

Millennials and the Church


Introduction

Millennials are, arguably, the toughest generation for churches to reach. Many Millennials did not grow up going to church, so are considered by many to be aloof, apathetic, and anti-Christian.

Currently, Millennials are between the ages of 15 and 35, which is a tough age range to reach, regardless of the generation. Any discussion about Millennials usually includes their use of technologies, like television, social media, and smartphones. However, use of technology is not the only defining aspect of this generation; Millennials are seen as a creative group of people who also enjoy volunteering and connecting with others.

As a Millennial, I can relate to many of the characteristics and ideals of my generation. As you'll soon read, while there are many qualities and experiences that Millennials share, they are really a diverse group of people who cannot always be categorized with neat statistics or general assumptions. Read on to discover more about who Millennials are, what they value, and how you can effectively reach them.

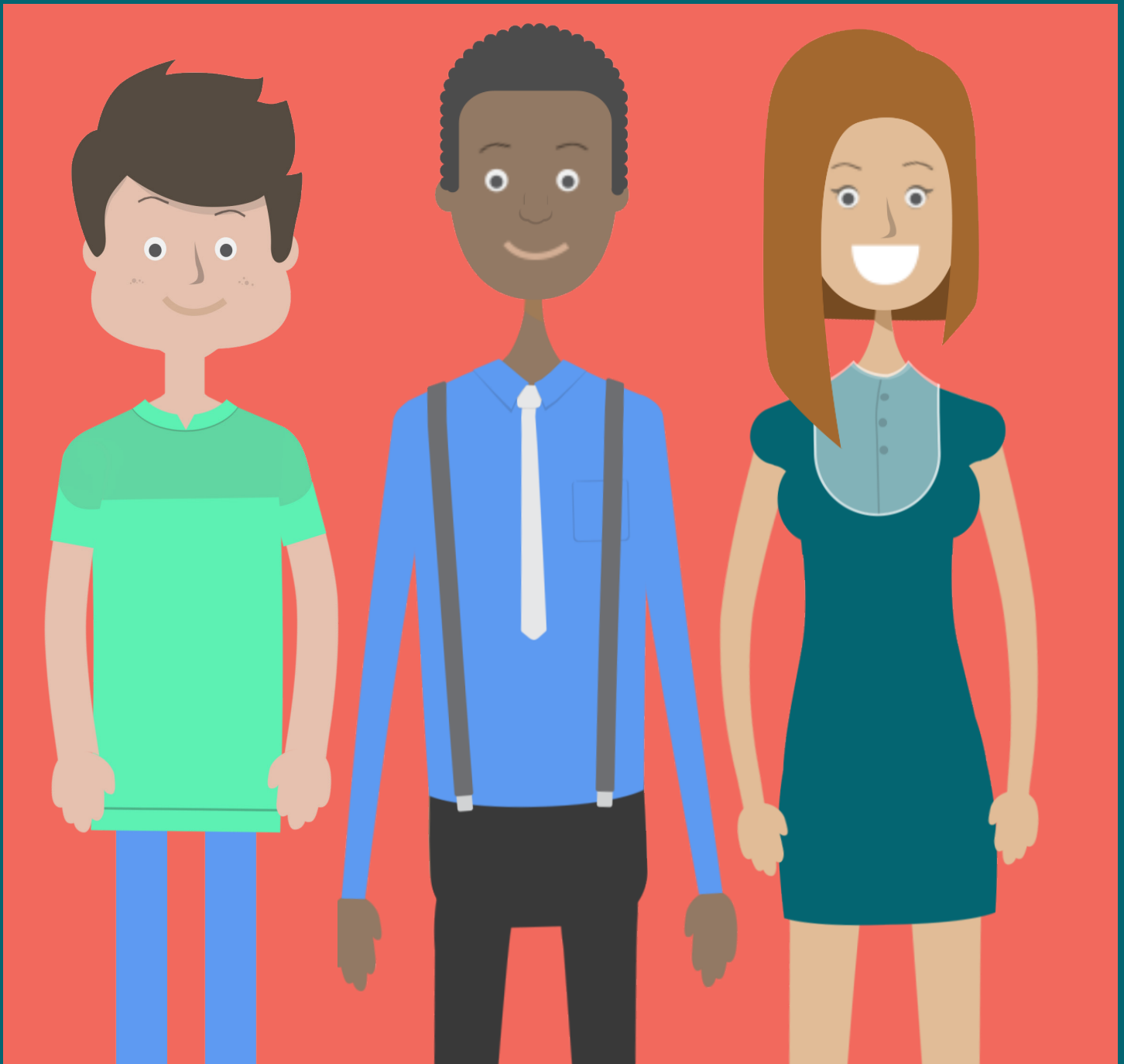




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Millennials

So, who are Millennials, anyway?



According to most sources, Millennials were born anywhere between 1980 and 2000. Some definitions have the end date a little sooner (1993ish), but either way, Millennials are the young adults in your congregation, ranging

from high school age to the early 30s. This age range can make generalizations difficult because some Millennials have just passed through puberty while others are sending their children to preschool.

