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The Loft: Where Gen Z Goes to Build Relationships and Discover Spiritual Truths

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

PROJECT PORTFOLIO:

THE LOFT: WHERE GEN Z GOES TO BUILD RELATIONSHIPS
AND DISCOVER SPIRITUAL TRUTHS



IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY
PORTLAND SEMINARY

BY:

JEREMY S. DEWEERDT

PROJECT FACULTY:

DR. GREGG BORROR

PORTLAND, OREGON

FEBRUARY 2023



CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This certifies that the doctoral Project Portfolio of

Jeremy S. DeWeerd

has been approved by
the Evaluation Committee on March 9, 2023
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics, Church, and Culture.

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Dedication

To my lifelong partner and best friend, Jen. Your love, prayers, support, and encouragement have given me the ability to tackle this project and complete it. Additionally, your passion for Jesus and people and your endless pursuit of authentic Christ-centered living have been inspiring, convicting, and life-giving. Your life models the concept of The Loft, a place where heaven and earth meet in beautiful union and Jesus is at work. I am forever grateful and could have never done this without you.

To my family, Caden, Connor, Paxton, and Dakota. You are my heart walking outside of my body. The conviction of this project is about you and the world you are living in. Like David, may you serve your generation (Acts 13:36). Your enthusiastic love, championing, and support have given me motivation and energy for this effort. I love you more than words can express.

To my parents. Your unswerving love and support throughout the decades have shaped who I am today. Your prayers helped bring me back to Jesus when I was a young adult, and now they echo to this next generation.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to acknowledge Jesus, the Leader and Forgiver of my life. I stand in awe of the blessed life you have given me, and I am forever indebted. May the fruit of this project bring you glory.

To City First Church. Your incarnational presence in our communities is inspiring, and the way you serve people is extraordinary. Your passion for Jesus, his Word, and others is nothing short of sacred. Thank you for having the courage to love. I am so honored to be a part of this faith community. I love my church!

To Dr. Leonard Sweet. Simply put, you have changed the way I see Scripture and preach it. I am forever indebted. I am grateful God crossed our paths two decades ago, and I have watched how God has used you to help shape my worldview and divine assignment. Thank you for your mentorship, opening your life to Jen and me, and consistently modeling Jesus at the center.

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To Terry, Scott, and Donna. Words cannot express my love and gratitude for each of you. The journey of pursuing and achieving our master's together was the beginning of a beautiful, divinely appointed friendship that led us into our doctoral studies and beyond. You have given me encouragement, strength, and, most of all, joy. Thank you for being true friends. Each of you are an inspiration to me.

To David Yonke. Thank you for your enthusiastic support, willingness to allow me to bounce ideas off you, and the years of experience that have championed this effort. Over the last three years, your assistance has been invaluable and helped me articulate making the dream a reality.

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To the Faculty of Portland Seminary/George Fox University. Thank you for inviting me to this life-changing journey. Your hard work, dedication to wise instruction, and love for the students are not lost on me.

To the amazing young adult team of City First Church. It has been such a pleasure dreaming, scheming, and working with you on The Loft vision. Jesus in you is the hope of this generation.

To Generation Z. My prayer for you is that you find a place to belong, authentic hope, and, most of all, the Creator who designed you for a relationship with Him. Jesus is not an organized religion, nor just a good person who lived centuries ago. He is life. I pray you find him in a place like The Loft.

Epigraph

"One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts."

Psalm 145:4 - English Standard Version

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Glossary

Generation Z Defining this generation differs slightly depending on the research. However, for this project I adhere to the interpretation of Generation Z consisting of individuals born between 1995 to 2015.¹ This research is primarily focused on Generation Z, who are aged 18 to 25 years old or post-high school at the time of writing of this project.

Gen Z This is a shortened title for the term, "Generation Z."

Pre-evangelism evangelism The origin of the term "pre-evangelism" is unclear. Some ascribe it to R.C. Sproul, others to Francis A. Schaeffer or a myriad of other various evangelists and theologians throughout the last century. Sometimes gatherings like Alpha Course (www.alphausa.org), with the primary goal of having conversations about faith, are described as pre-evangelism. However, for The Loft project, where faith conversations are not the primary goal but establishing relationships with those far from faith is, I have embellished on the existing term and added the word "evangelism," thus coining the modified term "Pre-evangelism evangelism."

My thought is that what you do prior to traditional evangelism (the telling others about Jesus, The Gospel, etc.) or pre-evangelism is, in effect, a form of evangelism preached with one's life and not necessarily one's words about God. This approach towards those who are far from faith where one does not lead with the story of Jesus, faith, or The Gospel but instead establishes relationship. No sermon is preached, and no spiritual advice is given. This approach requires the humility to learn the other person's story, dreams, hurts, and hang-ups and enjoy their company before suggesting the way of Jesus.

A metaphor for pre-evangelism evangelism could be the clearing and tilling of the ground/establish relationship (pre-evangelism evangelism) ahead of planting seeds/having faith conversations (pre-evangelism), and, finally, watering the seeds/presentation of Jesus (evangelism) before God produces the miracle of germination and growth/salvation.

Clearing Ground (Pre-evangelism evangelism):	Establish relationship
Planting Seeds (Pre-evangelism):	Conversations about faith and beliefs
Watering the seeds (Evangelism):	Share Jesus & The Gospel
Germination (Salvation):	God's work of new life

I use the term pre-evangelism evangelism periodically throughout this work when referring to the effort of The Loft. There is no evangelistic agenda, there is no Romans Road approach. There is only the opportunity to connect in an authentic way with another human and do life together. Once the

¹ Barna Group, "Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the next Generation: A Barna Report Produced in Partnership with Impact 360 Institute," USA: Barna Group, 2018.

bridge of relationship is built between a person of faith and someone who does not claim the Christian faith, Jesus can eventually walk across.

Third Space (sometimes referred to as the “Third Place”) A term coined in the 1980s by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, which describes a location, outside of home and work, where a person can gather simply for the life-giving experience of community, friendships, conversations, and vitality.² I use this term to describe The Loft, a place where Generation Z can gather to build relationships, have fun and insightful experiences, and potentially learn spiritual truths.

² Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts and How They Get You Through the Day* (Brooklyn, NY: Paragon House, 1989).

Research Method

This Doctoral Project utilized a blended research and design methodology called “Collaborative Design for Ministry and Nonprofit Contexts.” In Collaborative Design, practitioners work with stakeholder representatives to address a Need, Problem, or Opportunity (NPO) in their context. Using a combination of bibliographic resources, local knowledge derived from stakeholder Workshops, and an iterative process of continuous adjustment using just enough feedback information at each juncture of development, practitioners produce an application-oriented Project that seeks to effect Christ-centered change.

Abstract

It is an alarming but indisputable fact that the vast majority of Generation Z, specifically those between ages 18 and 25, are not attending and/or not interested in the faith or beliefs of the American Protestant Church today. Studies show that the Western Christian church is losing touch with an entire generation and that reality is the driving force behind this research project.

We know from research conducted for this Doctoral Project, as well as from multiple academic and sociological studies that members of Generation Z are often interested in spirituality but are either ignorant or highly skeptical of organized religion. Along with the culturally preconceived idea that the Christian Church is narrow-minded, outdated, and intolerant, this poses a significant problem for faith leaders attempting to reach Generation Z.

While formulating this Doctoral Project, I asked: "How can faith leaders connect with this generation in a relevant, viable, and appealing way, which could result in healthy relationships and, ultimately, point young adults to Jesus?" "Could the Church model Jesus in such a way that young adults become curious about faith and relationship in Jesus?" "If so, how and where?"

I will present the idea, proven by data and testing, that the creation of a third space model (named "The Loft") in which entertaining, interactive, and enlightening activities that appeal to Generation Z are regularly hosted in a neutral, non-threatening environment with a focus on building relationships could be a place where the Holy Spirit could use these authentic relationships to change lives and lead participants to Jesus ultimately.

Introduction

The Loft: Where Gen Z Goes to Build Relationships and Discover Spiritual Truths comprises a physical location in the arts district of Downtown Rockford that hosts programs and events, designed to attract and create a welcoming atmosphere for members of Generation Z (specifically ages 18 to 25), utilizing a non-threatening “pre-evangelism evangelism” strategy. The Loft is managed and funded through City First Church, with programs peer-led by the church’s young adult leaders in a “third space” setting. The purpose of holding events in a neutral space is to overcome the pervasive trend of Gen Z members not attending, being involved in, or caring about the American Protestant Church or the Christian faith. Through the ongoing process of hosting events, gatherings, and activities to build relationships with unchurched young adults, we will help them discover spiritual truths that ultimately will open doors to Jesus Christ.

Discovery

I have been interested in the spiritual development of the youngest generation for all my adult life. My journey leading to this Doctoral Project can be tracked to 1991 when I entered vocational ministry. I began to work in youth ministry as a youth pastor at the same church where I am now the Senior Pastor, Rockford First, affiliated with the Assembly of God denomination. The church, since renamed City First Church to reflect its multi-campus, multi-city outreach, has grown in the last decade to include four locations, with the broadcast campus in Rockford, a branch in Cape Coral, Florida, and two “God Behind Bars” prison campuses in Dixon, Illinois, and Bowling Green, Florida. In addition, we have multiple City First Anywhere online locations around the world.

One of my first pastoral outreaches for teens and young adults was starting a small group for high school students. In 1993, I founded a post-high school discipleship program called the Rockford Master’s Commission (now named the City First Leadership College), primarily for ministry training but also for teaching life skills and leadership training in the global marketplace. It started as a one-year discipleship training but expanded to offer up to four years of residential ministry training and advanced discipleship skills to prepare students to work in leadership roles, whether in vocational ministry or the secular marketplace. This program grew from 16 students in the first year to 26 in the second year, and by 1999 we had more than 170 individuals enrolled in the program who came primarily from the United States but also from as far away as England, Belgium, Mexico, and Africa.

My ministry was primarily focused on youth and young adults from 1990 until 2007 when I was named Senior Pastor of Rockford First. Although my roles and responsibilities had changed, I continued to feel a deep-seated need to help teens and young adults, those in the youngest age range that today are known as “Generation Z.” As a minister in the Christian Church, my ultimate goal is for these young adults to come to a life-changing faith in Jesus, while also discovering the purpose that God has for their life. I want to see them experience this revelation about finding their life’s purpose, then help them launch into their futures with the enthusiasm and ability to become “world-changers,” a term we used in the 1990s.

Design

Fifteen years after becoming the Senior Pastor of the church, my passion for the youngest generation remains undiminished. When I entered the doctoral program at Portland Seminary and was asked to pick an NPO (Need, Problem, and Opportunity), I immediately thought of the youngest generation and their lack of interest in, or awareness of, and in some cases, aversion to, the American Protestant church. My passion for this NPO at first centered on a wider age range, from 18 to 35, but as I conducted my Doctoral Program research, I began to narrow the scope to the oldest members of Generation Z, who at the time of this writing are those between the ages of 18 and 25. This was done to avoid mixing Gen Z with the youngest members of the Millennial Generation after I discovered the significant disparity in what the two generations value, not just spiritually but in life. For example, one of the individuals I interviewed early in my research was 34 years old, married, and working full-time at Starbucks. Their values and dreams were vastly different from those of an 18-year-old stockholder still in school and did not yet know what their career would be.

I also chose to narrow my research to the American Protestant Church, excluding the Catholic faith primarily because I don't have firsthand experience with it but also because it has its own distinct structure and culture. Another reason not to include the Catholic Church is that my research is designed to benefit leaders in Protestant Christianity, whether in churches or parachurch organizations, from mainline denominations such as Lutherans and United Methodists, as well as Baptists, Pentecostals, and non-denominational Christian churches.

This has been an extremely fulfilling three years of study and research because I have learned firsthand that Gen Z is a generation with vast potential. They are a spiritual generation but not in traditional ways, such as professing a personal faith in Jesus Christ. They are curious about the spiritual and even the supernatural realms, but not from the standard Christian worldview. This provides the church an exciting opportunity to connect with Gen Z and introduce them to authentic faith in Jesus. At the same time, we have a critical mandate to learn and understand how Gen Z views the world, faith, spirituality, and life in general because if we fail to do so, we will miss the opportunity to help this generation learn Christian and Biblical truths and connect with Jesus, which would leave the American Protestant Church potentially one generation away from extinction, or at best, irrelevant.

I discovered through my Doctoral Project research that for Generation Z, relationship is vital. Personal invitations are paramount to reaching this generation -- the first to have grown up spending many hours per day with their eyes on a screen and conducting many interactions remotely through digital chats, texts, and direct messages. Many seem eager to engage in personal relationships rather than today's distant, digitized interactions.

After considering several options to approach an NPO for my Doctoral Program, including writing a book or hosting an educational and instructive website about the church and Gen Z, I chose to pursue an in-person, relationship-building outreach with *The Loft: Where Gen Z Goes to Build*

Relationships and Discover Spiritual Truths, providing a neutral, non-church, “third space” facility in downtown Rockford’s arts district.

Initially, when considering leasing The Loft, I had a different idea for utilizing the space. I envisioned it as a creative workspace for the executive team of City First Church. But as I was simultaneously researching my NPO for the Doctoral Program, it quickly became clear to me that The Loft was ideally suited to host Gen Z gatherings.

In the Fall of 2021, I began discussions on how to develop this third space to effectively host activities that would appeal to Generation Z. By January 2022, a lease was signed on the building. It was not in a church- or Christian-friendly location; to the contrary, The Loft is located in a culturally liberal, arts-centered community where many residents have an aversion to Christianity.

In the Fall of 2021, an interior decorator was asked to create an atmosphere that was inviting to Gen Z and did so pro bono; affordable furniture was purchased in early 2022 to make the facility functional; the building was cleaned and painted; meetings were held with Gen Z leaders to discuss prospective programs; and we began posting promotions on social media to introduce young adults to what The Loft was all about.

In June 2022, a “soft opening” was conducted by offering access to The Loft from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. every Monday for students and young adults to study and/or work at the facility with free wi-fi and complimentary coffee in a cozy, comfortable setting. No strings were attached except that participants were required to register to access the internet.

Within the first few months, we learned that the open workspace concept, which we thought would have a strong appeal to Generation Z, needed to be revised. We found that many members of Gen Z hold jobs that do not require an office setting, such as baristas or work in other service-oriented fields, and that college students preferred the convenience of using their campus libraries or study areas rather than traveling to downtown Rockford. We reduced the Monday open workspace hours to noon to 5 p.m. in September 2022, then phased it out entirely in January 2023.

I also learned that The Loft needed to improve its usage of social media to promote events successfully and to concentrate our marketing efforts on TikTok and Instagram, which I discovered are the apps of choice among Gen Z. Along with creating savvy social media promotions, we found that it was beneficial to increase the number of personal invitations and relational connections between The Loft’s Gen Z leaders and those who would attend events at The Loft. It was also discovered that if young “influencers,” those with large followings on social media or in the community, would come to The Loft, other people would show up. Gen Z is not unlike previous generations in that people tend to follow leaders in their peer group.

I learned the difficult lesson that relying on Gen Z to follow through on their commitments can lead to disappointment for those attending, as well as the leaders in the 18-to-25 age range. I discovered that canceling last minute or not following through on commitments is normative for this age group. For example, the team scheduled a successful young business entrepreneur to lead a workshop on

"pop-up" stores, their area of expertise. However, that Gen Z entrepreneur canceled the night before the event without an explanation.

While the physical location of The Loft has been positive for many of our intended goals, including providing a neutral space that fits Gen Z's expectations for style and function, I have encountered several unanticipated negatives. For one, the artists who use the ground floor studio in the building demonstrated their dislike of religious groups by placing outright anti-Christian messages and/or offensive artwork in visible locations for people visiting The Loft, such as the stairs and windows that people pass on their way to The Loft. Also, neighbors who live in nearby apartments have complained about the noise generated at some of our gatherings. In both cases, our young adult leaders have met or will meet with the people involved to listen carefully to their concerns and defuse any animosity or ill will. We have already seen progress.

On the positive side, we have found that the neutral setting of The Loft has removed some, if not all, of the walls of anxiety, trepidation, and resistance that Gen Z often feels when invited to an event that would be held at a religious facility, due to their lack of familiarity or negative feelings toward organized religion and faith.

A critical learning experience has been to realize that despite our church foundation and Christian worldview, we cannot proselytize these individuals who visit The Loft or overtly try to get them to attend City First Church. The goal must be, quite simply, to build relationships. Any other approach at this stage of the project would alienate members of Gen Z. These relationships are best built at gatherings. For example, social gatherings, such as holiday parties for July 4th, Halloween, and New Year's Eve, have drawn the largest number of participants, with approximately 100 attending a Halloween costume party on October 31, 2022.

STAKEHOLDERS AND ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

At our first stakeholder meeting, I interviewed individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 before narrowing the demographic to 18 to 25, focusing on a Gen Z subset that shares many values, life situations, and long-term hopes and dreams. When it came to choosing stakeholders, a priority was to consult a diverse group of people, not only racially and ethnically but also regarding upbringing.

Secondly, I sought to conduct one-on-one interviews with people who have a finger on the pulse of Gen Z. I, therefore, interviewed, for example, a professor with a Ph.D. who lives in the liberal state of Oregon and, with his work in college classrooms, has become very familiar with Generation Z. Another stakeholder was a Christian communicator from Dallas, Texas, who spends half of his time in the secular marketplace, consulting for Fortune 500 companies, and the other half working in the faith world. He has a heart for the youngest generation that lives in Dallas, which is an overall conservative area.

I also interviewed a Christian researcher in Franklin, Tennessee, who has studied and conducted polls on faith issues for Barna Research, an evangelical Christian polling firm and publishing company. This stakeholder has written several books and leads think tank gatherings, bringing together some of the greatest minds inside and outside the faith world to discuss social issues and

constructs. Lastly, I interviewed a church researcher who lives in Toronto, Canada, to seek his insights on what he has seen at churches both in the United States and Canada regarding trends relating to the youngest generation and their participation in, or aversion to, church.

The stakeholders in my Doctoral Project ranged from liberal to conservative, from American to Canadian, and from those working in the global secular marketplace to those immersed in church and faith-based organizations.

Delivery

Through my research and experience, The Loft's purpose has been refined to that of "pre-evangelism evangelism." I see it as tilling the ground before the planting of seeds (pre-evangelism). Evangelism would be for those who water the seeds, and while our goal is for God to produce the miracle of germination (new life) and growth, I believe that is something only God can do.

At The Loft, we are not holding planned talks and events about God and faith, although that may come up in casual one-on-one or group conversations. We are tilling the ground of relationships. Let's game together. Let's talk sneakers together. Let's gather and learn to cook Indian food. This is how we see The Loft fulfilling its purpose, by building bridges of relationship that Jesus Christ can eventually walk across.

Moving forward, we plan to hold at least three events or activities per month at The Loft starting in April 2023, with a goal of hosting a total of 30 events by January 2024. Programs discussed thus far include pop-up markets, video gaming nights, a creative collaboration think tank, coffee tasting sessions, videographer workshops, songwriting workshops, mental health workshops, cooking classes, specialty food events, an artist workshop, photography workshops, sewing workshop, college football gameday parties, and free photo shoots for guests to use on their TikTok and Instagram apps.

In March 2023, we have scheduled a full day of planning with The Loft's Gen Z leadership team to evaluate how The Loft has been doing, both positives and negatives, and what we can do to improve our efforts in the future.

In June 2023, we plan to launch the website, www.TheLoft815.com, which will include photos, videos, and a calendar of events, so that Gen Z viewers will be able to use their smartphones and computers to see and understand what The Loft is, something this youngest generation requires before committing to an in-person visit.

We will hand out survey cards to participants at The Loft events, with four simple questions for them to answer quickly, easily, and anonymously, with a designated space for them to write down any ideas, observations, or suggestions they wish to share.

In July 2023, we will create a line item in the City First Church budget to provide sufficient funding to sustain The Loft for three fiscal years through July 2026. I will have City First Church create a "Loft" budget line in the church's general budget, which will be for the ongoing expenses of The

Loft. We plan on funding this effort for at least three years, as this is an outreach/mission effort into uncharted territory and is unlikely to generate any income on its own. Like any launch of a new ministry effort, it will take time and multiple years to become fully established and financially self-sufficient. City First Church considers The Loft a part of their missional strategy.

SUMMARY

My long-term goals for The Loft extend far beyond when this Doctoral Project is finished, with the hope of fine-tuning details for hosting events, activities, gatherings, and workshops that more effectively and efficiently appeal to members of Generation Z in years and decades to come. We seek to build on our successes and evaluate the challenges and shortcomings as we hone our pre-evangelism evangelism strategy. I will meet with Gen Z team leaders regularly and review the feedback from participants through confidential surveys as well as from informal conversations.

I believe The Loft will achieve the goal of effectively reaching an ever-increasing number of Generation Z members in the Rockford area. Through our website, www.TheLoft815.com, as well as on-site visits by church and parachurch leaders, we will provide a real-life working model that can be replicated in communities across the country and around the world. While The Loft is a physical space in an urban arts district in Rockford, Illinois, the concept, and methodology can be reproduced in virtually any venue appropriate to the local context of where Gen Z members live, from an outbuilding on a ranch in Wyoming to an on-campus rec room at a university.

Doctoral Project

Introduction

The Loft: Where Gen Z Goes to Build Relationships and Discover Spiritual Truths comprises a physical location in the arts district of Downtown Rockford that hosts programs and events designed to attract and feel welcoming to members of Generation Z (specifically ages 18 to 25) based on a “pre-evangelism evangelism” strategy. The Loft was created to be a peer-led effort in a neutral “third space” setting for the purpose of overcoming the pervasive trend of Gen Z members not attending, being involved in, or even caring about the Christian faith or adherence to the American Protestant Church. Through the ongoing process of hosting events and gatherings, along with a priority on building relationships with Gen Z participants, I believe we will open doors to faith in Jesus Christ and, potentially, involvement in his church.

Presentation of the Project

The Loft has provided a non-church, secular space in Downtown Rockford with free Wi-Fi, food, and coffee for Gen Z guests to use for work or study and to attend programs. The building was initially open from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. every Monday as a work/study facility, with visitors required to sign up with a membership name to access the internet for accountability purposes.

In addition to providing a space to work, The Loft has hosted events and programs such as (video) gamers nights, pop-up shops, a “Loft Talk” on women in leadership, and Halloween and New Year’s Eve parties. Future plans include workshops on such topics as videography, Instagram/Tik Tok marketing, and managing finances, all geared for people in the 18-to-25 age range. These events and gatherings have been promoted on social media and through word of mouth and are led by young adult leaders who are a part of City First Church in Rockford, Illinois, who are in or close to the Gen Z age range.

The goal of The Loft is to make Gen Z visitors feel comfortable in a non-threatening, non-church setting and build relationships that will ultimately inspire them to think about faith issues and become open to the Christian faith.

Introduction

The Loft: Where Gen Z Goes to Build Relationships and Discover Spiritual Truths was inspired by my three decades of serving in various pastoral roles at Rockford First Church, since renamed City First Church, to reflect its multi-campus, multi-city outreach. My roles at City First, which is affiliated with the Assembly of God denomination, have included the role of youth pastor, founding the Rockford Master’s Commission (now City First Leadership College), and now as senior pastor of City First Church, a multisite church headquartered in Rockford, Illinois, with branches in Cape Coral, Florida, two “God Behind Bars” prison campuses in Dixon, Illinois, and Bowling Green, Florida, along with multiple City First Anywhere online locations around the world. However, my passion for over thirty years has been to see the young adult generation find faith in Jesus.

We know from research conducted for this Doctoral Project and numerous academic and sociological studies that members of Generation Z (ages 18 to 25) are often interested in spirituality. Still, most are unaware or skeptical of organized religion. Their aversion seems toward organized religion, and they perceive Christian beliefs as archaic, irrelevant, homophobic, xenophobic, and narrow-minded. These young adults generally do not have negative feelings about Jesus; they simply know little or nothing about him.

It became a priority of mine to find ways to effectively counter this disturbing, growing chasm between the church and an entire generation of young adults. There is no alternative but to give it everything we can because, as I often say, the faith that has changed our lives is just one generation away from extinction.

Therefore, I started The Loft, a neutral third space spanning three stories in a brick building in Downtown Rockford's arts district, because it is well-suited to attract those in the 18-to-25 age demographic who would never attend an event held in a traditional church. Since The Loft opened in June 2022, I, along with a small, hand-picked team of young adults at City First Church, most of whom are a part of the Gen Z demographic, have been strategizing about the types of programs and events that would be most effective in getting Gen Z members to attend and participate.

I have been tweaking, refining, and/or re-imagining our strategy based on each event or gathering's attendance, as well as from surveys of participants, informal feedback, and team debriefings. We are also working on using better social media that Gen Z members use most often, specifically TikTok and Instagram, to promote The Loft and its events.

In January 2023, I secured a website, **www.TheLoft815.com**, that will be up and running by the summer of 2023 to provide photos, videos, links, and other information about The Loft so that anyone who is interested or considering attending an event will be able to see exactly what it looks like – including a look at its gathering spaces and feel more comfortable and confident about attending an activity at The Loft.

Assessment

I have worked with benchmarks that follow the SMART format – Specific, Measurable, Assignable, Realistic, and Time-Related. These benchmarks, also called critical success indicators, have guided my work on The Loft project from the initial vision to the course corrections I have made along the way -- and will continue to make -- based on real-world successes, shortcomings, and our overall forward-looking vision.

Strategic Benchmarks

- **Open a neutral, non-church facility in Rockford** in a location that appeals to Generation Z members with little to no church background or involvement. This was achieved in June 2022 with a "soft opening" of The Loft in Downtown Rockford's arts district. The loft is a 3800 square foot facility in the downtown district of Rockford, Illinois.

East-facing seating area:





Front entrance to The Loft on the sixth floor:



Southwest-facing seating area:





Commercial kitchen used for food preparation:



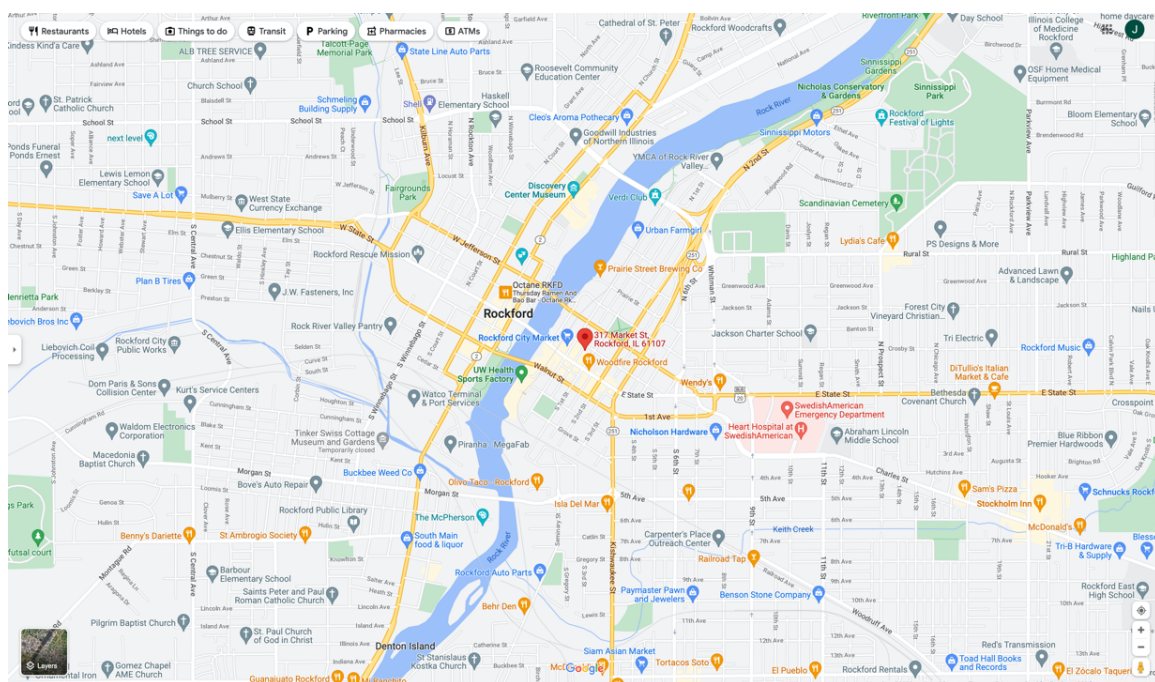


Rooftop gathering space:





Location of The Loft in downtown Rockford, Illinois (Picture - Google Maps):



Exterior of The Loft building (Picture - Urban Equities Realty):



- **Hold photo shoots and video sessions** promoting and explaining The Loft for use on websites, social media, and possibly, mainstream advertising media.

Photo shoot held in June 2022:





- **Open The Loft on a specific day**, with free Wi-Fi and coffee that would attract Gen Z members who need a place to work or study in quiet. This was achieved by opening The Loft on Mondays from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. starting in July 2022.

Participants in the Monday open workspace:



- **Through events, gatherings, and informal meetings,** foster relationship-building between The Loft team and Gen Z participants, as well as between the Gen Z participants themselves.

Summer of 2022:







- **Create an atmosphere of trust** where non-churched participants feel comfortable to discuss their views on faith, religion, spirituality, and the church.
- **Hold workshops, think tanks, and lectures on topics of interest** that are helpful to Gen Z, bringing in experts on topics such as videography, small-business entrepreneurship, farm-to-table cooking, and women in leadership.

Creative think tank at The Loft with fashion influencers in the city (June 28, 2022):

(Pictures - <https://www.kidsdreamheretoo.com>)





- **Hold social gatherings such as picnics on the roof of The Loft,** gaming events, and parties for holidays such as Halloween, the 4th of July, and New Year's Eve.

