ibid, 92.

The first belief that many disaffiliated emerging adults hold is that the church is *overprotective*. Criticisms within this theme include that the church demonizes everything in the secular world and that Christians hate or fear secular culture (media, movies, music, etc.).[31] Many emerging adults feel that the church tries too hard to shelter its followers from all things non-Christian, and that it fails to adequately deal with the complexity and reality of the world.[32] In a survey of 1,296 emerging adults, conducted by the Barna Group in 2011, 23% of respondents marked "completely or mostly true of me" when asked if they believed that Christians demonize everything outside of the church, while 22% gave the same response when asked if the church ignores the problems of the real world.[33] Given these statistics, it is no wonder why so many emerging adults feel the desire to leave or ignore such an organization. Why would they continue to participate in something they find to be so at odds with their daily realities?

The second theme is that the Christian faith is *shallow.* Kinnaman describes this best when he writes, "Easy platitudes, proof texting, and formulaic slogans have anesthetized many young adults, leaving them with no idea of the gravity and power of following Christ."[34] Over 30% of 18- to 29-year olds who were raised in a Christian church feel that church is boring, and almost a quarter of these same emerging adults believe that their church does not prepare them for real life or help

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[31] Ibid, 96.

[32] Ibid, 98.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid, 92.

them find their purpose.[35] The vast majority of young people cannot recall having a meaningful friendship with an adult in their church, and less than a quarter report any experience of serving the poor through their church.[36] Even more concerning, only 28% of both Catholic and Protestant Christian youth report learning about how Christians can positively contribute to greater society.[37] While these statistics may partially reflect the influences of youth and secular culture on faith development, churches also hold responsibility when it comes to developing deep, meaningful faith among its members.

There are several other trends commonly seen among churches, and particularly in youth programs, that contribute to this development of shallow faith. These include 1) a mass production approach, in which individual's needs and questions are not addressed or are addressed through formulaic responses, 2) missing rituals, or rituals that fail to convey the deeper meaning and importance to the younger participants, 3) a lack of expectation, on behalf of both church leadership and parents, which gives youth the option to choose non-commitment, and 4) a mentality that quantity is more important than quality, particularly in regards to youth ministry attendance numbers.[38] These statistics and trends show that, despite the undoubted influence of secular culture, the church has also significantly contributed to the view of a shallow Christian church. By failing to offer

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[35] Ibid, 116.

[36] Ibid, 119.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid, 124.

their youth many important aspects of a rich, deep Christian experience, the church portrays itself as a shallow congregation of rootless, superficial individuals. Furthermore, by using a conveyer-belt approach to discipleship and failing to set expectations or offer explanations to youth, the church sets itself up for a population of adults with "inch-deep, mile-wide faith."[39]

A third theme consistently reported by emerging adults is that the church is *anti-sciencе.* This problem is most succinctly defined by one emerging adult, Mike, who said, "To be honest, I think that learning about science was the straw that broke the camel's back. I knew from church that I couldn't believe in both science and God, so that was it. I didn't believe in God anymore."[40] Mike describes the conflict that emerging adults face every day – can Christians believe in science, and can scientists be Christians? While this anti-science stance is certainly not true of many churches and denominations, emerging adults may inaccurately universalize this theme across all denominations. A quarter of emerging adults report that they find Christianity to be anti-science, and 35% report that Christians are too confident that they know all the answers.[41] Many churches' lack of preparation to handle daily scientific advances, as well as the centuries-old feud between science and religion, have placed the church in a difficult position, with some congregations scrambling to reconcile science and scripture and others standing firm in their defense of traditional interpretations. Unfortunately, these statistics and quotes show that

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[39] Ibid, 121.

[40] Ibid, 131.

[41] Ibid, 137.

many emerging adults still feel a pressure from the church to prioritize faith over

scientific fact, which rarely ends in favor of the faith.

Yet another reason many emerging adults give for their disinterest in the

church is that they believe the church to be *repressive.* Particularly, they feel that the

church represses their sexuality. The biggest disconnect is the difference between a

traditionalist view of sexuality and an individualist view. Many emerging adults

believe the church still holds a traditionalist view on sexuality, in which sex and

sexuality are taboo topics that should never be discussed in public, let alone in

church.[42] For traditionalists, sexuality is shameful, even within marriage. The Barna

Group interviewed 562 emerging adults with Catholic backgrounds, and found that

40% of this sample believed the Catholic church's teaching on sexuality and birth

control to be out of date.[43] In today's culture, sexuality is viewed through an

individualistic lens. Sex is about personal satisfaction and is characterized by

freedom and self-expression, not shame.[44] Many emerging adults value this

individualistic approach, and feel that the church either represses this individual

freedom or judges them for their sexuality.[45] As sexuality is so intrinsic to human

nature, many emerging adults find this disconnect between church and their

experienced reality to be reason enough to distance themselves from the repressive

institution.

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[42] Ibid, 154.

[43] Ibid, 153.

[44] Ibid, 155.

[45] Ibid, 153.

A fifth theme commonly heard among emerging adults is that the church is too *exclusive*. There is a general perception that the church is like a country club, with a very clear delineation between who is in and who is out. Many emerging adults feel pressure from the church to have exclusively Christian friends and to close the door on those who are not already within the church.[46] As a generation, emerging adults value individuality, inclusivity, and tolerance, arguably more than any other generation ever has. They have much broader access to various theological and religious traditions than previous generations, and have established a culture for themselves based on acceptance and finding common ground with others.[47] Such a culture stands in stark contrast to traditional church practice, which, throughout history, has tended to focus more on differences between Christians and non-Christians. Thus, yet another rift is formed.

And finally, the last theme presented by Kinnaman is the overarching feeling that the church is *doubtless*. By this, he suggests that many emerging adults are unable to find room for their questions and doubts within the church. An astonishing 36% of 18- to 29-year olds from Christian backgrounds reported "completely or mostly true of me" to the statement, "I don't feel that I can ask my most pressing life questions in church," while 21% agreed that "I am a Christian, but the institutional church is a difficult place for me to live out my faith."[48] Without the opportunity to ask questions pertinent to their own lives, emerging adults are

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[46] Ibid, 171.

[47] Ibid, 174.

[48] Ibid, 190.

leaving the church in search of a place that welcomes their doubts, encourages honest discussion, and seems willing to reconsider traditions in light of the 21st century. Unfortunately, in the eyes of many emerging adults, the church consistently fails to provide such a space, and too often responds to questions and doubts with centuries-old answers. In light of these opinions, it is no surprise that many young Christians are leaving or avoiding the church in search of something/somewhere/someone more ready to discuss their doubts.

