

## Dear Church: An open letter from one of those millennials you can't figure out

May 13, 2015 by [Jonathan Aigner](#) 361 Comments

A lot's been made over the millennial generation and their religious life. Why they go to church. Why they don't go to church. What they want. What they hate. I'm going to do something different here. I'm not going to cite Barna. I'm not going to quote Rachel Held Evans. I'm not going to link to any articles or blog posts. I'm just going to tell you what's true for me, and what I've seen to be true of others like me.

I am one of those rascally millennials, by the way. One of those enigmatic, paradoxical, media-dependent, coffee-drinking young people swept together under this millennial umbrella. Except coffee tears up my stomach, so I dropped that stuff. I was born when a former actor was in the White House. I was crushed the day slap bracelets were banned from my elementary school. I remember hiding in my room with my five-inch TV to watch Friends and Seinfeld and the Simpsons, and all the other shows I wasn't allowed to see. I don't remember what it's like to not have a home computer. I can barely recall a time before cell phones. I've never left home without one.

I've always been in church. I've never left, though I've come close several times. I would have left in high school if I'd had the option, but in my house, attendance at my cool, hip, contemporary-worshiping, youth-group-glorifying, moralism-preaching, theology-eschewing McCongregation was a non-negotiable.

So I went. Through every repetition of "Shout to the Lord," every True Love Waits commitment ceremony, every rapture-ready dispensationalist Bible study, every sermon series on how to make myself into a good, moral, well-behaved person so that I wouldn't tick off God and bring condemnation to America.

But I was always a misfit. Always a skeptic. Always a doubter. Always an outsider. Today, you're my livelihood, and putting food on my table overcomes the gravitational pull of my mattress on a cold, rainy Sunday morning. Or a hot, dry one. Or any other one. But that pull is still there. It's always been there. It's never left.

The truth is, my relationship with you is still love-hate.

I love the theology, but I hate the expectations of pseudo piety.

Love the gospel, hate the patriotic moralism.

Love the Bible, hate the way it's used.

Love Jesus, but hate what we've done with him.

Love worship, but hate Jesusy entertainment.

*And those other kids I went to church with, I've come to find that many of them were misfits, skeptics, and doubters, too. Some of them still go, but more of them have left. Some of them left because they had no desire to conform to an outdated cultural norm that demanded we keep up appearances by parking our butts in our regular Sunday pew. They didn't believe, and didn't believe they needed to pretend that they did. Others have left because they grew keen to the bait-and-switch tactics. They've left because they didn't fit in, and couldn't pretend anymore. They left because the Jesus preached from the pulpit didn't look much like the Jesus of Nazareth. They left because all the bells and whistles and hooks and marketing rang hollow.*

*They left because they had been constantly catered to, constantly kept busy, but had never been taught how to be a part of the church. The programs won't bring them back. The coffee won't bring them back. The show – the lights, fog machine, the contemporary worship that we think is essential – nope, that won't do it, either.*

*But here are a few things that might just work with some of us. They may seem crazy. They may contradict everything you've heard. But, as one of these millennials, this is what would work for me, and for a lot of the people I know who have left.*

**Don't expect a "worship style" to do your dirty work.** Contemporary worship hasn't worked. The longer we extend the life of this failed experiment, the more we see the results. In my experience, contemporary worship brings in three groups. Baby boomers who are still stuck in their rebellion against the establishment, parents who mistakenly think that contemporary worship is the only way for their kids to connect to the church, and a small percentage of young adults who've never left and who never knew anything other than contemporary worship.

*In modeling worship after commercial entertainment, you've compromised your identity, and we're still not coming back. And even if we did, would there be any church left? Would there be anything beyond the frills, the lights, the performance, the affected vocals? Would we still see a cross? Would we still find our place among the saints who have come before? Would we find reminders of our life-long need of grace? Or would we have been hooked by something altogether different? Would we merely find your answer key for the great mystery of faith?*

**Don't give us entertainment, give us liturgy.** We don't want to be entertained in church, and frankly, the church's attempt at entertainment is pathetic. Enough with the theatrics. Enough with the lights, the visuals, the booming audio, the fog machine, the giveaway gimmicks, the whole production. *Follow that simple yet profound formula that's worked for the entire history of the church. Entrance, proclamation, thanksgiving, sending out. Gathering, preaching, breaking bread, going forth in service. Give us a script to follow, give us songs to sing, give us the tradition of the church, give us Holy Scripture to read. Give us sacraments, not life groups, to grow and strengthen us.*

*Week after week, season after season, year after year, let us participate in the drama of the gospel. It's not supposed to be fun. It's not supposed to produce intense emotional response. It's a microcosmic, disciplined, anticipatory remembrance of who we were, who we are, and who we are to be. We need this. We need these heartfelt rituals in our lives to keep us returning to the fount of grace, to mark our way back home. Be yourself, and you just might shake us out of our technology-induced, entertainment-craving slumber. Keep giving us Jesusy versions of mainstream entertainment, and there's no hope. You can't compete. You'll lose every time.*

**Don't target us.** In doing so, you've marketed and advertised yourself into oblivion. We're left with homogeneous congregations of approximately the same ages and backgrounds who are just there for what they can get out of the church. No wonder we've left. *Just be the church. Be yourself. Use your regular old liturgy. Offer your regular old sacraments. Sing your regular old songs. Cast a wide net, and let whosoever will come. Trust me, we're more likely to show up when we don't feel like fish snapping up the bait.*

*Be inclusive. Tear down silos. Save us from ourselves. We don't need more youth group lock-ins, more Sunday School options for each age group, more senior adult outings on beekeeping and genealogy. We need more of each other. We need to look into the faces of old and young, rich and poor, of different colors, races, and ethnic backgrounds, so we can learn to see Jesus in faces that don't look like us. So we can remember that the kingdom is bigger than our safe, suburban bubble. That's right, we need community, not bound together by age or economic status or skin color, but wrought with the hammering of nails on a wooden cross. Our internet connectivity is just fine. The rest of our lives is a different story. We are hopelessly disconnected. Church, you can be a powerful remedy if you stop posing as a Fortune 500 company scheming to sell a product.*

**Welcome the toughest, deepest, grittiest, most desperate, most shocking questions.** We have lots of questions. More and more, what we see in the world doesn't jive with what we grew up hearing from the pulpit. You have done more damage by requiring politeness, by refusing to engage, by brusquely rebuking honesty and vulnerability. You're better than that, church. At least you should be. *You should be a safe place for struggling, grappling, doubting. Allow us to be real with each other, to avoid the temptation to gloss over the crap going on around us with easy, tidy, Jesusy clichés'. You've always taught us how the world is black and white, just like The Andy Griffith Show and I Love Lucy. But, and excuse us for noticing, the world is mostly gray, gray like Ricky Ricardo's dinner jacket and Barney Fife's nightstick. Let's embrace that grayness together.*

So no more three points and a take home. No more self-help. No more marriage and parenting advice. No more anger management pointers. We don't need you to be our therapist, we need you to be our church. *We need you to grapple with us, to push back. We need you to show us how to be the hands and feet of Christ, to struggle with us in making it more on earth as it is in heaven.*

It's not too late, church, but your tactics aren't working.

It's time for a new strategy.

It's time to be uncool. To be radical. To be different.

***It's time to be yourself.***

Your Friend,

Jonathan