

Doing Church and Doing Justice: A Portrait of Millennials at Middle Church

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"Social Justice is a step past what people are comfortable with when they talk about doing good."

-Middle Church Millennial

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Introduction: Millennials by the Numbers

Demographics and Social Context

Americans age 18 to 29, often referred to as the Millennial Generation, are the most ethnically, religiously, and socially diverse age group in U.S. history. Only about 6-in-10 (61%) are white, another 1-in-5 (19%) are Hispanic, 14% are black, and 5% are Asian (Pew Research Center, *Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next*, 2010). Only 33% of Millennials are white Christians, compared to nearly 3-in-4 (71%) Americans who are age 65 or older (Public Religion Research Institute, *American Values Survey*, 2010). They are also the most educated generation in U.S. history, with 55% reporting that they have at least some college education, compared to 42% of Americans age 65 and older (U.S. Census Bureau, *Current Population Study*, 2009).

Millennials are also more likely to have been raised in complex family systems and to have diverse social networks. Nearly one-third (31%) report being raised by a single parent. Roughly one-quarter (24%) say their parents were divorced or separated during their childhood, and 11% say their parents were never married (Pew Research Center, *Millennials*, 2010). Millennials are also much more likely than older Americans age 65 and older to report having a close friend or family member who is gay or lesbian (50% vs. 32% respectively) (PRRI, *American Values Survey*, 2010).

The more diverse ethnic and religious composition of the Millennial cohort leads them to have more accepting views of minority populations. For example, members of the millennial generation hold distinctly more positive views of non-Christian religious groups (including Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists) than older Americans. For example, a majority (56%) of Americans age 65 or older agree that the values of Islam are at odds with American values and way of life, compared to only 36% of Millennials. Millennials also have more positive attitudes about the contributions of immigrants. A majority (51%) say that immigrants strengthen the country through their hard work and talents, a view shared by less than one-third (32%) of Americans age 65 and older (PRRI, *American Values Survey*, 2010).

The evolving familial arrangements experienced by Millennials have led to a greater acceptance of nontraditional family structures. Only about one-third (34%) of Millennials say the increase in unmarried couples raising children is a bad thing for society, compared to 58% of seniors age 65 and older. Less than 3-in-10 (27%) Millennials say that the increase in unmarried couples living together is a bad thing for society, compared to 64% of Americans age 65 and older (Pew, *Social Trends*, 2010). Only 5% of Millennials say it is a bad thing that more people of different races are marrying each other, compared to 26% of older Americans (Pew, *Millennials*, 2010).

Politics and Worldview

Younger Americans tend to be generally more progressive in their approach to politics and public policy. They are much more closely aligned with the Democratic Party than with the Republican Party. In 2008, 66% voted for Barack Obama, while their grandparents supported John McCain by a slight margin (53% to 45%) (NEP National Exit Poll 2008). Millennials also strongly believe in an active role for government. A majority (53%) say government should do more to solve social problems, compared to only about 4-in-10 (39%) Americans age 65 and older (Pew, Millennials, 2010).

Younger Americans overwhelmingly believe that diplomacy is preferable to military strength in foreign policy as a way to ensure peace (70% to 27%), while older Americans are divided on this question (44% to 51% respectively). One of the largest generation gaps can be found on issues related to rights for gay and lesbian people. A majority (59%) of Millennials say that gay and lesbian couples should be allowed to marry, compared to only 35% of Americans 65 and older (PRRI, Post-election American Values Survey, 2010).

Attitudes Towards Christianity

In *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity*, Barna Group president David Kinnaman concluded that “Christianity has an image problem” among America’s youth. In a study of younger Americans between 16 and 29 years of age, Kinnaman found that the three most common attributes associated with present-day Christianity were anti-gay, judgmental, and hypocritical. These attitudes persisted even among religiously affiliated youth, where he found that “four out of five young churchgoers say that Christianity is antihomosexual [sic]; half describe it as judgmental, too involved in politics, hypocritical, and confusing” (Kinnaman 2007).