While Kinnaman presents six separate themes, they can be condensed even further. After examining the underlying arguments presented in each theme, they can be categorized into three issues: that the church is irrelevant, shallow, and exclusive. The first and third themes (as presented above) comprise the category of irrelevance. When emerging adults view the church as overprotective and anti-science, they're speaking to the sense that the church is irrelevant in today's world. They understand the church to be withdrawn from both the problems and the realities of the everyday world, and fail to understand how such a withdrawn institution can hold any relevance in their own lives. The second category is shallowness. While this is one of Kinnaman's six themes, it also encompasses the idea that the church is doubtless. By discouraging the questions and doubts of its members, the church prevents believers from developing deep and meaningful faith. This perceived prohibition of questions and doubts leads many emerging adults to view the church not only as doubtless, but ultimately as shallow and flimsy. And finally, the third issue at hand is that of exclusivity. Again, this issue is one of Kinnaman's six, but it can easily include the "repressive" theme as well. Emerging

adults view the repressive tendencies of the church as yet another form of exclusion,

aimed specifically at sexuality. However, exclusivity can focus on socioeconomic

status, faith background, race or ethnicity, marriage status, or countless other

categories beyond sexuality. By recognizing the overlap among Kinnaman's six

themes, we are able to condense these themes into three overarching issues. As we

will see, a successful plan to encourage emerging adult participation and affiliation

within churches must address all three of these issues.

<p style="text-align:center">Non-Religious Influencers</p>

Along with these general themes, researchers have recently begun to explore

other, more external reasons for the increase in unaffiliation. While most of the

research conducted up to this point has focused on the self-reported claims of

emerging adults, many experts have begun to wonder what other causes may exist

to explain the absence of this generation in the church. Some of these hypothesized

causes include political identification, negative life events, education level, and the

delay of having children. Unfortunately, research on these topics is somewhat

limited, but the data available is briefly presented here.

In a study conducted by Nicholas Vargas, individuals were asked to report

whether or not they had seriously considered leaving the church in the past several

years and if they ultimately decided to disaffiliate. After data was collected, several

conclusions regarding politics and negative life events were reached. This study

ultimately found that political party identification does not influence the likelihood

of an individual actually disaffiliating from the church, but that specific divisive

political issues do appear to be associated with disaffiliation. One major example of such a political issue is gay rights. Another prominent study on religion and politics (*American Grace* by Robert Putnam) identified same-sex marriage as one of the most salient issues that connect religion and politics.[49] Of those individuals who considered leaving the church, those who support gay rights were more likely than their counterparts to actually disaffiliate.[50] Another finding reported "that life stressors do not appear to exert a uniform directional effect on religious disaffiliation. Financial crisis increases the odds of considering and leaving religion, while experiencing the death of an immediate family member is generally associated with *maintaining* a religious affiliation, even for those who consider religious departure."[51] It appears that those individuals considering disaffiliating may be more likely to disaffiliate if they experience a crisis to which the church cannot readily respond. Religion, historically, is prepared to cope with death and afterlife, while financial crises may be ignored or dismissed by church communities. Again, we see instances where individuals leave the church because the church is insufficient in addressing the real-life crises and questions faced by its members.

Researchers also considered two other factors that may contribute to the rise in disaffiliation: increasing education levels and the delay of having children. It has

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[49] Robert Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 370.

[50] Nicholas Vargas, "Retrospective Accounts of Religious Disaffiliation in the United States: Stressors, Skepticism, and Political Factors," *Sociology of Religion* 73, no. 2 (2012): 200-223.

[51] Ibid, 215.

been a widely held belief that increased education strongly correlates with decreased religiosity, but new research suggests otherwise. As Sensenig wisely reminds the reader, "drawing the conclusion of 'secular indoctrination' requires some diligent cherry-picking of the data."[52] While the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (a study often cited by those who believe education *does* decrease religiosity) found that 62% of college students decreased their church attendance while in college, it simultaneously found that 76% of students who do not go on to college after high school also decreased their church attendance during the same life stage.[53] When examining the entirety of this research, one could actually argue that college education aids in church retention. Unfortunately, the data is not so positive for the influence of delayed childrearing. According to the Baylor Religion Survey in 2005, respondents without children were 60% more likely to be religiously unaffiliated than their peers who had children.[54] Support was found in favor of a hypothesis that having children often tends to bring parents back to religious affiliation.[55] Thus, we can safely conclude that college education is not a notable cause of religious disaffiliation, but that the delay in having children may very well have a negative impact on this phenomenon.

In summary, these themes show us several things that emerging adults believe to be important: acceptance, depth, and relevance. Each of the above

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[52] Sensenig, "The Rise of the Nones," 338.

[53] Ibid, 338.

[54] Joseph O. Baker and Buster G. Smith, "The Nones: Social Characteristics of the Religiously Unaffiliated," *Social Forces* 87, no. 3 (2009): 1257.

[55] Ibid, 1258.

mentioned themes can be directly connected to one of these values. In order to disprove these beliefs, church congregations must be particularly aware of how they project acceptance, depth, and relevance when interacting with emerging adults. In the following section, we will explore the recommendations of several leading experts in the field and determine how they respond to these values, before moving on to the case study.

Part III: Options for Response

Now that we have identified some of the key arguments against the church, we are left asking ourselves, "What can we possibly do about it?" First and foremost, churches must recognize that they have been a part of the problem, and thus we, as members of the church, must take responsibility to be part of the solution. Once we recognize that our teachings and actions have contributed to many of these themes voiced by emerging adults, we will be able to move forward in developing strategies to attract them once again. In the past several years, literature attempting to answer this question has flooded shelves. Researchers and practicing youth ministers all seem to have something to contribute. Before offering my own action plan through a specific case study of Brecksville United Methodist Church, we will explore a number of these suggested, more general strategies from some of the leading experts. However, before beginning to explore possible strategies, an important note must be made. Regardless of the strategy, we remain conscious of one very serious point: our attempts to reunite emerging adults and the church must come from a desire to share the gospel, *not* from a desire to increase the number of

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emerging adults in church congregations. We need to continuously remind

ourselves, and those whom we lead in these efforts, that our ultimate goal should be

the spiritual health of emerging adults and not the health of our institution.[56]

Millennials are able to skillfully recognize any self-motivated effort, and such

recognition would certainly hinder their return to the church. Thus, the success of

any strategy seeking to increase emerging adult participation in the church must be

founded on an honest desire to share Jesus and his word. With this vital point in

mind, let us begin.

Reactive Responses

As his research proved important to our discernment of the problem at

hand, let us begin with the recommendations provided in David Kinnaman's text.