Summer 2022 rooftop party:

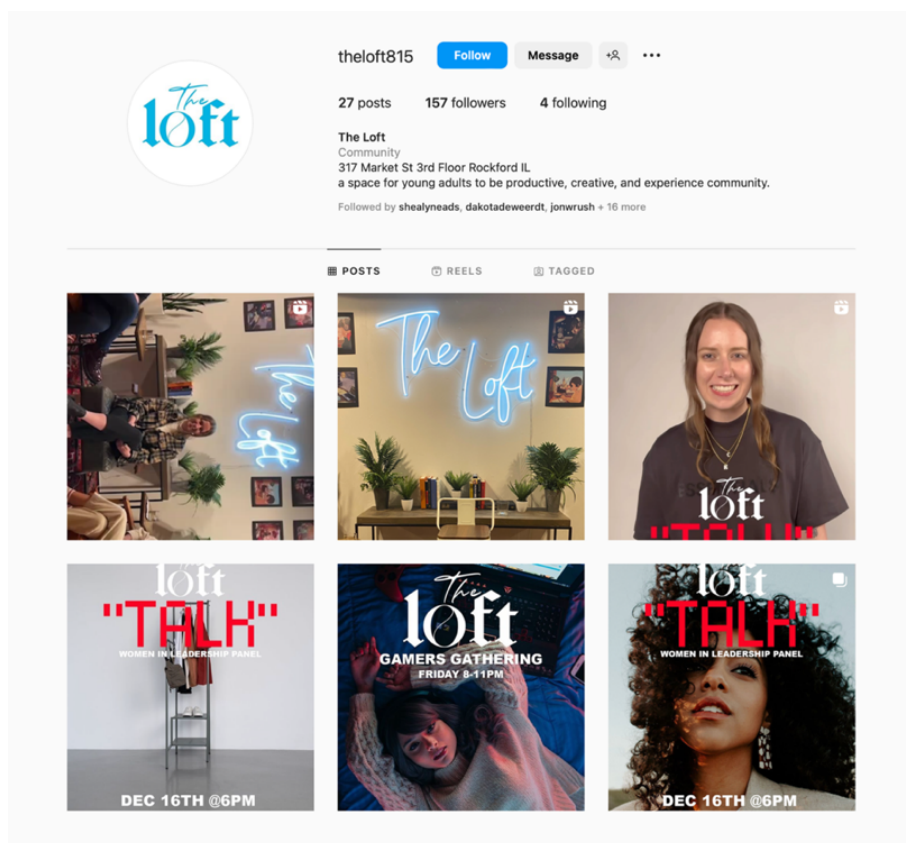


- **Continue to survey Gen Z participants** to help refine The Loft's efforts and effectiveness.

Performance Benchmarks

- **The location of The Loft** has been extremely positive for its intended goals, including a neutral space with a look and design that fits Gen Z's style expectations, located above an art studio. However, we have encountered several negatives that were unanticipated, such as:
 - The artists who use the ground floor studio have placed anti-Christian and/or offensive artwork in visible locations, such as stairs and windows that confront people on their way to The Loft.
 - Neighbors who live in nearby apartments have complained about the noise generated at our events.
- **The Monday open space for work or study has not been successful**, with less than a dozen people using it on an average day, most of them being church insiders. At first, we scaled back the hours to noon to 5 p.m., but as of January 2023, we are phasing out the Monday open space concept. We have found that many in Gen Z do not have jobs requiring office space, such as working at restaurants or other service/labor jobs. Also, we found that many college students prefer the convenience of using their nearby campus library for such purposes.
- **Marketing efforts need improvement.** There was no "buzz-worthiness" to the opening of The Loft. We plan to improve and fine-tune our social media presentations, specifically on TikTok and Instagram, to increase the number of The Loft's followers and "influencers," with a goal of surpassing 1,000 for each platform.

The Loft Instagram account, January 2023.





- **Create a new series of social media and advertising promotions** that showcase The Loft's professionally designed, warm, and appealing atmosphere so that Gen Z members can learn about the venue online and be more open to attending activities. We became aware that we did not showcase our facility sufficiently and learned that Generation Z members are reluctant to go somewhere without knowing what to expect through word of mouth and researching it online.
- **Plan to host 30 events and activities at** The Loft by January 2024. The Loft will host a variety of events and activities and determine which types of events/activities attract the most Gen Z participants. Such activity ideas are:
 - Pop-up shops
 - Video gaming nights

- Creative collaboration think tank
 - Workshops for Entrepreneurial individuals
 - Coffee tasting events
 - Videographer workshop
 - Songwriting workshop
 - Mental health workshop
 - Fourth of July party
 - New Year's Eve party
 - Halloween costume party
 - Holiday gatherings
 - Cooking classes/Specialty food events
 - Artist workshop
 - Photography workshop
 - Sowing workshops
 - How-to-build-your-brand workshop
 - Free photoshoot for use on Instagram and TikTok
- **Create a sense of community and belonging** with at least 50 people coming to The Loft for various events on a frequent basis, each attending at least once a month. The goal would be to have Gen Z participants often return to Loft events or activities and consider themselves a part of The Loft community. Once a participant is frequenting the Loft, I believe a relationship can be established, and conversations about life, goals, dreams, and faith can be explored.
 - **Seek to see Gen Z members who attend The Loft become connected with a local church.** We have seen success reaching that goal as Alejandro, who came to the Halloween party at The Loft, is now attending City First Church with his wife. The ultimate goal would be to have Gen Z participants a) find faith in Jesus and b) begin attending City First Church.
 - **Create a line item in City First Church budget in July 2023** to provide sufficient funding to sustain The Loft for three fiscal years through July 2026. I will have City First Church create a "Loft" budget line in the church's general budget, which will be for the ongoing expense of The Loft. We plan on funding this effort for at least three years, as this is an outreach/mission effort into uncharted territory. Like any launch of a new ministry effort, it will take time and multiple years to become fully established. City First Church will consider The Loft a part of their mission's strategy.
 - **We learned the benefits of using technology to complement - not replace -- live, in-person events.** When a Women in Leadership panel discussion was scheduled for December 16, 2022, a major snowstorm hit Rockford that night. The in-person event had to be canceled, but the online live-streaming presentation drew more than 70 participants. Therefore, I have concluded that The Loft must better use social media platforms to drive participants to in-person gatherings.

- **Ask local influencers to participate** in events and gatherings, regardless of their faith, which will attract Gen Z participants to The Loft. As I have discovered in over 17 years of youth and young adult ministry (pastoring those age groups), when influencers participate in events or attend a gathering, others tend to follow. Therefore, I believe that inviting local influencers to participate in events and activities at The Loft will, in turn, draw other people. We will vet which influencers we invite, assuring they do not have negative or harmful influence if they do not share the Christian faith.
- **We learned when it comes to engagement and participation of Gen Z, everything rises and falls on relationship and personal invites.** Although a social media presence and attractional events are important, Gen Z is inundated with messaging vying for their attention and attendance. An effort, like The Loft, can be one of many things competing for their attention. Therefore, we have discovered that personal connection, building relationships, and consistent individual invites are key to building attendance at Loft events and gatherings.

Project Launch Plan

Doctoral Project Description

The American Church has a problem: "The lack of interest and involvement of Generation Z, specifically ages 18-25, in the American Protestant faith."

It is an alarming but indisputable fact that the vast majority of Generation Z -- specifically those between the ages of 18 and 25 -- are not attending and/or not interested in the American Protestant Church today. If we do not engage people in this age range, we are one generation away from extinction when it comes to a practicing Christian faith. The fact that the Christian church is losing touch with an entire generation is the driving force behind this project. The goal is to find an answer to the question, "How can faith leaders connect with this generation in a relevant, viable, and appealing way, which could result in healthy relationships and, ultimately, point young adults to Jesus?"

Through three years of extensive research, numerous interviews, and the exploration of various prototypes, this project has been refined to "The Loft: Where Gen Z Goes to Build Relationships and Discover Spiritual Truths." The Loft is a neutral, non-church-affiliated third space in Downtown Rockford, Illinois that hosts activities and events of interest to Generation Z as a "pre-evangelism evangelism" outreach. While The Loft is a physical space in the urban downtown arts district of Rockford, Illinois, the concept, and methodology can be reproduced in virtually any venue appropriate to the local context of where Gen Z members live, from an outbuilding on a ranch in Wyoming to a community center located in a neighborhood in Philadelphia.

Audience

The audience for The Loft project consists of church, parachurch, and faith leaders interested in engaging local Generation Z adults, ages 18 to 25, and introducing them to an authentic faith in Jesus. This model can be utilized by individual churches and ministries, or on an interdenominational or a nondenominational group basis, with the purpose of coming together to reach a generation for Christ.

Development Plan

- Spring 2021:
 - Secured a year-to-year lease for a loft at 317 Market Street in downtown Rockford, Illinois, for a potential space to host events and gatherings to attract Gen Z individuals.
- Summer 2021:

- Worked with a friend who owns an interior design agency in Rockford, Illinois, and a small group of Gen Z individuals to imagine the furnishing and use of the space.
- Fall 2021:
 - Began discussions on creating a formalized neutral third space to host events aimed at Generation Z.
- January 2022:
 - Designated City First Church's Young Adult Pastor to oversee The Loft project.
- Spring 2022:
 - Signed a lease agreement on The Loft property for one more year.
 - Cleaned and painted the multi-floored Loft space.
 - Purchased furniture and sundry items to make The Loft a functional space.
 - Met with young adult leaders to discuss possible programs, events, and activities for the first year of The Loft.
 - Initiated promoting The Loft through social media.
- June 2022:
 - Conducted a "soft opening" of The Loft by providing a space every Monday in which students and young adults could study and/or work, with free wi-fi and complimentary coffee.
 - Started Thursday and Friday night gatherings at The Loft to offer workshops and seminars.
- July 2022:
 - Held the first holiday social event at The Loft to celebrate Independence Day.
- September 2022:
 - Scaled back the hours of the Monday work/study spaces due to lower-than-expected usage.

- October 2022:
 - Hosted a costume party on Halloween night.

- November 2022:
 - Hosted Gaming Night.
 - Hosted a pre- and post-Stroll on State gatherings on Thanksgiving Saturday.

- December 2022:
 - Hosted a women's entrepreneurial leadership seminar.
 - Celebrated New Year's Eve with a party for Gen Z participants.

- January 2023:
 - Phased out the Monday open space for work/study, realizing that was not a service that meets the needs of Generation Z.
 - Secured a website, www.TheLoft815.com, to market and promote the site and its events.
 - Met with The Loft young adult leaders to discuss strategies and evaluate successes and shortcomings of events that have already been held.

- March 2023:
 - Begin holding biweekly meetings with the church team that is hosting The Loft, with the senior executive pastor in attendance or me.
 - Begin holding at least three events each month with a goal of hosting a total of 30 events by January 2024.
 - Activities being discussed include:
 - Pop-up markets
 - Video gaming nights
 - Creative collaboration think tank
 - Workshops for entrepreneurial individuals
 - Coffee tasting events
 - Videographer workshop
 - Songwriting workshop
 - Mental health workshop
 - Independence Day party
 - Halloween costume party
 - New Year's Eve party

- Holiday gatherings such as a "Friendsgiving."
 - Cooking classes/Specialty food events
 - Artist workshop
 - Photography workshop
 - Sewing workshop
 - College Football gatherings
 - How-to-build-your-brand workshop
 - Free photo shoots for use on TikTok and Instagram
- Hold a full day of planning with Generation Z leadership team to evaluate how The Loft's efforts thus far and schedule upcoming events (listed above).
- Increase efforts to promote events via social media, specifically TikTok and Instagram which we have learned are the two outlets most popular among Gen Z.
- Ask local influencers, after a vetting process, to participate in events and gatherings, regardless of their faith, as my experience has taught me that Generation Z members tend to follow the lead of influencers.
- June 2023:
 - Hand out survey cards with no more than four questions for The Loft participants to answer anonymously, with a space for them to write down any ideas or suggestions.
 - Launch the website www.TheLoft815.com with photos, videos, and a calendar of events.
 - Host three events.
- July 2023:
 - Host an Independence Day party.
 - Pop-Up Market for sneakerheads.
 - Host three events.
- August 2023:
 - Formalize a budget through City First Church that will fund The Loft for the next three years.
 - Survey participants about their views of the events and gatherings.
 - Hold the second full day of planning with the Generation Z leadership team for ongoing evaluation.
 - Host three events.

- Fall and Winter 2023:
 - Host three events per month.
 - Survey participants about their views of the events and gatherings.
 - Host a series of meetings with the Executive Team and Young Adult Ministry of City First Church to create a resource for other churches and parachurch ministries.
- January 2024:
 - Plan a one-day meeting with The Loft leadership to determine which of the 30 events we hosted were effective, and plan accordingly for 2024. Also, determine if Gen Z individuals are becoming engaged through Loft efforts and if any are finding faith.
 - Host three events.

Development Process

"The Loft: Where Gen Z Goes to Build Relationships and Discover Spiritual Truths" has been in operation for eight months since the "soft opening" of The Loft in June 2022. We have learned from experience what works, what almost works, and what doesn't work. We plan to expand on our successes and evaluate the challenges and shortcomings as we hone ongoing workshops and events and develop new programs and activities. We will meet with team leaders regularly and solicit participant feedback through confidential, anonymous surveys for their positive and negative insights into the events they've attended.

Through regularly scheduled staff meetings, ongoing evaluations by church leaders, and honest, confidential feedback from participants, we believe The Loft will achieve the goal of effectively reaching growing numbers of Generation Z in the Rockford area. Additionally, the creation of a forthcoming resource and on-site visits by church and parachurch leaders provide a working model that can be replicated in communities across the country.

Appendix A— Milestone 1 The NPO Charter

PERSONAL RESEARCH MANIFESTO

I commit to embracing objectivity, creativity, and humility in my research by gathering data from diverse perspectives to explain why adults, ages 18 to 35, have a disinterest in church.

NPO STATEMENT

Problem: The lack of interest and involvement of adults, ages 18-35, in the American Protestant church.

NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

My research will include interviewing individuals in this demographic, questioning experts who focus on behaviors and mindsets of those in this age range, and studying the beliefs of churches and organizations who are engaging this segment of the population. I will focus less on church methodological solutions and more on theology, beliefs, and decision-making which could result in engaging these adults.

Approximately \$2,500 has been invested in facility rental, food, and honoraria for the Stakeholders and One-on-One Interviewees. An estimated \$5,000 will be invested in future interviews, honoraria, potential travel, and dinner gatherings with unchurched individuals.

NPO CONTEXT

My NPO context will include researching American adults ranging in ages from 18 to 35 who are "unchurched" or significantly "de-churched" (those who have not consistently attended a church in the last ten years.) It will be essential to investigate these individuals' beliefs, worldviews, and lifestyle trends in various parts of the nation, not isolating my research to one regional culture. I will research the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of both denominational and non-denominational Protestant churches of various sizes.

It will be important to investigate both younger "Millennials" and older "Generation Z" individuals since both are represented in the age range of 18 to 35 and have somewhat different values and mindsets. It will also be essential to research diverse groups of individuals; having proper racial and gender representation in my study. Lastly, I believe conducting on-going focus group research with unchurched/de-churched individuals will be beneficial.

ROOT CAUSES

My NPO's root causes seemingly stem from a perception of adults, ranging in ages 18 to 35, that the American church is exclusive and non-essential. Combined with a growing mindset in this demographic that truth is highly personalized, institutions cannot be trusted, and those in the church should not only value all beliefs but validated them, is creating a lack of interest. There appears to be much confusion about the importance and benefit of church attendance. Many in the NPO Discovery Workshop perceived the church as "boring" or irrelevant.

Another root cause is the uncomfortableness of attending a church and a lack of understanding of “what to do.” There is a fear of being judged, unwelcomed, or not meeting a spoken or unspoken ethical standard. Additionally, the church is no longer perceived as the only place to find spirituality or connection with “god.” The church is also considered to be too political, lacking diversity, and archaically monolithic.

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

The Stakeholders consisted of a white store manager, a black college student, a white barista, a white nursing student, a white special needs worker, a Hispanic waitress, a black entrepreneur, and two others.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

The One-on-One interviewees include a Juris Doctorate/assistant professor/campus pastor of a Christian university. An author/podcaster/church researcher. An author/pastor of a 15,000-member church successfully reaching this demographic.

3-5 KEY BIBLICAL TEXTS

Galatians 3:25-28 (ESV) But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave^[a] nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Jeremiah 33:3 (ESV) Call to me and I will answer you and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known.

I Corinthians 9:19-23 (ESV) For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

The primary sources will include Leonard Sweet, Professor, Author, and Theologian, George Fox University, Drew University; Peter Leithart, Author, Theologian, President of Theopolis Institute for Biblical, Liturgical, & Cultural Studies in Birmingham, Alabama; Alan Hirsch, co-founder and associate faculty for the M.A. in Missional Church Movements at Wheaton College, Adjunct professor at Asbury Seminary, Fuller Seminary, George Fox Seminary; Christian Smith, American sociologist, William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Sociology at the University of Notre

Dame; A.J Swoboda, Author, Teacher of Biblical studies, theology, and church history at George Fox Evangelical Seminary and Fuller Seminary; Dan Kimball, Author, Director of The ReGeneration Project, Pastor of Vintage Faith Church.

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APPENDIX A

My discovery session was held on October 17, 2020, from 9:00 AM to 11:30 AM, Central Time, at Alchemy Restaurant, 610 N Bell School Road, Rockford, IL 61107. The following were in attendance (Profession/Age):

- Store Manager (35)
- Barista (27)
- College Student (19)
- Special Needs Worker (29)
- Nursing Student (31)
- Waitress (29)
- Waiter (20)
- Entrepreneur/Self-employed (27)
- Unknown employment (20)
- Executive Pastor (Research Assistant)
- Executive Assistant to the Senior Pastor (Research Assistant)
- Administrative Assistant (Research Assistant)
- Administrative Assistant (Research Assistant)
- Myself
- Alchemy restaurant manager (Did not participate in focus group)

The session followed the predetermined format as described in the DMIN 750 syllabus assignments. Coffee, water, tea, and morning snacks were made available. Multiple focus group exercises were conducted. The question the participants came ready to discuss was, "Why do you not attend church?"

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

Gathering in a neutral location of a restaurant, I greeted those who were a part of the focus group and introduced each of the research assistants. I explained the purpose of the gathering and asked that everyone would answer questions honestly and without reservation. As researchers on a church staff, I reassured them that we desired truthfulness, even if it meant the organization, we are a part of is being described critically or unfavorably.

I also explained that if, at any time, for any reason, they decided not to participate, they could dismiss themselves without explanation. We then began a series of prescribed NPO discovery activities, specifically the Empathy Map, The Five Whys, and Four Helpful Questions. In between activities, I proposed the following questions regarding their perception of the church.

- "Have you ever been invited to church, and why did you attend or not attend? If you did attend, why did you stop attending?"
- "If there is a reason for your disinterest in church we have not discussed today, what would that be?"

- "If you could say anything to me, a pastor of a megachurch, what would you say?"
- "What haven't we covered today that you would like to share?"

After the discovery session, I thanked all the participants. Many shared that they enjoyed the experience and appreciated our willingness to listen. As they left, we gifted each participant with \$100.00 for their time.

DISCOVERY STATEMENT

Considering American adults, ages 18 to 35, we've discovered many seemingly have no interest in attending church, which is caused by the perception of the church's exclusivity and irrelevance. If solved, they may engage in a meaningful relationship with Jesus and His Church.

CRITICAL INSIGHTS FROM DISCOVERY WORKSHOP

After the discovery workshop, the research assistants and I met approximately one week later to discuss the findings and review the session minutes.

The Stakeholders:

- Exhibited a fear in coming to the discovery workshop. Some cancelled at the last minute, forcing us to find replacements.
- Needed a direct invite.
- Have differing opinions about church and God.
- Were not atheistic in their beliefs.
- Were overall positive about God but critical or confused about the church.
- Assumed churchgoers were judgmental or critical of them.
- Were intimidated by the thought of attending.
- Felt free to share their opinion once given permission to do so.
- Would attend a church if a direct invitation was given.
- Gave the reason of "not having time to attend church," yet admitted that was an excuse.
- Had difficulty understanding the reason to attend church.
- Had a strong opinion that the church was exclusive.
- Had a perception that those in the church were opinionated about politics, race, gender, and lifestyle.
- Most participants expressed that they enjoyed the discovery workshop.

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW DISCOVERIES

When interviewing the One-on-One participants, the following discoveries were made:

- There are two generations in my study. Younger Millennials and older Generation Z; both have different values and worldviews.
- Churches that have a "belong before you believe" methodology are coming under fire once the attendees discover the "hidden" beliefs, i.e., stance on same-sex attraction. They perceive it as a "bait and switch."
- The demographic in this study is very concerned about equality and justice. Therefore, certain theological stances of the church could be perceived as bigoted, discriminatory, homophobic, etc.
- The demographic in this study wants the church to not only value their beliefs but validate them.
- We are in a post-Christian America, yet most churches are functioning as if it is still a Christian America.
- Many people now find spirituality and peace from sources outside of the church.
- There is a "flattening of the world," where anyone with an opinion and a social media account can not only be listened to but be extremely influential.
- Most "none's" are not atheists.
- Most churches do not make a significant financial investment into reaching this age group.

SYNTHESIS

I found certain similarities between the Stakeholders and the One-on-One interviewees. First, it should be noted that all One-on-One interviewees were people of faith who work with or study those adults between the ages of 18 to 35. Therefore, they adhere to a Christian worldview.

The first similarity was that there is a growing distrust of organized religion and deconstruction of institutions in general. Many Stakeholders expressed skepticism of the church for various reasons; hypocritical actions, handling of money, abuse of power, etc. In general, the Stakeholders and One-on-One interviewees perceived this trend.

Second, the Stakeholders were not atheistic in their beliefs but instead had a belief in "god." The One-on-One interviewees commented that most "none's" are not anti-god or atheistic in the beliefs; they are finding spirituality outside of the church.

Third, the Stakeholders had strong opinions about inclusion and equality. If a church could not accept their lifestyle and beliefs, then that church was narrow-minded and archaic. The One-on-One interviewees commented that the church's stance on "hot topics" like same-sex attraction, immigration, racism, gender equality, politics, etc., has given certain churches a bad taste in the mouths of the demographic in this study.

Fourth, the Stakeholders believed that the church was boring, irrelevant, and non-essential in their lives. The One-on-One interviewees commented that some churches use a methodology

that is reaching a Boomer and (possibly) Gen X'er but not attracting the younger Millennial or older Generation Z individuals.

NEXT STEPS

Areas of further academic research include an investigation into adults' mindsets, values, passions, and worldviews ranging in age from 18 to 35. It will be important to understand how they see the world to comprehend their view of the church. I will need to research data about church attendance in America and look for any trends involving this demographic's engagement with both the local church and God (or their perception of God.) I will gather with my executive team to brainstorm ongoing gatherings of unchurched individuals in various locations to continue listening to this demographic's beliefs about church. I will research church history, especially the early church, to unearth any clues of how the unchurched became open to God and His Church. I will look at various American churches' orthodoxy and orthopraxy to discern overarching wins or misses in reaching this demographic.

DISCOVERY WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

October 17, 2020 - Alchemy 9AM-11:30AM

NPO:

Problem:

Finding ways to make today's Protestant church relevant to young people generally those between the ages of 18-35.

Empathy Map

Hypothetical Scenario:

Imagine with me, if you will, the following scenario. For this demonstration, we are going to use the name Chris, although feel free to insert your own name if this applies to you. Chris is a 28-year-old male. He graduated community college and now lives with a roommate and works at the Chrysler plant. He likes to hang out with friends and go out on the weekends. He tries to pick up overtime hours when available to have more spending money. He has a pretty good relationship with his parents, although they got divorced and remarried after he graduated high school. He remembers his grandparents going to church a lot and attended with his grandparents when he was in elementary school a few times. His parents never really talked about God or went to church while he was growing up, so he doesn't know either. He feels like he is a generally good person. He does no wrong by people, and he thinks good people will go to heaven. He does not feel the need to have to attend church on a Sunday morning. He thinks that is unnecessary and only for those who consider themselves more religious than himself. He probably believes there is a God. Even if he wanted to attend church on Sundays, he thinks he's too busy for that.

Volunteer's Answers:

Says: No time. No need.

Says: I'm not a church goer. Believes God's real but church not an option.

Says: Trying to figure out his life. Is at a point in his life where he actually is looking back at it.

Says: I don't need to go to church because I don't need someone else to dictate how I practice my beliefs.

Says: Church is a bad environment for him. He has other situations to handle other than church.

Says: Chris says he believes in God but is not religious. He does not get caught up in the details of being imperfectly human. Chris says he loves a range of people in all aspects of life including those that do attend church every Sunday.

Says: I'm not a church goer but I love God.

Says: If I already believe, why should I go?

Says: It's not for him. He's too busy. He won't fit in.

Says: He doesn't have the time. It's too much of a commitment. He has school and work. He doesn't want to go alone.

Says: He doesn't have time. Church is just a building/group and you don't need that to know God.

Thinks: Too busy. Not for him.

Thinks: That church is not for him. It's for "religious" people. Religiosity and faith are different things. He has a "connection" with God that doesn't need church. That good people go to heaven.

Thinks: Chris thinks that church has just never been a place for him. He thinks it has just never "worked" out and that one place on one day is such a small aspect of the grandiosity of God. Chris thinks that God is in daily life, not one hour.

Thinks: He may think church is a place where you're told what to do, how to think, what to feel about God and/or other people. Example: Catholic church experience can be very structured in

what you're required to do throughout mass. "The Bible says, 'this' so you need to view situations/people only through a certain lens."

Thinks: He won't fit in. He won't know how to dress. It's too early. It's too long. He won't know how to worship. Things and ideas will be pushed on him.

Thinks: I know I love God. I'll go when I'm not busy. Distracted by other life events because feels it is more important.

Thinks: He's too important to attend church.

Thinks: He's too busy for church.

Thinks: There is no reason to go to church if he already believes.

Thinks: He is also remembering his past and his upbringing. Is uncertain.

Does: Doesn't go. Doesn't come back. Doesn't want to stand up. Finds things to do so that he doesn't have time to go. Tries church and it feels unfamiliar and info overload.

Does: Stays busy. Can do his own on Sunday.

Does: No time. Good person.

Does: Chris does what he can with what he has wherever he is. And currently that is not contained to a church on Sunday.

Does: Doesn't go because he sleeps in and does not want to go.

Does: Not go to church for other reasons. Not want to go to church because he doesn't want to get judged.

Does: Doesn't go because he uses the excuse, he doesn't have any clothes to wear or he'll go to a later service.

Does: He may avoid events that are church supported or initiated. Does other good deeds to replace church.

Does: Avoids going to church. Comes up with reasons why church will not fit into his life. Tries to be a "good person."

Does: Uncertain and trying to figure out life. Doing his own thing.

Feels: Feels like he'll be judged for just now going and hasn't been in a long time.

Feels: Judged by "religious" people. Spiritual, like a good person, like being good is enough.

Feels: Confused

Feels: He may feel confused about church with limited exposure as a child. He may feel indifferent, not finding value or personal relevance to church.

Feels: Chris feels uncomfortable.

Feels: He should not have to go to church, feels like there is no reason to go.

Feels: Feels God's real but church isn't a go-to. Feels unwelcomed.

Feels: Uncomfortable, pressured, confused, overwhelmed, unwelcomed, ideas on lifestyle unwelcomed, like change is being pushed on him.

Feels: Church not good enough. Nervous of what people will think of him. Like he should give his life to God but also has regrets.

Feels: Confused, uncomfortable, not welcome

Summary: What are the common denominators here? Central theme:

Says:

1. No time
 - Time is the excuse but it's not a priority. Therefore, they are not interested in church because you make time for what is priority.
 - I'll make time for church later in life. I want to be relaxed right now, and not worry about it.
 - I don't want to make time for it again because it didn't make me feel good/I didn't have a good experience.
2. No need
 - I believe in God, why should I go? (no need)
 - Church isn't appealing/flashy
 - What's the purpose of going if you can just do all the "church" things at home
 - Worry about being judged or feel anxious towards going
 - Church is overwhelming - a lot of things within the topic.

Thinks:

- Church isn't for him
- He doesn't fit in
- He's too busy

Does:

- Doesn't want to be judged
- Too busy
- Believes he's a good person without church

Feels:

- Unwelcomed
- Judged
- Confused/uncomfortable

No time is the best excuse, we will do it when we are older and have more time.

Nervous, why go when we can pray at home.

Home is my comfort space, worry about how I look.

Question: Have you ever been invited to church and why did you go or not go? If you did end up going to church, why did you stop?

Person 1: Yes, I did not go many times because I do not believe in going to church. I don't see the purpose. I know my own thoughts and don't need someone else telling me things I don't believe. Also, church gets the rep of shoving beliefs down your throat and many people don't like that. I don't go to church because when I was in high school history class, I learned a lot about religion from a long time ago and the stuff I learned made me feel like a lot of it is money and status.

Person 2: Yes. I did go because I trusted my friends, wanted to spend time with them and I was curious what the experience would be like and interested to learn the perspectives of others. I stopped because I don't agree with the business of the church/organized religion. I believe faith and spirituality are a personal experience not to be dictated by someone behind a podium or a congregation of people. Many times, there feels to be a hidden agenda or a judgement. Big churches feel less personal or intimate, not as genuine where you feel seen and more well-known at smaller churches. Judgement should be between you and God versus you and the church.