Religious Affiliation

Given these negative associations with Christianity, it is not surprising that the Millennial generation is more likely to be unaffiliated than older Americans. One-third of Millennials report that they do not belong to any religious tradition, making them more than three-times as likely to have no formal religious affiliation than their grandparents (those age 65 and older) (PRRI, American Values Survey 2010). This lower level of affiliation is also not merely a function of life cycle effects. Millennials are significantly more likely to be unaffiliated than members of previous generations at a comparable point in their life cycle. In the 1970s, for example, only 12% of Americans age 18 to 29 were unaffiliated with religion. Notably, nearly 1-in-5 (18%) Millennials say they were raised in a religion but are now unaffiliated with any particular faith (Pew, Millennials, 2010).

As one might expect from this lower rate of religious affiliation, younger adults attend religious services less often and are less likely to say religion is very important in their lives. Millennials are half as likely as older Americans to attend religious services weekly or more (26% vs. 52% respectively). While nearly 7-in-10 (69%) older Americans say religion is very important or the most important thing in their lives, only a minority (46%) of Millennials agree (PRRI, American Values Survey 2010).

Religion & Public Life

Millennials generally embrace religious pluralism and are more wary than the general population about sectarian religious influence in politics. Only about 1-in-4 (26%) of Millennials believe that America has always been and is currently a Christian nation, a view held by a majority (53%) of Americans age 65 and older. Roughly two-thirds (64%) of Millennials say they were worry more about public officials who are too close to religious leaders than about public officials who do not pay enough attention to religion (PRRI, American Values Survey, 2010).

Interviews with Middle Church Millennials

In the first half of 2010, we conducted in-depth ethnographic interviews with 25 young adults (age 18-29) who are active in work for social justice and have a connection to local religious communities. Given that this Millennial generation has a higher proportion of religiously unaffiliated members compared to other generations, we were particularly interested in understanding what was working for them about church; why they thought church wasn't working for so many of their peers; and what language and values they used to talk about the integration of social justice and their faith.

What Turns Millennials Off about Church

As the national research makes clear, the Millennial generation generally has more negative than positive associations with religion and Christianity in particular. About one-fifth of the young people we interviewed explicitly talked about feeling the need to be a “closeted” Christian around their friends because of all the negative associations their peers have about Christianity. One respondent talked about literally losing sleep over her coworkers finding out that she went to church, and others expressed the need to qualify their religious affiliation by saying things like, “No, no, no, I’m not *that kind* of Christian.” The following excerpt illustrates the dilemma many of this cohort feel about being publicly identified as religious.

When I tell people I go to church, it’s like a hassle. I have to couch it in all of these [qualifications]: ‘but it’s very liberal,’ and, ‘Oh, Jewish people go there too, and it’s young and old, black and white, and it’s very diverse.’ I have to come up with all these different ways of describing it. I have a little speech... and I have to talk for way too long explaining this.

Consistent with national research, the young people we interviewed most frequently mentioned being anti-gay and judgmental as key attributes that turned off younger adults about contemporary churches. The following are just two of many examples we heard strongly expressing this sentiment.

What we hear are those super right wing religious folk on a regular basis.... I’m trying to think of when the last time was that I heard about good religion in the media versus the type that’s anti-gay and hypocritical.

Being intolerant and judgmental of gay people would be the biggest association people [my age] have with religion. I just don’t want to be associated with that. Certainly, there are plenty of faith communities who don’t believe that, but that to me is kind of the image that I have—

religious folks like are judgmental, and like use the faith as a way to judge people.... To me, it doesn't match with Jesus' message.

In fact, many of these Millennials talked about LGBT equality as a kind of litmus test for evaluating churches. Several mentioned the importance of Middle Church's presence in the gay pride parade and the presence of a rainbow flag at the church. Others said that they specifically used Google to search for gay-friendly churches and found Middle Church, or that one of the first things they did when evaluating churches online was to see if there was anything on the website or Facebook page about being a welcoming and affirming church.