These recommendations represent a list of suggestions collected from a vast

number of individuals, including pastors, researchers, CEOs, and musicians, and

provide a glimpse of what changes or strategies may work best when searching for

the emerging adult generation. While we cannot present all fifty ideas here, the

following are several of the most applicable suggestions.

1) *Confess.* Confessing your own shortcomings is one of the most important

    steps to creating an authentic Christian community. Michael DiMarco

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[56] Andrew Root, "Stop Worrying About the Millennials," *Christianity Today* 59, no. 1 (2015): 32.

writes, "Let's wear our mistakes like a red badge of courage, for the blood soaked in our bandages is not ours, but from the One who healed us."[57]

2) *Increase your expectations.* Challenge the people already in your congregation to begin praying for and sharing the gospel with others. This job should not rest solely on the pastor; all should be expected to participate in disciple-making.[58]

3) *Take risks.* Stop watering down the gospel message in your own life, and live the kind of radical life that Jesus calls his followers to live. Young people are waiting to see others take risks for their faith, and want to know if it's worth it to commit.[59]

4) *Re-center on Jesus.* Stop describing Jesus as a partner or an escape, and start sharing the truth that he is the ultimate source of joy and fulfillment. Emerging adults don't need another friend; they are seeking something much deeper than complacent friendship, and will look elsewhere if they fail to find what they need in the church.[60]

5) *Be intentionally intergenerational.* Youth and emerging adults do not need to be segregated from the rest of the congregation. In fact, research shows

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[57] Michael DiMarco in *You Lost Me*, 215.

[58] Francis Chan in *You Lost Me*, 216.

[59] Kenda Creasy Dean in *You Lost Me*, 219.

[60] Britt Merrick in *You Lost Me*, 220.

that intergenerational mentoring and small groups strengthen the faith of

all involved.[61]

6) *Meet a need.* Find a need in the community and do something about it.

This is one of the simplest ways to interact with people outside of the

church, develop relationships, and introduce them to Jesus.[62]

These suggestions certainly require honesty and intentionality, and have shown

results in many of the authors' churches and personal experiences. While the list is

helpful in providing quick jumpstart ideas, it unfortunately fails to offer a cohesive

action plan. These suggestions also fail to respond to the specific themes presented

earlier in his book, and appear to focus exclusively on the issue of shallowness

rather than exclusivity or irrelevance. By simply inviting outside contributors to

offer unrelated suggestions, Kinnaman leaves his reader without solutions to the

problems presented.

Thom and Joani Schultz attempt to provide a more cohesive plan in their

book, *Why Nobody Wants to be Around Christians Anymore.* Thom, the founder and

president of Group Publishing, and his wife, Joani, the chief creative officer at Group,

suggest four "acts of love" that may attract emerging adults and other unaffiliated

individuals to the church. The first act is known as *radical hospitality.* Radical

hospitality requires us to leave the condemning to God, to invite people into our

homes, to be intentionally and profoundly relational, and to seek to understand

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[61] Kara Powell in *You Lost Me*, 227.

[62] Shane Claiborne in *You Lost Me*, 229.

those around us.[63] It also challenges us to let people know we're thinking of them, to

share meals together, and to befriend those whom others might find hard to love.[64]

The second act of love is *fearless conversation.* The Schultzes challenge their readers

to do three things under this act: 1) welcome questions and be okay not having the

answers, 2) avoid assuming people's motives when they ask questions, and 3) let go

of any agenda and encourage authentic conversation.[65] Thirdly, they require *genuine*

humility. They define genuine humility as being radically relational (meeting people

where they are spiritually, not where we want them to be), being open to learning

from others with different beliefs or of different ages, and admitting mistakes.[66]

And finally, the last act of love is what they refer to as *divine anticipation.* Divine

anticipation "means we emphasize God's reality, presence, and action in our lives

today."[67] By realizing that God is always involved, is always relevant, and is always

going to show up, we can practice divine anticipation. Through these four acts of

love, the Schultzes argue that the gospel message will be shared through action and

lifestyle, and that ultimately, people will be magnetically drawn back towards

Christians and the church.

 Both Kinnaman and the Schultzes approach the topic of recapturing

emerging adults from a present perspective. They recognize the problem as-is, and

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 [63] Thom Schultz and Joani Schultz, *Why Nobody Wants to be Around Christians Anymore* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2014), 61.

 [64] Ibid, 81.

 [65] Ibid, 87.

 [66] Ibid, 118.

 [67] Ibid, 140.

seek ways to bring this generation of emerging adults back into the church. They

differ, however, in a noteworthy regard: Kinnaman suggests the need for a much

more confident, Christ-centered, proclamation-style response, while the Schultzes

emphasize humble, Christ-modeled hospitality. Kinnaman responds primarily to the

idea that the church is shallow. By proclaiming the truth of the gospel, he hopes to

show emerging adults that the church has a depth far beyond what they realize. The

Schultzes, on the other hand, address the belief that the church is exclusive. By

practicing their "acts of love," they hope to present the church as a radically

accepting community of believers. While both are important problems for the

church to address, Kinnaman and the Schultzes fail to address more than one of the

problems in their individual proposals (and neither address the need for relevance).

A successful, cohesive solution must address the needs for acceptance, depth, and

relevance, and not focus solely on one. This is not to say that these suggestions are

useless. On the contrary, they will shape our case study in several ways: 1) that

emerging/young adult ministry must be service-minded, 2) that emerging adults

must feel accepted, meaning congregation members must be humble and hospitable,

and 3) that congregations must be excessively intentional.

<center>Proactive Responses</center>

The next two examples take quite a different approach. Rick Lawrence,

author of *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry*, and Kenda Creasy Dean, author of *Almost*

Christian, approach the issue in a much more proactive manner; they offer concrete

suggestions for increasing retention among teenagers rather than ways to regain

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already-lost emerging adults. This approach should be taken very seriously –

statistics show that there is a 43% decrease in church engagement between the

teenage and emerging adult years.[68] If more attention were given to creating lasting,

sustainable faith among teenagers, perhaps the number of disaffiliated emerging

adults would dwindle. We know that almost 70% of Americans recall participating

in Sunday school or youth group meetings at least once a month during their youth –

it stands to argue that churches must make better use of this time and find ways to

more effectively encourage faith development among youth.[69]

Rick Lawrence provides eight straightforward ideas in his book, *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry*. In this book, he hopes to shift the focus of youth ministry

away from the superficial games and outings and back to a Jesus-centered

community of young believers. Outlined below are his eight practices:

1) *Beeline everything back to Jesus.* Regardless of the conversation or

    scripture topic, relate everything to Jesus. It is important for youth to see

    how every aspect of the Bible, and of their lives, is part of the Jesus

    narrative.[70]

2) *Create experiences that require students to depend on Jesus.* Put students in

    vulnerable and uncomfortable situations – particularly in the mission

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[68] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 22.