Person 3: Yes. I have. I didn't attend because I was afraid of being judged by how I look or what I wore. I stopped going consistently to church because I had to take care of responsibilities as I got older, so I just go from time to time.

Person 4: I've been invited to church, and I didn't go because I felt not as accepted as my brothers because I'm less talkative and less relatable. My reason for stopping going to church is because I was intrigued by other things outside of the church.

Person 5: Yes. I didn't go because I felt like I'll be judged or looked as different or not welcomed and seen as lame to my brothers. I stopped because I felt like I was forced as a kid.

Person 6: I was kind of invited. Usually when I am invited, I will go but it also does depend on the intentions of the person.

Person 7: Yes, because I felt like I needed to attend because I was asked, and it was the holidays, and it wouldn't hurt. Self-righteous, abrasive, no support to other groups.

Person 8: Yes. I have been invited and have gone because I felt like I needed it in my life at that moment. I stopped because I felt judged.

Person 9: I have been invited to church. In my youth, I would go, but I was already involved in church and comfortable. After I stopped going to church, I have declined invitations to go because I felt it would be uncomfortable, like I didn't belong anymore, that I was a fraud now, that people knew I had lived "wrong" for so many years. I also have always had a hard time feeling that personal relationship with God, so why keep going to church if I can't attain that? Anxiety.

Summary:

The invite isn't direct or strong, more like if you want to.

Shoving beliefs down your throat, wants money, is boring. That's not for me.

I only go when I feel like that's what I need in my life at the moment.

I grew up in church, when I was younger, I would go. After becoming de-churched, I feel anxious and uncomfortable about going because I know how I should have been living my life. I feel like a fraud for going. I had a panic attack when I went because these people are going to know that I wasn't living my life the way I should have been.

The 5 Whys

Why are most 18-35-year-olds not interested/involved in church?

The 5 Why's Answers

Person 1:

1. They don't want to.
2. They want to live life how they want.
3. It is more fun to have that freedom and not have to live by the rules.
4. They feel like they are being good.
5. Having a personal relationship with God has never been emphasized as the way to salvation, and they have been told that being good and following church rules is the way.

Person 2:

1. They don't want to be seen as lame or busy partying.
2. Attention spans short. Might have a hangover.
3. Monotone. Sits in one spot. Anxiety.
4. Overthinking. Not feeling accepted. Drags on one subject.
5. Not understanding.

Person 3:

1. They are still figuring out life because they have a lot they don't want to confront or deal with.
2. They don't want to deal with it because it's things that hurt or stuff that they still have to overcome.
3. It's hard to overcome because it's deeper issues that sometimes come from our childhood.
4. Things from our childhood (good or bad) have a very big influence in our life as grown-ups. Sometimes we would rather be comfortable.

Person 4:

1. Because they do not believe in God.
2. Because lack of evidence and proof.
3. In history, much of the religion was seen as money and power and lies.
4. Because you had to give money to be a part of the church.
5. This leads people to believe the background of God is false.

Person 5:

1. Not inclusive
2. Self-righteousness
3. Abrasive
4. Boring
5. Not convenient

Person 6:

1. Don't want to be judged/feel uncomfortable
2. They don't want to be put in a box

3. Overthinking
4. Very judgmental
5. Depression

Person 7:

1. Some may feel they're too old for church
2. Very judgmental
3. Anti-social
4. Hard time communicating or getting along with other people
5. Uncomfortable around others

Person 8:

1. They don't trust church.
2. They don't trust it because it doesn't feel personal/relevant/genuine. It feels judgmental.
3. It feels ingenuine or judgmental because you're just one person in a sea of thousands at large churches, so you aren't truly seen/heard.
4. Also feels ingenuine because pastors of large congregations can't personalize the experience for everyone individually, but they can profit from you.
5. Church feels like a business, not a place for spiritual connection.

Person 9:

1. Long, boring, sometimes not relatable
2. Attention span is short. No enthusiasm, upbringing.
3. They don't want to be associated with a place that causes so much hurt.
4. (No answer)
5. They want to build a relationship with God on their time and terms.

Person 10:

1. Too many rules/not useful
2. They are already good people
3. They follow society's rules and feel moral.
4. They feel being good is enough in life and to get to heaven.
5. (No answer)

Summary:

1. Confused and judged by church (Judgmental). Inconsistent. Uncertainty.
2. Irrelevant and feel judged because they don't know the right way to be there. Don't know what they are doing—feeling like an outsider. Not inclusive of LGBTQ. Judgment from the other Christians, not necessarily the leaders of the church. Uncomfortable.

3. Judged. Christians are different outside of church.
4. Christians are inauthentic. The Church teaches how to live your life instead of how to have a relationship with God.
5. Acceptance.

The 4 Helpful Questions: What is Right, Wrong, Confused, or Missing?

Right

Good place to exhale

Community–like minded

Good intentions

Good guidance

Talk about Scripture

Education

Wrong

Acceptance

No separation of church and state, too political

Need to put on a façade–pressure to be perfect

Emphasis on money, power, and status

Hypocrisy

Scripture is boring

Preaching isn't relevant –needs real life examples of how to apply–applicable.

Not genuine

Confused

Why go and what is the benefit/basis of going

The Bible

Contradicting

Too many interpretations/denominations

Different ideas on what is right and wrong

Communion

Is God real?

Missing

Inclusivity

Personalization

A beginner's class

Understanding

Accountability

Community outreach

Proximity to leaders

Relational connection/meaningful relationships

Explanation of why we are doing what we are doing in church

Humility

Ability to be curious (ask questions)

Interactive/participatory/missing because it's one direction

Engagement

Resources

Anything else to add?

Is God real? – questioning history of church

Money is a big deal

Churches should have resources for de-churched and unchurched for proximity or personalization. Have an opportunity to share. Beginner's class.

Feels ingenuine.

Feels like a white thing. Not inclusive to all races.



ONE-PAGE POST-WORKSHOP MESSAGE TO STAKEHOLDERS



Dear NAME,

I cannot believe it has been over one month since our meeting at the Alchemy restaurant. Thank you again for your participation and assistance that day; it was extremely helpful.

I want to share with you some of the findings from our day together. Though this is not a comprehensive list of what we discovered, it will give an overarching idea of the take-aways from that morning.

First, the prevailing thought from our time together could be boiled down to this statement:

Considering American adults, ages 18 to 35, we've discovered many seemingly have no interest in attending church, which is caused by the perception of the church's exclusivity and irrelevance. If solved, they may engage in a meaningful relationship with Jesus and His Church.

Second, some of the primary things we "heard" you say:

- You don't have time for church, yet what you really meant is it is not a priority.
- There is a concern about being "judged" if you attend church.
- You were unsure why church attendance is important (Irrelevant, long, and boring.)
- You were uncomfortable about attending church because of not knowing what that experience would entail (Lack of clarity.)
- You believed churches could be money-centric, inauthentic, and possibly hypocritical.
- You felt churches could be exclusive and not inclusive of those with different beliefs, races, and lifestyles.
- You believed churches are not clear about how to ask questions or take the next step of faith.
- Some felt that those inviting them to the church were not direct in their approach.
- You were not "anti-God" per se but somewhat hesitant about engaging in a church.

Again, this is not an exhaustive list but hopefully captures the spirit of the conversation. If you have anything to add to this from your experience that we may have missed, please let us know! You can email Jenn Kjellstrom (my assistant) at Jenn.Kjellstrom@CityFirst.Church.

Thank you again! I really enjoyed our time together.

With Appreciation,



Jeremy DeWeerd

Pastor, City First Church

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW DOCUMENTATION

One-on-One Interviewee A - Assistant Professor/University Campus Pastor:

- Two generations in this study. (Younger Millennial and older Generation Z.)
- Keep in mind there is a gap of values, beliefs, and worldviews between them.
- Race is something to consider. A white church, black church, or Hispanic church may have very different approaches to that age demographic.
- Research Tim Elmore
- Younger adults see the church as more exclusive.
- Younger adults accept gender fluidity.
- The “believe before you belong” approach is backfiring with some churches (i.e. Mosaic LA.)
 - This is seen as a “bait and switch.”
 - New attendees are asking, “Why didn’t you just tell us your core beliefs?”
 - The church fears political backlash thus keeps certain beliefs quiet.
- The LGBTQ+ topic will be a lightning rod for most churches with this age group.
- Is there a difference between what we doctrinally believe and what we socially believe?
 - For example: Why can’t gay people have health insurance and marry?
 - Can the church navigate this?
- Agrees with the results of the discovery session.
- That age group is very concerned about social justice.

One-on-One Interviewee B - Author, Podcaster, Researcher:

- Agreed with the results of the discovery session.
- The real issue here is a values exchange. That age does not want to exchange their values for the church’s.
 - They want the church to value their beliefs AND validate their beliefs.
 - The book “UnChristian” (Kinnaman/Lyons) was before its time.
- That demographic wants a dialogue, not a monologue.
- They perceive the church as being about money and power.
- They don’t understand why a Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist can’t all just believe the same thing and be ok.
- We are in a post-Christian world.
 - Post-Christian is defined as never a church goer/believer.
 - Some believe post-Christian means those who once went to church.
 - We now have a generation of people who never went to church.
- Most in that group are deist. Most are not atheist.
 - They have a secular spirituality.
 - They search for truth online and listen to YouTube for answers.
- That age demographic is very concerned about identity.

- Their sexuality is their identity (pronouns)
 - If you the church says their sexuality is wrong, they interpret that as an offense against their identity.
- You must anchor your identity in something or someone.
 - They are anchoring it in THEIR definition of truth.
 - Identity used to be anchored in success (material items/career,) but that is changing.
 - Now it is being anchored in experience.
 - Weddings are productions
 - Social media
 - Vulnerability is now “posted online”
 - Child-centered parenting
- The world is flattening
- Those who have a social media account now feel empowered to speak as if they have proven leadership.
- There is a deinstitutionalized mindset
 - A devolution of power
 - Tearing down of the system
- Post-COVID will be interesting for the church.
 - Will we need micro-churches since people don’t want large groups and desire interactive experiences?
- In ten years, churches who do not focus on those under 35 will experience a shocking awakening. They won’t come and everyone else will be old and dying.

One-on-One Interviewee C - Author, Founder, and Pastor of Megachurch:

- Agreed with the results of the discovery session.
- His church has been very strategic with reaching 20-somethings, which is why they are seeing good results.
- Most young adult/20-something/YA ministries are led by an older youth pastor with no budget outside of the salary of the person leading it.
 - Many churches demand that 20-somethings show up to church on Sunday, but his church decided to not make that the goal.
- His church has 1,200 20-somethings in weekly attendance at their Thursday young adult service; 2,500 in total adherence.
 - About 600 attend the weekend services also.
- His church has 6 young adult staff
 - They pour a lot of money into the 20-something ministry in personnel and operational budget (\$100,000 operational)
- It is the “best/worst” ministry of the church
 - Best: Because he wants his young adult kids to attend it.
 - Worst: Because of the amount of money invested with little financial return.

- To reach 20-somethings you must have 20-somethings represented on your pastoral team and communications team.
 - His communications team consists of him (almost 50), a 30-year-old, and two older 20-somethings.
 - Of the four campuses, three are ran by 20-somethings.
- You will deal with the “youngness” of those leaders or the absence of 20-somethings in your church. You pick your poison.
- The congregation’s response to the 20-somethings preachers is mixed, but the pastor is “playing the long game.”
- “We all watched Willow Creek get old with Bill and didn’t want that to be our story.”
- The person in charge of the 20-somethings ministry must have a heart for the house and not try to make the YA ministry a silo.
 - The desired goal is to integrate the 20-somethings into the weekend services, but the real goal is engagement in the overall church.
- The only real difference between the Thursday night YA service and the weekend service is that the YA service is only YA-aged people. “They act different when the parents aren’t there.” (But not in an immoral way.)

Appendix B– Milestone 2 NPO Topic Expertise Essay

20-Somethings, Faith, and Church

There has been extensive research conducted in recent years that shows a lack of interest and involvement of young adults, ages 20-29, in the American Protestant church. This age range consists of younger Millennials, born between 1980 and 1994³, and older members of Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2015.⁴ In an effort to understand 20-somethings and their assumptions about Jesus and the church, in-depth questions must be asked: What is the nature of their faith? What is the nature of their belief? Christian doctrine would define faith as the right and proper response of sinful, fallen humanity to a holy, saving God. Sin creates a gap between God and us. Faith in Jesus bridges that gap and restores our fractured relationship. Today's Christian leaders must learn how 20-somethings view faith and how they practice their beliefs, and how these things impact their interest in the American Protestant church.

Belief is a "fundamental brain function on which individual and societal behavior is grounded."⁵ Therefore, the beliefs of 20-somethings, and the formation of said beliefs, are essential to understand because they influence personal practice of faith and church adherence. Possibly, the key questions regarding this age group are, "What does it mean to a 20-something to have faith?" and "What is the specific nature of their beliefs?"

The formation of the beliefs of 20-somethings is profoundly influenced by the environment in which they grow up. Speaking specifically of Generation Z, they are growing up in environment unlike that of any previous generation. 57% use screen media four hours or more on an average day. "The internet is at the core of Gen Z's development, a uniquely powerful influence on their worldview, mental health, daily schedule, sleep patterns, relationships, and more. Devices are almost constantly on their person and on their minds." Only 4% have a biblical worldview. "The worldview of Gen Z (and, in turn, their moral code) is highly inclusive and individualistic. This diverse, open-minded group of young people is sensitive to others' feelings and experiences, and wary of asserting any one view as right or wrong."⁶ 33% of younger 20-somethings say gender is how a person feels inside, not their birth sex. "Their assorted views on gender identity and expression are just one-way teens are wrestling with how to accept and affirm other people, to create 'safe space' where each person can be herself or himself without feeling threatened or

³ James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2017).

⁴ Barna Group, "Gen Z."

⁵ Rüdiger J. Seitz, Raymond F. Paloutzian, and Hans-Ferdinand Angel, "Processes of Believing: Where Do They Come from? What Are They Good For?," *F1000Research* 5 (October 25, 2016): 2573.

⁶ Barna Group, "Gen Z," 13.

judged.” 39% interact with people who are different from them compared to just one-quarter of Baby Boomers. “As the most racially, religiously and sexually diverse generation in American history, Gen Z expects people to have different beliefs and experiences, and they seem to have a greater appreciation for social inclusiveness compared to generations before them.”⁷

Lastly, and more significantly, “In practice, this means that they are less inclined to discrimination of any kind, and broadly committed to equality – gender, sexuality, ethnicity and any ‘protected characteristic’ (e.g. disability) – being taken as read.”⁸ The greatest value for this generation is nothing less than individual freedom.⁹ Some of the core beliefs of the 20-somethings are in direct opposition to historical Christian beliefs (i.e. Cultural vs. Biblical definition of sexuality) and could be a reason why this age demographic does not have adherence to organized Christian religion.

Textual Discussions

The experiences and information that have shaped the beliefs and values of today's 20-somethings tend to conflict with the beliefs and values of the historical Christian Church. However, though circumstances may be different, Christianity being at odds with cultural belief is not new. In the Apostle Paul's letters to Timothy, he encourages his young protégé to avoid false doctrine, hold on to the pattern of sound teaching and live by the Holy Scriptures, and warns that many will follow false teaching that tickles one's ears and satisfies one's desires. Paul also informs that suffering will come, most likely because of Christ-followers' counter-cultural beliefs and practices. Yet, over the years the church grew, sometimes as much as 40 percent each decade during the first three centuries¹⁰. Therefore, it seems the church grows even in a pagan environment with beliefs that contradict the teachings of Scripture.

Everyone has faith. John Lennox, a mathematics professor at Oxford University, argues that even “atheism is a ‘faith position’, and science itself cannot do without faith.”¹¹ Interestingly enough, most 20-somethings are not atheists in belief but in lifestyle. “According to the Pew Research

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Martyn Percy, “Sketching a Shifting Landscape: Reflections on Emerging Patterns of Religion and Spirituality among Millennials,” *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 9, no. 2 (July 3, 2019): 163-172.

⁹ White, 47.

¹⁰ Alan Kreider, *Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 8.

¹¹ John C. Lennox, *Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists Are Missing the Target* (Oxford, UK: Lion Hudson, 2011), 47.

Center, formal attachment to religious organizations in the USA is in decline, and 'no affiliation' increasingly reported. Similarly, 'nones' now comprise a significant percentage of the UK population (perhaps up to a third); and over 75% of those under the age of 25. But - and this is a big 'but' - many 'nones' *do* profess to believe in God. Yet they freely confess to doing little about it."¹²

What is faith? German-American Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich studied popular assumptions about faith and how it took on a shallow, overly-simplistic meaning. Tillich defined authentic faith as "ultimate concern" and described it as "the state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamic of faith are the dynamics of man's [sic] ultimate concern."¹³ He explains that every person is concerned about their life, health, relationships, finances, etc. However, there is always one person or thing that demands our "full attention and our total commitment...something that promises to give us ultimate meaning and fulfillment."¹⁴ Along with the demand of our attention, Tillich believes there is an object of our faith. "What we have faith *in*."¹⁵

In the early 2000's, Christian Smith coined the term, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."¹⁶ "The emerging generation is kind, considerate, tolerant, and good. It will not stand for racism, sexism, homophobia, or xenophobia. The emerging generation believes in many good things, and also in God: but does not join a faith-organization to express this."¹⁷ This Personal, Therapeutic Moralistic Deism did not fit well into the traditional Christian faith. Moral Therapeutic Deism is primarily concerned with a moral approach to life. It believes that the foundation of a happy life is to be a good, "moral" person - which is an effort to be kind, pleasant, kind, courteous, responsible, and taking care of others while working to improve themselves for health and success. Moral Therapeutic Deism holds the belief that God exists, created the universe, and defines our general moral order. But a relationship with God is not particularly personal. The God of Moral Therapeutic Deism often keeps a safe distance.¹⁸

Over the last 15-20 years as culture has evolved so has the belief systems of 20-somethings. While they still hold the belief that a moral approach to life is best, many are becoming more

¹² Percy, 163-172.

¹³ Brent A. R. Hege, *Faith, Doubt, and Reason* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 3.

¹⁴ Hege, 3.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Smith and Lundquist Denton.

stringent in their definition of moral and less accepting of people or institutions who do not abide by these definitions. Many in Generation Z seem to be converting from Moral Therapeutic Deism to Critical Theory in their belief system. Critical Theory sees the world through the binary of Oppressor/Oppressed. We see this in almost every arena of culture - race, gender, sexuality, ability, and religion. The fundamental moral duty is freeing people from their oppressive groups.¹⁹

1 Timothy 1:3-5 - A Sincere Faith

1 Timothy 1:3-5 (HCSB) *As I urged you when I went to Macedonia, remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach different doctrine or to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies. These promote empty speculations rather than God's plan, which operates by faith. Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.*

Paul encourages Timothy to assure that rogue doctrine is not preached and proclaims that only the Apostle's instruction leads to a "sincere faith." The Greek word used here for "faith" is "πίστις," which is a conviction of the truth of anything, belief.²⁰ In Pauline writings, he encourages Christians to have a faith or a belief that imitates Christ in life and death. More than acquiring mere knowledge, he challenges the reader to practice his or her beliefs through intentional actions in keeping with the Savior. "The imitation is expressed even more strongly in terms of assimilation in the expression 'in him we might become the righteousness of God (ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ).'"²¹

A sincere πίστις is one that has Jesus in the middle of it. As Suzan J. M. Sierksma-Agteres writes, "Paul repeatedly speaks of living 'in Christ', 'in the Lord' or 'in him' and, conversely, though less often, of Christ living in him. In these phrases, πίστις is used in paradigmatic relation to Christ, both with the same preposition (ἐν) as near equivalents. In 2 *Corinthians*, we read the exhortation, 'Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith (εἰ ἐστὲ ἐν τῇ πίστει). Test yourselves.

¹⁹ Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity-and Why This Harms Everybody* (Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), 21-87.

²⁰ "Pistis," New Testament Greek Lexicon - New American Standard, Bible Study Tools, accessed February 16, 2021, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/nas/pistis.html>.

²¹ Suzan J. M. Sierksma-Agteres, "Imitation in Faith: Enacting Paul's Ambiguous *Pistis Christou* Formulations on a Greco-Roman Stage," *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 77, no. 3 (May 26, 2016): 119-153.

Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you (ὅτι Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν)? – unless, indeed, you fail to pass the test!”²²

Could Paul be implying in 1 Timothy 1:3-5 that the "myths" Timothy is to avoid or expose lead to a faith or πίστις that does not have Jesus in the middle of it? If so, they lead to “empty speculations” rather than God’s perfect plan for one’s life. Concerning 20-somethings, their πίστις seems to be forming an individualistic religion that is “merely mutating into significant forms of personal spirituality, rather than disappearing.”²³ Though their faith solicits actions that somewhat reflect Christ’s teachings, the core Christian belief of Jesus becoming the substitutionary atonement for personal sin does not fit into their πίστις.

New Testament scholars have long pegged the Apostle Paul as the great opponent of gnostic heresy.²⁴ Like many of his letters, Paul writes to Timothy to encourage and challenge him to combat the Gnosticism which was prevalent in Ephesus. The doctrine Paul is referring to in this passage is the belief that our faith is the right and proper response of sinful, fallen humanity to a holy, saving God. Sin creates a gap between God and us. Faith in Jesus bridges that gap and restores our fractured relationship. We can see a narrative laid out in Scripture that falls into four acts: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.²⁵ However, we can see a new narrative coming to the forefront of culture today that could quite easily be compared to the Gnosticism Paul is fighting against. The story of critical theory begins not with creation, but with oppression. There is no transcendent Creator who has a purpose and a design for our lives and our identities. Instead, we define ourselves in terms of race, class, sexuality, and gender identity. Raising awareness, protesting, and resisting oppressive individuals and institutions is the vehicle that leads to redemption. We work to overthrow and dismantle hegemonic power; that is our primary moral duty. There is no need for redemption within Critical Theory; liberation is the ultimate goal. Liberation is achieved through equality, power reversal, and justice for all those who have been oppressed.²⁶ While there are many injustices in our world today, looking to anything other than Jesus and the answer is exactly what Paul is arguing in this text. Using Critical Theory as a means to solve cultural problems and calling it “Gospel” is another form of Gnosticism - “20-Something Gnosticism.”

²² Sierksma-Agter, 119-153.

²³ Percy, 163-172.

²⁴ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters* (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1992).

²⁵ Neil Shenvie, “Christianity and Critical Theory – Part 2,” Neil Shenvi - Apologetics, November 3, 2018, <https://shenviapologetics.com/christianity-and-critical-theory-part-2/>.

²⁶ Ibid.

2 Timothy 4:3-5 - Itching Ears

2 Timothy 4:3-5 (NLT) *For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth and chase after myths. But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don't be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you.*

Paul forecasts that those in culture will morally disintegrate to a state of only listening to what they want to hear. The standard of truth will become fluid, and people will yearn to listen to teaching that conveniently is in line with their pre-existing beliefs and actions. They will follow teachers who tell them what they want to hear, rather than what they need to hear. "These people accumulate teachers, picking and choosing from among those teachings that suit their fancy."²⁷

"Contemporary usage of this expression suggests, first, that the translation at 2 Tim 4:3 should be 'having their ears tickled', rather than 'having itching ears', and second, that the idiom refers primarily to the experience of pleasure rather than curiosity."²⁸ Paul's warning is that people will chase after myths or teachings that sound good yet are not full of truth. "Seneca argues that oratorical pleasantness should never be an object in itself: Our words should aim not to please, but to help (*non delectent verba nostra, sed prosint*). If, however, you can attain eloquence without painstaking, and if you either are naturally gifted or can gain eloquence at slight cost, make the most of it and apply it to the noblest uses. But let it be of such a kind that it displays facts rather than itself. It and the other arts are wholly concerned with cleverness; but our business here is the soul (75.5)."²⁹

Church and living counter-culturally lies at the heart of reaching the 20-somethings. "The challenge is, first, to understand the ideas and, second, to engage them."³⁰ Paul indicates that this counter-cultural proclamation of truth may result in persecution. Nevertheless, Timothy should not "be afraid of suffering for the Lord." (vs. 5)

2 Timothy 3:14-17 (HSCB) - A Standard of Truth

2 Timothy 3:14-17 (HCSB) *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you, and you know that from childhood you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All*

²⁷ Raymond F. Collins, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: A Commentary*, 270.

²⁸ Matthijs den Dulk, "No More Itch (2 Tim 4.3)," *New Testament Studies* 64, no. 1 (January 2018): 81-93.

²⁹ den Dulk, 81-93.

³⁰ White, 68.

Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

There must be a standard of truth. Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann stated, "Serious Scripture study calls one to repentance and invites one to a changed perceptual world."³¹ Paul believes the power of God's Word is self-evident. Not only must those who have faith study the Word of God to understand how to live rightly in the eyes of God, but those who are far from faith must eventually acknowledge that there is a truth outside of their human understanding. God's Word is an eternal truth that supersedes one's perception of rational thought or view of cultural normativeness.

"Scripture, working in tandem with the Holy Spirit, is the message of truth about the living God and an instrument of God's presence and power. Paul emphasizes this living and active quality of Scripture to his successor Timothy, noting that Scripture has the capacity of making people 'wise for salvation.'"³² The understanding here is that Scripture must be a standard or plumb line of truth when calling people to salvation. The challenge, specifically for 20-somethings, is when the Bible is viewed as archaic and irrelevant to today's culture. In terms of truth, "more than one-third of Gen Z believes it is not possible to know for sure if God is real (37%), compared to 32 percent of all adults."³³

Ironically, in 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul instructs Timothy to "preach the word." "One might have expected that the Pastor's Paul would have charged Timothy to 'preach the Gospel' (see v.5) or that he would have used Luke's phrase 'preach the kingdom,' but he has not done so. In the Pastor's circles, 'the word' is the word of God (2:9; 1 Tim. 4:5; Titus 1:3, 2:5), the message of truth (2:15), the words of faith (1 Tim. 4:6). Charged with preaching the word, Timothy is to proclaim Paul's Gospel message."³⁴ Therefore, the preaching of the Word is the preaching of the Good News message. Mere quoting of Scripture is not the intent of Paul's instruction. Timothy must "convince, warn, and encourage people."³⁵ to turn to Jesus.

1 Timothy 2:3-5 - Pointing to Jesus

³¹ Anthony Robinson and Robert Wall, *Called to Lead: Paul's Letters to Timothy for a New Day* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 177-178.

³² Robinson and Wall, 178.

³³ Barna Group, "Gen Z," 64.

³⁴ Collins, 269.

³⁵ Ibid., 270.

1 Timothy 2:3-5 (HCSB) *This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

For there is one God

and one mediator between God and humanity,

Christ Jesus, Himself human,

who gave Himself—a ransom for all,

a testimony at the proper time.

Paul encourages Timothy to pray and intercede for all people and indicates that God, our Savior, desires that everyone be saved. In this instruction, we see the importance of prayer and then the subsequent action of informing those we are praying for with the knowledge of Jesus. To the 20-something, Jesus must be more than a good person or kind soul; a person whom compassionate actions can be modeled after. Jesus must be seen as the one who is God and become the mediator between the Father and humanity.

In the fourth century, Saint Ambrose wrote, “the Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for us...our pardon comes through his power, our life is secured through his grace.”³⁶ Herein lies the challenge to reaching the 20-somethings. They must understand Jesus has their leader and forgiver, not just a kind and loving person whom one's actions should be modeled after.

“We must keep in the mind that Generation Z is mostly ‘spiritually illiterate.’ They don’t know much about the Bible, or the basics of Christian belief and theology. They do not understand the importance of the work of the cross. They are more than post-Christian; they have no memory of the Gospel. As a result, there is a profound spiritual emptiness.”³⁷ Therefore, an accurate representation of Jesus is needed for 20-somethings to understand their need for a Savior.

Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments

“In the last quarter century, a steadily increasing number of North Americans, when asked their religious affiliation, have self-identified as ‘spiritual but not religious (SBNR).’”³⁸ The 20-

³⁶ Peter J. Gorday and Thomas Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture - New Testament IX - Colossians, 1-2 Thessalonians, 1-2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

³⁷ White, 131.

³⁸ Galen Watts, “On the Politics of Self-Spirituality: A Canadian Case Study,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 47, no. 3 (September 2018): 345-372.

some things are not atheists yet do not desire to affiliate with organized religion. "Data show(s) church attendance, belief in God, prayer and Bible-reading have been dropping for decades. The role of religion in public life has also diminished. The church no longer holds the cultural authority it wielded in times past."³⁹ Yet, 20-somethings adhere to a type of spirituality. "SBNRs tend to value, above all else, their own (self's) accumulated experiences."⁴⁰ This poses a challenge for the American Protestant church.

Critical Theory argues for a "Positional Epistemology" taking in the belief that one's lived experience is the absolute truth.⁴¹ Positional epistemology bypasses questions of true or false and focuses on claimants' group identity. The epistemology of Critical Theory poses a dangerous conflict with Christianity because it undermines any appeal to the Bible. "The primary concern for people who have embraced Critical Theory is not appealing to reason, argument, evidence, or Scripture. Their primary concern is unearthing and deconstructing the hidden motives of their opponents so that their claims can then be ignored."⁴²

In reaching the 20-somethings, a priority should be placed on connecting them to Jesus and not strictly to church affiliation or adherence. Though church attendance is essential for a person's ongoing spiritual growth, the 20-somethings may first be attracted to the person of Jesus before his perceived "organization." "(In) the emerging faith of Millennials and Generation Z, although desires appear to be still clustered around spiritual fulfillment and 'personal experience', there is also a craving for 'the authentic.'"⁴³ The church is riddled with scandals, shortcomings, and flaws, giving 20-somethings a reason to doubt or criticize. Though he does not fit into the age bracket, it could be said that television personality Bill Maher sums up the mindset of 20-somethings when he said, "I'm a big fan of Jesus. I'm not a big fan of those who work for him."⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the person of Jesus is attractive and authentic.