Millennials we interviewed also frequently mentioned two related issues as additional turn-offs: what they described as an arrogant stance by churches to have absolute certainty about their beliefs and to hold exclusivist claims to truth and salvation that do not respect the authenticity of other religions.

The problem with the Evangelical [perspective] in my mind is that you're automatically saying my beliefs are better than yours.... Frankly, the world is smaller than it was 50, 100 years ago. My graduate class is 50% international.... I can't stand there saying 'Christianity is the only way to go,' and not offend somebody.

Finally, Millennials lamented that many churches wanted them to fit into preexisting programs and structures, rather than creating programs that were responsive to their needs, styles, interests, and busy lifestyles. Many interviewees also mentioned the lack of spirituality and embodied practice in existing programs and worship experiences as a turnoff. One interviewee put it this way:

Churches aren't that interested in developing spirituality, and that's annoying. You know what I mean? Why would I go to church when I can go to yoga? Yoga is more embodied, it's more personal. It costs \$15 in New York. And you are not dogged down by dogma. Stodgy American religious institutions aren't going to do shit for young people. Bring back prayer; bring back meditation into the mix.

A related but different issue was a distinction between joining an institution and participating in a community. The Millennial generation has lower expectations of institutional loyalty. Decades of service at one employer or cradle to grave church membership are alien concepts to this generation. Along these lines, many Millennials expressed a frustration with rigid structures that demanded consistent participation over time, preferring instead multiple, flexible opportunities that do not depend upon previous participation. One participant summed it up this way: "So when people have the ability to organize, maybe it is just around one project, maybe it is just around one action and then disperse, what's wrong with that?"

What Millennials are Looking for in Church

When we talked to Millennials about what they were looking for in a religious community, we were struck by the utter absence in their conversations of one typically prominent attribute of churches: denominational affiliation. Not a single respondent, even when pressed, said a church's denominational affiliation was important to them. The following exchange was typical.

Q: So you grew up Presbyterian but said you feel fairly comfortable here at Middle Church?

A: Yes, but if somebody asked me what denomination this is, I wouldn't even be able to answer. I think it's Unitarian.

Q: It's Reformed I think, like Reformed Church in America, right?

A: I don't know who pays Jacqui's checks. I just show up. [Note: Rev. Jacqui Lewis is the Senior Minister at Middle Church].

The irrelevance of denomination for these Millennials was born out in their own personal religious histories. Approximately one-third of our sample explicitly mentioned participating in multiple denominations or even multiple faith traditions, and many of these did so simultaneously. About one-sixth of our sample understood their identity either as interfaith—such as both Jewish Reform-Mennonite, or Hindu-Presbyterian—or as Unitarian-Universalist; and these respondents described integrating these beliefs and practices in fluid and non-contradictory ways. For example, one respondent said he had regularly participated in Pentecostal and Greek Orthodox prayer groups and practiced Buddhist meditation at home; and when he described his work for social justice, he employed a number of Jewish theological concepts. Another gave an example of a typical dinner blessing in their household: “Come Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let this food be blessed. Amen. Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna, Krishna, Hare, Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama, Rama, Hare, Hare.”

If traditional programs, denominational orthodoxy, doctrinal purity, and traditional institutional membership are not appealing, what is? In addition to the clarity about what they did not want from church, these Millennials expressed some clear ideas about what they found valuable from church.

- Church as a community that encourages responsibility for social justice activism.

Church is such a way of creating an easy community of people that are ready to actively engage in social action.... That's why I love religion. When people are like, 'Oh, I'm spiritual but I'm not religious,' [I think], 'But where do you find the community to actually engage in doing stuff? How do you actually get together and have somebody that's actually holding you responsible for going out and doing something?' This particular community made me feel like I had a responsibility to actually do something—that you couldn't just show up at church and not be actively involved in what's happening in the rest of the world.

- Church as an “oasis in a sea of noise,” a safe but challenging place of mutual concern.

