



Making Sense of the Millennial Debates

In the midst of multiple paradigms

David P King, Ph.D.

May 2015

Several months ago, I broached the topic of millennials, faith, and philanthropy in this newsletter. The combination of those three themes together struck a chord with readers and has led Lake Institute to continue researching and speaking on this issue. But of course, we're not alone. Countless blogs suggest the top ten reasons to reach millennials for your religious community. In the Washington Post, millennial pundit Rachel Held Evans recently offered the opposite advice. If you want millennials back in the pews, she advises "stop trying to make church 'cool.'"¹ Millennial debates are certain to get more eyeballs in our current public conversation. But the question remains, what is the point?

A few weeks ago, I returned from speaking at Valparaiso University's Institute for Leadership and Service on the topic ([Millennials, Faith and Philanthropy: Who Will Be Transformed?](#)). It was a wonderful gathering for several reasons. First, there was a mix of all generations in the room: builders, boomers, X'ers, and millennials. Second, these generations engaged each other in intentional small group reflections on the topics of faith and philanthropy (not a given and often overlooked). Third, we listened to millennials themselves. Gifted undergraduates presented their own research on issues facing their generation from the paralyzing choice of short-term service opportunities, social justice traditions, and the market philanthropy of buy-one give-one companies such as TOMS shoes. The passion around these conversations and the encouragement for further engagement was impossible to miss.

And while Valparaiso's gathering was unique for its inclusivity of generations in intentional dialogue while prioritizing millennials' own insights, it is just one example among many demonstrating the passion around millennials. A larger question is what else can we learn from these passionate debates?

It is important to attend to outlook. For some, attention to the millennial generation comes from fear, a fear that everything is changing. This is the Chicken Little approach: the sky is falling. Others approach millennials with more complacency. They would rather believe that millennials are no different from past generations: nothing new under the sun; kids will be kids.... These two poles may serve as extremes, but they should not hide the fact that it is important to consider that how we approach the millennial debates may shape the answers we offer.

I believe that we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. This is bigger than just the arrival of the millennial generation, rather millennials are one part of a larger story. In *The Great Emergence*, emergent church guru, Phyllis Tickle sees the coming of a paradigm shift in religion and culture at the turn of the 21st century.² Tickle's interpretations and predictions of religious history might be a



IUPUI

LAKE INSTITUTE
ON FAITH & GIVING

LILLY FAMILY SCHOOL OF PHILANTHROPY

Indiana University
Indianapolis



bit too broad, but I believe her general point holds. Something new is emerging. Paradigms are shifting. And our question is what does that mean for issues of faith and philanthropy?

Over forty years ago, historian of science Thomas Kuhn popularized the notion of paradigm shifts. One of Kuhn's critical observations, however, was that as a new paradigm emerged, the old did not automatically fade away. Both paradigms continue on for at least a period of time.³ This seems to be where we are at present – in the midst of multiple paradigms.

This is why if attending to outlook is important, measuring outcomes is even more so. Why do we care about the millennial question? Too often it is in order to make millennials into something else, have them join our religious community, our workforce, donate to our cause. The majority of outcomes simply seek to impose the traditional paradigm on a new generation. But, what if instead of shaping millennials into a preconceived paradigm, the outcome is rather mutual transformation? Any dialogue should hold out the possibility of change on both sides.

As leaders in institutions engaged in issues of faith and giving, we must recognize we are in the midst of a paradigm shift. In future articles, we can discuss more fully what the paradigm shift means for our work, but the first step is recognizing that we are leading in the midst of change. Our institutions, our fundraising sources, and our networks are changing. If we can admit these shifts are occurring, we must become comfortable leading without having all the answers. As Michael Fullan notes, it is less about leading change and more about leading in the midst of a culture of change.⁴ Living and leading in-between paradigms is difficult but also life-giving if you are able to consider this time as a gift enabling us to talk across generations. Attending to these multiple paradigms will allow us to improve what we are doing as well as considering how we might create something new.

¹ Evans, R. (2015). "Want Millennials Back in the Pews? Stop Trying to Make Church 'Cool'." *Washington Post*. Online: http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jesus-doesnt-tweet/2015/04/30/fb07ef1a-ed01-11e4-8666-a1d756d0218e_story.html

² Tickle, P. (2012). *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is Changing and Why*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books.

³ Kuhn, T. (1970). *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

⁴ Fullan, M. (2001). *Leading in a Culture of Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

For further thoughts on how leaders must both improve and create, see Gil Rendle, "Waiting for God's New Thing: Spiritual and Organizational Leadership in the In-Between Time." Texas Methodist Foundation. April 2015. [Read article.](#)



IUPUI

LAKE INSTITUTE
ON FAITH & GIVING

LILLY FAMILY SCHOOL OF PHILANTHROPY
Indiana University
Indianapolis