³⁹ Barna Group, "Gen Z," 24-25.

⁴⁰ Watts, 345-372.

⁴¹ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 21-87.

⁴² "Christianity and Critical Theory - Part 2."

⁴³ Percy, 163-172.

⁴⁴ Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 248.

"Almost always before people come and see Jesus, they need to know someone else who knows Jesus."⁴⁵ Theologian Leonard Sweet believes Christianity is moving away from an emphasis on economics to a world influenced by "Iconomics," which is images wrapped in story and sound.⁴⁶ Christians are "God's icons" here on earth. They represent him through their lives, actions, and interactions with those far from-faith. "You look through an icon to something greater."⁴⁷ Paul would encourage Christians to be God's icons, imitating a sincere and accurate faith or *pistis*, to a world that has itching ears and wants to hear only pleasurable information, prayerfully proclaiming God's Good News about Jesus, the One who was more than a good man but the Savior-Mediator.

A study of 1 & 2 Timothy may shed some light on the current problem of 20-somethings' disinterest in the American Protestant church. Paul's instruction to Timothy on how to share the Word of God, the Good News of Jesus, and model Christ-like behavior and lifestyle may unveil invaluable truths on how to introduce 20-somethings to Jesus.

Topic History

Each generation stands on the shoulders of the ones that came before, but that doesn't mean they continue along the same path. Such is the case with Generation Z, today's 20-somethings whose parents comprised the older Millennial generation or Generation X. The differences between Millennials (born between 1982 and 1995), and Gen Z (born in 1996 or after) are distinct and drastic, resulting from a confluence of cultural, social, and technological forces that emerged after the turn of the 21st century.

Defining Events

The defining moments in the lives of Gen Z have been the Great Recession of 2008 and the election of America's first black president, Barack Obama. Those landmark moments were influential in creating a sense of economic insecurity and uncertainty among young Americans in terms of their goals and opportunities, and an embrace of multiculturalism and diversity when it comes to their country, communities, and authority figures.

Generation Z is the first generation in history to be raised with instant and unlimited access to information, through cell phones, laptops, tablets, and personal computers. They can -- and do -- tap into the exponentially expanding internet and its billions of pages of words, images, sounds, and videos myriad times a day.

⁴⁵ J.R. Briggs and Skye Jethani, *The Sacred Overlap: Learning to Live Faithfully in the Space Between* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 145.

⁴⁶ Leonard Sweet, "You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters (Kate Murphy) - Book Summary Discussion" (Zoom presented at the George Fox University DMIN Zoom Discussion, Zoom, October 26, 2020).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Reaching 20-somethings with the Gospel message by using media that they consume regularly poses a fundamental risk: the medium can overwhelm the message. As influential 20th century communication theorist Marshall McLuhan noted, the choice of media not only alters the presentation of the message, it actually *becomes* the message. His most noted idea, introduced in 1967, was that “the medium is the message.” “Whenever methods or media change, the message automatically changes along with them,” McLuhan wrote in “Understanding the Media: The Extensions of Man.”⁴⁸

While the presenter of the message may be focusing on the content, the recipient is often distracted by the method/medium of presentation. McLuhan uses a bold metaphor to explain this concept: “The content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb.”⁴⁹

Bill Henard, in his book “Evangelicals Engaging Emergent,” refers to McLuhan’s insights when he writes: “Sincere efforts to make the Bible message more palatable to contemporary audiences can easily result in obscuring the message when the means of presentation or the nature of a given audience are stressed to the point of rising out above the message itself.”⁵⁰ It is, indeed, an ongoing challenge to find ways to present the Gospel to the next generation in a way that makes the message relevant and appealing without compromising the authenticity of Scripture.

The rise of social media, most notably Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, also has altered personal interaction among Gen Z’ers. More than half of today’s 20-somethings spend four hours or more each day in front of a screen. The Barna Group’s research found that twenty-six percent of Gen Z’ers spend more than eight hours a day on digital media.⁵¹

At the same time, America has become increasingly diverse in its culture and ethnicity, following immigration reform in 1965 that shattered the homogenous makeup of previous U.S. generations. Prior immigration quotas favored Western Europeans, but in recent decades the immigrant population is comprised of a wide range of nationalities, spanning Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa. The sixty-nine million 20-somethings in the U.S. today make it the nation’s largest generation, which will be “the last white-majority generation” in America, according to Jeff Fromm and Angie Read in “Marketing to Gen Z: The Rules for Reaching this Vast – and Very

⁴⁸ “The Medium Is the Message: How New Media Affects the Gospel,” Thought Hub, accessed April 23, 2021, <https://www.sagu.edu/thoughthub/the-medium-is-the-message-how-new-media-affects-the-gospel-2>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ William Henard and Adam Greenway, *Evangelicals Engaging Emergent A Discussion of the Emergent Church Movement* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2014).

⁵¹ Barna Group, “Gen Z.”

Different - Generation of Influencers.⁵² Fifty-five percent of Generation Z is white, compared to 70 percent of Boomers. The most common surname in America has changed from Smith, which had been the case for over two centuries, to Rodriguez.⁵³ Among Gen Z, 24 percent are Hispanic, 14 percent are African American, and four percent are Asian, according to Fromm and Read, who use the term "Pivotal Generation" to describe 20-somethings, saying they are "pivoting away from common Millennial behaviors and attitudes..."⁵⁴ Multiracial marriages have increased 400 percent in the last 30 years, and in 2013, 10 percent of births were multiracial, compared to 1 percent in 1970.⁵⁵

Generation Z has been riding this tidal wave of societal shifts since birth, with the consequent riptides of change separating them from the worlds in which their Millennial parents and their Boomer grandparents were raised. Geopolitical analyst and author Martin Gurri describes the exponential rise of the internet as a "tsunami" of information, one that is reshaping America's traditional political, industrial, and social structures from a "top-down" elitism to a populism that demands a "flattening of the pyramid."⁵⁶ The public today, empowered by global platforms made possible by the internet, is no longer accepting of society "elites" being isolated from the masses by layers of bureaucracy and security. They demand that barriers be removed, and they expect to dialogue with leaders, not just be subjected to one-way communication handed down from above.⁵⁷

Faith

Gen Z also has drifted apart from preceding generations on spiritual matters, having little or no exposure to traditional religions and sacred texts. According to the Barna Group, just 4 percent of Gen Z'ers have a biblical worldview.⁵⁸ It's not that Gen Z'ers are consciously rejecting organized religion and deliberately cutting ties with America's historic Judeo-Christian heritage, it's more a matter of them never having been exposed to churches, synagogues, or sacred texts. They

⁵² Jeff Fromm and Angie Read, *Marketing to Gen Z: The Rules for Reaching This Vast and Very Different Generation of Influencers* (New York: AMACOM, American Management Association, 2018).

⁵³ James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World*, 2017, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://www.overdrive.com/search?q=CC8FF5BD-C97D-4FBF-9E3A-0BC0ADFF8248>. p.45

⁵⁴ Fromm and Read, *Marketing to Gen Z: The Rules for Reaching This Vast and Very Different Generation of Influencers* (New York, NY: American Management Association 2018).

⁵⁵ White, 45.

⁵⁶ Martin Gurri, *The Revolt of The Public and the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium* (San Francisco, CA: Stripe Press, 2018).

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Barna Group, "Gen Z."

have no knowledge of church or Bible and conduct their daily lives without any thought or awareness of God. As megapastor and author James Emery White writes in "Meet Generation Z," growing numbers of people see no need to look outside themselves. "Rather than rejecting the idea of God, our culture simply ignores him."⁵⁹ The majority of older Millennial parents now raising Gen Z'ers grew up with Gen X'er or younger Boomer parents who typically took them to church. But once they reached adulthood, many Millennials drifted away from organized religion and are now part of the growing wave of "nones" -- those who self-identify as having no religious affiliation. Nones grew from 5 percent of Americans in the 1940s to 16 percent in 2007 to 23 percent by 2015, according to the Pew Research Center. For Americans under age thirty, about one-third are nones.⁶⁰

Although many of today's 20-somethings have never gone to church and have had no exposure to the Bible, their disconnect with organized religion does not necessarily translate into atheism. The Pew Research Center reported in 2018 that 7 percent of American adults who say their religion is "nothing in particular" also say that religion is "very" or "somewhat" important in their lives despite their lack of a formal affiliation.⁶¹ Six-in-ten religiously unaffiliated Americans -- adults who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" -- say the questioning of religious teachings is a very important reason for their lack of affiliation. The second-most-common reason is opposition to the positions taken by churches on social and political issues, cited by 49% of respondents (the survey asked about each of the six options separately). Smaller, but still substantial, shares say they dislike religious organizations (41%), don't believe in God (37%), consider religion irrelevant to them (36%) or dislike religious leaders (34%).⁶² Leigh Stein, writing an opinion column titled "The Empty Religions of Instagram" for the New York Times published March 5, 2021, described herself as a "none" who may be reconsidering in light of recent world events.

"I have hardly prayed to God since I was a teenager, but the pandemic has cracked open inside me a profound yearning for reverence, humility and awe. I have an overdraft on my outrage account. I want moral authority from someone who isn't shilling a memoir or calling out her enemies on social media for clout."⁶³

⁵⁹ White, 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 19.

⁶¹ "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion," Pew Research Center, accessed March 24, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/08/08/why-americas-nones-dont-identify-with-a-religion/>.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Leigh Stein, "Opinion: The Empty Religions of Instagram," *The New York Times*, March 5, 2021, accessed March 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/05/opinion/influencers-glennon-doyle-instagram.html>.

The economic instability of their youth and the fear of living in a world in which mass shootings and terrorism are regularly reported in the media have also led many 20-somethings to find comfort in the beauty and vast scope of nature. "Forty-nine percent of Generation Z surveyed found a deep awe and wonder about the universe," according to White, citing the 2014 Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Research Center.⁶⁴ The connection between an awe of nature and the existence of a Creator God is noted in the Bible, as Psalm 19:1 states: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

Harvard religion professor emeritus Harvey Cox notes in his 2009 book, *"The Future of Faith,"* "the advance of science has increased the sense of awe we feel at the immense scale of the universe or the complexity of the human eye. People turn to religion more for support in their efforts to live in this world and make it better, and less to prepare for the next. The pragmatic and experiential elements of faith as a way of life are displacing the previous emphasis on institutions and beliefs."⁶⁵ Martyn Percy, dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and theology professor at the University of Oxford, notes that younger generations are shifting from "dispositional" to "episodic" in their affiliations.

"They do not identify closely with, or become members of, institutions, groups, political parties, churches or other organizations. They may join movements - but these tend to be 'seasonal,' or limited to specific issues."⁶⁶ "The concept of long-term membership of a group, institution or organization has become rather more attenuated for Generation Z-ers," Percy writes. "Their engagement with value-based institutions will be occasional and consumerist rather than unequivocally committed. ... Gratifying personal spiritual experience will come before collective duty towards or affiliation within an institution."⁶⁷

Percy said that in his observation, as an academic and clergyperson, "Christianity is mutating into a much broader, but also 'thinner' version of itself. Another way of labeling 'moralistic deism' is to say we are seeing the rise of the 'Almost Christian' being religious is being replaced by being nice."

Social Justice Movement

Another major, yet largely overlooked or misunderstood factor affecting America's traditional institutions today -- government, corporations, universities, mass media, religion, and others -- is the growing influence of the Social Justice Movement, according to Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay in their 2020 book, *"Cynical Thinking: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything*

⁶⁴ White, 138.

⁶⁵ Harvey Cox, *The Future of Faith* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2009), 2-3.

⁶⁶ Percy.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

About Race, Gender, and Identity - and Why this Harms Everyone."⁶⁸ According to the authors, the Social Justice Movement is a proper noun with a specific applied philosophy that grew out of the postmodern research that began in France after World War II and flourished in academia in the 1960s. This movement has moved from academia into virtually every aspect of American society today, becoming "the driving force of the culture war of the late 2010s."⁶⁹

The Social Justice Movement seeks to deconstruct and reinvent societal norms, with Pluckrose and Lindsey contending that the movement's leaders "have created a new religion, a tradition of faith that is actively hostile to reason, falsification, disconfirmation, and disagreement of any kind." One of the characteristics of the Social Justice Movement is to treat its theories as "The Truth." The movement "tolerates no dissent, and expects everyone to agree or be 'cancelled.'"⁷⁰ According to Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer in "The Incompatibility of Critical Theory and Christianity," "Christianity provides us with an overarching metanarrative that runs from creation to redemption: We are creatures made in God's image, who have sinned against him, who need to be rescued through the atoning work of Jesus, and who are called to love both God and neighbor."⁷¹ The Social Justice Movement, which aligns with Critical Theory, professes a diametrically opposed metanarrative that "runs from oppression to liberation," according to Shenvi and Sawyer. Critical Theory asserts that "we are members either of a dominant group or of a marginalized group with respect to a given identity marker. As such, we either need to divest ourselves of power and seek to liberate others, or we need to acquire power and liberate ourselves by dismantling all structures and institutions that subjugate and oppress. In critical theory, the greatest sin is oppression, and the greatest virtue is the pursuit of liberation."⁷² These conflicting metanarratives raise fundamental questions: Are humans defined in terms of a vertical relationship to God, or in terms of power dynamics between groups of people? And, is the fundamental problem of humankind sin, in which we are all stand equally condemned before a holy God, or is it oppression, in which members of dominant groups are tainted by guilt in a way that members of subordinate groups are not?

As Pluckrose and Lindsay see it:

"Indeed, the whole postmodernist project now seems, in retrospect, like an unwitting attempt to have deconstructed the old metanarratives of Western thought - science and reason along with religion and capitalist economic systems - to make room for a wholly new

⁶⁸ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 11-20.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 208.

⁷¹ Pat Sawyer and Neil Shenvi, "The Incompatibility of Critical Theory and Christianity," The Gospel Coalition, accessed March 15, 2021, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/incompatibility-critical-theory-christianity/>.

⁷² Ibid.

religion, a postmodern faith based on a dead God, which sees mysterious worldly forces in systems of power and privilege, and which sanctifies victimhood. This, increasingly, is the fundamentalist religion of the nominally secular left."⁷³

According to Critical Theory, "my lived experience is the absolute truth," rejecting appeals to reason, evidence, or Scripture. They believe societal norms are controlled by privileged classes - mostly white, educated, wealthy males - who intentionally or subconsciously are motivated to maintain their dominant roles by oppressing others.⁷⁴

The world in which 20-somethings are now growing into adulthood has been shaped by these two culturally disruptive forces: The internet giving voice and power to the masses, and the philosophical Social Justice Movement that has been applied to all aspects of society as it strives to deconstruct objective truth -- while tolerating no dissent.

Key Voices

Martin Gurri

Martin Gurri worked for the CIA's Open Source Center from 1982 to 2010 as a geopolitical analyst, and was the Director of Research and Visual Analysis before leaving to focus his research on the relationship between politics and global media. He is a visiting fellow at Mercatus Center at George Washington University, and writes a blog titled "the fifth wave: information and influence in the age of the public." While Gurri does not specialize in how politics and media intersect with religion, his research and analyses explain much about cultural shifts and the underlying impact of the internet on society overall, including the church and American "screenagers" who grew up with the internet at their fingertips. In the foreword to Gurri's groundbreaking book, "The Revolt of the Public -- And the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium," economic scholar Arnold Kling notes that Gurri "saw it coming," in reference to political outsider Donald Trump's election to the presidency in 2016 that surprised or even shocked most political experts.

While Gurri did not name Trump specifically, Kling notes, "he saw how the internet in general and social media in particular were transforming the political landscape."⁷⁵ Gurri saw that the internet would expose mistakes and flaws of the "elites," and that they would be increasingly despised by the public. And he saw that the elites would respond with defensiveness and contempt, only causing more hostility and defiance from the public toward authority. Gurri also saw that while the public has gained new-found power via the internet, there is no program or plan in place, raising the threat of nihilism and chaos.

The Pull Request, a publication about technology by technologists and for technologists, hailed Gurri as "The Prophet of the Revolt." "I am no prophet," Gurri writes in the introduction to

⁷³ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 210-211.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 208-210.

⁷⁵ Gurri, 8-13.

"The Revolt of the Public," adding that "the future is, and must be, opaque." But looking at present times, he sees "an old, entrenched social order is passing away even as I write these words - one rooted in the hierarchies and conventions of industrial life. Since no substitute has appeared on the horizon, we should, as tourists flying into the unknown, fasten our seatbelts and expect turbulence ahead."⁷⁶

Decades ago, information was limited to newspapers and television reports. While working for the CIA he gathered information from these sources with the idea that information was knowledge -- and the more information, the better. "Back when the world and I were young, information was scarce, hence valuable,"⁷⁷ Gurri writes. Sources of information in times of scarcity became authoritative. In the early days of television, there were only three major networks dispensing the news, and in 1972 Walter Cronkite, the former CBS Nightly News anchor, was voted "the most trusted man in America." As the amount of information available to the public increased, "the authoritativeness of any one source decreased," Gurri observed.⁷⁸

With CNN launching its 24/7 cable news in 1980, email becoming available to the public in the 1980s, and the internet arriving in 1993 and blogging in 1997, the information age underwent a seismic shift. "More information was generated in 2001 than in all the previous existence of our species on earth," Gurri observed. Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, reported that 3 billion gigabytes of information was produced in 2000, 6 billion in 2001, 12 billion in 2002, and 24 billion in 2003. The oceans of information have continued to double on an annual basis.⁷⁹ Gurri observed that as the internet and social media soared in popularity, the mass media elite who had for a century and a half been the arbiter of news, were suddenly and ungraciously deposed from their authoritative role.

"That passive mass audience on which so many political and economic institutions depended had itself unbundled, disaggregated, fragmented into what I call vital communities: groups of wildly disparate size gathered organically around a shared interest or theme."⁸⁰

The institutional elite reacted not with worry or regret, Gurri observes, "but moral outrage and condemnation, sometimes accompanied by calls for repression." The newly empowered and articulate masses turned the tide on the elite as they "tramped with muddy boots in the sacred

⁷⁶ Ibid., 19-31.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 22-23.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 26.

precincts of the elites, overturning this or that precious heirloom.”⁸¹ This shift in authority from elites to the public led to the toppling of dictators, spurring the Arab Spring that ousted dictators in the 2010s – and the consequent deaths of more than 6,100 people. Gurri acknowledges that as a researcher he had been “enthralled” with the astronomical growth of information but came to realize later that the “truly epochal change” was “the revolution in the relationship between the public and authority in almost every domain of human activity.”⁸²

Technology can be dazzling, connecting people across oceans with internet video calls or linking people through social media. “But it turns out that fascination with surface glitter has obscured our view to what is transpiring in the depths. There, human beings interact with platforms and information, and are changed by the interaction, and the accumulated changes have shaken and battered established institutions from companies and universities to governments and religions.”⁸³ The outcome of this revolution is still to be determined. And whether that outcome is for good or evil “will largely depend on us,” Gurri writes.⁸⁴

Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay

Helen Pluckrose is a cultural writer and speaker living in England, editor of *Areo Magazine*, and author of numerous essays on postmodernism, critical theory, liberalism, secularism, and feminism. She earned a master’s degree in modern studies at Queen Mary University in London. James Lindsay is an American mathematician who earned his Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Tennessee. Lindsay has a background in physics, pursues an interest in the Social Justice Movement and postmodernism, and is the founder of NewDiscourses.com. Beginning 2017, Lindsay and Pluckrose teamed with Florida Gulf Coast State College professor emeritus Peter Boghossian to write 20 hoax academic papers and submit them to peer-reviewed journals using pseudonyms, in an effort to expose corruption in academia. Seven of their papers were accepted – including a rewrite of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in feminist language by the feminist social work journal *Affilia* -- six were rejected, and seven were still under review before the authenticity of one of their hoax studies was questioned and they explained their intentionally bogus work [in a YouTube documentary](#).

Lindsay has described the Social Justice Movement as his “ideological enemy” and calls himself a critic of “wokeness,” which he analogizes to religious belief. Pluckrose and Lindsay collaborated on a book intended to explain, expose, and counter the vast influence of Critical Theory and The Social Justice Movement titled “~~Critical~~ Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody.” The book

⁸¹ Ibid., 27.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., 65.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

became a USA Today, Publishers Weekly and Wall Street Journal bestseller upon its release in 2020.

Pluckrose and Lindsay explain in the introduction to this book that they believe that the Social Justice Movement poses an existential threat to "liberalism," a guiding philosophy of Western civilization for two centuries whose main tenets are "political democracy, limitations on the powers of government, the development of universal human rights, legal equality for all adult citizens, freedom of expression, respect for evidence and reason, the separation of church and state, and freedom of religion."⁸⁵

According to Pluckrose and Lindsay, far-left activists are advancing Postmodernism, Critical Theory, and the Social Justice Movement not only through "revolutionary aims that openly reject liberalism as a form of oppression, but they also do so with increasingly authoritarian means seeking to establish a thoroughly dogmatic fundamentalist ideology regarding how society ought to be ordered." Postmodernism "rejects objective truth as a fantasy dreamed up by naïve and/or arrogantly bigoted Enlightenment thinkers who underestimated the collateral consequences of Modernity's progress," the authors previously wrote in "A Manifesto against the Enemies of Modernity," *Areo Magazine*, Aug. 22, 2017.⁸⁶

Currently waging war against postmodernism, according to Pluckrose and Lindsay, are "far-right populist movements claiming to be making a last desperate stand for liberalism and democracy against a rising tide of progressivism and globalism" around the world.⁸⁷ The authors believe that most Americans are unaware of the motives, extent and dangers of applied postmodernist theory, which they assert can have a chilling effect on free speech and, if institutionalized, transform into a kind of authoritarianism.

"This deserves an explanation. In fact, it needs one because these changes, which are happening with astonishing rapidity, are very difficult to understand.... This is because they stem from a very peculiar view of the world - one that even speaks its own language, in a way."⁸⁸

They use the word "racism" as an example. When Social Justice Movement advocates use the term, "they are not referring to prejudice on the grounds of race, but rather to, as they define it, a racialized system that permeates all interactions in society yet is largely invisible except to those

⁸⁵ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 11.

⁸⁶ Helen Pluckrose, "A Manifesto Against the Enemies of Modernity," *Areo Magazine*, last modified August 22, 2017, <https://areomagazine.com/2017/08/22/a-manifesto-against-the-enemies-of-modernity/>.

⁸⁷ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 12.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

who experience it or who have been trained in the proper 'critical' methods that train them to see it. (These are the people sometimes referred to as being 'woke,' meaning awakened, to it.)"⁸⁹

Pluckrose and Lindsay are intent on alerting the public to the advance of postmodernism and the Social Justice Movement as they infiltrate Western civilization today.

"It is this problem that we have dedicated ourselves to learning about and hope to explain in this volume: the problem of postmodernism, not just as it initially arose in the 1960s but also how it has evolved over the last half century. Postmodernism has, depending upon your view, either become or given rise to one of the least tolerant and most authoritarian ideologies that the world has had to deal with since the widespread decline of communism and the collapses of white supremacy and colonialism."⁹⁰

Postmodernism was developed in relatively obscure corners of academia, the authors explain, but starting in the 1960s began to spread to other parts of the academy.

"It has, from there, begun to seep into broader society to the point where it, and backlashes against it - both reasonable and reactionary - have come to dominate our sociopolitical landscape as we grind ever more painfully into the third decade of the new millennium."⁹¹

The Social Justice Movement's rejection of objective truth and what it calls "metanarratives," or broad, cohesive explanations of the world and society, poses a threat to Christianity, according to Pluckrose and Lindsay.

"This book aims to tell the story of how postmodernism applied its cynical Theories to deconstruct what we might agree to call 'the old religions' of human thought - which include conventional religious faiths like Christianity and secular ideologies like Marxism, as well as cohesive modern systems such as science, philosophical liberalism, and 'progress' - and replaced them with a new religion of its own, called 'Social Justice'."⁹²

This new "faith" interprets the world in terms of subtle material forces, such as systemic bigotry, instead of subtle spiritual forces such as sin and grace, the authors contend.

As postmodernism gains increased influence on society, as evidenced by the rise of "identity politics" and "political correctness," church leaders need to be aware, informed and able to explain the tenets, beliefs and practices of their faith, particularly to the many 20-somethings whose worldview has been greatly influenced by the Social Justice Movement.

James Emery White

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 13.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., 18.

James Emery White is the founding pastor of [Mecklenburg Community Church](#) in Charlotte, North Carolina, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention and has an average weekly attendance of 12,000. White also is a ranked adjunct professor of theology and culture at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, where he previously served as president. He has bachelor's degrees in public relations and business, and earned his Master of Divinity and doctorate degrees from Southern Seminary. He also has completed advanced university study at Vanderbilt University in religious history, and continuing education at Oxford University in England and has taught at Anderson University. White is president of Serious Times, a ministry that explores the intersection of faith and culture, and he hosts and writes a blog at [ChurchAndCulture.org](#).

Among White's twenty books are "The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated," "A Search for the Spiritual," and "Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World." White's writings and teachings often focus on 20-somethings and what the American church can do to attract this generation and reverse the widespread trend of Generation Z's drift away from Christianity. He notes in "Meet Generation Z" that along with the rise in the number of "nones" - those who say they have no religious affiliation - in the U.S. in recent decades, there has also been an increase in secularism among their rank. "In 2007, 57 percent of all none felt religion was of little importance to their lives; in 2014, that number climbed to roughly two-thirds of all respondents (nones)."⁹³ It has been widely recorded that Church attendance in the U.S. has been falling steadily since 1994, when 62 percent of Americans said they attended church frequently, dropping to 53 percent in 2013, according to surveys by Gallup. These trends are not just in the United States. A survey of twenty thousand residents of the United Kingdom showed the none rose from 3 percent in 1963 to 44.7 percent today. And among adults age twenty-five and under in the U.K., nearly two-thirds are none.⁹⁴ While church leaders have been trying for years to win over Busters or Generation X, who followed the Boomers, White asserts it is now critical for them to focus instead on Gen Z.

"Let me save you time. Drop everything and start paying attention to Generation Z, which now constitutes 25.9 percent of the US population. That's more than Millennials (24.5 percent). That's more than Gen X (15.4 percent). Yes, that's even more than Baby Boomers (23.6 percent)."⁹⁵

He said in this 2017 publication that "by 2020, members of Generation Z will account for 40 percent of all consumers. They will not simply influence American culture, as any generation would; they will constitute American culture."

White writes that the technological revolution, led by the popularity of the internet and the cellphone, has transformed American culture so swiftly that it "makes it difficult for older

⁹³ White, 23.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 37.

generations to realize the radically different world into which Generation Z has been born.”⁹⁶ Ninety-two percent of 20-somethings report going online daily and a quarter of Gen Z’ers say they go online “almost constantly.” While a nearly unlimited amount of information is available online, Gen Z has grown up searching the web on their own, without the help of intermediaries such as libraries, teachers or shops that had collected and sorted information for centuries. “This has made them more independent and self-directed than generations before them,” according to White.⁹⁷ It also places 20-somethings before a “widening chasm between wisdom and information.”

White also notes that Gen Z is more multiracial and “sexually fluid,” with strong support for gay marriage and transgender rights, more than any previous U.S. generation.⁹⁸ But “the most defining characteristic of Generation Z is that it is arguably the first generation in the West (certainly in the United States) that will have been raised in a post-Christian context. As a result, it is the first post-Christian generation.”⁹⁹ White points to two defining characteristics of today’s 20-somethings:

“First, they are lost. They are not simply living in and being shaped by a post-Christian cultural context. They do not even have a memory of the gospel. The degree of spiritual illiteracy is simply stunning.”¹⁰⁰

And second, “they are leaderless. Little if any direction is coming from their families, and less from their attempts to access guidance from the internet.”¹⁰¹ Among the key points White makes in “Meet Generation Z” is that the church must find its voice and speak to 20-somethings in ways that are relevant and to which Gen Z’ers can relate -- without compromising the core Christian message.

“... every generation must translate the Gospel into its unique cultural context. But this is very different from transforming the message of the Gospel into something that was never intended by the biblical witness. Transformation of the message must be avoided at all costs. Translation, however, is essential for a winsome and compelling presentation of the gospel of Christ. Transformation is heresy. Translation is the heart of our mission. Knowing the difference is the crucible of leadership and the difference between being in the world and being of the world.”¹⁰²

⁹⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 45-46.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 63.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 64.

¹⁰² Ibid., 94.

Synthesis and Conclusion

Over the last half-century, the United States has been undergoing a profound shift in how emerging generations view the church and the Gospel. It is beyond dispute that church attendance has been steadily declining, affiliation with organized religion has been dropping steeply, and the number of people who declare themselves "Spiritual But Not Religious" has been rising dramatically.

The vast majority of today's 20-somethings have had no exposure to Christian teachings, with only four percent having a "biblical worldview." At the same time, 20-somethings' lives and outlooks are being shaped by the proliferation of technology, a rejection of traditional institutions and authority, and a movement promoting Social Justice as a secular belief system that supports its own functional "religion."

With these changes, the church faces immense and critical challenges to its mission of spreading the Gospel to young Americans and future generations. It must seek ways to understand and attract members of Generation Z -- without compromising its foundational beliefs. In many ways, this task aligns with traditional Christian missionaries' intent to preach the Gospel to foreign cultures, where the people have no awareness of Jesus or Christianity.