Churches should be oases in a sea of noise. They should be places of healing and of peace and—not always peace because sometimes there’s going to be contention, but they should—churches should be the healers. They should be the sites of unconditional love from whatever higher power you teach from. They’re sites of tradition and belonging and feeling connected to a whole host, so that you realize that you’re not alone, that other people care about you and about the things that are happening in your life and are interested in lifting you up. So then in a culture and our world that’s very I-centric it becomes about a ‘we’ and about a community, and about an opening up, and about a place where you can be safely challenged, and not feel like you’re going to end up alone because of that.

- Church as a diverse community that broadens their worldview and circle of concern. Millennials we interviewed valued the diversity of the community for at least two reasons that were mentioned multiple times: 1) interconnectivity: it connected them with people outside their normal social circles (generational, ethnic, class, etc.); and 2) intersectionality: it expand their sensitivities to issues beyond those that affect them directly. One participant put it this way: diversity within the church “counteracts fear mongering. You can say, ‘Well, but there are trans folks in my church; there are immigrants in my church. And I know why they’re here, and I have contact with those communities. I see them as part of my community, and therefore their issues affect me.’

- Church as a place for critical thinking. Many of the Millennials we interviewed also talked about the value of church as a place where you didn’t have to check your brain at the door. One participant noted that she wasn’t looking for “youth group 2.0” but rather a place where there could be “critical engagement with texts” and respectful conversations about hard, complex questions. This approach fits with a broader theme of a questioning spirituality that we heard most of the Millennials in this group discuss in one way or another. Rather than prefabricated traditional answers, these Millennials often talked about a bricolage approach to questions that gathers and weighs potential answers from multiple sources. One participant also connected this orientation directly to being a part of the internet generation:

We have a lot of questions, and I think we are much more aware of this than any generation was before. Things like Wikipedia and all these technologies, you want to learn anything—. I think that causes a shift out of organized religion.

- Church as a place of creativity, open to the arts. One of the unexpected findings to us was the centrality of the arts, particularly the choir. Nearly half our respondents mentioned one of two choirs (a traditional choir and a gospel choir)

as a point of connection, source of fun, and source of community. This blend of traditional music, gospel music, along with dance and other performing arts in worship embodies one of Middle Church's mantras—"old time religion, with a twist." And this blend of old and new, of tradition and creative re-appropriation, was frequently cited as an asset by the Millennials we interviewed.

- Church as a place to recharge and rekindle hope in the face of overwhelming odds. Although many Millennials we interviewed were somewhat uncertain about what they thought about God, they talked about a connection to a higher power and something bigger than themselves as an important anchor for the social justice work they were doing. In the following extended quote, one respondent explained the importance of a spiritual community for sustaining hope and maintaining perspective in the face of disappointment while working for social justice.

There's always a want or a need for a higher sort of force for all of this. You don't want to spend your life fighting for gay rights to see nothing happen and at the end of the day feel like there's not even a higher force that makes this worthwhile. You're just up against people all day, every day. Like that is really the point?!.... [There is] obviously ... the Civil Rights Movement and all these things that were rooted in the church.... You can spend all your time writing letters, and then the New York Senate will vote down gay marriage in New York, and you're like, 'Really, what on earth....' Having a religious community and believing ... that we will get there, I feel like religion can be hugely inspiring in all of that.... Having that place to actually go and get recharged and sort of connect to an even larger picture than this one issue on this one day versus this one group of other people. And also seeing those other people as humans as well, and sort of respecting the other in ways that it's difficult to do when you have a very specific pro and con list and somebody [else] has the exact opposite list.

How Millennials Approach Religion and Spirituality

As part of the study, we asked a specific question of all participants about how important four different elements of religion were to them: belief, practice, community, and experience. While a significant number cited each of these components as most important to their sense of religion, and many noted the interconnectedness of these dimensions, slightly more cited beliefs and practices than cited community and experience.