Entitlement, Tolerance & 9/11

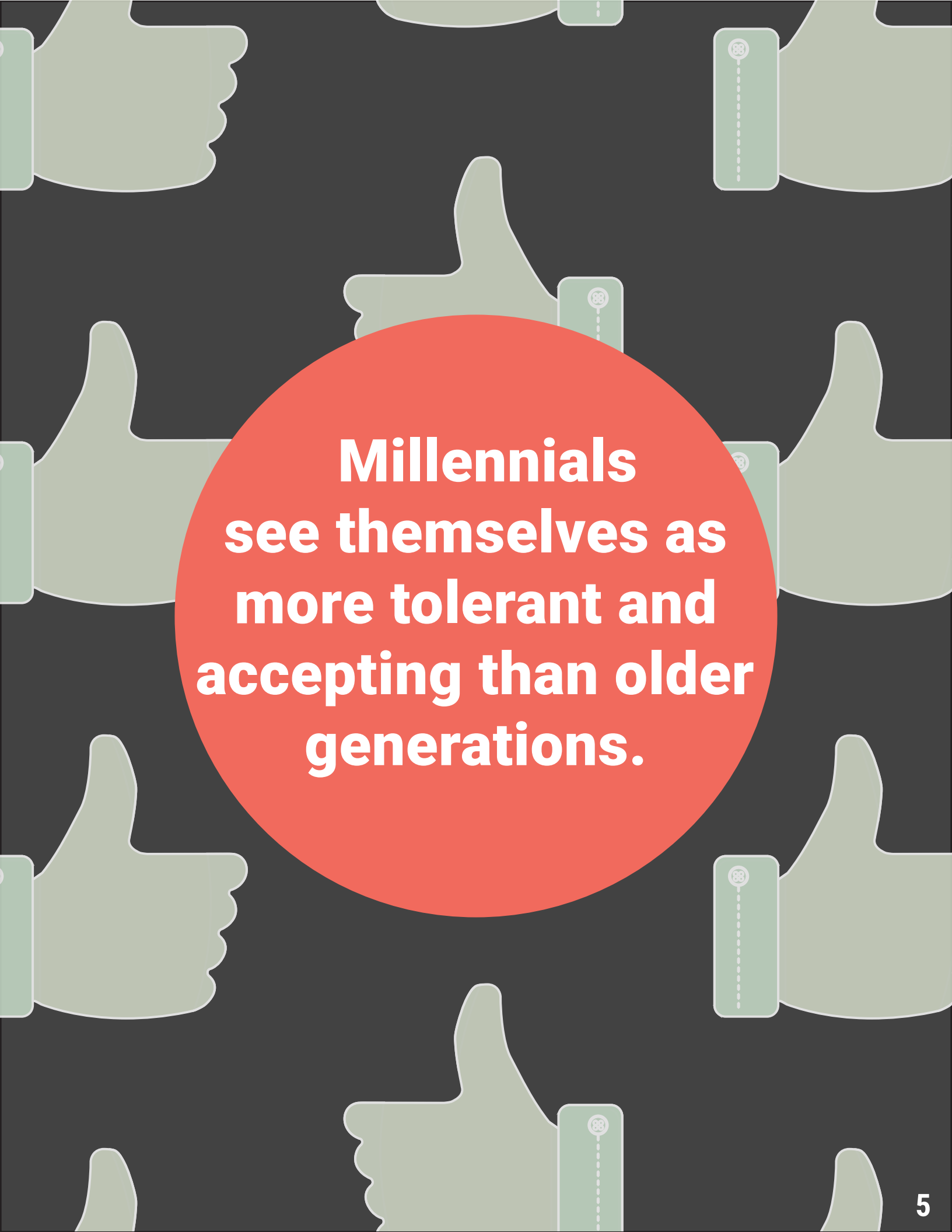


Older generations often associate Millennials with negative characteristics, referring to them as narcissistic, entitled, or lazy. Some refer to them as “trophy kids” because this generation grew up receiving participation trophies, leading to a constant need for recognition, affirmation, and feedback later in life.

It is common for Millennials to see themselves, however, as being more tolerant and accepting than older generations. Having grown up with technology at their fingertips, they’ve been exposed to numerous ways of life and differing cultures, and they believe they are more accepting of all world views.

A Pew Research Center article on religion among Millennials states that this generation is “more accepting than older Americans of homosexuality, more inclined to see evolution as the best explanation of human life and less prone to see Hollywood as threatening their moral values.”

Millennials grew up in the wake of 9/11. Some were in their late teens and early twenties when the event happened; others were too young to remember the details. The formative years of all their lives have been spent knowing the United States not as the world superpower who won World War II, but as a country susceptible to terrorist attacks.

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Millennials & the Age of Information

This world-changing event was the first to be documented after use of the Internet became mainstream, so Millennials quickly grew accustomed to learning about world events through online means more so than

“traditional” forms of reporting such as television or newspapers. Millennials are far more likely to learn about world events from peers on social media than the evening news.