David J. Hesselgrave, in his book "Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally," cites Bruce J. Nichols' observation in "Theological Education and Evangelization" that missionaries must aim for "contextualization." He quotes Nichols' definition of contextualization as "the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the Kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate culture and within their particular existential situations."¹⁰³

White makes a similar point in "Meet Generation Z," saying the church must find its voice and speak to 20-somethings in ways that are relevant by "translating" the Gospel into Gen Z's cultural context without "transforming" the authentic biblical message.¹⁰⁴

As the church strives to reach Generation Z, it must find ways to present the Gospel, not just in verbal form or traditional media but also through the technologies and visual elements in which modern "screenagers" are so immersed. The church must also capture the 20-somethings' attention almost immediately before their average 8.25-second attention span expires. And once it breaks through this 8.25-second "filter," which 20-somethings have developed as a means to sort through the flood of information, the church must then be prepared to make the Gospel meaningful without using "insider" jargon or Christianese references. These have become second-nature to Christians but can sound like a foreign language to 20-somethings who have never been taught

¹⁰³ David Hesselgrave, *Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally: An Introduction to Missionary Communication*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 136.

¹⁰⁴ White, 94.

about Jesus or the Bible, do not know what the cross or salvation represents, or may have a preconceived negative view of the institutional church.

Apostle Paul used such wisdom in Athens, where he spoke to the pagan crowd at the Areopagus, a public forum for discussing “the latest ideas.” (Acts 17:22-31) Paul began by stating, “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious,” a compliment that drew their attention. “For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: ‘To an Unknown God.’ Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.”

Paul went on to explain Biblical principles without mentioning the name of Jesus or using the word “sin.” Acts 17:32 states that “some of them sneered, but others said, ‘We want to hear you again on this subject,’” and verse 34 says: “A few men became followers of Paul and believed.”

Another characteristic of Generation Z is a desire for authenticity. To be effective in reaching 20-somethings, the church must present Jesus without any cultural or political add-ons. Dr. Leonard Sweet states when engaging culture and the complexities of current topics, we, as Christ-followers, should simply present the person and words of Jesus without editing. We must “hide behind Jesus.”¹⁰⁵ The church should let the authenticity of Jesus’ words speak for themselves. It is all too easy for preachers to fall into a habit of putting words into Jesus’ mouth, extrapolating his statements in the Bible by applying them to the day’s most controversial social issues. Jesus spoke firmly against sin, so he would “of course” speak out against whatever cultural or political sin the speaker now views as a threat to souls and society.

Too many times, Christians have comingled Jesus’ statements with political or cultural agendas, such as Jesus *and* gun control, Jesus *and* nationalism, Jesus, *and* Western paradigms (colonialism), or Jesus *and* conservative politics. This commingling not only weakens the presentation of Christ, but it also typically leads to debate, cynicism, and/or rejection by the receptor.

Another way to reach Generation Z with the Gospel is to “live Jesus” – allow the believers’ lives to demonstrate the impact Jesus has had on them. The church is not all rote and ritual; the Gospel is not just a philosophical discussion. Jesus, the church, and the Word of God have a real-world impact on real people. As Christians live their daily lives, they show resilience and a sense of peace. They can “go through hell” and still have positivity, which nonbelievers notice and are drawn to.

Another way the church can reach Generation Z is by highlighting the balance of the universe, from atoms and animals to planets and galaxies, and build on the “awe and wonder” of the universe felt by many 20-somethings. As James Emery White notes, while most 20-somethings

¹⁰⁵ Leonard Sweet, “Discussion of Napkin Scribbles Podcast #1: Sensual Orthodoxy” (Lecture presented at the Doctor of Ministry Cohort, Zoom, January 11, 2021).

are "spiritually illiterate," it does not mean they are atheists.¹⁰⁶ They have not rejected God; they just find no need for a higher power in their daily lives and are disconnected from any organized religion. They are, however, impressed by the beauty and depth of nature. As the Pew Research Center found, about half of Generation Z "found a deep awe and wonder about the universe."

Amid all the tragedy of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, a few positive consequences have arisen, including a renewed and intense interest in being outdoors. With the virus being more contagious indoors, outdoor activities have soared in popularity to the point that people have had difficulty finding RVs, bicycles, kayaks, and the like for sale. The pandemic has reconnected people with their innate "hunger" for nature that cannot be satisfied by viewing or clicking on a screen.

As Americans experience nature in new ways, White writes that "discussing the awe and wonder of the universe, openly raising the many questions surrounding the universe and then positing the existence of God, is one of the most valuable apologetics/pre-evangelism approaches that can be pursued."¹⁰⁷ Talking to Gen Z-ers about nature provides a strategic opening that can lead them to think beyond themselves and present them with a compelling case for a Creator's existence.

One more way the church can work on relating to 20-somethings is to acknowledge their passion for "Social Justice" and compare it to Biblical justice. As Tim Keller writes in "A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory," the secular world offers "competing visions of justice," yet none of these fragmented alternates has achieved cultural consensus.¹⁰⁸ In contrast, Keller asserts, Christians have "an ancient, rich, strong, comprehensive, complex and attractive understanding of justice" that incorporates all of the secular aspects of social justice. Today's preachers can learn from Keller's approach in stressing the historic and comprehensive nature of Christian justice, with its clearly defined goals and criteria that have been tested for two millennia and point out that today's Social Justice Movement lacks unity or vision, with eclectic secular groups all vying to install their own version of social justice.¹⁰⁹

Meanwhile, the Social Justice Movement sees the world in two categories – oppressors and the oppressed. They value inclusiveness, individualism, and equality above everything else. The church needs to play to its strengths and demonstrate to 20-somethings that their craving for social

¹⁰⁶ White, 131.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 138.

¹⁰⁸ "Timothy Keller, 'A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory,' Life in the Gospel, last modified July 31, 2020, <https://quarterly.gospelinlife.com/a-biblical-critique-of-secular-justice-and-critical-theory/>.

¹⁰⁹ Nieuwhof, Carey. "Tim Keller on How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America." Carey Nieuwhof, last modified May 12, 2020. <https://careynieuwhof.com/episode339/>.

justice, as currently defined by culture falls, far short of the Biblical concepts of justice, equality, and liberation.

If the church succeeds in letting Jesus' words speak for themselves, if Christians can "live Jesus," if the church can use technology wisely, and if Christians can explain why Biblical justice is more appealing than the nihilism of the secular Social Justice Movement, then the church's mission will continue and, almost as a byproduct, 20-somethings will be in attendance.

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Appendix C—Milestone 3 Design Workshop Report

INTRODUCTION

This report documents the research conducted with a focus group (Design Workshop) of members of Generation Z, specifically ages 18 to 25-years-old, to gain insight regarding this demographic's beliefs and views about faith, Jesus, and the American Protestant Church. The Stakeholder participating in the Design Workshop also provided potential solutions regarding Generation Z's seeming disinterest, non-involvement, and, sometimes, disdain with the Christian faith and the American Protestant Church. Questions were asked to the Stakeholders to gain better understanding, and the results of the focus group research were then provided to three experts, who gave analysis during one-on-one interviews. The collected data and outcomes of the focus group research, expert analysis, and a topical study on Generation Z are included in this report.

NPO STATEMENT

ORIGINAL - Problem: The lack of interest and involvement of adults, ages 20-29, in the American Protestant church.

REVISED - Problem: The lack of interest and involvement of Generation Z, specifically ages 18-25, in the American Protestant faith.

(NPO OPTION) - Opportunity: The Church needs to discover a new way to communicate the timeless truth of Jesus and His Kingdom to Generation Z (specifically 18 to 25-year-olds).

NPO SCOPE AND CONSTRAINTS

I am researching the lack of interest in Generation Z, ages 18-25, in Jesus, Christianity, and the American Protestant Church. My research lives within this context to avoid broadening the scope to include other ages or Catholic churches. My focus will primarily be on the worldview, spirituality, values, and views of Jesus and the Church in this generation. Secondly, I will focus on many current church methodologies which may positively or negatively influence Generation Z from finding faith in Jesus and/or becoming a part of a Christian faith community.

The individuals at our Stakeholder's meetings each received \$100 for their participation, and each person who engaged in the one-on-one interviews has also received a gift. Approximately \$3,500 has been invested into honoraria, facility rental, food, and gifts of appreciation.

NPO CONTEXT

My NPO context will include researching American adults ranging in ages from 18 to 25 who are "unchurched" or significantly "de-churched" (those who have not consistently attended a church in the last ten years.) It will be essential to investigate these individuals' beliefs, faiths, worldviews, and the subsequent impact on Protestant church attendance. I will also research the

effectiveness (or lack thereof) of both denominational and non-denominational Protestant churches in reaching or engaging this demographic.

I will primarily focus on "Generation Z" who fall into the category of post-high school-aged up to 25 years old. It will be essential to research heterogeneous individuals, having diversified racial and gender representation in my study. Lastly, I believe conducting ongoing focus group research with unchurched/de-churched individuals will be beneficial.

ROOT CAUSES

My NPO's root causes seemingly stem from a perception of adults, ranging in ages 18 to 25, that the beliefs of the American Protestant church are exclusive, narrow-minded, and/or non-essential. Combined with a growing mindset in this age demographic that truth is highly personalized, institutions cannot be trusted, and those in the church should not only value all beliefs but validate them, is creating a lack of interest in Christian faith and, thus, an absence of this sector of the population in American Protestant churches. Additionally, there appears to be much confusion about the importance and benefit of church attendance. Many participants in the NPO Discovery (fall 2020) and Design Workshops (fall 2021) perceived the church as "boring" or irrelevant.

Another root cause is the perceived uncomfortableness this age demographic would experience if attending a church and a lack of understanding of "what to do." There is an overarching fear of being judged, unwelcomed, or not meeting a spoken or unspoken ethical standard or appearance criteria. Additionally, the church is no longer perceived as the only or primary place to find spirituality, connection with "god," answers to life's questions, or experience faith. The church is also considered too political, lacking diversity, and archaically monolithic.

THREE BIG IDEAS

- 1). Write a book intended for church leaders, young adult workers, and those interested in Generation Z that would give them the unique and personal perspective of what it's like to be raised as Generation Z and how their reality, beliefs, and the Christian faith intersect.
- 2). Design an online open resource which creates a partnership of collaboration for those working together towards engaging Generation Z into a Christ-centered faith and church community.
- 3). Create a non-traditional church space where Generational Z could gather to build relationship, discuss beliefs, and be introduced to Jesus.

DEFINITION OF 'DONE'

For churches to understand this group and prayerfully design an approach to introduce them to Jesus, with subsequent efforts which engages them in a faith community. Changes in the Church will need to happen for this to become a reality.

THREE CONCEPT PITCHES

Book:

An idea would be to write a book with a title like, "The Gospel According to Gen Z" or "The Gospel According to Alexis" or "The Gospel According to Jordan." The book would be primarily about a person who falls into the age demographic of Generation Z (ages 18 to 25) and how they see the world, faith, and the American Protestant Church. Additionally, it would be helpful and enlightening to expound on current Church methodologies and the intentional or unintentional signals the Church is projecting to that age demographic. I would also juxtapose the current beliefs, values, and methods of the American Protestant Church, drilling down on where Generation Z and the Church agree or disagree.

This book would also present the data from my research in a story or narrative form. Alexis, Jordan, or Gen Z would represent the Generation Z age demographic as a whole. It would be written based on the age-old adage, "Walk a mile in (someone's) shoes." Prayerfully, the book would put the reader in the shoes of Gen Z, better understanding their upbringing, worldview, exposure to religion and spirituality, and how they see Jesus and His Church. The goal would be for the reader to better understand this amazing, unique, and complex generation and see a way to present an accurate picture of who Jesus is in a way that they will comprehend. Secondly, the book would point out areas the American Protestant Church needs to rethink its approach, information signaling, and dogma (carefully and prayerfully) without violating Orthodox Christian theology.

- *Big Idea:* Write a book, a fictional narrative where the main character represents the worldview, values, priorities, and faith of Generation Z and how they perceive the Church.
- *Audience:* The audience reading the book would be church leaders, young adult pastors/workers, and those interested in understanding Generation Z and desire to better present the person of Jesus and His Church.
- *NPO:* **Problem:** The lack of interest of Generation Z, ages 18-25, in Jesus, Christianity, and Church. (or) **Opportunity:** The Church needs to discover a new way to communicate the timeless truth of Jesus and His Kingdom to Gen Z (specifically 18 to 25-year-olds).
- *Benefit:* The reader would benefit by understanding Generation Z better and, prayerfully, how to present Jesus better.
- *Approach:* The uniqueness of a book, which is a fictional narrative about a character representing a generation, is that the reader can perceive Jesus and His Church through Gen Z's eyes, per se.
- *Risks.* I might not be able to thoroughly represent Generation Z's worldview, values, or priorities in a compelling way. Or I may not be able to point out the Church's ineffective methodologies, dogma, or information signaling.

- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* I am testing the idea of whether a narrative book would be more helpful than a book full of data and research findings.
- *Benchmarks of success:* I would write an outline or a draft of the book and ask multiple church leaders, professors, and social workers whether it is compelling or not.
- *Other Approaches:* Presently, very few current resources are available that speak to Generation Z and its view of Jesus and His Church.

Online Think Tank:

An idea would be to form a think tank comprised of material from researchers (Christian and secular) who have studied Generation Z, American Church trends and methodologies, and the effectiveness of reaching that age demographic. A website could be created that houses current data regarding Generation Z and faith and ideation for church leaders on how to present Jesus and His Kingdom in a way that these young adults would comprehend. Secondly, the think tank could be a resource for church leaders on how to approach difficult or complex subjects with Generation Z and share what is working in Christian houses of faith across the nation.

One option would be to create a space on the online think tank where individuals could share ideas, ask questions, and wrestle with multi-faceted subjects related to Generation Z's faith journey. Another option would be to use an existing social media platform to host such a think tank.

- *Big Idea:* Create an open source online think tank that would make research, solutions, ideas, and conversation about Generation Z and Jesus/church available to the user.
- *Audience:* The audience accessing the online think tank would be church leaders, young adult pastors/workers, and those interested in understanding Generation Z and desire to better present the person of Jesus and His Church.
- *NPO: Problem:* The lack of interest of Generation Z, ages 18-25, in Jesus, Christianity, and Church. (or) **Opportunity:** The Church needs to discover a new way to communicate the timeless truth of Jesus and His Kingdom to Gen Z (specifically 18 to 25-year-olds).
- *Benefit:* The think tank would be a resource about Generation Z, Jesus, and the Church in a current environment where little is being discussed regarding all three of those interrelated topics.
- *Approach:* I am not presently aware of an online resource like this. Therefore, could the think tank be an ever-expanding resource for those interested?
- *Risks.* The cost of building such an online think tank may be too expensive. Also, keeping the online think tank updated may be too intensive.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test:* Create a prototype on an existing online platform and invite select individuals to give their opinions of its value.

- *Benchmarks of success:* Ask for honest feedback from those invited to test the prototype.
- *Other Approaches:* Presently, very few current resources are available that speak to Generation Z and its view of Jesus and His Church.

The Loft:

An idea would be to create a safe and neutral space where those who are in Generation Z could gather to find friendship, discuss faith, and have fun. This space could create an opportunity for interactive conversations about faith, an overwhelming idea that surfaced in the Design Workshop. Additionally, it would be a relational gathering.

One of the hurdles for this age group is their disdain for "organized religion" or "commercialized church." By creating an initially neutral space for Generation Z to gather, it may remove some of the initial barriers that could eventually lead to faith in Jesus.

Presently, there is such a space we have named "The Loft," located in downtown Rockford, Illinois, which has been the place where we have hosted some young adult events. It is in the heart of the art and local business district and has an appropriate "vibe," attractive to that age demographic. I believe this space could become the place where intentional, yet organic gatherings could build a relationship with Generation Z.

"The Loft" could become a model for other churches. Part of the shift that the American Protestant Church might have to make is creating an alternative gathering effort to build a relationship with this age demographic. The traditional push to a Sunday morning service might not be the most effective approach. Also, The Loft may need to be hosted by those who are Generation Z-aged themselves to create an relaxed environment. One topic that surfaced in the workshop is that 18- to 25-year-olds distrust large institutions and organized religion. Therefore, an approach may be to create an informal gathering hosted by like-aged individuals of faith, where the primary goal would be to build a relationship with Generation Z. Build a bridge of relationship, and Jesus will eventually walk across.

- *Big Idea:* Create a "vibey" space where Generation Z aged individuals could often gather to build relationships and discuss faith and Jesus.
- *Audience:* The audience would be those in the age demographic of 18 to 25-year-olds.
- *NPO:* **Problem:** The lack of interest of Generation Z, ages 18-25, in Jesus, Christianity, and Church. (or) **Opportunity:** The Church needs to discover a new way to communicate the timeless truth of Jesus and His Kingdom to Gen Z (specifically 18 to 25-year-olds).
- *Benefit:* The Loft would create a neutral location where those who are a part of Generation Z could safely discuss faith without being in an overtly religious space.

The Loft would be led by those of faith in the same age range, and the effort could act as pre-evangelism evangelism.

- *Approach*: The approach would be purposefully organic and non-structured. The primary goal would be to build a relationship, as it is essential that the effort not be inauthentic.
- *Risks*. The cost of having a space downtown Rockford is expensive. The “results” may not be immediately apparent.
- *Assumptions/hypotheses to test*: The hypothesis would be that once you gather people from this age demographic together in an interactive, relational environment, the Holy Spirit will lead and direct conversations towards Jesus.
- *Benchmarks of success*: Create a prototype model by hosting a certain number of gatherings and evaluate the experience before fully launching The Loft.
- *Other Approaches*: If successful, could The Loft model be replicated in other cities, overseen by other churches?

DESIGN WORKSHOP STAKEHOLDERS

- Undergrad Student (African American)
- Undergrad Student (African American)
- Undergrad Student, Dance Instructor (African American)
- Barista (White)
- Dance Instructor (African American)
- Barista (Hispanic)
- Undergrad Student (White)

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

- Speaker, Author, and Founder of a consulting group that works with both religious and marketplace organizations (like the NBA, Teknion Data Solutions), and in-part consults these organization about employment of Generation Z.
- Speaker, Author, and Founder of a Christian think tank, bringing together both secular and faith experts to discuss various current topics and explore solutions. This individual has done extensive research on Generation Z.
- Speaker, Author, Church Planter, and Professor who serves at a distinguished Christian seminary, and has conducted research on Generation Z.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dean, Kenda Creasy. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010.

In *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean dives into the data supplied from the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) - the study on adolescent spirituality performed from 2003-05. Dean narrowed her focus to evaluating the 8% of students whom the NSYR classified as "highly devoted" Christian teenagers in order to assess what it is that contributes to the "consequential faith" possessed by those interviewed. Dean believes that the elements that contribute to consequential faith could be the key to "better preparing young people steeped in Moralistic Therapeutic Deism for the trust-walk of Christian faith?" (p. 22) Though written in 2010, much of Dean's research and conclusions are still pertinent and can be used to understand the worldview in which Generation Z was raised.

Nieuwhof, Carey. *The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*, November 22, 2021, 9:00PM CST.

Guest: Kara Powell. Toronto, Canada. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/carey-nieuwhof-leadership-podcast-lead-like-never-before/id912753163?i=1000542783871>

Podcast guest, Kara Powell, is a PhD and the Chief of Leadership Formation and the Executive Director of the Fuller Youth Institute at Fuller Theological Seminary. She is named by Christianity Today as one of the 50 Women to Watch, serves as a youth and family strategist for Orange and speaks regularly at parenting and leadership conferences. She authored and coauthored numerous books including, "Faith in an Anxious World," and "Can I Ask That?"

Young adults today struggle with anxiety, depression, and life. Dr. Powell suggests Generation Z can be described as **anxious, adaptive, and diverse**. Gen Z is also a diverse generation, as US census data shows 50% of young people are people of color, which leads them to pursue racial justice and racial reconciliation more than in the past. Therefore, Powell believes leaders should look for the different ways these traits are manifested. Powell points out that Generation Z believes **Identity** is defined by "who I am both individually and communally." She argues Generation Z need a sense of **belonging**; they are hungry for connection. Lastly, when it comes to **purpose** in young adults, serving is important, but many are burnt out or lack a motivation that fueled their service. This podcast provides an insightful overview of how faith leaders can engage with Generation Z.

White, James Emery. *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2017.

In *Meet Generation Z*, James Emery White present an honest, yet hopeful, look at Generation Z (those born from 1995-2010). White explores what the American Christian Church is facing as this

generation lives a new post-Christian existence. After painting the picture of what defines and marks this group, the attention turns to how to best to reach them. White lays out a “new approach” by suggesting five ways to connect with this generation where they live: (1) Become a countercultural church, (2) Find our voice, (3) Rethink evangelism, (4) Approach apologetics for the new generation, and (5) Make strategic decisions to make the reach.

APPENDICES

DESIGN WORKSHOP DESCRIPTION

On November 2nd, 2021, my design workshop had its second session in my research on the lack of interest and involvement of adults, ages 18-25, in the American Protestant Church. Of those in attendance, seven were stakeholders, each of whom were paid \$100 for their involvement, and were categorized as unchurched, young adults, and willing to have a civil conversation regarding their world views on religion in modern America. The other seven volunteers included an executive Pastor, two executive assistants, one staff pastor, two ministry staff, and me; all of whom were employed by City First Church and received no extra compensation for their service. This session followed a predetermined path that had been critiqued and agreed upon the day of by all seven staff members.

The session began by briefly introducing the rest of those in the room, sharing their names and positions at City First Church. I made it very clear to the seven stakeholders that they were the “experts” of this conversation and that I wanted to hear from them. I also provided them with the promise that nothing they said would offend any Jesus-follower in this room, and that they should be honest to the utmost degree. After my brief introduction, I communicated to the room that I would sit and stay silent, yet attentive, as to not dominate the conversation or sway it in any non-predetermined direction.

DESIGN WORKSHOP DOCUMENTATION

The first staff member then introduced the first activity which included them placing sticky notes on a white board with their answers to six clearly stated questions:

Six Posed Questions:

1. Are you curious about faith/God/church? Why or Why Not?
2. Do you consider yourself spiritual? Why or why not?
3. How COULD church add value to your life?
4. How would you define church?
5. What are your thoughts on the Bible?
6. Who or what do you look to, to find hope?

After allotting them 15 minutes to answer all six questions and stick them on the board, the staff member in charge of leading this exercise went through and read all the questions and their answers out loud. The following were the Stakeholders answers:

1. Are you curious about faith/God/church? Why or Why Not?

- a. I'm curious about other's views/opinions on faith/God/church. Not so much about how they may benefit myself.
- b. No, I'm never curious about God. I've just always had the feeling He was with me.
- c. I feel as I have become older, I am less curious about God/church.
- d. I feel not as curious as I used to be just because I understand more than I used to.
- e. I'm a little curious, but at the same time I have not been.
- f. I think I've always been curious about all faiths/religions,
- g. I am curious about God because I want to know why Christians do the things they do.

2. Do you consider yourself spiritual? Why or why not?

- a. I do consider myself spiritual because I meditate (i.e., lucid dreaming, seeking guidance within myself.)
- b. I would consider myself spiritual. I think there is a world beyond death that we don't comprehend. I also think there are ways you can tap into spirituality.
- c. I do, but self-spiritual. Due to my mom not going to church I switched focus on myself.
- d. Yes, I feel like our body is a shell and that being happy/spiritual is important. There is music that lifts your spirits and soul food that makes you happy.
- e. Yes, growing up I was heavily involved in my family's church. Over time, I found my own version of faith.
- f. I do consider myself a spiritual person. I think everything happens for a reason, like teaching lessons, due to some sort of higher power.
- g. I guess I am sort of spiritual. I don't pray to God really at all, but I do talk to my dead friends and family.

3. How COULD church add value to your life?

- a. Church could provide purpose in someone's life when they are lost and need it most.
- b. It could open more opportunities for me to change some of my spiritual beliefs.
- c. It could give me a deeper level of understanding.

- d. Church is a place full of positive people, there is always great advice that will help you add value.
- e. Church would be a good place to find people who can help you with personal goals.
- f. I don't think church would benefit me, as I prefer to practice my beliefs independently. I also view church as a place to gather and connect with others, but I prefer to do that with my own family/friends.
- g. I don't know how it could add value. I don't think I need it.

4. How would you define church?

- a. I would define church as a community of different people coming together.
- b. I define church as a place of gathering.
- c. The house of God.
- d. A place of worship.
- e. Church is a place of release. A place to cleanse the soul.
- f. A place where you should feel safe, comfortable, and open to allow God in your life mentally and physically.
- g. I don't know how to define church.

5. What are your thoughts on the Bible?

- a. The Bible has words for everybody and every situation in life.
- b. I can always find something within it that I can apply to my life.
- c. I feel like it's important but often is complicated and at times it's easy to misunderstand "stuff" in there.
- d. It's just a book to me.
- e. I view the Bible as just a biased man-made option, but something that is open to interpretation. I tend to not agree with some "interpretations" or how Christians project it on others. (Street preaching/hate speech).
- f. My thoughts are nonexistent, I've never investigated it personally.
- g. To be honest, it's kind of long.

6. Who or what do you look to, to find hope?

- a. I look to friends who raise my spirits. I go to my family for advice. I find joy in the things I do.
- b. At my lowest moments, I look choose to look forward into the future.
- c. When I need hope, I look to myself.
- d. I look to family and friends close to me for hope.
- e. Besides God, I guess I would say my family or sometimes myself.
- f. I guess I find hope in other people.
- g. I look to family and friends for hope when I'm feeling down.

After their answers were read, the second staff member began the second activity: 3-12-3. This activity's purpose was to have participants spend three minutes brainstorming what first ideas came to mind when they heard the words "Generation Z" and "Church". They would then write these ideas/phrases on note cards. After the three minutes were up, the participant's responses were shuffled and handed back out to the seven participants, but now as groups of three. The groups would then have twelve minutes to prepare a presentation of the information on the notecards they had received. Their presentations and takeaways regarding Generation Z and the church were as follows:

Group #1

- More accepting of LGBTQ then they would be more open to go to church.
- Christians hurting other Christians/other people.
- Church is not a safe place to express themselves.
- They feel like church is an "insider" thing.
- People make it feel like you're damned to hell if you don't go to church.
- Care about the person - not just getting them to church.

Group #2

- "Am I really accepted?"
- Busy schedule, no time for church.
- Different times for church (late night, early afternoon).
- Different feel/vibe: not so fancy.
 - Want it to feel more relaxed.
 - More casual feeling: not so stuffy.

Group #3

- Focused on what's in front of them: reaching for goals.
- Gen Z is overly sensitive/ easily offendable.

- They want to learn about what they're interested in, not things that are not interested in.
- Church is judgmental (Christians don't practice what they preach).
- "How do I know that the church I'm going to is the right church?"

After the presentations, the third staff member introduced the third and final activity. This activity was meant to go back through the points that were made from the presentations in the previous activity and weed out the ones that weren't viewed as the "big hitters" of their thoughts on "Generation Z" and "Church." This was accomplished by granting each participant 5 votes that they were able to cast on any of the phrases listed by the above groups. Once this voting was complete, the participants re-approached the most-voted-for answers and offered their own solutions/practical implementations to mend the relationship between Generation Z and Church. Their top answers and solutions are as follows:

STAKEHOLDER SOLUTIONS

Solutions to the statement: "If church was like _____, I would want to go."

- More accepting of everyone.
- More casual, welcoming, comfortable, and not judged.
- Like to talk, not just listen (interactive).
- Christians practiced what they preached.

1. How can a church be more accepting?

- Be a good Christian, in and out of the church.
 - How do you become a good Christian outside of the church?
- Ask more people how they feel/allow space for questions to be asked.
- Speak publicly about what the church stands for, not just have people guess.
 - Be outspoken on beliefs.
- Acknowledge what is happening in the world and talk about the "elephant in the room," per se.
- What does accepting mean to you within the church?
 - We support you no matter what.
 - Use the word "embracing" not "accepting."

2. How do we make people feel more natural/welcoming?

- Don't make people feel like what you're wearing matters.
- Make groups smaller.
- Make the environment welcoming.
 - Calming atmosphere.
 - What do people feel (senses) when they walk in?
- Don't judge by how people act or look.
- You can be too nice/intimidating while still being welcoming.