Many of the Millennials in this study talked about the fluidity or uncertainty of their beliefs, something typical for their life stage. The most frequently cited belief was a belief in God, but this belief was often described in more abstract or impersonal terms such as a higher power, or "something bigger than me." This belief in the existence of

God was closely connected to the fact that God loves and accepts everyone, and that one of the main goals of a religious person is to love God and love your neighbor.

While these Millennials mentioned a wide range of practices, such as singing in the choir, social service, and attending church, the most frequently mentioned practice was contemplative prayer and meditation. Millennials also included in this category some creative forms of contemplation, such as writing or blogging, singing, walking or hiking, and even reading Maya Angelou novels.

About one-fourth of the sample talked specifically about powerful, personal mystical experiences of the presence of God, a higher power, or of “a larger being that was taking care of me.” These experiences were variously associated with a sense of peacefulness, calmness in the midst of crisis, and a sense of oneness, of not being against anyone. In two cases, this powerful experience of the presence of God was a one-time experience, but one that continues to shape and fuel their sense of spirituality.

Much of the comments about community were covered in the section on what Millennials are looking for in church above. Generally, respondents talked about the importance of feeling connected to a place where rejected people can feel accepted, and a place that challenges one to “get outside your personal bubble.”

Animating Values

Three key values were mentioned most often in the interviews: social justice, non-judgment, and respect for diversity. Given that the respondents were recruited in part because they were active social justice, it is not surprising that the value of justice was prominent in the interviews. A number of respondents contrasted justice to charity or to doing good works. One respondent noted the distinction sharply, declaring:

Social Justice is a step past what people are comfortable with when they talk about doing good.... People who are doing good are doing charity work.... But social justice is about looking at systemic change, looking at systems of oppression and the way in which things are structured.

Moreover, for a number of respondents, social justice was not only something that church members did out in the world, but it was also something that shaped the culture inside the church. One respondent vividly described how this orientation is working at Middle Church.

Social justice should be an opportunity to be able to say to people, ‘Let me offer you my hand and you can do with it what you want.’ And I think that that’s what’s really great about Middle, is that all the hands are up. People are drawn to that place because their hands are always stretched out. But I don’t think that they’re evangelical about the way that they try to get people into their church. It’s more of a welcoming extension of their mission to not say, ‘You’re wrong and we’re right,’ but ‘how can we help?’

For these Millennials, then, social justice goes beyond charity and doing good works and extends to focusing on systemic change. It also is operative not only in the broader community but even within the church itself, a place in which “all the hands are up.” This openness is reflected not only in immediate ongoing ministries like food pantries and a clothing closet but also in allowing the experiences and needs of the diverse members of the congregation to energize and inform broader action for social change.

Another important value for these Millennials is the value of being non-judgmental, embodied in a live and let live attitude. Several respondents talked about leaving their churches because of what they perceived to be its judgmental posture. One respondent related this as his own experience:

I left the church for a while. I couldn't stand the hypocrisy. I didn't like the judgment. And we don't like judgment. You know what, nobody wants to go to church all the time and be told that they're sinners, that they're going to hell if they don't do A, B, and C. No one [in our generation] wants to hear that.

Another concluded, “The culture wars I think [have it] totally backwards. We need to be judging ourselves; we don't need to be judging everyone else.”

Finally, these Millennials, citing their own diverse social networks, talked about respect for ethnic and religious diversity and strong interfaith relations as a core value.

I'm one of those people who believes that most religions are founded on general principles that are all similar. I believe everybody can go to heaven. It's not like a Christian or Jewish or Muslim thing.... That's probably why I call it 'I'm spiritual versus religious,' because ... as soon as I say I am religious, I am associating myself with Presbyterian versus being Jewish, versus being Muslim, versus Catholicism, but what really resonates with me is the commonality between all of those.... I don't want to attend a church where I am told my diverse group of friends and colleagues will be going to hell unless they convert.

The Church and Politics

Overall, we heard a general wariness about churches speaking out on political issues, particularly because of a perception that the churches that had done that the most had been hyper-politicized around opposition to same-sex marriage and abortion. And while some thought the appropriate response to this problem was to keep churches out of politics altogether, more were convinced that progressive religious voices speaking out are needed so that the media and the public is not left with a conservative religious monologue that claims to represent all people of faith.