This has led many Millennials to become more skeptical of the news media, the government, and other traditional authorities. With Google at their fingertips, they believe they can refute any argument with a few

taps and clicks. They’ve grown up being able to find nearly any information almost instantaneously and are rarely satisfied with a first answer, knowing that they can quickly verify or deny any claim.

Millennials & Technology

The Tools Millennials Use

Millennials have grown up relying on technology. Those born in the early 1980s might remember a time without computers, but TVs were most likely a household staple, and video game systems quickly became a major form of entertainment for young people. Since the creation of Facebook in 2004, social interactions have been significantly changed by social in technology have heavily influenced Millennials throughout their childhood and into adolescence and adulthood.

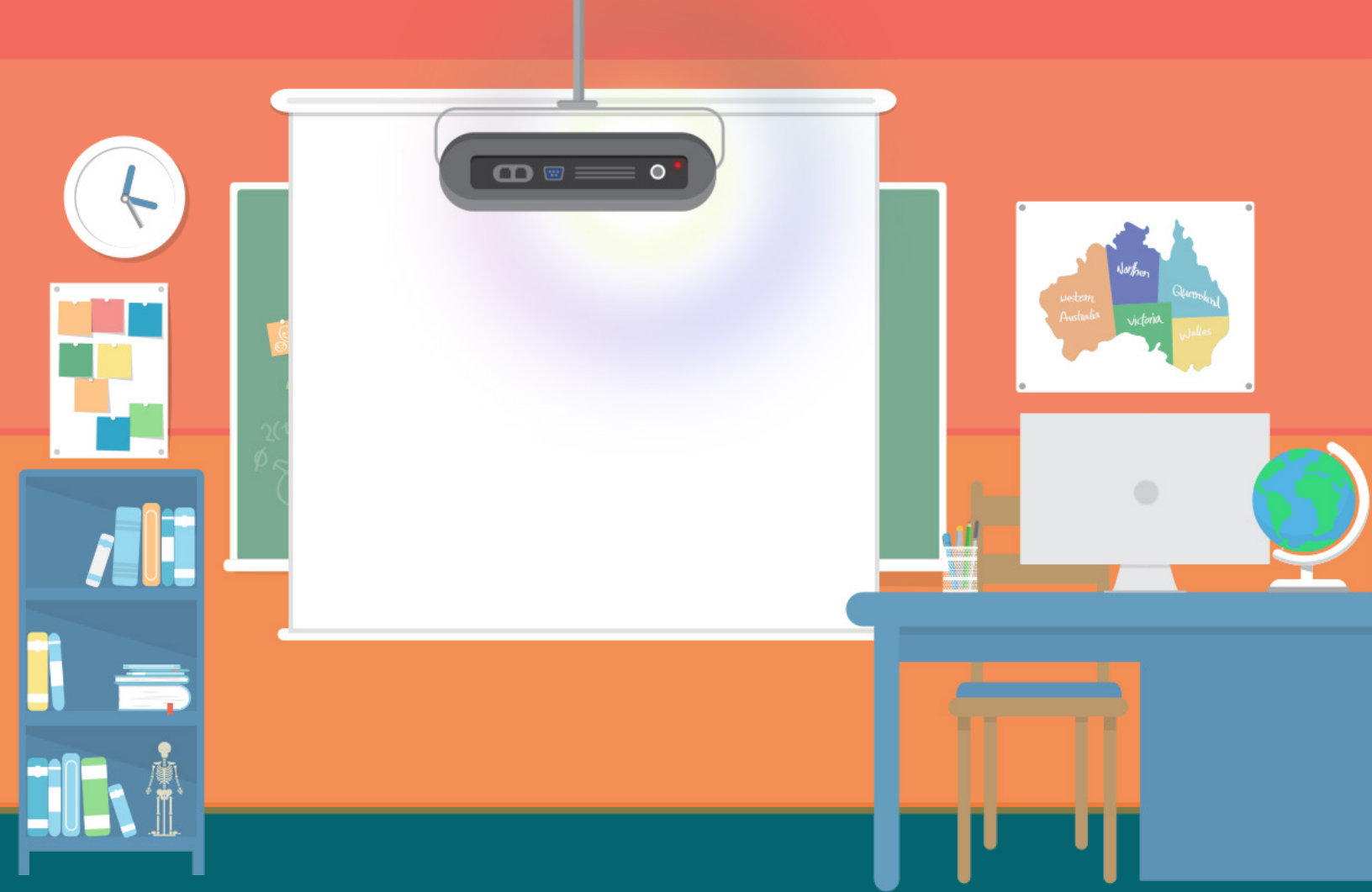
Smartphones have dramatically shaped the way Millennials view technology. Computers, MP3 players, telephones, calculators, maps, cameras, clocks, notepads, and Bibles are all now contained in one handheld device. Any information, whether it be someone's Facebook profile or the definition of a word, can be looked up instantly. Millennials are the largest adopters of this form of technology; in a 2015 Pew Research study, 86 percent of respondents aged 18–29 own a smartphone.