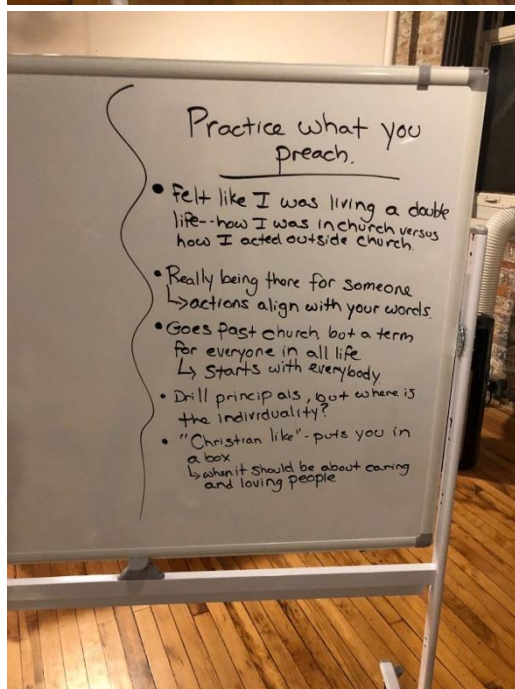
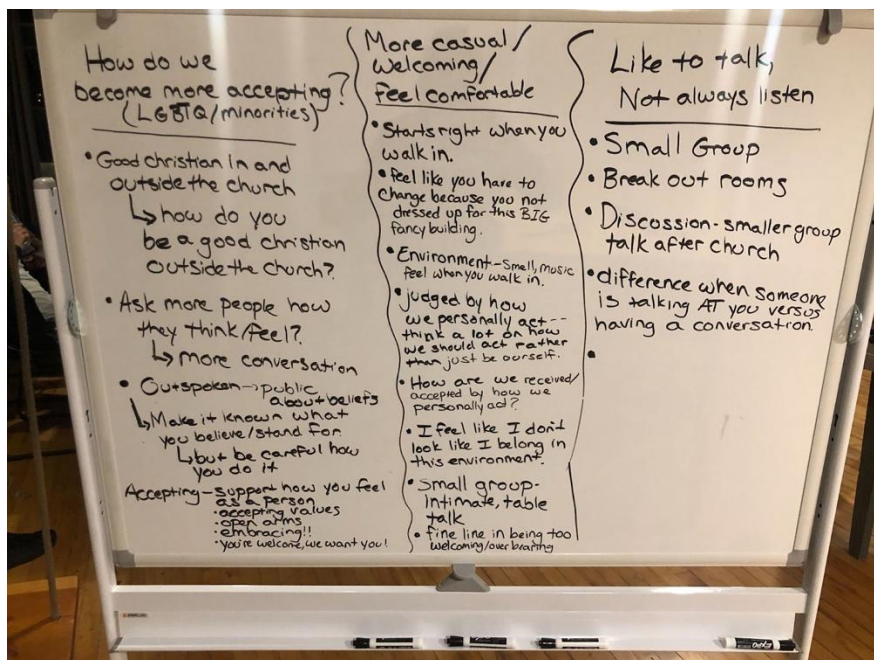
3. Like to talk/not always listen.

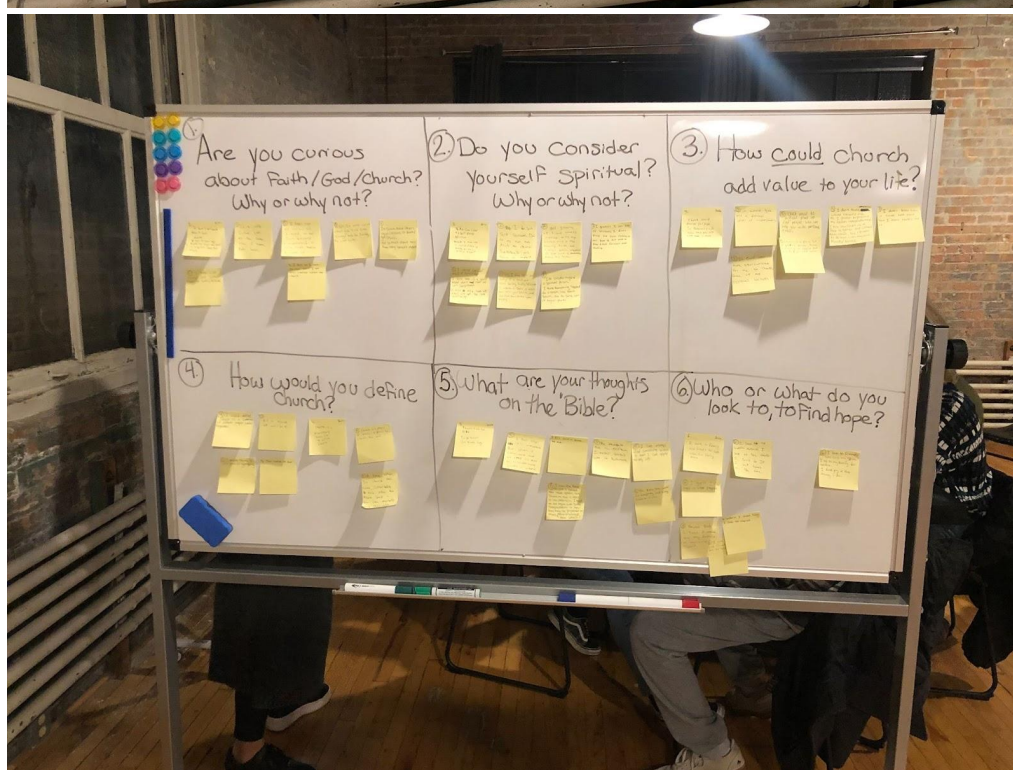
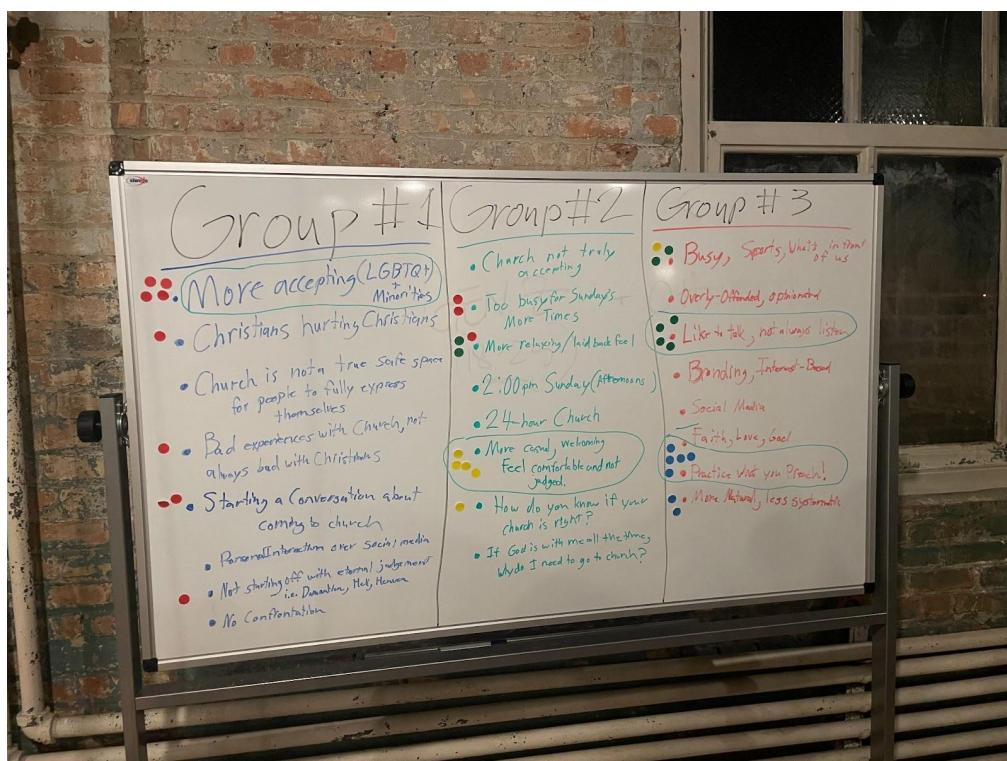
- Allow people to have smaller groups in order to hear others' opinions.
- Listening is different from conversation-based environments then lecture based environments.

4. Practice what you preach!

- Felt like they had to live a double life.
- Being there for people, not just say you're going to do it.
 - Actions should be aligning throughout the week with what you are learning on Sundays.
- This is a generational thing - not just for "churched" people in general.
- Churches focus too much on making "Christian drones" instead of allowing people to think freely.
 - It should be more about caring/loving people instead of getting put in a box.
- Drill principles, but where is the individuality?

I then thanked the group for their participation and paid them each \$100 in cash for their participation. Overall, I left the workshop satisfied with the insights I had gained from it. I had a few participants stay afterwards who had questions regarding my own thoughts on Generation Z, inclusivity, and opinions on the subjects that were discussed earlier. They stated that they wished that "church felt more like this"; a small gathering of people who could bounce opinions and ideas off each other with no judgement. I believe full well that all participants and staff members enjoyed their time and conversations and would "do so again in a heartbeat."







ONE-PAGE POST-WORKSHOP MESSAGE TO STAKEHOLDERS



Dear Stakeholder,

Allow me to share my sincere gratitude for your participation in the November 2 focus group gathering (Design Workshop). Your feedback was very insightful and valuable to the project I am leading. I realize your schedule is already full, so your willingness to help does not go unnoticed.

The premise of my research is based upon Generation Z's (specifically ages 18 to 25 years old) reluctance to embrace the Protestant Christian Faith and engage in a Christian church. Research informs us that only 4% of those in your age demographic would self-identify as having a "Biblical worldview." This reality impacts church attendance, and as a result, most churches in America are quickly aging, and the younger demographic is absent.

Thanks to your feedback, insight, and suggestions, I gathered that there are four primary reasons for Gen Z's reluctance to fully embrace the Protestant Christian faith and, thus, attend a house of worship:

1. Christianity/church needs to be more accepting of everyone.
2. Church needs to be more casual, welcoming, and less judgmental.
3. Church needs to be more interactive.
4. Christians need to "practice what they preach." (Additional reasoning)

I will now focus on these ideas and formulate potential solutions. Again, thank you for your participation in the design workshop, and it is my prayer you have a wonderful holiday season.

With Appreciation,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "JD", is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Pastor Jeremy DeWeerd

Senior Pastor, City First Church

ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS DOCUMENTATION

(Transcript)

Researcher

I've been conducting focus groups and interviewing experts to try to understand Generation Z; specifically, those who are ages 18 to 25, and their thoughts and beliefs on God, faith, and church. For the most part, all participants said they were spiritual in one way or another. Their view of spirituality is not necessarily framed in the way that you and I would see faith. We asked for their thoughts on the Bible and what are the hurdles that keep them from attending church.

Participant 1 (Overview)

Generally, there's a crisis of "meaning making." People don't know where to find meaning, purpose, and hope, so they're finding hope in their friends and family and themselves, which is just a dead end. There's a crisis of meaninglessness. There's a mental health crisis, which the meaninglessness plays into, where there's just despair in that generation. They're not sure there's a future ahead because of the current world we live in, whether it's the pandemic or digital metaverse realities coming their way fast. They're not even sure what it means to be human anymore.

Embodiment is what they're after - smaller, embodied trusting. But one of their challenges is the ability to know how to talk to one another, to communicate, to build relationships, because they've been trained to do that in a digital world, not a physical world.

We as the church are practicing some things that are essential to meaning making, and they've never experienced it. So, they have to kind of bump into that conversation, and when they bump into it, it'll resonate without religious language, and it might create curiosity.

When (Facebook founder) Mark Zuckerberg is talking about the metaverse and creating a whole digital world where you're isolated, essentially, it's trying to fake community. The church has to have an answer that's different, that says, "No, that's actually not going to be what solves your loneliness problem. It can't. It's not made to do that."

So, there's these big, huge questions that can only be well answered when you understand there's a God or a moral authority outside yourself. Despair comes from not believing that there's a God. The way into that group, I believe, is through helping them start to discover meaning and purpose in their life, and that one-on-one conversation is a big part of the God-conversation.

I think the other piece is that some of this meaningless comes from boredom and affluence. It's just kind of the cycle of the generations right now. Broadly speaking, these children have grown up with everything ... everything they could need or want. That feeds into this lost-ness that they feel.

Researcher

Do you believe they're spiritual people? They self-identified as yes, they are, but would you agree? Do you believe Gen Z is a spiritual generation?

Participant 2 (Overview)

Yes, but I think every generation is. I believe Gen Z's options for filling the vacuum include more witchcraft, more identifying with social justice issues, a focus on climate change, and pursuit of purpose. It's like climate change represents pantheism and the idea of worshipping the earth. It will give a "cause" that is going to feel very "spiritual," and like a religion. It's like dogma that they're going to fall into because we as human beings like that kind of structure and dogma in our life, but they don't want it from the Church. They'll buy into it from this other system that is going to persuade them that they need to sacrifice their life for the earth versus for the Kingdom or for others.

Researcher

In our Gen Z focus groups, all of them self-identified as "spiritual," but they consider spirituality to include such practices as lucid dreaming, seeking guidance within myself, talking to the dead - to family members that had gone before them. One person said, "I'm spiritual, but due to my mom not going to church, I switched the focus to myself." They are saying, "Yeah, we're spiritual, just not in the way that you (Church) define spiritual."

Participant 3 (Overview)

I would be asking them questions. "Where did your thoughts of spirituality come from? Where did they originate from? So, you think you're spiritual? Why? Where did those spiritual thoughts come from? How do you define church? Where was the first picture of church you ever saw?"

I want to know if their picture of church was from a movie. I want to know if they perceived a good church. Was it a small church? Was it your mom's church? I can't tell you how many people I talked to in their 30s and 40s who used this phrase: "I went to church with my grandmother." They only know their grandma's church.

I think you could go deeper in your research by breaking it down by demographics - African American, Hispanic, White churches. At Gomez Chapel (African American church), I was amazed by how many people were impressed by a pastor wearing jeans. Amazed! They would say, "Man, I really like this pastor. He wears jeans! He's real down to earth!" It really shows you how little they know about churches outside of their own limited experiences. A lot of pastors wear jeans now. But in their minds, a pastor still wears a robe. (Their experience when they were at their grandmother's church.)

Researcher

Only 4 percent of Gen Z self-identifies as having a biblical worldview. As a pastor, we better focus on this generation, otherwise there's going to be absent. My goal is to try to understand how to get Gen Z curious about our faith in Jesus, the byproduct of which would be church adherence. Do you believe they are, generally speaking, disinterested in Jesus or Church or both?

Participant 2 (Overview)

Reading some of your research, the first thing that comes to mind is almost all the answers, and even some of the questions, almost implied that the purpose of Christian faith, or faith in general, should be about improving my life. I just found a lot of those answers to be saying, "What can you do, or what have you done, for me lately?"

I read a recent study that found the average teenager looks at their phone approximately 2,300 times a day. And every single app on their phone is pointing to themselves. It's about you, you, you. Every notification's about you. We're catechizing people into selfishness, and they bring that into their faith. I almost feel like crying reading those responses. It shows we've catechized this generation into selfishness.

My second thought is that all the responses are exhibiting a deep commitment to spirituality, but it almost feels like you're allowed to be a spiritual seeker, but you can't spiritually arrive. Like you're allowed to be a spiritual seeker, but the minute you find anything (true) and claim it has any universal appeal or reality, it's deemed judgmental. So, seeking is okay, but finding is not. You can seek, but you can't find.

Researcher

Some of the people interviewed say they believe Generation Z is overly sensitive and easily offendable, which I think is a very interesting self-diagnosis. So that's a problem when you go to church because your carnality will be offended. They perceived church as judgmental.

And they don't want to sit and listen to a preacher, they want a dialogue not a monologue. Thoughts?

Participant 2 (Overview)

When you spend your life living in a world with this kind of egalitarianism, everyone has an equal voice sort of thing, and then you come in a church and you see somebody talk and everybody listens, I can understand how that can rub your soul the wrong way. But I think it's really important that we have spaces where we go shut up and listen.

I've been in rooms where everybody has an equal voice, and I don't know if it leads where we want it to lead. There was a while there that even in preaching, everything was about moving from the pulpit to the round table. And I think that's appropriate in certain environments, but don't we need some spaces where proclamation is sacred and held in high esteem?

Participant 3 (Overview)

I think if I could say one thing to anyone trying to lead this group or trying to attract Gen Z'ers, I think it's got to be something that you're doing that's not on a Sunday. I think it's got to be something like, we're doing this effort for the community. And I would even encourage leaders to be bigger than, "hey, by the way, we're inclusive of the LGBTQIA+." Instead, the church is going to go and serve the community, and whether you're LGBTQIA+ affirming, or not, we are going to go love the community that houses both.

I think now more than ever people are looking at the community impact of a church and what it's doing for the city. Church can be viewed as, "you're trying to get me in the building for you so your attendance could go well, so your budget can be bigger, so that you can get a bigger building. But I think the more churches move out of their four walls to do something in the community, the more people will want to come to the church because they want to be a part of that. They want to make a difference. They want to be a part of things that do make a difference.

TOPICAL ESSAY

20-Somethings, Faith, and Church

There has been extensive research conducted in recent years that shows a lack of interest and involvement of young adults, ages 20-29, in the American Protestant church. This age range consists of younger Millennials, born between 1980 and 1994¹¹⁰, and older members of Generation Z, born between 1995 and 2015.¹¹¹ In an effort to understand 20-somethings and their assumptions about Jesus and the church, in-depth questions must be asked: What is the nature of their faith? What is the nature of their belief? Christian doctrine would define faith as the right and proper response of sinful, fallen humanity to a holy, saving God. Sin creates a gap between God and us. Faith in Jesus bridges that gap and restores our fractured relationship. Today's Christian leaders must learn how 20-somethings view faith and how they practice their beliefs, and how these things impact their interest in the American Protestant church.

Belief is a "fundamental brain function on which individual and societal behavior is grounded."¹¹² Therefore, the beliefs of 20-somethings, and the formation of said beliefs, are essential to understand because they influence personal practice of faith and church adherence. Possibly, the key questions regarding this age group are, "What does it mean to a 20-something to have faith?" and "What is the specific nature of their beliefs?"

¹¹⁰ White.

¹¹¹ Barna Group, "Gen Z."

¹¹² Seitz, Paloutzian, and Angel.

The formation of the beliefs of 20-somethings is profoundly influenced by the environment in which they grow up. Speaking specifically of Generation Z, they are growing up in environment unlike that of any previous generation. 57% use screen media four hours or more on an average day. "The internet is at the core of Gen Z's development, a uniquely powerful influence on their worldview, mental health, daily schedule, sleep patterns, relationships, and more. Devices are almost constantly on their person and on their minds." Only 4% have a biblical worldview. "The worldview of Gen Z (and, in turn, their moral code) is highly inclusive and individualistic. This diverse, open-minded group of young people is sensitive to others' feelings and experiences, and wary of asserting any one view as right or wrong."¹¹³ 33% of younger 20-somethings say gender is how a person feels inside, not their birth sex. "Their assorted views on gender identity and expression are just one-way teens are wrestling with how to accept and affirm other people, to create 'safe space' where each person can be herself or himself without feeling threatened or judged." 39% interact with people who are different from them compared to just one-quarter of Baby Boomers. "As the most racially, religiously and sexually diverse generation in American history, Gen Z expects people to have different beliefs and experiences, and they seem to have a greater appreciation for social inclusiveness compared to generations before them."¹¹⁴

Lastly, and more significantly, "In practice, this means that they are less inclined to discrimination of any kind, and broadly committed to equality - gender, sexuality, ethnicity and any 'protected characteristic' (e.g. disability) - being taken as read."¹¹⁵ The greatest value for this generation is nothing less than individual freedom.¹¹⁶ Some of the core beliefs of the 20-somethings are in direct opposition to historical Christian beliefs (i.e. Cultural vs. Biblical definition of sexuality) and could be a reason why this age demographic does not have adherence to organized Christian religion.

Textual Discussions

The experiences and information that have shaped the beliefs and values of today's 20-somethings tend to conflict with the beliefs and values of the historical Christian Church. However, though circumstances may be different, Christianity being at odds with cultural belief is not new. In the Apostle Paul's letters to Timothy, he encourages his young protégé to avoid false doctrine, hold on to the pattern of sound teaching and live by the Holy Scriptures, and warns that many will follow false teaching that tickles one's ears and satisfies one's desires. Paul also informs that suffering will come, most likely because of Christ-followers' counter-cultural beliefs and practices. Yet, over the

¹¹³ Barna Group, "Gen Z," 13.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 13.

¹¹⁵ Percy.

¹¹⁶ White, 47.

years the church grew, sometimes as much as 40 percent each decade during the first three centuries¹¹⁷. Therefore, it seems the church grows even in a pagan environment with beliefs that contradict the teachings of Scripture.

Everyone has faith. John Lennox, a mathematics professor at Oxford University, argues that even "atheism is a 'faith position', and science itself cannot do without faith."¹¹⁸ Interestingly enough, most 20-somethings are not atheists in belief but in lifestyle. "According to the Pew Research Center, formal attachment to religious organizations in the USA is in decline, and 'no affiliation' increasingly reported. Similarly, 'nones' now comprise a significant percentage of the UK population (perhaps up to a third); and over 75% of those under the age of 25. But - and this is a big 'but' - many 'nones' do profess to believe in God. Yet they freely confess to doing little about it."¹¹⁹

What is faith? German-American Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich studied popular assumptions about faith and how it took on a shallow, overly simplistic meaning. Tillich defined authentic faith as "ultimate concern" and described it as "the state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamic of faith are the dynamics of man's [sic] ultimate concern."¹²⁰ He explains that every person is concerned about their life, health, relationships, finances, etc. However, there is always one person or thing that demands our "full attention and our total commitment...something that promises to give us ultimate meaning and fulfillment."¹²¹ Along with the demand of our attention, Tillich believes there is an object of our faith. "What we have faith *in*."¹²²

In the early 2000's, Christian Smith coined the term, "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."¹²³ "The emerging generation is kind, considerate, tolerant, and good. It will not stand for racism, sexism, homophobia, or xenophobia. The emerging generation believes in many good things, and also in God: but does not join a faith-organization to express this."¹²⁴ This Personal, Therapeutic Moralistic

¹¹⁷ Kreider, 8.

¹¹⁸ Lennox, 47.

¹¹⁹ Percy, 163-172.

¹²⁰ Brent A. R Hege, 3.

¹²¹ Hege, 3.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Smith and Lundquist Denton.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

Deism did not fit well into the traditional Christian faith. Moral Therapeutic Deism is primarily concerned with a moral approach to life. It believes that the foundation of a happy life is to be a good, "moral" person - which is an effort to be kind, pleasant, kind, courteous, responsible, and taking care of others while working to improve themselves for health and success. Moral Therapeutic Deism holds the belief that God exists, created the universe, and defines our general moral order. But a relationship with God is not particularly personal. The God of Moral Therapeutic Deism often keeps a safe distance.¹²⁵

Over the last 15-20 years as culture has evolved so has the belief systems of 20-somethings. While they still hold the belief that a moral approach to life is best, many are becoming more stringent in their definition of moral and less accepting of people or institutions who do not abide by these definitions. Many in Generation Z seem to be converting from Moral Therapeutic Deism to Critical Theory in their belief system. Critical Theory sees the world through the binary of Oppressor/Oppressed. We see this in almost every arena of culture - race, gender, sexuality, ability, and religion. The fundamental moral duty is freeing people from their oppressive groups.¹²⁶

1 Timothy 1:3-5 - A Sincere Faith

1 Timothy 1:3-5 (HCSB) *As I urged you when I went to Macedonia, remain in Ephesus so that you may instruct certain people not to teach different doctrine or to pay attention to myths and endless genealogies. These promote empty speculations rather than God's plan, which operates by faith. Now the goal of our instruction is love that comes from a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith.*

Paul encourages Timothy to assure that rogue doctrine is not preached and proclaims that only the Apostle's instruction leads to a "sincere faith." The Greek word used here for "faith" is "πίστις," which is a conviction of the truth of anything, belief.¹²⁷ In Pauline writings, he encourages Christians to have a faith or a belief that imitates Christ in life and death. More than acquiring mere knowledge, he challenges the reader to practice his or her beliefs through intentional actions in keeping with the Savior. "The imitation is expressed even more strongly in terms of assimilation in

¹²⁵ Smith and Lundquist Denton.

¹²⁶ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 21-87.

¹²⁷ "Pistis."

the expression 'in him we might become the righteousness of God (ἡμεῖς γενώμεθα δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ).'"¹²⁸

A sincere πίστις is one that has Jesus in the middle of it. As Suzan J. M. Sierksma-Agteres writes, "Paul repeatedly speaks of living 'in Christ', 'in the Lord' or 'in him' and, conversely, though less often, of Christ living in him. In these phrases, πίστις is used in paradigmatic relation to Christ, both with the same preposition (ἐν) as near equivalents. In *2 Corinthians*, we read the exhortation, 'Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith (εἰ ἐστὲ ἐν τῇ πίστει). Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you (ὅτι Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ἐν ὑμῖν)? – unless, indeed, you fail to pass the test!'"¹²⁹

Could Paul be implying in 1 Timothy 1:3-5 that the "myths" Timothy is to avoid or expose lead to a faith or πίστις that does not have Jesus in the middle of it? If so, they lead to "empty speculations" rather than God's perfect plan for one's life. Concerning 20-somethings, their πίστις seems to be forming an individualistic religion that is "merely mutating into significant forms of personal spirituality, rather than disappearing."¹³⁰ Though their faith solicits actions that somewhat reflect Christ's teachings, the core Christian belief of Jesus becoming the substitutionary atonement for personal sin does not fit into their πίστις.

New Testament scholars have long pegged the Apostle Paul as the great opponent of gnostic heresy.¹³¹ Like many of his letters, Paul writes to Timothy to encourage and challenge him to combat the Gnosticism which was prevalent in Ephesus. The doctrine Paul is referring to in this passage is the belief that our faith is the right and proper response of sinful, fallen humanity to a holy, saving God. Sin creates a gap between God and us. Faith in Jesus bridges that gap and restores our fractured relationship. We can see a narrative laid out in Scripture that falls into four acts: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.¹³² However, we can see a new narrative coming to the forefront of culture today that could quite easily be compared to the Gnosticism Paul is fighting against. The story of critical theory begins not with creation, but with oppression. There is no transcendent Creator who has a purpose and a design for our lives and our identities. Instead, we define ourselves in terms of race, class, sexuality, and gender identity. Raising awareness, protesting, and resisting oppressive individuals and institutions is the vehicle that leads to

¹²⁸ Sierksma-Agteres.

¹²⁹ Sierksma-Agteres, 119-153.

¹³⁰ Percy, 163-172.

¹³¹ Pagels.

¹³² Shenvi.

redemption. We work to overthrow and dismantle hegemonic power; that is our primary moral duty. There is no need for redemption within Critical Theory; liberation is the ultimate goal. Liberation is achieved through equality, power reversal, and justice for all those who have been oppressed.¹³³ While there are many injustices in our world today, looking to anything other than Jesus and the answer is exactly what Paul is arguing in this text. Using Critical Theory as a means to solve cultural problems and calling it "Gospel" is another form of Gnosticism - "20-Something Gnosticism."

2 Timothy 4:3-5 - Itching Ears

2 Timothy 4:3-5 (NLT) *For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth and chase after myths. But you should keep a clear mind in every situation. Don't be afraid of suffering for the Lord. Work at telling others the Good News, and fully carry out the ministry God has given you.*

Paul forecasts that those in culture will morally disintegrate to a state of only listening to what they want to hear. The standard of truth will become fluid, and people will yearn to listen to teaching that conveniently is in line with their pre-existing beliefs and actions. They will follow teachers who tell them what they want to hear, rather than what they need to hear. "These people accumulate teachers, picking and choosing from among those teachings that suit their fancy."¹³⁴

"Contemporary usage of this expression suggests, first, that the translation at 2 Tim 4:3 should be 'having their ears tickled', rather than 'having itching ears', and second, that the idiom refers primarily to the experience of pleasure rather than curiosity."¹³⁵ Paul's warning is that people will chase after myths or teachings that sound good yet are not full of truth. "Seneca argues that oratorical pleasantness should never be an object in itself: Our words should aim not to please, but to help (*non delectent verba nostra, sed prosint*). If, however, you can attain eloquence without painstaking, and if you either are naturally gifted or can gain eloquence at slight cost, make the most of it and apply it to the noblest uses. But let it be of such a kind that it displays facts rather than itself. It and the other arts are wholly concerned with cleverness; but our business here is the soul (75.5)."¹³⁶

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Collins, 270.

¹³⁵ den Dulk, 81-93.

¹³⁶ den Dulk, 81-93.

Church and living counter-culturally lies at the heart of reaching the 20-somethings. "The challenge is, first, to understand the ideas and, second, to engage them."¹³⁷ Paul indicates that this counter-cultural proclamation of truth may result in persecution. Nevertheless, Timothy should not "be afraid of suffering for the Lord." (vs. 5)

2 Timothy 3:14-17 (HSCB) - A Standard of Truth

2 Timothy 3:14-17 (HCSB) *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed. You know those who taught you, and you know that from childhood you have known the sacred Scriptures, which are able to give you wisdom for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.*

There must be a standard of truth. Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann stated, "Serious Scripture study calls one to repentance and invites one to a changed perceptual world."¹³⁸ Paul believes the power of God's Word is self-evident. Not only must those who have faith study the Word of God to understand how to live rightly in the eyes of God, but those who are far from faith must eventually acknowledge that there is a truth outside of their human understanding. God's Word is an eternal truth that supersedes one's perception of rational thought or view of cultural normativeness.

"Scripture, working in tandem with the Holy Spirit, is the message of truth about the living God and an instrument of God's presence and power. Paul emphasizes this living and active quality of Scripture to his successor Timothy, noting that Scripture has the capacity of making people 'wise for salvation.'"¹³⁹ The understanding here is that Scripture must be a standard or plumb line of truth when calling people to salvation. The challenge, specifically for 20-somethings, is when the Bible is viewed as archaic and irrelevant to today's culture. In terms of truth, "more than one-third of Gen Z believes it is not possible to know for sure if God is real (37%), compared to 32 percent of all adults."¹⁴⁰

Ironically, in 2 Timothy 4:2, Paul instructs Timothy to "preach the word." "One might have expected that the Pastor's Paul would have charged Timothy to 'preach the Gospel' (see v.5) or that he would have used Luke's phrase 'preach the kingdom,' but he has not done so. In the Pastor's circles, 'the word' is the word of God (2:9; 1 Tim. 4:5; Titus 1:3, 2:5), the message of truth (2:15), the words of faith (1 Tim. 4:6). Charged with preaching the word, Timothy is to proclaim Paul's Gospel

¹³⁷ White, 68.

¹³⁸ Robinson and Wall, v177-178.

¹³⁹ Robinson and Wall, 178.