[69] Ibid, 23.

[70] Rick Lawrence, *Jesus-Centered Youth Ministry* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2014), 101.

field. Push them to have experiences where they can do nothing but depend on Jesus.[71]

3) *Tell the truth about Jesus.* Require students to think critically and Biblically about who Jesus was and what he taught. Shift the question from "What would Jesus do?" to "Do we know Jesus well enough to know what he'd do?"[72]

4) *Focus on the red stuff.* Build a strong foundation of knowledge among students, so that they know the real Jesus and what he said, according to scripture.[73]

5) *Ask surprising, specific, and personal questions.* When it comes to talking about Jesus, the better the question, the better the conversation. Ask questions that make students think for themselves and see situations and stories in new ways.[74]

6) *Practice the "Jesus Push-Back."* In the Bible, Jesus constantly resists cultural norms and pushes back against social conventions. Encourage students to do the same, and to question cultural norms in light of the scriptures.[75]

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[71] Ibid, 120.

[72] Ibid, 129.

[73] Ibid, 150.

[74] Ibid, 160.

[75] Ibid, 169.

7) *Use parables.* Instead of lecturing students, tell stories. Even though

   sermons and messages are easy ways to keep control of youth group

   time, students need to be interactive and responsive. Parables require

   students to uncover the meaning for themselves, rather than having it

   handed to them in a speech.[76]

8) *Help students embrace their true identity in Jesus.* Refuse to focus on the

   superficial components of students and be conscious of their spiritual

   nature. Don't be afraid to share what you know God believes about

   them.[77]

By using these eight principles, Lawrence suggests that teenagers will transition

from complacent churchgoers to genuine Jesus-followers. These steps encourage

mature faith development, with the hope that fully developed faith will be more

easily maintained not only through emerging adulthood, but also far beyond.

Kenda Creasy Dean provides several other suggestions for developing

mature and stable faith among teenagers in the church. To start, she places a great

amount of importance on the *role of the parent.* "In the end," she writes, "awakening

faith does not depend on how hard we press young people to love God, but on how

much we show them that we do."[78] Dean argues that the best way to get youth more

involved and more serious about their faith community is to get their parents more

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[76] Ibid, 199.

[77] Ibid, 219.

[78] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 120.

involved and more serious about their faith community. As parents become more invested, they will begin to model more mature faith, and in turn, guide their children to more mature faith. Dean's second suggestion is similar to several suggestions already seen: *talk honestly about Jesus.* However, she takes this suggestion a step further. Dean challenges leaders in the church to not only talk honestly about Jesus, but to teach students how to talk about Jesus, as well. Research from the National Study of Youth and Religion indicates that, apart from Mormons and some conservative Protestants, "most American teenagers...have enormous difficultly putting religious faith into words."[79] Dean suggests that by creating environments where students learn how to verbalize aspects of their faith, they will be more likely to share their faith and feel confident in their beliefs – even as they age.[80] Lastly, students need to be given *opportunities for spiritual experiences.* Dean argues that spiritual experiences help to teach students that they are not the center of the universe; they are decentered, however momentarily, and are able to glimpse the divine.[81] Unfortunately, many youth programs focus on keeping participants active *for* Jesus, rather than allowing them time to be *with* Jesus. By allowing students the time to have genuine spiritual experiences, we open the door to opportunities that help solidify personal faith. Dean heavily focuses her action plan on creating deeply rooted, mature faith among teenagers, in hopes that more fully developed faith will keep youth involved in the church after they graduate.

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[79] Ibid, 132.

[80] Ibid, 137.

[81] Ibid, 165.

Again, we see two very different proposals: one focused on confidently proclaiming the gospel message, and the other taking a more mild approach. Lawrence's proposal is very similar to Kinnaman's in that it centers its recommendations on creating depth through an emphasis on Jesus. Lawrence encourages youth leaders and volunteers to "beeline everything back to Jesus," but fails to discuss the needs for an accepting and relevant ministry. Dean's proposal is much more gentle than Lawrence's, but also focuses primarily on the need for depth within faith. She approaches this quite differently than Lawrence in that she places immense value on the role of the parent and on spiritual experiences, rather than on a hard and fast "preach Jesus" approach. Unfortunately, we once again see these proposals focus on one issue while disregarding the others. They will be useful, however, when developing the concrete plan for Brecksville UMC, in that they include several important themes regarding depth. The need for spiritual experiences and honest, challenging conversation about Jesus will be vital when outlining the key characteristics of a successful youth ministry program.
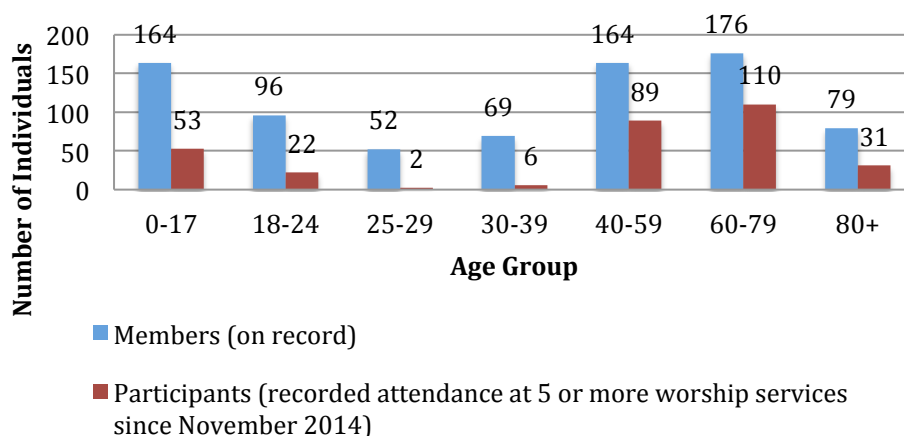
Where do we go from here? We've identified the population under consideration, defined the key terms and parameters involved, explored the statistics and common reasons for unaffiliation, and have introduced several proposals and solutions by leading experts in the field. Unfortunately, we have yet to see a comprehensive action plan for a church to use in a real-life ministry setting – a plan with ultimately seeks to build a culture of acceptance, depth, and relevance for emerging adults. Throughout the remainder of this essay, I will provide a detailed outline of an action plan, designed specifically for the Brecksville United Methodist

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Church, which deliberately addresses the three key issues of exclusivity, shallowness, and irrelevance.