Greg Witto, Director of Campus and Family Life Ministry at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Charleston, Illinois, has been mentoring and leading Millennials since they first began entering college. He says that Millennials are “technologically astute.” They understand the value and purpose of technology, quickly adapting to learn to use any kind of program or device. However, he counters this characterization with the following warning:

“There is an inability to properly manage the technological interaction [in Millennials]. I see [technology] as a deterrent to healthy interpersonal communication. I do believe, and once again it’s a generalization, that there is an inability to communicate.”

entertainment
Millennials’
media. Advances





Technology in the Classroom & Workplace

Regardless of whether they were born in the early 1980s or late 1990s, Millennials' education differed greatly from that of their parents. Whether computers were seen as an exciting budding technology or a commonplace learning tool, Millennials' education has been dictated by this form of technology. Smart Boards, online textbooks, and YouTube videos have been used in the classrooms of most Millennials at some point in their education.

In the earlier years of computer technology, the Internet was not a trusted source for formal research, but as professional journals have migrated online, many projects rely solely on electronic resources. In today's colleges, it is far more common for students

to find all research articles online than to use any printed resources at all. With the Internet constantly in the palm of their hands, Millennials need only a few seconds to find their desired information.

Now that most Millennials are in the workforce (or will soon be entering it), technology dictates how they apply for jobs and what kind of jobs are available. Website development is a field that is projected to grow 27 percent over the next ten years. Online portfolios are required for most writing or design careers. Most available job opportunities require extensive familiarity with various forms of technology, and Millennials are already well-equipped to handle them.

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Millennials & the Church

Church Attendance

Of every generation, Millennials attend church the least. Part of this is due to their age—older people attend church more frequently—but the fact remains that Millennials appear to be leaving the church in droves for more “entertaining” or “accepting” experiences.



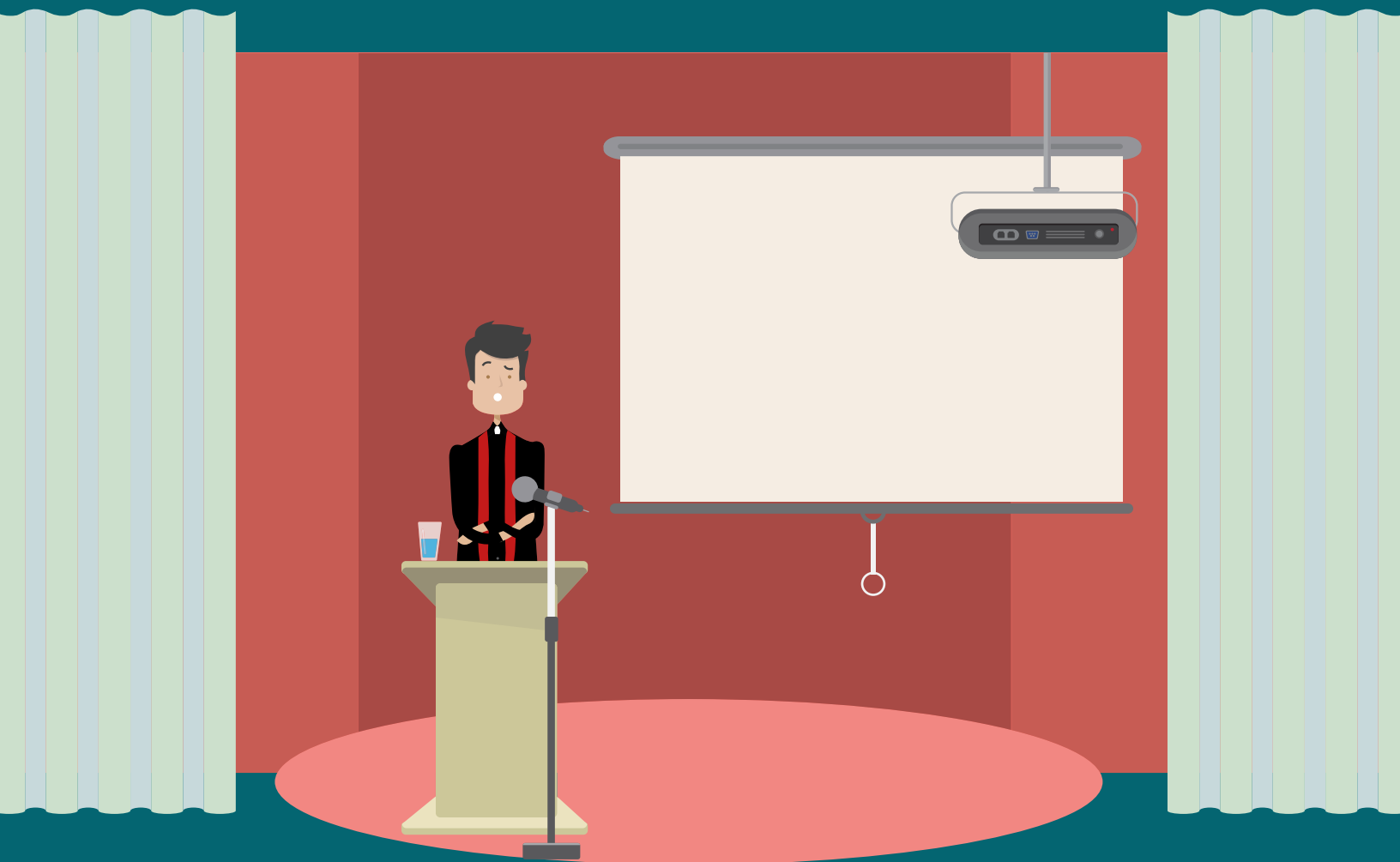
In a 2007 Pew Research Center study, 25 percent of Millennials identified themselves as “unaffiliated” with any religion, the age group with the highest percentage of individuals who identify as such. (In the study, individuals could identify as religious or as secular unaffiliated, atheist, or agnostic.) In that same study, only 18 percent of Millennials said they attended worship services on a weekly basis.