¹⁴⁰ Barna Group, "Gen Z," 64.

message."¹⁴¹ Therefore, the preaching of the Word is the preaching of the Good News message. Mere quoting of Scripture is not the intent of Paul's instruction. Timothy must "convince, warn, and encourage people."¹⁴² to turn to Jesus.

1 Timothy 2:3-5 - Pointing to Jesus

1 Timothy 2:3-5 (HCSB) *This is good, and it pleases God our Savior, who wants everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

For there is one God

and one mediator between God and humanity,

Christ Jesus, Himself human,

who gave Himself—a ransom for all,

a testimony at the proper time.

Paul encourages Timothy to pray and intercede for all people and indicates that God, our Savior, desires that everyone be saved. In this instruction, we see the importance of prayer and then the subsequent action of informing those we are praying for with the knowledge of Jesus. To the 20-something, Jesus must be more than a good person or kind soul; a person whom compassionate actions can be modeled after. Jesus must be seen as the one who is God and become the mediator between the Father and humanity.

In the fourth century, Saint Ambrose wrote, "the Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself as a ransom for us...our pardon comes through his power, our life is secured through his grace."¹⁴³ Herein lies the challenge to reaching the 20-somethings. They must understand Jesus has their leader and forgiver, not just a kind and loving person whom one's actions should be modeled after.

"We must keep in the mind that Generation Z is mostly 'spiritually illiterate.' They don't know much about the Bible, or the basics of Christian belief and theology. They do not understand the importance of the work of the cross. They are more than post-Christian; they have no memory of

¹⁴¹ Collins, 269.

¹⁴² Ibid., 270.

¹⁴³ Gorday and Oden.

the Gospel. As a result, there is a profound spiritual emptiness.”¹⁴⁴ Therefore, an accurate representation of Jesus is needed for 20-somethings to understand their need for a Savior.

Synthesis of Themes, Values, and Commitments

“In the last quarter century, a steadily increasing number of North Americans, when asked their religious affiliation, have self-identified as ‘spiritual but not religious (SBNR).’”¹⁴⁵ The 20-somethings are not atheists yet do not desire to affiliate with organized religion. “Data show(s) church attendance, belief in God, prayer and Bible-reading have been dropping for decades. The role of religion in public life has also diminished. The church no longer holds the cultural authority it wielded in times past.”¹⁴⁶ Yet, 20-somethings adhere to a type of spirituality. “SBNRs tend to value, above all else, their own (self’s) accumulated experiences.”¹⁴⁷ This poses a challenge for the American Protestant church.

Critical Theory argues for a “Positional Epistemology” taking in the belief that one’s lived experience is the absolute truth.¹⁴⁸ Positional epistemology bypasses questions of true or false and focuses on claimants’ group identity. The epistemology of Critical Theory poses a dangerous conflict with Christianity because it undermines any appeal to the Bible. “The primary concern for people who have embraced Critical Theory is not appealing to reason, argument, evidence, or Scripture. Their primary concern is unearthing and deconstructing the hidden motives of their opponents so that their claims can then be ignored.”¹⁴⁹

In reaching the 20-somethings, a priority should be placed on connecting them to Jesus and not strictly to church affiliation or adherence. Though church attendance is essential for a person’s ongoing spiritual growth, the 20-somethings may first be attracted to the person of Jesus before his perceived “organization.” “(In) the emerging faith of Millennials and Generation Z, although desires appear to be still clustered around spiritual fulfilment and ‘personal experience’, there is also a craving for ‘the authentic.’”¹⁵⁰ The church is riddled with scandals, shortcomings, and flaws, giving 20-somethings a reason to doubt or criticize. Though he does not fit into the age bracket, it could be said that television personality Bill Maher sums up the mindset of 20-

¹⁴⁴ White, 131.

¹⁴⁵ Watts.

¹⁴⁶ Barna Group, “Gen Z,” 24-25.

¹⁴⁷ Watts, 345-372.

¹⁴⁸ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 21-87.

¹⁴⁹ “Christianity and Critical Theory – Part 2.”

¹⁵⁰ Percy, 163-172.

some things when he said, "I'm a big fan of Jesus. I'm not a big fan of those who work for him."¹⁵¹ Nevertheless, the person of Jesus is attractive and authentic.

"Almost always before people come and see Jesus, they need to know someone else who knows Jesus."¹⁵² Theologian Leonard Sweet believes Christianity is moving away from an emphasis on economics to a world influenced by "Iconomics," which is images wrapped in story and sound.¹⁵³ Christians are "God's icons" here on earth. They represent him through their lives, actions, and interactions with those far from faith. "You look through an icon to something greater."¹⁵⁴ Paul would encourage Christians to be God's icons, imitating a sincere and accurate faith or *pistis*, to a world that has itching ears and wants to hear only pleasurable information, prayerfully proclaiming God's Good News about Jesus, the One who was more than a good man but the Savior-Mediator.

A study of 1 & 2 Timothy may shed some light on the current problem of 20-somethings' disinterest in the American Protestant church. Paul's instruction to Timothy on how to share the Word of God, the Good News of Jesus, and model Christ-like behavior and lifestyle may unveil invaluable truths on how to introduce 20-somethings to Jesus.

Topic History

Each generation stands on the shoulders of the ones that came before, but that doesn't mean they continue along the same path. Such is the case with Generation Z, today's 20-somethings whose parents comprised the older Millennial generation or Generation X. The differences between Millennials (born between 1982 and 1995), and Gen Z (born in 1996 or after) are distinct and drastic, resulting from a confluence of cultural, social, and technological forces that emerged after the turn of the 21st century.

Defining Events

The defining moments in the lives of Gen Z have been the Great Recession of 2008 and the election of America's first black president, Barack Obama. Those landmark moments were influential in creating a sense of economic insecurity and uncertainty among young Americans in terms of their goals and opportunities, and an embrace of multiculturalism and diversity when it comes to their country, communities, and authority figures.

¹⁵¹ Kimball, 248.

¹⁵² Briggs, 145.

¹⁵³ Leonard Sweet, "You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters (Kate Murphy) - Book Summary Discussion" (Zoom presented at the George Fox University DMIN Zoom Discussion, Zoom, October 26, 2020).

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

Generation Z is the first generation in history to be raised with instant and unlimited access to information, through cell phones, laptops, tablets, and personal computers. They can -- and do -- tap into the exponentially expanding internet and its billions of pages of words, images, sounds, and videos myriad times a day.

Reaching 20-somethings with the Gospel message by using media that they consume regularly poses a fundamental risk: the medium can overwhelm the message. As influential 20th century communication theorist Marshall McLuhan noted, the choice of media not only alters the presentation of the message, but it also actually *becomes* the message. His most noted idea, introduced in 1967, was that "the medium is the message." "Whenever methods or media change, the message automatically changes along with them," McLuhan wrote in "Understanding the Media: The Extensions of Man."¹⁵⁵

While the presenter of the message may be focusing on the content, the recipient is often distracted by the method/medium of presentation. McLuhan uses a bold metaphor to explain this concept: "The content or message of any particular medium has about as much importance as the stenciling on the casing of an atomic bomb."¹⁵⁶

Bill Henard, in his book "Evangelicals Engaging Emergent," refers to McLuhan's insights when he writes: "Sincere efforts to make the Bible message more palatable to contemporary audiences can easily result in obscuring the message when the means of presentation or the nature of a given audience are stressed to the point of rising out above the message itself."¹⁵⁷ It is, indeed, an ongoing challenge to find ways to present the Gospel to the next generation in a way that makes the message relevant and appealing without compromising the authenticity of Scripture.

The rise of social media, most notably Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, also has altered personal interaction among Gen Z'ers. More than half of today's 20-somethings spend four hours or more each day in front of a screen. The Barna Group's research found that twenty-six percent of Gen Z'ers spend more than eight hours a day on digital media.¹⁵⁸

At the same time, America has become increasingly diverse in its culture and ethnicity, following immigration reform in 1965 that shattered the homogenous makeup of previous U.S. generations. Prior immigration quotas favored Western Europeans, but in recent decades the immigrant population is comprised of a wide range of nationalities, spanning Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. The sixty-nine million 20-somethings in the U.S. today make it the

¹⁵⁵ "The Medium Is the Message: How New Media Affects the Gospel," Thought Hub, May 12, 2016, <https://www.sagu.edu/thoughthub/the-medium-is-the-message-how-new-media-affects-the-gospel-2>.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Henard and Greenway.

¹⁵⁸ Barna Group, "Gen Z."

nation's largest generation, which will be "the last white-majority generation" in America, according to Jeff Fromm and Angie Read in "Marketing to Gen Z: The Rules for Reaching this Vast - and Very Different - Generation of Influencers."¹⁵⁹ Fifty-five percent of Generation Z is white, compared to 70 percent of Boomers. The most common surname in America has changed from Smith, which had been the case for over two centuries, to Rodriguez.¹⁶⁰ Among Gen Z, 24 percent are Hispanic, 14 percent are African American, and four percent are Asian, according to Fromm and Read, who use the term "Pivotal Generation" to describe 20-somethings, saying they are "pivoting away from common Millennial behaviors and attitudes..."¹⁶¹ Multiracial marriages have increased 400 percent in the last 30 years, and in 2013, 10 percent of births were multiracial, compared to 1 percent in 1970.¹⁶²

Generation Z has been riding this tidal wave of societal shifts since birth, with the consequent riptides of change separating them from the worlds in which their Millennial parents and their Boomer grandparents were raised. Geopolitical analyst and author Martin Gurri describes the exponential rise of the internet as a "tsunami" of information, one that is reshaping America's traditional political, industrial, and social structures from a "top-down" elitism to a populism that demands a "flattening of the pyramid."¹⁶³ The public today, empowered by global platforms made possible by the internet, is no longer accepting of society "elites" being isolated from the masses by layers of bureaucracy and security. They demand that barriers be removed, and they expect to dialogue with leaders, not just be subjected to one-way communication handed down from above.¹⁶⁴

Faith

Gen Z also has drifted apart from preceding generations on spiritual matters, having little or no exposure to traditional religions and sacred texts. According to the Barna Group, just 4 percent of Gen Z'ers have a biblical worldview.¹⁶⁵ It's not that Gen Z'ers are consciously rejecting organized religion and deliberately cutting ties with America's historic Judeo-Christian heritage, it's more a matter of them never having been exposed to churches, synagogues, or sacred texts. They have no knowledge of church or Bible and conduct their daily lives without any thought or awareness of God. As megapastor and author James Emery White writes in "Meet Generation Z,"

¹⁵⁹ Fromm and Read.

¹⁶⁰ White, 45.

¹⁶¹ Fromm and Read.

¹⁶² White, 45.

¹⁶³ Gurri.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Barna Group, *Gen Z*.

growing numbers of people see no need to look outside themselves. "Rather than rejecting the idea of God, our culture simply ignores him."¹⁶⁶ The majority of older Millennial parents now raising Gen Z'ers grew up with Gen X'er or younger Boomer parents who typically took them to church. But once they reached adulthood, many Millennials drifted away from organized religion and are now part of the growing wave of "nones" -- those who self-identify as having no religious affiliation. Nones grew from 5 percent of Americans in the 1940s to 16 percent in 2007 to 23 percent by 2015, according to the Pew Research Center. For Americans under age thirty, about one-third are nones.¹⁶⁷

Although many of today's 20-somethings have never gone to church and have had no exposure to the Bible, their disconnect with organized religion does not necessarily translate into atheism. The Pew Research Center reported in 2018 that 7 percent of American adults who say their religion is "nothing in particular" also say that religion is "very" or "somewhat" important in their lives despite their lack of a formal affiliation.¹⁶⁸ Six-in-ten religiously unaffiliated Americans -- adults who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" -- say the questioning of religious teachings is a very important reason for their lack of affiliation. The second-most-common reason is opposition to the positions taken by churches on social and political issues, cited by 49% of respondents (the survey asked about each of the six options separately). Smaller, but still substantial, shares say they dislike religious organizations (41%), don't believe in God (37%), consider religion irrelevant to them (36%) or dislike religious leaders (34%).¹⁶⁹ Leigh Stein, writing an opinion column titled "The Empty Religions of Instagram" for the New York Times published March 5, 2021, described herself as a "none" who may be reconsidering in light of recent world events.

"I have hardly prayed to God since I was a teenager, but the pandemic has cracked open inside me a profound yearning for reverence, humility and awe. I have an overdraft on my outrage account. I want moral authority from someone who isn't shilling a memoir or calling out her enemies on social media for clout."¹⁷⁰

The economic instability of their youth and the fear of living in a world in which mass shootings and terrorism are regularly reported in the media have also led many 20-somethings to find comfort in the beauty and vast scope of nature. "Forty-nine percent of Generation Z surveyed

¹⁶⁶ White, 21.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 19.

¹⁶⁸ "Why America's 'Nones' Don't Identify with a Religion."

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Stein.

found a deep awe and wonder about the universe," according to White, citing the 2014 Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Research Center.¹⁷¹ The connection between an awe of nature and the existence of a Creator God is noted in the Bible, as Psalm 19:1 states: "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands."

Harvard religion professor emeritus Harvey Cox notes in his 2009 book, "The Future of Faith," "the advance of science has increased the sense of awe we feel at the immense scale of the universe or the complexity of the human eye. People turn to religion more for support in their efforts to live in this world and make it better, and less to prepare for the next. The pragmatic and experiential elements of faith as a way of life are displacing the previous emphasis on institutions and beliefs."¹⁷² Martyn Percy, dean of Christ Church, Oxford, and theology professor at the University of Oxford, notes that younger generations are shifting from "dispositional" to "episodic" in their affiliations.

"They do not identify closely with, or become members of, institutions, groups, political parties, churches or other organizations. They may join movements - but these tend to be 'seasonal,' or limited to specific issues."¹⁷³ "The concept of long-term membership of a group, institution or organization has become rather more attenuated for Generation Z-ers," Percy writes. "Their engagement with value-based institutions will be occasional and consumerist rather than unequivocally committed. ... Gratifying personal spiritual experience will come before collective duty towards or affiliation within an institution."¹⁷⁴

Percy said that in his observation, as an academic and clergyperson, "Christianity is mutating into a much broader, but also 'thinner' version of itself. Another way of labeling 'moralistic deism' is to say we are seeing the rise of the 'Almost Christian' being religious is being replaced by being nice."

Social Justice Movement

Another major, yet largely overlooked or misunderstood factor affecting America's traditional institutions today -- government, corporations, universities, mass media, religion, and others -- is the growing influence of the Social Justice Movement, according to Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay in their 2020 book, "Cynical Thinking: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything About Race, Gender, and Identity - and Why this Harms Everyone."¹⁷⁵ According to the authors,

¹⁷¹ White, 138.

¹⁷² Cox, 2-3.

¹⁷³ Percy.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 11-20.

the Social Justice Movement is a proper noun with a specific applied philosophy that grew out of the postmodern research that began in France after World War II and flourished in academia in the 1960s. This movement has moved from academia into virtually every aspect of American society today, becoming "the driving force of the culture war of the late 2010s."¹⁷⁶

The Social Justice Movement seeks to deconstruct and reinvent societal norms, with Pluckrose and Lindsey contending that the movement's leaders "have created a new religion, a tradition of faith that is actively hostile to reason, falsification, disconfirmation, and disagreement of any kind." One of the characteristics of the Social Justice Movement is to treat its theories as "The Truth." The movement "tolerates no dissent, and expects everyone to agree or be 'cancelled.'"¹⁷⁷ According to Neil Shenvi and Pat Sawyer in "The Incompatibility of Critical Theory and Christianity," "Christianity provides us with an overarching metanarrative that runs from creation to redemption: We are creatures made in God's image, who have sinned against him, who need to be rescued through the atoning work of Jesus, and who are called to love both God and neighbor."¹⁷⁸ The Social Justice Movement, which aligns with Critical Theory, professes a diametrically opposed metanarrative that "runs from oppression to liberation," according to Shenvi and Sawyer. Critical Theory asserts that "we are members either of a dominant group or of a marginalized group with respect to a given identity marker. As such, we either need to divest ourselves of power and seek to liberate others, or we need to acquire power and liberate ourselves by dismantling all structures and institutions that subjugate and oppress. In critical theory, the greatest sin is oppression, and the greatest virtue is the pursuit of liberation."¹⁷⁹ These conflicting metanarratives raise fundamental questions: Are humans defined in terms of a vertical relationship to God, or in terms of power dynamics between groups of people? And, is the fundamental problem of humankind sin, in which we are all stand equally condemned before a holy God, or is it oppression, in which members of dominant groups are tainted by guilt in a way that members of subordinate groups are not?

As Pluckrose and Lindsay see it:

"Indeed, the whole postmodernist project now seems, in retrospect, like an unwitting attempt to have deconstructed the old metanarratives of Western thought - science and reason along with religion and capitalist economic systems - to make room for a wholly new religion, a postmodern faith based on a dead God, which sees mysterious worldly forces in

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 17.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 208.

¹⁷⁸ Sawyer and Shenvi.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

systems of power and privilege, and which sanctifies victimhood. This, increasingly, is the fundamentalist religion of the nominally secular left.”¹⁸⁰

According to Critical Theory, “my lived experience is the absolute truth,” rejecting appeals to reason, evidence, or Scripture. They believe societal norms are controlled by privileged classes – mostly white, educated, wealthy males – who intentionally or subconsciously are motivated to maintain their dominant roles by oppressing others.¹⁸¹

The world in which 20-somethings are now growing into adulthood has been shaped by these two culturally disruptive forces: The internet giving voice and power to the masses, and the philosophical Social Justice Movement that has been applied to all aspects of society as it strives to deconstruct objective truth -- while tolerating no dissent.

Key Voices

Martin Gurri

Martin Gurri worked for the CIA’s Open-Source Center from 1982 to 2010 as a geopolitical analyst, and was the Director of Research and Visual Analysis before leaving to focus his research on the relationship between politics and global media. He is a visiting fellow at Mercatus Center at George Washington University, and writes a blog titled “the fifth wave: information and influence in the age of the public.” While Gurri does not specialize in how politics and media intersect with religion, his research and analyses explain much about cultural shifts and the underlying impact of the internet on society overall, including the church and American “screenagers” who grew up with the internet at their fingertips. In the foreword to Gurri’s groundbreaking book, “The Revolt of the Public -- And the Crisis of Authority in the New Millennium,” economic scholar Arnold Kling notes that Gurri “saw it coming,” in reference to political outsider Donald Trump’s election to the presidency in 2016 that surprised or even shocked most political experts. While Gurri did not name Trump specifically, Kling notes, “he saw how the internet in general and social media in particular were transforming the political landscape.”¹⁸² Gurri saw that the internet would expose mistakes and flaws of the “elites,” and that they would be increasingly despised by the public. And he saw that the elites would respond with defensiveness and contempt, only causing more hostility and defiance from the public toward authority. Gurri also saw that while the public has gained new-found power via the internet, there is no program or plan in place, raising the threat of nihilism and chaos. The Pull Request, a publication about technology by technologists and for technologists, hailed Gurri as “The Prophet of the Revolt.” “I am no prophet,” Gurri writes in the introduction to “The Revolt of the Public,” adding that “the future is, and must be, opaque.” But looking at present times, he sees “an old, entrenched social order is passing away even as I write these words – one

¹⁸⁰ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 210-211.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 208-210.

¹⁸² Gurri, 8-13.

rooted in the hierarchies and conventions of industrial life. Since no substitute has appeared on the horizon, we should, as tourists flying into the unknown, fasten our seatbelts and expect turbulence ahead.”¹⁸³

Decades ago, information was limited to newspapers and television reports. While working for the CIA he gathered information from these sources with the idea that information was knowledge -- and the more information, the better. “Back when the world and I were young, information was scarce, hence valuable,”¹⁸⁴ Gurri writes. Sources of information in times of scarcity became authoritative. In the early days of television, there were only three major networks dispensing the news, and in 1972 Walter Cronkite, the former CBS Nightly News anchor, was voted “the most trusted man in America.” As the amount of information available to the public increased, “the authoritativeness of any one source decreased,” Gurri observed.¹⁸⁵

With CNN launching its 24/7 cable news in 1980, email becoming available to the public in the 1980s, and the internet arriving in 1993 and blogging in 1997, the information age underwent a seismic shift. “More information was generated in 2001 than in all the previous existence of our species on earth,” Gurri observed. Researchers at the University of California, Berkeley, reported that 3 billion gigabytes of information were produced in 2000, 6 billion in 2001, 12 billion in 2002, and 24 billion in 2003. The oceans of information have continued to double on an annual basis.¹⁸⁶ Gurri observed that as the internet and social media soared in popularity, the mass media elite who had for a century and a half been the arbiter of news, were suddenly and ungraciously deposed from their authoritative role.

“That passive mass audience on which so many political and economic institutions depended had itself unbundled, disaggregated, fragmented into what I call vital communities: groups of wildly disparate size gathered organically around a shared interest or theme.”¹⁸⁷

The institutional elite reacted not with worry or regret, Gurri observes, “but moral outrage and condemnation, sometimes accompanied by calls for repression.” The newly empowered and articulate masses turned the tide on the elite as they “tramped with muddy boots in the sacred precincts of the elites, overturning this or that precious heirloom.”¹⁸⁸ This shift in authority from elites to the public led to the toppling of dictators, spurring the Arab Spring that ousted dictators

¹⁸³ Ibid., 19-31.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 22-23.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 26.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 27.

in the 2010s – and the consequent deaths of more than 6,100 people. Gurri acknowledges that as a researcher he had been “enthralled” with the astronomical growth of information but came to realize later that the “truly epochal change” was “the revolution in the relationship between the public and authority in almost every domain of human activity.”¹⁸⁹

Technology can be dazzling, connecting people across oceans with internet video calls or linking people through social media. “But it turns out that fascination with surface glitter has obscured our view to what is transpiring in the depths. There, human beings interact with platforms and information, and are changed by the interaction, and the accumulated changes have shaken and battered established institutions from companies and universities to governments and religions.”¹⁹⁰ The outcome of this revolution is still to be determined. And whether that outcome is for good or evil “will largely depend on us,” Gurri writes.¹⁹¹

Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay

Helen Pluckrose is a cultural writer and speaker living in England, editor of *Areo Magazine*, and author of numerous essays on postmodernism, critical theory, liberalism, secularism, and feminism. She earned a master’s degree in modern studies at Queen Mary University in London. James Lindsay is an American mathematician who earned his Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Tennessee. Lindsay has a background in physics, pursues an interest in the Social Justice Movement and postmodernism, and is the founder of NewDiscourses.com. Beginning 2017, Lindsay and Pluckrose teamed with Florida Gulf Coast State College professor emeritus Peter Boghossian to write 20 hoax academic papers and submit them to peer-reviewed journals using pseudonyms, in an effort to expose corruption in academia. Seven of their papers were accepted – including a rewrite of Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* in feminist language by the feminist social work journal *Affilia* -- six were rejected, and seven were still under review before the authenticity of one of their hoax studies was questioned and they explained their intentionally bogus work [in a YouTube documentary](#).

Lindsay has described the Social Justice Movement as his “ideological enemy” and calls himself a critic of “wokeness,” which he analogizes to religious belief. Pluckrose and Lindsay collaborated on a book intended to explain, expose, and counter the vast influence of Critical Theory and The Social Justice Movement titled “~~Critical~~ Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity – and Why This Harms Everybody.” The book became a *USA Today*, *Publishers Weekly* and *Wall Street Journal* bestseller upon its release in 2020. Pluckrose and Lindsay explain in the introduction to this book that they believe that the Social Justice Movement poses an existential threat to “liberalism,” a guiding philosophy of Western civilization for two centuries whose main tenets are “political democracy, limitations on the powers

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 65.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

of government, the development of universal human rights, legal equality for all adult citizens, freedom of expression, respect for evidence and reason, the separation of church and state, and freedom of religion."¹⁹²

According to Pluckrose and Lindsay, far-left activists are advancing Postmodernism, Critical Theory, and the Social Justice Movement not only through "revolutionary aims that openly reject liberalism as a form of oppression, but they also do so with increasingly authoritarian means seeking to establish a thoroughly dogmatic fundamentalist ideology regarding how society ought to be ordered." Postmodernism "rejects objective truth as a fantasy dreamed up by naïve and/or arrogantly bigoted Enlightenment thinkers who underestimated the collateral consequences of Modernity's progress," the authors previously wrote in "A Manifesto against the Enemies of Modernity," *Areo Magazine*, Aug. 22, 2017.¹⁹³

Currently waging war against postmodernism, according to Pluckrose and Lindsay, are "far-right populist movements claiming to be making a last desperate stand for liberalism and democracy against a rising tide of progressivism and globalism" around the world.¹⁹⁴ The authors believe that most Americans are unaware of the motives, extent and dangers of applied postmodernist theory, which they assert can have a chilling effect on free speech and, if institutionalized, transform into a kind of authoritarianism.

"This deserves an explanation. In fact, it needs one because these changes, which are happening with astonishing rapidity, are very difficult to understand.... This is because they stem from a very peculiar view of the world - one that even speaks its own language, in a way."¹⁹⁵

They use the word "racism" as an example. When Social Justice Movement advocates use the term, "they are not referring to prejudice on the grounds of race, but rather to, as they define it, a racialized system that permeates all interactions in society yet is largely invisible except to those who experience it or who have been trained in the proper 'critical' methods that train them to see it. (These are the people sometimes referred to as being 'woke,' meaning awakened to it.)"¹⁹⁶

Pluckrose and Lindsay are intent on alerting the public to the advance of postmodernism and the Social Justice Movement as they infiltrate Western civilization today.

"It is this problem that we have dedicated ourselves to learning about and hope to explain in this volume: the problem of postmodernism, not just as it initially arose in the 1960s but

¹⁹² Pluckrose and Lindsay, 11.

¹⁹³ Pluckrose.

¹⁹⁴ Pluckrose and Lindsay, 12.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

also how it has evolved over the last half century. Postmodernism has, depending upon your view, either become or given rise to one of the least tolerant and most authoritarian ideologies that the world has had to deal with since the widespread decline of communism and the collapses of white supremacy and colonialism."¹⁹⁷

Postmodernism was developed in relatively obscure corners of academia, the authors explain, but starting in the 1960s began to spread to other parts of the academy.

"It has, from there, begun to seep into broader society to the point where it, and backlashes against it - both reasonable and reactionary - have come to dominate our sociopolitical landscape as we grind ever more painfully into the third decade of the new millennium."¹⁹⁸

The Social Justice Movement's rejection of objective truth and what it calls "metanarratives," or broad, cohesive explanations of the world and society, poses a threat to Christianity, according to Pluckrose and Lindsay.

"This book aims to tell the story of how postmodernism applied its cynical Theories to deconstruct what we might agree to call 'the old religions' of human thought - which include conventional religious faiths like Christianity and secular ideologies like Marxism, as well as cohesive modern systems such as science, philosophical liberalism, and 'progress' - and replaced them with a new religion of its own, called 'Social Justice'."¹⁹⁹

This new "faith" interprets the world in terms of subtle material forces, such as systemic bigotry, instead of subtle spiritual forces such as sin and grace, the authors contend.

As postmodernism gains increased influence on society, as evidenced by the rise of "identity politics" and "political correctness," church leaders need to be aware, informed, and able to explain the tenets, beliefs and practices of their faith, particularly to the many 20-somethings whose worldview has been greatly influenced by the Social Justice Movement.

James Emery White

James Emery White is the founding pastor of Mecklenburg Community Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, which is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention and has an average weekly attendance of 12,000. White also is a ranked adjunctive professor of theology and culture at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, where he previously served as president. He has bachelor's degrees in public relations and business and earned his Master of Divinity and doctorate degrees from Southern Seminary. He also has completed advanced university study at Vanderbilt University in religious history, and continuing education at Oxford University in England and has taught at

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 13.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 18.

Anderson University. White is president of Serious Times, a ministry that explores the intersection of faith and culture, and he hosts and writes a blog at ChurchAndCulture.org.

Among White's twenty books are "The Rise of the Nones: Understanding and Reaching the Religiously Unaffiliated," "A Search for the Spiritual," and "Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World." White's writings and teachings often focus on 20-somethings and what the American church can do to attract this generation and reverse the widespread trend of Generation Z's drift away from Christianity. He notes in "Meet Generation Z" that along with the rise in the number of "nones" - those who say they have no religious affiliation - in the U.S. in recent decades, there has also been an increase in secularism among their rank. "In 2007, 57 percent of all none felt religion was of little importance to their lives; in 2014, that number climbed to roughly two-thirds of all respondents (nones)."²⁰⁰ It has been widely recorded that Church attendance in the U.S. has been falling steadily since 1994, when 62 percent of Americans said they attended church frequently, dropping to 53 percent in 2013, according to surveys by Gallup. These trends are not just in the United States. A survey of twenty thousand residents of the United Kingdom showed the none rose from 3 percent in 1963 to 44.7 percent today. And among adults aged twenty-five and under in the U.K., nearly two-thirds are none.²⁰¹ While church leaders have been trying for years to win over Busters or Generation X, who followed the Boomers, White asserts it is now critical for them to focus instead on Gen Z.

"Let me save you time. Drop everything and start paying attention to Generation Z, which now constitutes 25.9 percent of the US population. That's more than Millennials (24.5 percent). That's more than Gen X (15.4 percent). Yes, that's even more than Baby Boomers (23.6 percent)."²⁰²

He said in this 2017 publication that "by 2020, members of Generation Z will account for 40 percent of all consumers. They will not simply influence American culture, as any generation would; they will constitute American culture."

