

Opinions

# Want millennials back in the pews? Stop trying to make church ‘cool.’

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By Rachel Held Evans April 30, 2015

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Bass reverberates through the auditorium floor as a heavily bearded worship leader pauses to invite the congregation, bathed in the light of two giant screens, to tweet using #JesusLives. The scent of freshly brewed coffee wafts in from the lobby, where you can order macchiatos and purchase mugs boasting a sleek church logo. The chairs are comfortable, and the music sounds like something from the top of the charts. At the end of the service, someone will win an iPad.

This, in the view of many churches, is what millennials like me want. And no wonder pastors think so. Church attendance has [plummeted](#) among young adults. In the United States, 59 percent of people ages 18 to 29 with a Christian background have, at some point, [dropped out](#). According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, among those of us who came of age around the year 2000, a solid quarter claim no religious affiliation at all, making my generation significantly more disconnected from faith than members of Generation X were at a comparable point in their lives and twice as detached as baby boomers were as young adults.

In response, many churches have sought to lure millennials back by focusing on style points: cooler bands, hipper worship, edgier programming, impressive technology. Yet while these aren't inherently bad ideas and might in some cases be effective, they are not the key to drawing millennials back to God in a lasting and meaningful way. Young people don't simply want a better show. And trying to be cool might be making things worse.

You're just as likely to hear the words “market share” and “branding” in church staff meetings these days as you are in any corporate office. Megachurches such as Saddleback in Lake Forest, Calif., and Lakewood in Houston have entire marketing departments devoted to enticing new members. Kent Shaffer of ChurchRelevance.com routinely ranks the best [logos](#) and [Web sites](#) and offers strategic counsel to organizations like Saddleback and LifeChurch.tv.

Increasingly, churches offer sermon series on iTunes and concert-style worship services with names like “Vine” or “Gather.” The young-adult group at Ed Young’s Dallas-based Fellowship Church is called [Prime](#), and one of the singles groups at his father’s congregation in Houston is called [Vertical](#). Churches have made news in recent years for giving away tablet computers, TVs and [even cars](#) at Easter. Still, attendance among young people remains flat.

Recent [research](#) from Barna Group and the Cornerstone Knowledge Network found that 67 percent of millennials prefer a “classic” church over a “trendy” one, and 77 percent would choose a “sanctuary” over an “auditorium.” While we have yet to warm to the word “traditional” (only 40 percent favor it over “modern”), millennials exhibit an increasing aversion to exclusive, closed-minded religious communities masquerading as the hip new places in town. For a generation bombarded with advertising and sales pitches, and for whom the charge of “inauthentic” is as cutting an insult as any, church rebranding efforts can actually backfire, especially when young people sense that there is more emphasis on marketing Jesus than actually following Him. Millennials “are not disillusioned with tradition; they are frustrated with slick or shallow expressions of religion,” argues David Kinnaman, who interviewed hundreds of them for Barna Group and compiled his research in [“You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church . . . and Rethinking Faith.”](#)

My friend and blogger Amy Peterson [put it this way](#): “I want a service that is not sensational, flashy, or particularly ‘relevant.’ I can be entertained anywhere. At church, I do not want to be entertained. I do not want to be the target of anyone’s marketing. I want to be asked to participate in the life of an ancient-future community.”

Millennial blogger Ben Irwin [wrote](#): “When a church tells me how I should feel (‘Clap if you’re excited about Jesus!’), it smacks of inauthenticity. Sometimes I don’t feel like clapping. Sometimes I need to worship in the midst of my brokenness and confusion — not in spite of it and certainly not in denial of it.”

When I left church at age 29, full of doubt and disillusionment, I wasn’t looking for a better-produced Christianity. I was looking for a truer Christianity, a more authentic Christianity: I didn’t like how gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people were being treated by my evangelical faith community. I had questions about science and faith, biblical interpretation and theology. I felt lonely in my doubts. And, contrary to popular belief, the fog machines and light shows at those slick evangelical conferences didn’t make things better for me. They made the whole endeavor feel shallow, forced and fake.

While no two faith stories are exactly the same, I'm not the only millennial whose faith couldn't be saved by lacquering on a hipper veneer. [According](#) to Barna Group, among young people who don't go to church, 87 percent say they see Christians as judgmental, and 85 percent see them as hypocritical. A similar [study](#) found that "only 8% say they don't attend because church is 'out of date,' undercutting the notion that all churches need to do for Millennials is to make worship 'cooler.'"

In other words, a church can have a sleek logo and Web site, but if it's judgmental and exclusive, if it fails to show the love of Jesus to all, millennials will sniff it out. Our reasons for leaving have less to do with style and image and more to do with substantive questions about life, faith and community. We're not as shallow as you might think.

If young people are looking for congregations that authentically practice the teachings of Jesus in an open and inclusive way, then the good news is the church already knows how to do that. The trick isn't to make church cool; it's to keep worship weird.

You can get a cup of coffee with your friends anywhere, but church is the only place you can get ashes smudged on your forehead as a reminder of your mortality. You can be dazzled by a light show at a concert on any given weekend, but church is the only place that fills a sanctuary with candlelight and hymns on Christmas Eve. You can snag all sorts of free swag for brand loyalty online, but church is the only place where you are named a beloved child of God with a cold plunge into the water. You can share food with the hungry at any homeless shelter, but only the church teaches that a shared meal brings us into the very presence of God.

What finally brought me back, after years of running away, wasn't lattes or skinny jeans; it was the sacraments. Baptism, confession, Communion, preaching the Word, anointing the sick — you know, those strange rituals and traditions Christians have been practicing for the past 2,000 years. The sacraments are what make the church relevant, no matter the culture or era. They don't need to be repackaged or rebranded; they just need to be practiced, offered and explained in the context of a loving, authentic and inclusive community.

My search has led me to the Episcopal Church, where every week I find myself, at age 33, kneeling next to a gray-haired lady to my left and a gay couple to my right as I confess my sins and recite the Lord's Prayer. No one's trying to sell me anything. No one's desperately trying to make the Gospel hip or relevant or cool. They're just joining me in proclaiming the great mystery of the faith — that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again — which, in spite of my persistent doubts and knee-jerk cynicism, I still believe most days.

One need not be an Episcopalian to practice sacramental Christianity. Even in Christian communities that don't use sacramental language to describe their activities, you see people baptizing sinners, sharing meals, confessing sins and helping one another through difficult times. Those services with big screens and professional bands can offer the sacraments, too.

But I believe that the sacraments are most powerful when they are extended not simply to the religious and the privileged, but to the poor, the marginalized, the lonely and the left out. This is the inclusivity so many millennials long for in their churches, and it's the inclusivity that eventually drew me to the Episcopal Church, whose big red doors are open to all — conservatives, liberals, rich, poor, gay, straight and even perpetual doubters like me.

Church attendance may be dipping, but God can survive the Internet age. After all, He knows a thing or two about resurrection.

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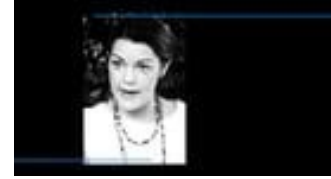
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