In a survey sent out by Concordia Technology Solutions (CTS), 71 percent of respondents indicated that less than one quarter of their regular worshipers are Millennials. This statistic isn’t surprising; in the previously mentioned Pew study, only 33 percent of all respondents aged 18–29 attended church weekly. However, if the respondents claimed to be religiously affiliated, that number increased to 43 percent.

How Millennials Choose a Church

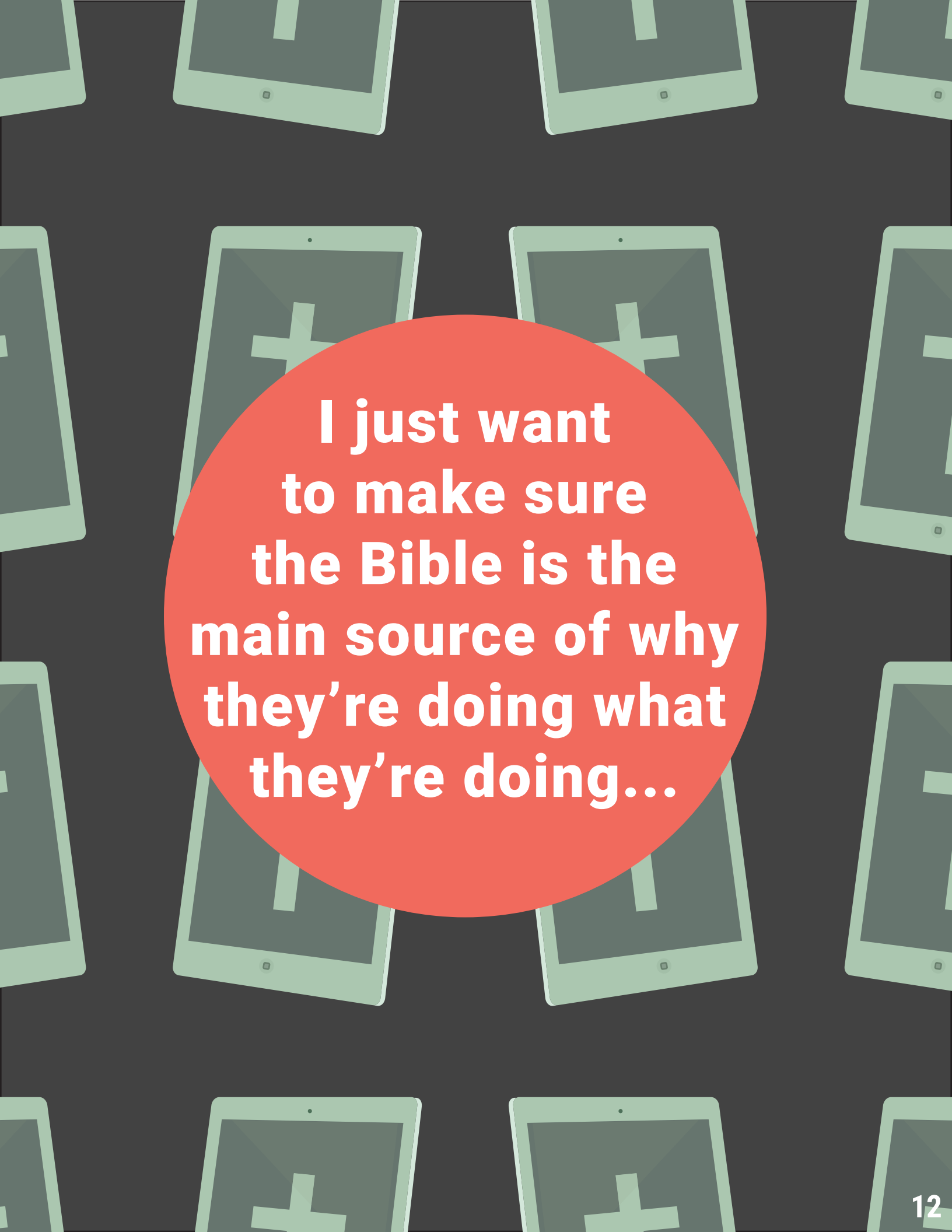
Many people in older generations believe that Millennials are not interested in traditional church services. They believe Millennials attend churches only where there are projection screens and contemporary music. While Millennials are more partial to technology, jumping to the conclusion that they attend church only when PowerPoint slides are projected during the service is a hasty assumption. Many Millennials don't even consider technology when they're looking for a new church, as they are more concerned with how biblically sound the church's beliefs are.