Part IV: A Case Study

Brecksville United Methodist Church is a Mainline Protestant congregation located in Brecksville, Ohio, an upper-middle class suburb of Cleveland. It recently voted to become a member of the Reconciling Ministries Network, an organization within the United Methodist Church that is dedicated to the inclusion and support of people of all sexual orientations. It offers middle school and high school youth groups, men's groups, a strong United Methodist Women organization, Vacation Bible School, a praise team and chancel choir, bell choir, and regular opportunities for congregants to volunteer at the Cleveland Food Bank and support fundraisers for refugees, victims of human trafficking, and mission trips to Camphor Mission in Liberia. In 2015, Brecksville UMC reported just over 700 members, with total weekly attendance between 200-250 individuals. Below is a graph displaying the age groups within the congregation. As shown, Brecksville UMC is a prime example of a congregation experiencing lower participation from emerging adults. While it may appear an unfair break in age group (smaller groups for emerging adults), this is important to show the sharp decrease in participation, particularly among older emerging adults. It is true that there are only slightly fewer emerging adults than children and teens in the church database, but participation in worship decreases nearly 50% between children/teenagers and emerging adults.

Membership and Participation of Various Age Groups at Brecksville United Methodist Church

Number of Individuals

Age Group	Members (on record)	Participants
0-17	164	53
18-24	96	22
25-29	52	2
30-39	69	6
40-59	164	89
60-79	176	110
80+	79	31

■ Members (on record)

■ Participants (recorded attendance at 5 or more worship services since November 2014)

An interesting observation from this data is that 30-39 year old participation (and membership) is also drastically lower than children and older adults. Unfortunately, it appears that this absence of emerging adults may perhaps extend even into the young adults within Brecksville UMC's congregation. Regardless, this data shows that Brecksville UMC is among the countless congregations that suffer from a sharp decrease in participation and an absence of emerging adults, and would benefit from a concrete action plan to bring these members back to church.

To find long-term success in the re-affiliation of emerging adults, we must approach this problem from multiple vantage points. We cannot simply design the youth program one particular way to prevent future disaffiliation, because so many emerging adults are already absent. At the same time, we cannot focus all our efforts on finding and inviting disaffiliated millennials and thus neglect the young people

already in our church. Furthermore, we cannot approach these solutions with any mindset less than full church involvement and commitment. It cannot rest solely on the church staff to solve the issues of millennial disaffiliation. A successful program will require these three things: 1) first and foremost, the participation and support of the entire congregation, 2) a plan to maturely develop the faith and beliefs of youth currently within the youth ministry program, and 3) a series of concrete strategies to meet, engage with, and re-invite disaffiliated emerging adults while simultaneously supporting those emerging adults still active within the church. By working proactively, reactively, and cohesively, Brecksville United Methodist Church will begin to see greater youth retention and increased participation in their young adult ministry program and in regular worship.

Step One: It Takes a Village

The first and arguably most important step when creating an action plan to respond to the decrease in emerging adult church affiliation and participation is *getting the entire congregation involved.* Both proactive and reactive steps will only be successful if lay members of the congregation work alongside church leadership. In nearly every step outlined below, we see a common theme that emerging adults require authentic Christian role models in order to be interested in re-joining the church. Through interactions with these Christian role models, they hope to discover a community that is inclusive, deep, and relevant. Before Brecksville UMC, or any church, begins a campaign to attract emerging adults, individuals must pledge to be involved as active Christian role models. I recommend that Brecksville

UMC involve as many members as possible in the execution of this plan as possible, as to encourage buy-in and ownership from congregants. Individuals must be responsible for their continuous participation, and they must recognize how invaluable their commitment truly is to the steps outlined below. Without their active support and participation, the overall attitude of the congregation towards emerging adults is unlikely to change, and millennials will surely notice this attitude even if they do connect with a pastor on an individual basis. Furthermore, volunteers are vital to any program that reaches out into the community, and individuals within the congregation have far wider connections within the community and with various emerging adults than the pastor alone. For these reasons, the full participation and support of the entire congregation is vital to the success of Brecksville United Methodist Church's young adult ministry.

Step Two: Keeping Those You've Got

In order to cultivate a successful, cohesive, and long-term program, Brecksville UMC must encourage mature faith development among its youth. By youth, I particularly mean ninth to twelfth grade students. While this paper aims to address the absence of emerging adults within the church, we must start by taking a step back. In order to combat the complaints of so many emerging adults (the church being exclusive, shallow, and irrelevant), we must work diligently to ensure the effectiveness of youth programming. As we've seen, there is a drastic decrease in church attendance once students graduate from high school, both within Brecksville UMC and throughout the wider church. While this is often interpreted negatively,

this also means that *students are present before graduation.* Whether they

voluntarily attend church events or are forced to attend by parents, the church

needs to take advantage of this time with teens and more effectively instill an

understanding of the acceptance, depth, and relevance found within the Christian

faith. By working proactively to disprove those common themes heard among so

many emerging adults, the church will eventually see fewer emerging adults leaving

the church.

  Rick Lawrence and Kenda Creasy Dean do a fine job addressing appropriate

youth ministry techniques, as described in the previous section. At the core of both

these arguments is one common thread: Jesus permeates everything**.** Lawrence

describes this through his series of Jesus-centered steps, and shows the importance

of bringing everything back into relation with Jesus. Dean touches on this in a

slightly more nuanced way through her discussion of involving parents, speaking

honestly about the gospel, and creating room for spiritual experiences. Throughout

all of this lies the common theme that Jesus is the utmost important and key figure.

While true, we must not focus only on the depth of the gospel, but also on teaching

students how Jesus is both accepting and relevant. With this in mind, I recommend

several step-by-step strategies to cultivate a youth ministry program centered on

acceptance, depth, and relevance.

Acceptance

  Create a safe space. Before any intentional ministering can begin, students

must feel comfortable in their space. This concept of comfort pertains to both the

physical and the emotional environment. The youth space at Brecksville UMC

already achieves much of the physical component of this goal – bright paint colors,

comfortable couches and chairs, a large TV, pool table, basketball net, and plenty of

snacks. High school seniors are also invited to leave their handprint in paint on one

wall, giving them yet another sense of belonging and legacy. It will be important for

each youth minister to refresh the space as they transition into the position, in order

to create a safe space unique to that new group. By including students in the design

and refreshing of this space, new leaders will establish a sense of community and

shared space. Safe space also refers to the emotional environment of a group. Youth

groups need to establish a community of trust, mutual respect, and positivity in

order for students to eventually be willing to share honest faith and life struggles.