White writes that the technological revolution, led by the popularity of the internet and the cellphone, has transformed American culture so swiftly that it "makes it difficult for older generations to realize the radically different world into which Generation Z has been born."²⁰³ Ninety-two percent of 20-somethings report going online daily and a quarter of Gen Z'ers say they go online "almost constantly." While a nearly unlimited amount of information is available online, Gen Z has grown up searching the web on their own, without the help of intermediaries such as libraries, teachers or shops that had collected and sorted information for centuries. "This has made

²⁰⁰ White, 23.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 26.

²⁰² Ibid., 37.

²⁰³ Ibid., 41.

them more independent and self-directed than generations before them,” according to White.²⁰⁴ It also places 20-somethings before a “widening chasm between wisdom and information.”

White also notes that Gen Z is more multiracial and “sexually fluid,” with strong support for gay marriage and transgender rights, more than any previous U.S. generation.²⁰⁵ But “the most defining characteristic of Generation Z is that it is arguably the first generation in the West (certainly in the United States) that will have been raised in a post-Christian context. As a result, it is the first post-Christian generation.”²⁰⁶ White points to two defining characteristics of today’s 20-somethings:

“First, they are lost. They are not simply living in and being shaped by a post-Christian cultural context. They do not even have a memory of the gospel. The degree of spiritual illiteracy is simply stunning.”²⁰⁷

And second, “they are leaderless. Little if any direction is coming from their families, and less from their attempts to access guidance from the internet.”²⁰⁸ Among the key points White makes in “Meet Generation Z” is that the church must find its voice and speak to 20-somethings in ways that are relevant and to which Gen Z’ers can relate -- without compromising the core Christian message.

“... every generation must translate the Gospel into its unique cultural context. But this is very different from transforming the message of the Gospel into something that was never intended by the biblical witness. Transformation of the message must be avoided at all costs. Translation, however, is essential for a winsome and compelling presentation of the gospel of Christ. Transformation is heresy. Translation is the heart of our mission. Knowing the difference is the crucible of leadership and the difference between being in the world and being of the world.”²⁰⁹

Synthesis and Conclusion

Over the last half-century, the United States has been undergoing a profound shift in how emerging generations view the church and the Gospel. It is beyond dispute that church attendance has been steadily declining, affiliation with organized religion has been dropping steeply, and the number of people who declare themselves “Spiritual But Not Religious” has been rising dramatically.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 43.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 45-46.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 63.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 64.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 94.

The vast majority of today's 20-somethings have had no exposure to Christian teachings, with only four percent having a "biblical worldview." At the same time, 20-somethings' lives and outlooks are being shaped by the proliferation of technology, a rejection of traditional institutions and authority, and a movement promoting Social Justice as a secular belief system that supports its own functional "religion."

With these changes, the church faces immense and critical challenges to its mission of spreading the Gospel to young Americans and future generations. It must seek ways to understand and attract members of Generation Z -- without compromising its foundational beliefs. In many ways, this task aligns with traditional Christian missionaries' intent to preach the Gospel to foreign cultures, where the people have no awareness of Jesus or Christianity.

David J. Hesselgrave, in his book *"Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally,"* cites Bruce J. Nichols' observation in *"Theological Education and Evangelization"* that missionaries must aim for "contextualization." He quotes Nichols' definition of contextualization as "the translation of the unchanging content of the Gospel of the Kingdom into verbal form meaningful to the peoples in their separate culture and within their particular existential situations."²¹⁰

White makes a similar point in *"Meet Generation Z,"* saying the church must find its voice and speak to 20-somethings in ways that are relevant by "translating" the Gospel into Gen Z's cultural context without "transforming" the authentic biblical message.²¹¹

As the church strives to reach Generation Z, it must find ways to present the Gospel, not just in verbal form or traditional media but also through the technologies and visual elements in which modern "screenagers" are so immersed. The church must also capture the 20-somethings' attention almost immediately before their average 8.25-second attention span expires. And once it breaks through this 8.25-second "filter," which 20-somethings have developed as a means to sort through the flood of information, the church must then be prepared to make the Gospel meaningful without using "insider" jargon or Christianese references. These have become second-nature to Christians but can sound like a foreign language to 20-somethings who have never been taught about Jesus or the Bible, do not know what the cross or salvation represents, or may have a preconceived negative view of the institutional church.

Apostle Paul used such wisdom in Athens, where he spoke to the pagan crowd at the Areopagus, a public forum for discussing "the latest ideas." (Acts 17:22-31) Paul began by stating, "Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious," a compliment that drew their attention. "For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: 'To an Unknown God.' Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you."

²¹⁰ Hesselgrave, 136.

²¹¹ White, 94.

Paul went on to explain Biblical principles without mentioning the name of Jesus or using the word "sin." Acts 17:32 states that "some of them sneered, but others said, 'We want to hear you again on this subject,'" and verse 34 says: "A few men became followers of Paul and believed."

Another characteristic of Generation Z is a desire for authenticity. To be effective in reaching 20-somethings, the church must present Jesus without any cultural or political add-ons. Dr. Leonard Sweet states when engaging culture and the complexities of current topics, we, as Christ-followers, should simply present the person and words of Jesus without editing. We must "hide behind Jesus."²¹² The church should let the authenticity of Jesus' words speak for themselves. It is all too easy for preachers to fall into a habit of putting words into Jesus' mouth, extrapolating his statements in the Bible by applying them to the day's most controversial social issues. Jesus spoke firmly against sin, so he would "of course" speak out against whatever cultural or political sin the speaker now views as a threat to souls and society.

Too many times, Christians have comingled Jesus' statements with political or cultural agendas, such as Jesus *and* gun control, Jesus *and* nationalism, Jesus, *and* Western paradigms (colonialism), or Jesus *and* conservative politics. This commingling not only weakens the presentation of Christ, but it also typically leads to debate, cynicism, and/or rejection by the receptor.

Another way to reach Generation Z with the Gospel is to "live Jesus" – allow the believers' lives to demonstrate the impact Jesus has had on them. The church is not all rote and ritual; the Gospel is not just a philosophical discussion. Jesus, the church, and the Word of God have a real-world impact on real people. As Christians live their daily lives, they show resilience and a sense of peace. They can "go through hell" and still have positivity, which nonbelievers notice and are drawn to.

Another way the church can reach Generation Z is by highlighting the balance of the universe, from atoms and animals to planets and galaxies, and build on the "awe and wonder" of the universe felt by many 20-somethings. As James Emery White notes, while most 20-somethings are "spiritually illiterate," it does not mean they are atheists.²¹³ They have not rejected God; they just find no need for a higher power in their daily lives and are disconnected from any organized religion. They are, however, impressed by the beauty and depth of nature. As the Pew Research Center found, about half of Generation Z "found a deep awe and wonder about the universe."

Amid all the tragedy of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, a few positive consequences have arisen, including a renewed and intense interest in being outdoors. With the virus being more contagious indoors, outdoor activities have soared in popularity to the point that people have had difficulty finding RVs, bicycles, kayaks, and the like for sale. The pandemic has reconnected people with their innate "hunger" for nature that cannot be satisfied by viewing or clicking on a screen.

²¹² Sweet, "Discussion of Napkin Scribbles Podcast #1: Sensual Orthodox."

²¹³ White, 131.

As Americans experience nature in new ways, White writes that “discussing the awe and wonder of the universe, openly raising the many questions surrounding the universe and then positing the existence of God, is one of the most valuable apologetics/pre-evangelism approaches that can be pursued.”²¹⁴ Talking to Gen Z-ers about nature provides a strategic opening that can lead them to think beyond themselves and present them with a compelling case for a Creator's existence.

One more way the church can work on relating to 20-somethings is to acknowledge their passion for “Social Justice” and compare it to Biblical justice. As Tim Keller writes in “A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory,” the secular world offers “competing visions of justice,” yet none of these fragmented alternates has achieved cultural consensus.²¹⁵ In contrast, Keller asserts, Christians have “an ancient, rich, strong, comprehensive, complex and attractive understanding of justice” that incorporates all the secular aspects of social justice. Today's preachers can learn from Keller's approach in stressing the historic and comprehensive nature of Christian justice, with its clearly defined goals and criteria that have been tested for two millennia and point out that today's Social Justice Movement lacks unity or vision, with eclectic secular groups all vying to install their own version of social justice.²¹⁶

Meanwhile, the Social Justice Movement sees the world in two categories – oppressors and the oppressed. They value inclusiveness, individualism, and equality above everything else. The church needs to play to its strengths and demonstrate to 20-somethings that their craving for social justice, as currently defined by culture falls, far short of the Biblical concepts of justice, equality, and liberation.

If the church succeeds in letting Jesus' words speak for themselves, if Christians can “live Jesus,” if the church can use technology wisely, and if Christians can explain why Biblical justice is more appealing than the nihilism of the secular Social Justice Movement, then the church's mission will continue and, almost as a byproduct, 20-somethings will be in attendance.

²¹⁴ Ibid., 138.

²¹⁵ Keller. “A Biblical Critique of Secular Justice and Critical Theory.”

²¹⁶ Nieuwhof.

Appendix D—Milestone 4 Design Research Report

INTRODUCTION

It is an alarming but indisputable fact that the vast majority of Generation Z -- those between ages 18 and 25 -- are not attending and/or not interested in the American Protestant Church today.²¹⁷ The fact that the Christian church is losing touch with an entire generation is the driving force behind this research project: How can ministry leaders make the American Protestant Church relevant, viable and appealing to people in this age group?

PROTOTYPE SUMMARY AND FINDINGS

This research project explored three different prototypes:

1). **Write a book** intended for church leaders, young adult workers, and those interested in Generation Z that would give them the unique and personal perspective of what it's like to be raised as Generation Z, and how their reality, beliefs, and the Christian faith intersect.

The book would center on a representational character in the Gen Z demographic and show how they see the world, faith, and the American Protestant Church. Additionally, it would juxtapose current beliefs, values, and methodologies of the American Protestant Church and their intentional or unintentional signals to that age demographic.

The goal would be twofold:

One, for the reader to better understand this amazing, unique, and complex generation and see a way to present an accurate picture of who Jesus is in a way that they will comprehend.

Second, the book would point out areas in which the American Protestant Church needs to rethink its approach, information signaling, and dogma (carefully and prayerfully) without violating Orthodox Christian theology.

The book prototype was ultimately ruled out for several reasons: I might not be able to thoroughly represent Generation Z's worldview, values, or priorities in a compelling way using a single fictional character as the main subject. It also would be difficult to comprehensively point out the Church's ineffective methodologies, dogma, or information and the signals that they present to Gen Z.

2). **A website or online think tank** comprised of material from researchers (Christian and secular) who have studied Generation Z, American Church trends and methodologies, and the effectiveness of reaching that age demographic.

²¹⁷ Clare Ansberry, "Young People Say Disconnect Keeps Them from Church," last modified October 25, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/young-people-say-disconnect-keeps-them-from-church-11635163200>.

A website could be created that houses the latest data regarding Generation Z and faith and ideation for church leaders on how to present Jesus and His Kingdom in a way that these young adults would comprehend.

Secondly, the think tank could be a resource for church leaders on how to approach difficult or complex subjects with Generation Z and share what is working in Christian houses of faith across the nation.

Although I am unaware of any online resource such as this, I opted not to pursue the online think tank prototype because it may be too expensive to create and maintain, and keeping it updated may be too intensive.

3). **A "third space"** prototype would involve the creation of a safe and neutral space where Generation Z could gather, distinct from the two primary spaces in most people's lives -- home and work.

This space could create an opportunity for interactive conversations, experiential events, and relational gatherings.

One of the hurdles for this age group is their disdain for "organized religion" or "commercialized church." By creating an initially neutral space for Generation Z to gather, it removes some of the initial barriers and could open the door for people in the 18 to 25 age range to connect with Church people their own age in a "pre-evangelism" setting.

Presently, our church has such a space called "The Loft" in downtown Rockford, Illinois. It is in the heart of the art and local business district and has an appropriate "vibe," attractive to that age demographic. I believe this space could become the place where intentional, yet organic gatherings could build relationships between young Church staffers and members of Generation Z, and the participants with one another.

Surveys show that experiences, particularly a variety of experiences, are the primary value of Gen Z, therefore The Loft will strive to offer a broad and creative range of activities, events, and classes that appeal to the 18-to-25 age demographic, hosted in a non-threatening environment in which participants feel safe and comfortable.

The first goal of hosting such activities is to build relationships. Although there will be no overt efforts to convert participants to Christianity, the long-term goal is to build "bridges" through relationships. I believe that ultimately, after such bridges are built, Jesus then has the opportunity to walk across.

"The Loft" could easily serve as a model for other churches, using whatever space is available and organic to the local church and community. In a rural community, for example, it could be a barn. In a suburban setting, it might be a local community center. The parameters for the third spaces are flexible, as long as they are in neutral, "non-Churchy" locations and make Gen Z participants feel welcome and comfortable.

In one of the brainstorming sessions I held with Gen Z stakeholders, the participants were asked whether they consider themselves spiritual, and why or why not? Their answers are representative of this generation's lack of a biblical worldview and illustrate the depth of the challenge the Church faces in overcoming beliefs that are in conflict with Orthodox Christian theology. Even within the Christian faith in American there are differing views about historical and traditional theology, namely the acceptance and affirmation of practicing LGBTQIA+ individuals.²¹⁸

Their answers, given during one of the workshops held at The Loft, included:

- I do consider myself spiritual because I meditate (i.e., lucid dreaming, seeking guidance within myself.)
- I would consider myself spiritual. I think there is a world beyond death that we don't comprehend. I also think there are ways you can tap into its spirituality.
- I do, but self-spiritual. Due to my mom not going to church I switched focus on myself.
- Yes, growing up I was heavily involved in my family's church. Over time, I found my own version of faith.
- I guess I am sort of spiritual. I don't pray to God really at all, but I do talk to my dead friends and family.

Further illustrating Gen Z's misguided understanding of foundational Christian truths are some of the workshop participants' responses when asked for their thoughts on the Bible:

- I feel like it's important but often is complicated and at times it's easy to misunderstand "stuff" in there.
- It's just a book to me.
- I view the Bible as just a biased man-made option, but something that is open to interpretation. I tend to not agree with some "interpretations" or how Christians project it on others. (Street preaching/hate speech).
- My thoughts are nonexistent, I've never investigated it personally.
- To be honest, it's kind of long.

The third space prototype is the Most Viable Prototype, or MVP, presenting the best option for this research project because a working model already exists with The Loft.

NPO STATEMENT

"The lack of interest and involvement of Generation Z, specifically ages 18-25, in the American Protestant faith."

²¹⁸ Paul Bond, "Nearly 40 Percent of U.S. Gen Zs, 30 Percent of Young Christians Identify as LGBTQ, Poll Shows," *Newsweek*, October 20, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/nearly-40-percent-us-gen-zs-30-percent-christians-identify-lgbtq-poll-shows-1641085>.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How can the American Protestant Church reverse the decades-long decline in Generation Z's attendance and find new ways to make the Church relevant and appealing without compromising foundational beliefs? What kind of outreaches can the Church offer that tap into Gen Z's high priority on experiential programs and help build genuine relationships that ultimately can open doors to spiritual truths?

BACKGROUND RESEARCH ESSAY ON THE EMERGING SOLUTION

The loss that has been experienced in our country over the last two years during COVID has forced so many Americans to stop and ask the big questions. What is the true value of this life? Am I living the life I want? Speaking specifically of Gen Z, they are asking, "what is the value proposition of my work, relationships, and experiences."

"As the pandemic-era Great Resignation continues, Gen Z and young millennial workers are rebelling against their parents and striking fear into corporate America by publicly quitting. Gen Z workers aren't just looking for better pay. They are demanding jobs that give them a chance to do something they're passionate about. Eighty percent of Gen Z job-hoppers said they want to leave their job to find a career that aligns more with their interests, and 76% say they're quitting for the opportunity to gain more experience."²¹⁹

This growing dissatisfaction in Gen Z and a general desire for meaningful purpose and experience could be an opportunity for the Church to engage in meaningful relationships with this age demographic. The Apostle Paul writes in I Corinthians 9:20-22, "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some."²²⁰

Gen Z, generally speaking, is disinterested in established and organized religion.²²¹ They view God, if there is one, as very pluralistic and happiness as an important value. Borrowing from

²¹⁹ Chloe Berger, "'Gen Zers Are Rebelling against Their Parents and Striking Fear into Corporate America by Publicly Quitting,'" *Fortune Magazine*, last modified March 19, 2022, <https://fortune.com/2022/03/19/gen-z-is-joining-great-resignation-terrifying-corporate-america/>.

²²⁰ *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

²²¹ Jeffrey Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Gallup Poll, last modified March 29, 2021, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>.

Christian Smith's research in the 2000's, Kevin Vanhoozer Gen Z's conjectural creed seems to be centered in a Moralistic Therapeutic Deistic faith and experience:

*"I believe in a creator God who orders and watches over life on earth. I believe that God wants people to be good and act nicely to one another (the moralistic tenet). I believe that the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about myself (the therapeutic tenet). I believe that God is not involved in my life except when I need him to solve a problem. I believe that good people go to heaven, and that almost everyone is good (or at least nice). Glory be to God (and me). As it is now, may perhaps ever be (who knows?), virtual world without end. Amen."*²²²

Instead of the Church being offended by such belief, could the Church leverage its influence to show Gen Z an authentic and life-changing Jesus through intentional, yet unforced, relational experience in a neutral, non-religious environment? Could a space be created outside of the traditional church facility that is attractive to the Gen Z demographic where meaningful experiences take place, significant relationships could be formed, and the Holy Spirit could work in the hearts of those who are far from faith?

ASSESSMENT BENCHMARK

Create a third space model in which entertaining, interactive and enlightening activities are hosted in a neutral, non-threatening environment with a focus on building relationships, believing the Holy Spirit will ultimately change lives and lead participants to Jesus.

PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION

Generation Z members participated in two design workshops for The Loft/third space project. The second workshop session was held Nov. 2, 2022, and included a racially diverse group of participants including four African Americans, two Hispanics, and two Caucasians.

All participants were unchurched, young adults willing to have an honest and civil conversation regarding their world views on religion in modern America. These seven stakeholders were paid \$100 for their involvement in the workshop.

There were also seven volunteers, all employed by City First Church, to help facilitate the session. I made it very clear to the seven stakeholders that they were the "experts" of this conversation and that I wanted to hear from them. I also provided them with the promise that

²²² Kevin Vanhoozer, *Pictures at a Theological Exhibition: Scenes of the Church's Worship, Witness and Wisdom* (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 53

nothing they said would offend any Jesus-follower in this room, and that they should be honest to the utmost degree.

LEARNING SUMMARY

These are the most notable characteristics I found that make a third space appealing to members of Generation Z and conducive to building relationships with like-aged Church members, and to pursuing the goal of finding ways to make Church – using new methods without compromising Orthodox Christian theology -- relevant and attractive to those in the 18-to-25 age range:

- **A neutral, nonthreatening environment:** The space must be separate from any church buildings. Many Gen Z'ers have a disdain for, and/or a distrust of, the Christian faith and organized religion, and will either not attend or will not feel comfortable attending an activity held in a church setting.
- **Discuss, don't lecture:** Gen Z'ers do not want to be lectured, they want to participate in conversations. Make the space conducive to group discussions.
- **Offer experiences:** Hold classes that fully engage participants in activities that are educational, healthful, and enjoyable. Options include specialty cooking classes (ethnic, seasonal, meatless, on a budget, etc.); dance classes; book discussions; poetry or slam poetry workshops; musical instrument classes; learning computer music programs (Apple's Logic, for example); crafts (sewing, knitting, creating holiday decorations); an introduction to crypto; fitness tips.
- **Engage like-aged hosts:** Most Gen Z'ers will feel more comfortable with group leaders in the same age range as them. Have younger individuals of faith head up the events held in the third space.
- **Love and justice:** These are important values to members of Generation Z and essential to a third space atmosphere if it is to be successful. Be non-judgmental; be accepting and affirming to all participants.
- **Be authentic:** Gen Z'ers are skeptical in general and can spot a poser a mile away. Be serious about building relationships and getting to know those who participate in third space events. Your interest in the people and your love and compassion for individuals must be genuine.
- **Focus on pre-evangelism evangelism:** Build relationships and the rest will follow. Gen Z'ers will see and sense the third space leaders' love and faith without being preached at, inspiring them to "have what you have" and be drawn closer to the Truth. As St. Francis of Assisi said eight centuries ago, "Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary."

BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Introduction:

Despite numerous studies that affirm the growing chasm between Generation Z and the American Protestant Church, today's Christian leaders have been unable to find a widespread antidote that would make the Church a viable, worthwhile option for those in the 18-to-25 age range.

As I continue to research Gen Z and the Church, I believe the prototype of a neutral third space, run by like-aged, faith-filled leaders who strive first to build relationships with participants, has immense potential to change lives and break down the barriers that exist between America's younger generation and Christianity.

Analysis of approaches:

In workshops I've held with members of Generation Z, most of the overarching criticisms of the church had to do with perceived hypocrisy, judgmentalism, and a disinterest in listening to the people in attendance.

In response to a question on what should the Church do to make them want to go, for example, Gen Z members' suggestions included:

- 1). More accepting of everyone.
- 2). More casual, welcoming, comfortable, and not judged.
- 3). More interactive - listen, don't just talk.
- 4). Christians should practice what they preach in and out of the church.
- 5). Churches focus too much on making "Christian drones" instead of allowing people to think freely.

Interviews with ministry leaders, experts and consultants on Gen Z and the Church offered a variety of insights into the problem and possible solutions.

According to the Barna Group, more than half of today's 20-somethings spend four hours or more each day in front of a screen, and 26 percent of Gen Z'ers spend more than eight hours a day on digital media.²²³ One expert interviewed for this project noted that Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg is now heavily promoting a "metaverse" where people can pursue activities and create an identity in a digital world, but that won't solve people's loneliness problems. However, over time, concerts, fashion drops, and films will be enjoyed within the metaverse and gaming, which will

²²³ Barna Group, "Gen Z."

further draw people into a virtual reality world.²²⁴ What is the Church's response to this? The Church offers real-world and, potentially, VR-world relationships and support, which are universal needs among people regardless of location. When the Scriptures quote Jesus as saying, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation," could all now include virtual reality?²²⁵ Could this be a new mission field?

Another ministry leader noted that attracting Gen Z'ers will not result from something done in Church on Sunday. "I think it's got to be something like, 'We're doing this effort for the community ... I think now more than ever people are looking at the community impact of a church, what it's doing for the city. Church can be viewed as, 'You're trying to get me in the building for you so your attendance could go well, so your budget can be bigger, so that you can get a bigger building. But I think the more churches move out of their four walls to do something in the community, the more people will want to come to the church because they want to be a part of that. They want to make a difference. They want to be a part of things that do make a difference.'"

Research findings:

Generation Z, of which only 4 percent profess to have a biblical worldview, is not interested in traditional church, where they feel they are being talked at but not listened to; where they believe Church-goers are living duplicitous lives - acting one way in Church and another way outside of the Church walls -- and where they distrust ministers who they believe are more interested in building up their own kingdoms instead of caring about or nurturing the people in their congregations.

Americans in the 18-to-25 demographic are digital natives, spending much of their time using technology and staring at screens. They are hungry for true, face-to-face relationships and for the deeper truths of existence. They value experiences and authenticity. They want justice and equality for all.

CONCLUSION AND SYNTHESIS

If the Church is going to reach Generation Z, it must get out of its traditional modes of thinking and find new methodologies - without compromising core beliefs - to attract young Americans, many of whom distrust or have no interest in the Church or Christianity.

MVP (MOST VIABLE PROTOTYPE)

The Loft, a neutral third space already in operation in the art district of downtown Rockford, Illinois, is the most viable prototype because it is already in operation. Further efforts to host

²²⁴ "5 YPulse Predictions for 2022," Ypulse Newsletter, last modified January 3, 2022, <https://www.ypulse.com/article/2022/01/03/5-ypulse-predictions-for-2022/>.

²²⁵ *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version Bible.*

relationship-building interactive and experiential events in a non-threatening, “vibey” atmosphere has the potential to make life-changing differences for many 18-to-25-year-old Americans.

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APPENDICES

IDENTITY OF THE PHYSICAL SPACE

- Location (where there is darkness you need light)
- Can't be in a church
- Vibe
- Not too small, not too big
- Accommodating passions and interests
 - Kitchen
 - Dancing
 - Enough space for gathering
- Gathering around tables and food ("breaking bread")

VALUES FOR THIS FAITH EXPLORATION GATHERING

- Creating an experience for 18-24-year-olds but within your control zone
- Leader is relevant and current and up to date (culture, news, fashion)
- Giving people purpose (they're giving back to justice movements)

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Space is not branded as a church space
 - When do we let people know, it is connected to a church
 - Don't offer, but answer when asked
- Ratio of churched to unchurched people - what is it?
- Standards for the experiences that are hosted/guardrails
- Social media for the loft
- It's not a service

SPIRITUAL CORE VALUES/PROFILE OF LEADER

- Theologically sound
- Right age of leader
- Cultural and language training
- Not the place to correct, convict, or conclude
- Understand the rules of engagement
- Connector
- Heart and Soul with City First

What are the needs of this generation?

How can the Loft meet these needs?

Pair needs and passions

Health – Yoga

Work – Shared work experience space w free wifi

Pop up shop

Creative space - a safe space to be creative

Resources

EXPERIENCES

Loft Meeting

Summary/Notes:

- What is going on in culture? What should the church do?
- Gen-Z/post high school - 18-24 years old
 - What their faith is and how they agree/disagree with the Protestant church
 - This generation wants to be part of a bigger thing.

Goal:

- Create an adoptable model for other people/churches/organizations to adopt and adapt to reach the next generation.
 - Don't do mine, do yours. Figure out ours first.
 - A space conducive to faith exploration with Gen-Z
 - 10 characteristics of a space
 - Approach - space, time, experience

Idea:

"THE LOFT" / THE LOFT 815

- What would attract our 18-24 year olds in Rockford?
- Reach our Jerusalem first
- 5 nights a week something is happening there

Experience/Activity Brainstorm:

- Friday nights - dance class/art studio?
- Dance, street art, tech nights.
- Rooftop yoga - sunset
- Pop up shop nights
- Rooftop street art
- Classes - boba and açai bowl
- Cooking classes
- Say no to Ramen or ...real ramen
- Ballin on a budget night
- Shoe cleaning
- SIDE HUSTLE 101

- Space to design
- Local bands - tiny desk sessions
- Password of the month
- Comics
- Coffee - cafe - internet - print - work, etc
- Community workspace
- Every Thursday - create/workspace
- Limit age for pop up shop
- Chargers and bathrooms
- Sound/environment - can't be silent
- Social media account
- Record music?
- Card reader or special code to get in
- The Loft Website
 - Shoot us your ideas on the website
 - Place for feedback
 - QR codes for feedback - constantly asking for feedback
- Move to experiences outside the Loft - sponsored by the Loft with the brand of the Loft
 - Events sponsored by the LOFT
 - Outreach experiences sponsored by the LOFT

Values Brainstorm:

- SPACE:
 - Space becomes identity - 3rd space - belonging
 - Right location - "If it's full of light, you don't need another light."
 - The space has to be a place where there is not much light/intentional environment
 - Vibey
 - Not too small not too big
 - Not a church building
 - A "dark" place
 - A place that reflects the identity of the generation
 - Aesthetically pleasing
 - Interactive
- LOGISTICAL:
 - Is there a ratio? church vs. unchurched
 - Stealth - not label or branded but when do we let them know its connected to City First
 - What are we competing against?
 - Place to accommodate when they have time
 - Leads to Next Steps - Very loose - spiritual growth pathway
 - Next steps for overflow and growth - how do we transition people

- Growth Track - leads to serve position in THE LOFT
 - Side note: Adapt growth track for young people?
- Standards for the experiences that are hosted - guardrails
 - Guidelines - so it does not get taken advantage
 - Age restrictions
- CORE VALUES:
 - What are the spiritual core values
 - Maybe not about creating conversation but experiences with them?
 - Expectation of Gen-Z - "experience changes my life."
 - Create moments to create momentum.
 - Not a church service
 - Creating something that offers variety - respect, love, justice, the things that they value
 - Embody the values from the top down
 - Accommodate passions and interests - Needs vs passion
 - Food must be involved
 - Building healthy people
 - Safe place to be creative
 - Resources
 - Collaboration
 - Diversity and unity
 - Intentional strategic conversation
 - Not the place to correct or convince
 - A handshake - people can get invited
 - Not offering - but answering
 - A place to find inspiration
 - Allow people to belong before they believe
 - Elements: Justice, experiences, food, convictions
 - Missional - anti-trafficking
 - Give opportunities for purpose
- TEAM:
 - Who is running it and what are they like - what qualities do they have - cultural and missionary training
 - Connector
 - Fun
 - Depth of character and values
 - Up to date - what's in the world and in fashion and happening in the world
 - Media training
 - Networking
 - Carries the heart and mission of City First

- In their 20's
- Theologically sound, heart and soul, culturally relevant
 - "They were different by HOW THEY LIVED"
 - Did things differently
 - Jesus is attractive
 - Live authentically
- Team has ethnicity. Built strategically but it's organic.
 - Weekly meetings
 - Calendaring out
 - Your time is limited and train up the next people
 - Who would like to be apart?
 - Cultural and missionary training - language

Decor Ideas:

- Neon Sign - THE LOFT
- Core values on wall?
- Bulletin board place
- Coffee table books
- Book space
- Hours on the wall
- Black walls
- Start a Pinterest board

Date of Launch:

SUMMER

Start on a LOFT logo or look!

Appendix E—Project Appendix Documentation

Examples of the logo created for The Loft:

The Loft logo:



The Loft Logo with tagline:



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