One recent college graduate said that when she is looking for a new church, "the most important thing is what they are basing their mission statement off of. I just want to make sure the Bible is the main source of why they're doing what they're doing and that it is credible, that they're not wishy-washy." That last statement, "that they're not wishy-washy," gives a glimpse of many Millennials' views of religious institutions. They can easily see through "feel good" Christianity and are turned off by the inconsistencies and weak doctrine that are present in some churches' beliefs.



When asked the same question about looking for a new church, a twenty-nine-year-old Millennial responded, "I don't care about that stuff [technology]. It's nice, but I'm more inclined to go

somewhere that I find out about through word of mouth rather than through flash because anyone can put together a nice website. A website is a way to reel people in, but I don't find it convincing."



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Millennials' Worship Style

Millennials' preferred worship style can be stereotypically presented as a concertlike experience, featuring flashing lights, raised hands, and a live band. However, according to the CTS survey, many Millennials still attend traditional or liturgical worship services. The assumption is often made that Millennials are superficial worshipers, but many are focused on bigger issues surrounding worship than the style.

Another Millennial said, "I prefer contemporary [worship], but I would like it if some traditions were implemented." She elaborated that contemporary worship "seems more real" to her, and that, while she has attended liturgical services in the past and values that tradition, she prefers a worship style that "rings true" with her own personal devotion time.

In essence, the Millennial definition of worship is not based solely on the style of music that is played. Often, their worship style preference is due to a desire for a deeper understanding of God. Thom Rainer echoes these ideas in a blog post on his

website, where he identifies rich content, authenticity, and quality as the three elements of worship that Millennials seek.

It's true that some Millennials have a view of the church as a restrictive, nay-saying entity that only seeks to prevent them from having fun. Another Millennial gave this piece of advice:

"Preach on. Speak to issues of fundamental importance—like world view.

Younger Christians more acutely feel the tension between the confession of Scripture and the mindset of the twenty-first century. Preaching on the underlying causes for this tension [e.g., world view] rather than railing against the symptoms [homosexuality, gender issues, cohabitation, etc.] would, I think, ring true and be very appealing for those who think the church is there simply to say 'no' all the time."

Being transparent about the root cause of current issues will encourage Millennials to become engaged in the church and their own personal faith.



Combining Millennials, Technology & The Church

Efforts to Draw Millennials

We've seen how Millennials interact with technology in their daily lives and their average patterns for church attendance. One common reaction is to combine these two facets of Millennial life—to incorporate technology and snazzy marketing into the church—in order to draw them into the church. But does this tactic work?

I was once told by a parishioner at a rural church that they put screens up in their hundred-year-old building to “stay relevant with the younger kids.” I was baffled—the screens looked out of place next to their gilded altar and intricate architecture—but this older woman was convinced that screens were what would draw in young people.



Millennials aren't going to magically appear in church because you put up a screen, but they are quicker to embrace the use

of technology in church compared to their parents or grandparents.

Technology in Worship

A personal example of this kind of generational difference: My parents (Baby Boomers) and I were visiting my cousin's church one Sunday, and we attended the contemporary worship service. The pastor, a middle-aged man a few years younger than my parents, read the Scripture readings from his smartphone's Bible app. After the service, my mom mentioned how she thought it was "strange" that he did that, where I hadn't even questioned it until she pointed it out.

Many members of older generations who write about Millennials, particularly Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation, often fail to understand the depth of Millennials. While Millennials are more accepting of technology in church, it is not common for them to base their attendance on the presence of it. Some members of older generations see Millennials' quick adoption of technology and assume that, surely, technology is the way to draw Millennials in, when in fact Millennials are concerned with more substantial issues.



I'M LOOKING FOR MORE THAN JUST PRAISE BANDS AND PROJECTORS

I'M LOOKING FOR SOMETHING SUBSTANTIAL



One Millennial responder in the CTS survey said, "So many Millennials in our congregation are burnt out from all the screens, all the praise bands, and all the empty feelings that such superficial stuff promotes."

Basically, Millennials want something more. They want something substantial (the "solid food" Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians

3:2), something that allows them to relate faith to their lives, and they require the help of those around them to get to that point. Differences in understandings of technology, social media, and motivations drive a wedge between generations and prevent genuine interactions and conversations about real topics, particularly in the church.

The Next Step

Reaching Out & Building Relationships

Every Millennial is unique. I have friends who value the reverence of liturgical services and others who like to praise God with their hands raised and a band playing contemporary music. Some of my peers spend hours curating their Instagram profile to look just right, while others have deleted their social media accounts in an effort to draw closer to God.



If many Millennials don't necessarily care about worship style, screens, or social media, then what do they care about? How can you reach a seemingly apathetic generation that values honesty but desires acceptance?

One way to reach out to Millennials is to, well, reach out to them, personally, with a handshake or a compliment or an invitation to dinner. They may seem intimidating or standoffish at first, but at their core, they're the same as anyone else, and conversations are the starting point for relationships.