The youth program at Brecksville UMC should continue to focus on building an

emotionally safe space, through weekend retreats, team-building exercises and

games, and fun outings and activities. Two activities that help create a safe space

among a youth group are high ropes courses (such as GoApe!, located in

Strongsville, OH), and open-ended question books (such as *450 Unfinished Sentences*

by Les Christie).[82] Both of these activities require students to communicate with one

another yet maintain a non-invasive nature. One important point when discussing

this group, as well as many other high school groups, is to be conscious of cliques

and grade divisions. Task three or four older students to lead the group in creating a

welcoming and accepting atmosphere, and to not group themselves by grade.

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[82] Les Christie, *450 Unfinished Sentences* (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties, 2000).

Welcome first, mold second. Along with creating a safe space, students must also feel immediately accepted. Particularly when working with teenagers, it is important to encourage members already "in" the group to be instantly accepting of new members, regardless of their beliefs, practices, lifestyle, clothing choices, peer group, or anything else. The group mindset should be that the youth group, first and foremost, welcomes all, and that teaching new members about Jesus comes second. Once new students belong to the community, teaching and molding will come naturally. Trying to reverse this pattern – so that students must fit the mold of the youth group before they're welcomed into the community – will only serve to deter students, prevent growth, and teach the exclusive mindset that repulses many emerging adults. Specifically within Brecksville UMC's youth program, this can be challenging when students of lower socio-economic status or from other school districts enter the group. Keep conversations focused on common ground and away from school gossip or other divisive topics. Challenge students to see things from other perspectives by randomly dividing them into groups and giving them a new identity for the remainder of the lesson (racial minority, different sexual orientation, etc.).

Depth

Stop watering down Jesus. Brecksville's high school students are ready to be challenged by Jesus and his gospel and to discover the depth of this message. While elementary and middle school students still need to learn what the Bible *says*, these high school students should focus more on what the Bible *means.* Ask hard

questions about Jesus, and push students to figure out the answers for themselves. The majority of the group are quite gifted students, and need mental challenges to keep them engaged. One example is as follows: while younger students need to hear that Jesus said, "Turn the other cheek," high school students should be challenged to discuss what this meant in biblical times and what it means for them in today's world. By introducing high school students to the complex nature of both Jesus and the scriptures, they'll uncover a deep, permeating gospel – one that is anything but shallow, and that is relevant through all walks and stages of life. The message of Jesus isn't meant to be sugar coated or watered down, made easier to swallow. It has always meant to challenge believers to live in a way that is radically different from the ways of the world. Start challenging, encouraging, and exemplifying for students how to live radically for Jesus.

Hold students to high expectations. Require students to show up and be mentally present, and encourage student leaders in the group to set these standards for the others. By creating a community that expects commitment, high schoolers will recognize the importance of commitment and not fear that commitment later in life (a characteristic of many emerging adults). Several great ways to raise expectations, specifically within the youth group at Brecksville UMC, include 1) creating a phone-free environment by requiring students to place their phones in a basket by the door when they come in, 2) enlisting older students to text younger students on a weekly basis, reminding them about youth group and offering rides if they need them, and 3) setting required events throughout the year for students hoping to make their Confirmation or participate in a summer mission trip. By

clearly outlining requirements that hold students to high expectations, they will know exactly what is expected of them and will learn that a commitment is required of them. Mature faith doesn't happen by chance, but is the result of an intentional and recognizable commitment to following Jesus and belonging to a Christian community.

Be the group that goes deeper. In a society where teenagers are over-scheduled and over-stimulated, church needs to be more than an extracurricular. One key way that Brecksville UMC, and the youth group in particular, should set themselves apart from extracurricular activities is by going deeper. By this, I mean that the youth group needs to provide a space for students to ask difficult questions, process through those questions, and be in a trusting and committed community. Most, if not all, extracurricular activities aim to entertain. Youth groups and churches should not aim to entertain, but to teach. While games and activities can serve important purposes, at the end of the youth group time, students should leave feeling spiritually fulfilled on a deeper level than being entertained. This depth comes from honest and challenging conversations about Jesus and faith, where students are encouraged to ask questions and respond to one another. One helpful resource for prompting deep conversations is the series of spoken word videos by Jefferson Bethke, available on YouTube. These videos touch on a variety of topics, are simultaneously entertaining and intriguing, and direct conversations towards difficult topics and honest group processing. Another way to create depth is by implementing a mentorship program. Older members from the congregation should be encouraged to pair up with high school students who share similar career goals

or hobbies and meet regularly to explore these common interests and how they can relate to Christian faith. By showcasing the depth and truth of Jesus's message, teenagers will develop a unique understanding of the church as anything but shallow.

Relevance

Take them somewhere new. Whether for an afternoon or a week, get students out of their physical comfort zones. By removing students from the humdrum of daily life, little siblings, dramatic friends, and stressful schoolwork, you give them an opportunity to rely on one another, themselves, and ultimately, Jesus. High school students need to be challenged not only by scripture and by expectations, but also by their experiences. Provide students with opportunities to meet new people, explore new cultures, and discover a dependence on Jesus to bring them through uncomfortable times. These new spaces could be the Brecksville MetroPark Reservation, where students would be encouraged to read scripture and journal in three hours of total silence, or could be as far away as the Camphor Mission in Liberia. By immersing students in the world around them, whether introspectively or missionally, they will come to realize that faith isn't confined to the four church walls and that, even more importantly, leaders in the church don't expect them to be confined. Whenever there is a chance to mix up routine, get students out of their comfort zones, and show them that Christians don't hide within the church building, seize that opportunity.

Stay connected after graduation. It is so important to note that successful youth ministry and faith development cannot stop when students graduate from high school. Church staff and lay people all need to make conscious efforts to stay connected to students as they graduate and move on to college, a gap year, the military, or the workforce. The vast majority of graduating seniors at Brecksville UMC go on to four-year colleges, and so it is reasonable for our action plan to be designed with this in mind. Several concrete examples of how to stay connected to college students include sending care packages around final exam times, inviting them back to youth group meetings during winter and summer breaks, and providing a list of campus ministries or nearby churches during their first months at school. By emphasizing the importance of getting connected to a local ministry while away, the youth minister can encourage graduated students to stay involved in church even if it can't be Brecksville UMC. Regular communication is also an important component of staying connected, and is made easy by texting and other social media apps (SnapChat, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, etc.). Graduated students need to know that they are still loved and supported by the church community, that they were more than another number in the youth group attendance count, and that they are still welcome despite any life changes, mistakes, or doubts they may have.