Two basic themes emerged from the interviews. First, there was a higher comfort level with religious public engagement at the local grassroots level than at the national level. Second, respondents thought churches should focus their engagement on actions

that serve the common good or speak up for the oppressed rather than opposing a controversial issue because of theological objections. Here is how one respondent summarized this point:

If [the church] is really helping someone or helping the underrepresented, the ostracized, the oppressed, [that's appropriate]. I think when the church really takes a stand, especially in a way you might not expect—so when a church takes a stand on being pro gay marriage, that speaks a lot louder than a church taking a stance against. Same for abortion.... If it's just housing rights, if it is a piece of legislation that is bad for health care, when a church can get involved in that way... it is really not coming from self interest.

In terms of issues, young adults are not a single-issue constituency. When we asked about what issues were important to them, we heard a wide array of issues mentioned, such as gay and lesbian rights, the environment, economic justice and a living wage, poverty, criminal justice reform, health care reform, and immigration reform. We also heard a strong theme of intersectionality, seeing the connections between issues, and of interrelated forces that run along lines of gender, social class, and sexual orientation.

There was also a striking difference in approach to two dominant cultural issues, abortion and same-sex marriage. Despite being specifically prompted about abortion by the interviewer, only ten of twenty-five respondents (7 male, 3 female) talked about the issue of abortion at all. No respondent talked about abortion or reproductive rights as the dominant animating issue for him or her. On the other hand, gay and lesbian rights issues were ubiquitous in the interviews. Nearly all say either they have a close friend or family member who is LGBT. Nearly all talked about LGBT rights as a leading, important issue for them. It would be difficult, in fact, to overstate the importance of LGBT equality for these Millennials. It is a symbolic defining issue for their politics, and a primary lens through which they evaluate religious institutions.

Most also had painful stories of rejection of either gay or lesbian friends or themselves by churches. And there was a clear sense that even in New York City they see few places where one can integrate their sexual and religious identities.

I think that there are a lot of people who grew up with the faith who had a meaningful experience with God who then find that...the faith community tells them, 'You pick faith or you pick your sexuality or your gender,' and the queer community sort of says the same thing. There seems to be not as much tolerance as I wish there were to be queer and Christian. [The queer community says], 'Oh, those are those people who are oppressing us.' The Christians are like, 'Oh, those are those people who are tearing the church apart.'

These Millennials, however, strongly desired to find a place that would honor being both gay and Christian.

Faith and Technology

The prevailing attitude about technology and its relationship to both doing church and doing justice was fairly straightforward. For nearly all the young people we interviewed, things like texting, email, podcasts, and social media were simply taken for granted as part of the landscape. On the one hand, respondents noted the importance for churches to use these tools for both practical and symbolic reasons; as one participant put it, not having them would be “*like being a restaurant and not having a menu... You’re not a real restaurant if you don’t have a menu.*” A number of respondents also reported finding their current congregations through Google, Facebook, or Twitter. But, most were clear that these tools in themselves are not the magic bullet solution to reaching Millennials.

Two uses of social media came to the fore in the interviews. First, social media provides a way for like-minded religious social activists to connect and feel part of a larger movement.

People involved in social justice work have been so traditionally isolated, because they’re a very small percentage of people who dedicate such a huge percentage of their lives to it.... But I might have 500 Facebook friends who are ... partners in crime in doing good stuff for the world. I don’t feel isolated.... I’m not just a Lone Ranger, I’m part of a movement.... And you feel like it, and it matters.

Second, most of the Millennials in our interviews were clear that these technological tools were “a means to an end.” One participant summarized the role of technology this way: “it does not replace the community; it complements it.” In contrast to the stereotype of Millennials as a generation that thrives on thin connections in virtual worlds, the young people we interviewed clearly saw technology as providing tools to augment and facilitate connections to embodied, face-to-face community.