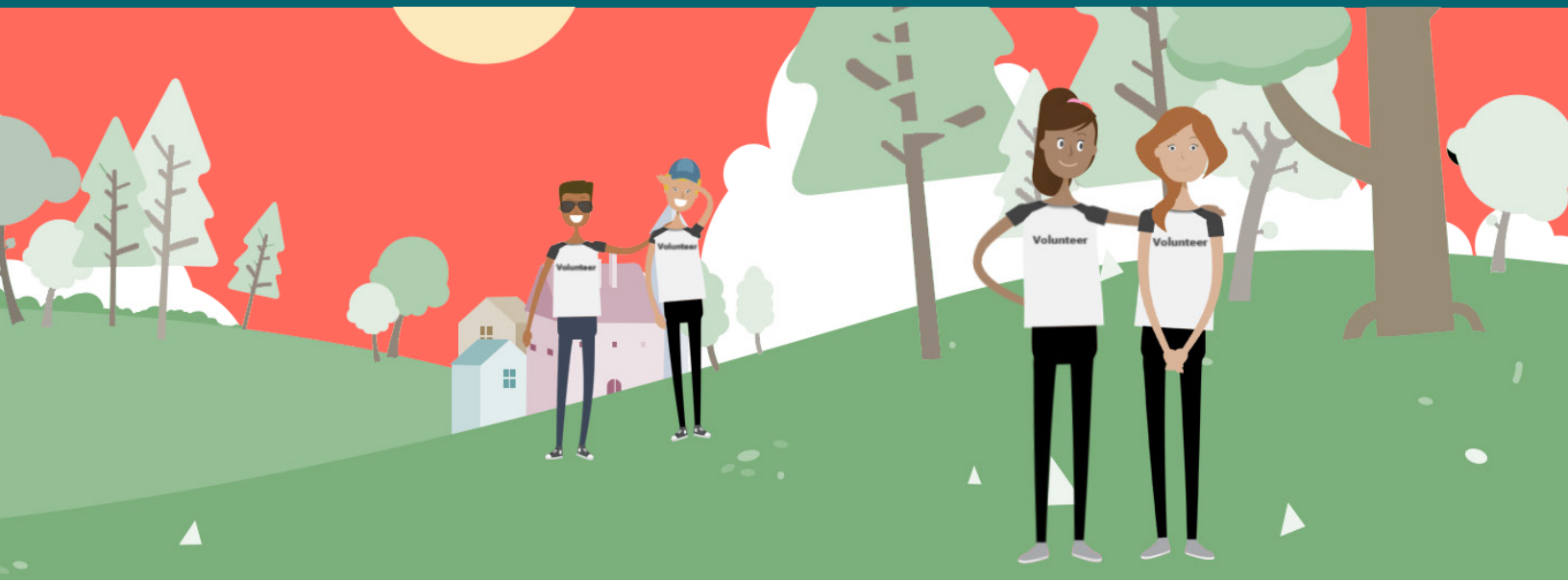
A piece of advice from a Millennial responder in the CTS survey encourages us to look past the differences among their generation:

"Talk with [us], instead of assuming we're just some monolithic group that can be attracted by slick marketing. I want to see that these things are real in people's lives, that they are connected to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and the history of His Bride, the Church."

Provide Opportunities for Millennials

In short, share what Christ has done in your life. Millennials want deep friendships, real conversations, valuable interactions with others, and a relationship with God. Don't worry about making marketing videos or investing hours in social media. We are all part of the Body of Christ because of what Christ did for us on the cross, and that has nothing to do with our worship preferences or technological savviness. Be open, and share your story of the new life that has been given to you.

Millennials want to be involved in their church. One Millennial in the CTS survey said that "opportunities to serve" the church are incredibly important to her, and that they're her way of "intentionally plugging in." Sometimes this "plugging in" is not so easy. Another Millennial said that one thing that frustrates Millennials in their church is that "leadership positions are almost never 'relinquished' to people in my generation. Therefore, we feel as though our voice (our membership in the church) is not as valuable." Yet another indicated that there is a "lack of 'mentoring' from older generations."



How does this disconnect affect Millennials' involvement? For many, it turns them off. Greg Witto again offers a similar thought and a solution:

"We [the church in general] do extremes—'this is what you have to do, go do it' or 'I'm going to do it all for you'—there's no mentoring. We say, 'This is what it's going to be,' so we eliminate ownership, or we go to the other extreme and don't give [young people] any direction or mentorship. The church has to have those

commitments like family. We need to produce a partnership and an understanding of family."

Millennials are an important facet of the Church at large, and excluding them from partnering in the sharing of the Gospel will only further drive them away. Offering them real opportunities to serve, interact, and work together to share the Gospel will engage Millennials far more than any snazzy marketing video.



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What Millennials Want

When asked in the CTS survey about the opportunities she desires in a church, a recent college graduate said the most important opportunity is a “small group setting or a community group, just something where I can get to know other people outside of Sunday morning. I want it to be beyond ‘we’re having this dinner’ or ‘we’re having this cookout once every three months.’” This desire for authentic relationships is at the heart of what Millennials want.