Step Three: Finding Those You've Lost

Unfortunately, too many millennials have already slipped through the cracks for us to simply ignore. While we can proactively work to prevent future emerging

adults from disaffiliating, we must admit our own failings and recognize that so

many have already walked away. Many solutions were introduced above, but none

provide a cohesive action plan. In large part, this may be due to the fact that each

individual church requires a unique plan to fit its needs, circumstances, and

resources. While many of the contributing authors in Kinnaman's last chapter

provide useful insight, they tend to be more abstract behavioral changes than

concrete responses to the major causes. Thom and Joani Schultz also present

behavioral changes more than action-oriented suggestions; while these are certainly

necessary in this process, they fail to offer ministers and church leaders specific,

concrete suggestions for implementable programs that respond directly to the most

common disconnects between the church and emerging adults. The benefit of

performing such a specific case study is that we are able to do just that – tailor

suggestions and strategies to the circumstances and resources available at

Brecksville UMC. In order to provide a concrete and simultaneously flexible action

plan, we must address each of the major issues from section two (exclusivity,

shallowness, and irrelevance) and determine applicable and effective changes to

counteract them.

Acceptance

　　Move from an exclusive and repressive institution to a radically accepting

community. Many emerging adults voice concerns that the church is too exclusive.

Before they will consider listening to the gospel message and the relevance that

message has on their lives, they must first feel accepted for who they are. Brecksville

UMC needs to be *far more intentional* about practicing what the Schultz' refer to as "radical hospitality." This means more than simply taking a vote to join the Reconciling Ministries Network, as previously discussed. It requires getting outside the walls of the church, actively pursuing relationships with non-church members, and showing a genuine interest in building relationships with those individuals. Sharing meals, sending regular texts or phone calls, and getting to know non-church goers on a deeply personal level are all simple ways to exemplify a wildly inclusive faith. A specific way to show this radical hospitality is to invite the refugee families and human trafficking victims (who are the regular subjects of fundraising campaigns within the congregation) to worship services. Volunteers should be recruited to reach out to these families and offer transportation to and from Sunday services, especially on holidays and other important Sundays throughout the year. By practicing radical hospitality and an open door policy, regardless of the surrounding circumstances, emerging adults will begin to lose the belief that church is exclusive and instead recognize the Christian faith as an intensely inclusive community.

When discussing sexuality and the idea that the church is sexually repressive, there really can be no concrete action step to alleviate this view. There needs to be, if anything, a removal of action steps. Views on sexuality, abstinence, sexual orientation, etc., should not be the first thing shared with young people. Moving from repression to acceptance must come quietly. Churches in general need to remove the loudspeaker announcements proclaiming sex as sin, and recognize that this topic may be better left alone until millennials are back within church

communities. At the very foundation of this problem, we need to remember that *acceptance must come before teaching*. Emerging adults need to feel welcomed and accepted into a church community before they will be open to learning what the scriptures say about the blessing of sex.

This is one of Brecksville UMC's strongest attributes. As previously mentioned, the congregation recently voted to join the Reconciling Ministries Network within the United Methodist Church, which publicly announces their acceptance and support of all sexual orientations. This information should be widely publicized, particularly in areas (college campuses, workplaces with younger employees, etc.) where there is a greater emerging adult population. While Brecksville UMC has already officially announced this radically accepting stance, they must actively share this information with individuals not already in the congregation. By intentionally advertising their accepting nature among groups of emerging adults, Brecksville UMC can more successfully live out the standard that they have chosen to set.

Depth

Move from a shallow and doubtless sermon to a deep and personal faith. One theme identified by Kinnaman was the notion that the church is doubtless. Two main things must be done in order to confront this: *people within the church must openly voice their own doubts, and space must be created for doubts and questions to be raised by those outside the church*. As the Fuller Youth Institute suggests, "Doubt

isn't toxic to faith. Silence is."[83] Brecksville UMC should lead and encourage

congregation members to voice their own doubts and raise their own questions,

while simultaneously creating situations where millennials are invited to pose their

questions. One concrete example is to invite college students from local campuses to

a coffee shop for a round-table discussion, at which they would be invited to ask

their toughest faith-based questions to pastors, youth pastors, and lay congregation

members. By meeting in a public, secular environment, or even on campus,

individuals may be more likely to attend and feel less judgment when voicing their

doubts about religion. Another radical example of creating space for questions is to

infuse Sunday morning worship services with a technology-based Q&A session;

individuals would be invited to anonymously text the pastor their questions

throughout the sermon and receive real-time responses. Such an environment

would certainly alter the notion of the church as doubtless to one of encouraging of

questions.

The second argument in this issue is that the Christian faith is shallow.

Emerging adults want to go deeper. They want things explained. Blanket statements

and explanations, clichés, proof-texting, and cheesy slogans don't make the cut when

it comes to emerging adults. This generation seeks meaning. Churches need to stop

watering down the gospel message, stop advertising meaningless clichés, and start

teaching people about the radical joy found in Jesus. Millennials don't need another

Facebook friend in Jesus; they need ultimate fulfillment. One concrete way to

[83] Jim Candy, Brad M. Griffin, and Kara Powell, *Can I Ask That?* (Pasadena: Fuller Youth Institute, 2015), cover.

promote a more personal young adult ministry within Brecksville UMC is to

intentionally pair up emerging adults with older congregation members who share

similar careers or hobbies. Partnering individuals with similar interests can expose

emerging adults to examples of Christian living outside church walls, showing them

that the gospel message is pertinent to all areas of life. Through deep and

meaningful intergenerational relationships, emerging adults will see beyond the

clichés and shallow attempts to attract them, and will discover the permeating

message of Jesus. Through such a mentorship program, millennials will begin to see

how Christians positively contribute to society through secular careers and will be

encouraged to view their own jobs and interests with God in mind. Brecksville UMC

should advertise these mentorship opportunities at the annual Rally Day and at

Christmas and Easter services (when many students are likely to attend with their

families), and should encourage the mentorship program among high school

students as well. By creating a culture open to questions and willing to intentionally

seek depth, Brecksville UMC will show emerging adults that Christianity is not

meant to be a shallow faith.

Relevance

Move from a removed and reluctant antique to a relevant and engaged guide.
One problem many emerging adults have with the church is that it appears to be an

overprotective institution that demonizes all secular components of life. If

Brecksville UMC hopes to attract emerging adults, they need to *get knee-deep in the*

problems of the world. It is not sufficient to recognize struggles and send money –

emerging adults require active and tangible participation. Whether in the local community, halfway around the world, or somewhere in-between, millennials seek opportunities to get completely immersed in the problems of the world. More importantly, they need to see older Christians doing the same. Brecksville UMC should develop a program specifically for emerging adults to complete various service projects, and publicize this group on local college campuses (Baldwin Wallace, Cuyahoga Community College, Cleveland State University, John Carroll University, etc.). By inviting emerging adult populations to participate in this service-centered group, the program will expand far beyond the Brecksville community and offer college students a way to get involved in the community through a faith-based organization. Projects to complete could range from annual trips to developing countries, late-night walks through urban communities to hand out blankets, food, and clothing, bi-monthly trips to the Cleveland Food Bank or Twice Blessed Free Store, or setting up stands on college campuses to offer free food on weekend late-nights.