Mentors and Family

The Millennials we interviewed strongly value mentoring relationships. They reported actively seeking out these relationships in their professional and personal lives, and nearly all of those who did not currently have people they considered mentors said they would find having a mentor valuable.

One of the more surprising things about this group of Millennials was the high frequency with which they mentioned their parents as role models and mentors. The following quotes were typical.

My dad is far and away my idol....

My parents would be a huge, huge force in that, like how they managed to raise us with religion being the forefront even despite the fact that we sort of have a religion (chuckles) that we cobbled together ourselves.

They were always about helping others. It was just a huge part of our everyday existence.

So why did I end up marrying someone who's so dedicated to social justice? It would definitely be [because of] my parents and my brother.

One interesting pattern that emerged was that most of the mentors these Millennials cited were either people who had inspired them to work for social justice, or who had lived an exemplary spiritual life, but not both. That is, fewer cited examples of someone who integrated social justice and religion. When Millennials cited their parents, they more often talked about their parents as bequeathing to them a sense of social justice than a strong connection to religion.

Finally, it was notable that half the sample talked specifically about Rev. Jacqui Lewis, the senior minister at Middle Church, as a mentor or inspiring exemplar. Among the specific things these Millennials noted was personal openness such as hosting the young adults in her home, willingness to craft programs and create opportunities for engagement in response to specific needs, the ability to put religion on the ground and help them connect it to their daily lives, the creation of a safe space in which to ask difficult questions, her ability to reinterpret traditional religious teachings on fundamental topics like Jesus and the devil, and a general style that provides critical substance but that leaves room for people to “figure it out” for themselves.

Appendix A. Methodology and Setting

Methodology

This study is based on in-depth interviews with 25 young adults (age 18 to 29), who are involved in social justice work and who are connected to a place of worship in the greater New York City area. The 90-minute interviews were conducted from January - June 2010. An initial sample of 15 subjects for the study was provided by Middle Collegiate Church staff. The initial sample of young adults was augmented through a process of snowball sampling, a technique that relies on current study subjects to recruit future subjects. The initial interviews were conducted in person at Middle Collegiate Church. Additional interviews that were conducted among subjects recruited from the initial list of respondents were conducted by phone. Additionally, the study included 5 interviews with mentors who were identified in the course of the interviews by the young adult respondents. These 30-minute interviews were conducted from July-August 2010. All interviews were recorded, professionally transcribed, and coded for themes using ethnographic research techniques. The full set of interviews comprised over 400 pages of single-spaced transcripts.

In addition to the qualitative interviews, each young adult respondent also completed a brief questionnaire that included basic demographic questions (age, sex, race, education, income and religious affiliation). See Appendix B for results.

Setting: About Middle Collegiate Church

Middle Collegiate Church is one of four congregations that make up the Collegiate Church of New York, the oldest Protestant church in North America with a continuous ministry. It was originally established in 1628, after the Dutch West India Company sent an ordained minister to the small settlement of New Amsterdam. The Collegiate Church is affiliated with the Reformed Church in America. Middle Church is located in the East Village in New York City and attracts a diverse community of worshippers. Particularly since the arrival of Senior Minister Rev. Jacqueline Lewis, Ph.D. in 2004, Middle Church has self-consciously and energetically embraced four adjectives, which describe its unique approach to doing church: “welcoming, artistic, inclusive, bold.”

Appendix B. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Demographic Characteristics Millennial Respondents	
Average Age	25.8
Gender	<u>Percent</u>
Male	52
Female	44
Transgender	<u>4</u>
	100
Race/Ethnicity	
White	56
Black	28
Mixed race	12
Hispanic	<u>4</u>
	100
Religious Attendance	
Once a week	48
Occasionally	39
Seldom/Never	<u>13</u>
	100
Education	
High school graduate	0
Some college education	16
College graduate	52
Post-graduate	<u>32</u>
	100
Politics & Ideology	
Extremely Liberal	10
Very Liberal	55
Somewhat liberal	25
Moderate	5
Conservative	<u>0</u>
	100