The screens, PowerPoint slides, and smartphones are a part of the Millennial generation, but they don’t provide what Millennials need. Millennials need authentic relationships, they need opportunities to serve, and most important, they need to hear the Gospel and receive the gifts of Christ.

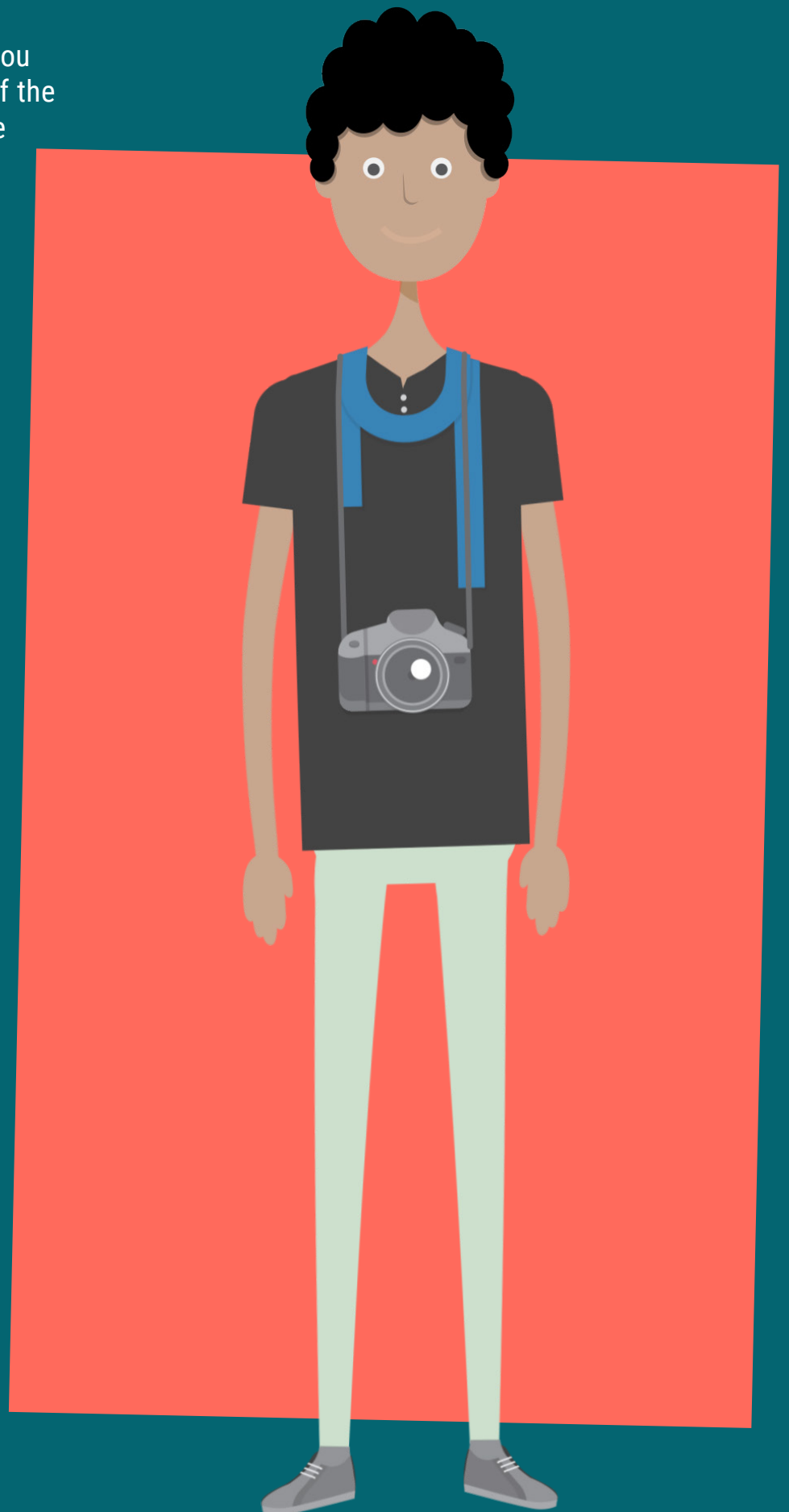


In the End

Hopefully, after reading this, you have a better understanding of the Millennial generation and have been given some insight into how to reach out to them in your own church. Of course, there's no foolproof plan to draw Millennials to your church, but reaching out to them and treating them as equals is a pretty good start.

Millennials aren't all superficial, don't all resent God, and aren't always obsessed with technology. Many do, however, see the value of technology, desire to help others, and seek a relationship with God, as well as with those around them. Some of their defining characteristics may seem negative to older generations, but Millennials are here now, and they're part of the Body of Christ.

Ultimately, the Church is built on Christ and His work through Word and Sacrament. Regardless of generational differences, Christ still promises to grow His Church and advance His kingdom through these means. Millennials, just like all previous generations, are recipients of that promise.





Concordia Technology Solutions

TECHNOLOGY & YOUR MINISTRY

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