Along with the active service component of becoming relevant, emerging adults also need a community that will openly approach popular culture. Emerging adults seek connections between their faith and the rest of their lives. There can no longer be a religion compartment, a work or school compartment, a church music compartment, a secular music compartment, and so on and so forth. One way to create these connections is to use popular secular music or movies in Bible study conversation; series like Lord of the Rings, Harry Potter, and The Chronicles of Narnia are great segues between secular and religious movies, while love songs can

often be used to exemplify divine love and human desire for fulfillment. Once a service group has been soundly established, monthly Bible study opportunities should be introduced that focus on these cross-boundary examples and how they pertain to the message of Jesus.

Another issue many emerging adults have with the church is that they still believe it to be very anti-science. While this pre-conceived notion of the church as anti-science certainly is not factual in many Mainline Protestant churches (including Brecksville UMC), there still remains the tension. Growing up in a time when the latest scientific findings are available at the click of a mouse, millennials are steeped in scientific fact. In order for any church to break through and move beyond this pre-conceived idea, they must be deliberate in presenting emerging adults with their actual understanding of the relationship between science and religion. Emerging adults need to hear how older congregation members view scientific fact in light of their faith, and how the two are ultimately compatible and supportive of one another. One concrete way to show this compatibility is through environmental responsibility. Brecksville UMC already does an outstanding job displaying how faith supports science by offering opportunities to recycle (not only paper and plastic, but batteries, bicycles, eyeglasses, etc.) and educating their congregation on the importance of recycling and being environmentally friendly in the face of the global warming crisis. Brecksville UMC could benefit from more widely advertising these opportunities throughout the community, specifically through local newspapers and flyers. While encouraging these eco-friendly habits, Brecksville UMC also needs to deliberately include a component of faith – God entrusts

humankind with the earth, and expects us to take care of it and be good stewards of our environment and resources.

Another important point to remember when fighting this misunderstanding of the church being anti-science is how valuable honest conversation can be. One way to initiate honest conversation would be to host a "Science and Religion" night on a nearby college campus or at the church, where emerging adults would be invited to share a meal and participate in a discussion with pastors and older Christians about how they reconcile faith and science. By deliberately encouraging this conversation, emerging adults would realize that Brecksville UMC is not afraid of science, and is actually very progressive in its views towards evolution, global warming, pollution, etc. Through this example, and surely many others, emerging adults would come to recognize that many mainline Protestant churches do, in fact, accept scientific findings as truth and are able to find connections between science and scriptural faith.

<center>Other Important Considerations</center>

1) *Specific Political Issues.* Along with the six themes presented in *You Lost Me*, there are several other issues that need to be addressed in regards to millennial disaffiliation. One major issue deals with specific political debates. Two main political debates that often alienate emerging adults from the church are gay rights and abortion. Emerging adults tend be more liberal in these debates, while they feel the church is overly conservative and traditional. In order for these young adults to feel welcomed in a church community, they need to know that their faith can be in

line with their political stance. As a fairly progressive congregation, I would challenge Brecksville UMC to participate in the Cleveland PRIDE Parade and publicize their reconciling vote in other media forms (Facebook advertisements, public rallies, local print publications). Belonging to such an organization is a strong statement about the beliefs and values of the congregation, and would certainly show emerging adults the similarities between their own views and those of the church.

2) *Life Crises.* Research also shows that individuals are more likely to disaffiliate in the aftermath of life crises – particularly, of those crises that the church is unable to sufficiently respond to. This problem has a very simple solution: church leaders and congregants need to take the time to proactively plan responses to more crises than death. The church as a whole has plenty of practice when handling the death of a loved one; it does not, however, have the necessary practice to handle personal bankruptcy, economic recessions, abusive relationships, hate crimes, etc. Particularly within this congregation, support groups for families dealing with children with drug addiction are vital. Church leadership should work to bring in experts in the field and encourage members to share their struggles with one another and with other families in the community dealing with the same issues. If Brecksville UMC hopes to retain their current members who are in times of crisis, and eventually attract new members who are also seeking support, then intentional planning, scriptural teaching, and support groups need to be set in place.

3) *Delay of children.* Lastly, the delay of having children is cited as a potential contributing factor to the extended disaffiliation of many emerging adults. While

statistics do show that having children often brings young adults back into a church community, this delay continues to lengthen. Looking at the demographics of Brecksville UMC, many of the individuals within the 24-29 year old range are single or married but childless. One way this congregation can counteract the decline in attendance and affiliation of this population is to purposefully plan for their demographic. Brecksville UMC does an excellent job offering child education and young family programming (Vacation Bible School, new parent support groups, etc.), but often falls short when dealing with twenty-something non-parents. Small group studies, mission opportunities, and social events directly targeting emerging adults who don't have children are all ways to actively engage with them and counteract the negative impacts of delayed childrearing on church affiliation and participation. The Habitat Apostles Build scheduled for Summer 2016 is an excellent opportunity for Brecksville UMC to specifically target this demographic, as it provides a service opportunity centered on physical ability and short-term commitment. This event should be more widely publicized, particularly among the emerging adults already in Brecksville UMC's membership database.

Conclusion

In order for Brecksville United Methodist Church to see an increase in emerging adult participation and affiliation, they must be deliberate and genuine in their approach. They must strive to tackle the complaints many emerging adults have against the church, and prove that they are an accepting, deep, and relevant community that offers more than another Facebook friend. If taken seriously and

given the time to take root, the recommendations presented above will transform

the demographics of the Brecksville United Methodist Church. By creating a

radically accepting community, free of judgment on past choices, sexual identity,

socioeconomic status, or whatever else, emerging adults will be drawn to the

ministry. As they become more involved in this accepting and genuine community,

they will come to know the depth of the gospel message through interactions with

congregation members and opportunities to raise their biggest doubts and

questions. Finally, they will recognize the relevance of the Christian faith in all areas

of their lives, particularly by engaging in the world around them through mission

work. If Brecksville UMC is able to apply these strategies with the full engagement of

the congregation, they will create a safe space for emerging adults to feel accepted,

fulfilled, and empowered. With patience and perseverance, the church will see the

fire for Christ reignited among young people.

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