

# 59 Percent of Millennials Raised in a Church Have Dropped Out—And They're Trying to Tell Us Why

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By [Sam Eaton](#)

Here's why Millennials are leaving the church: Millennials and church don't seem to mix. The truth is no one has asked me why millennials don't like church. Luckily, as a public school teacher, I am highly skilled at answering questions before they're asked. *It's a gift really.*

**From the depths of my heart, I want to love church.**

I want to be head-over-heels for church like the unshakable Ned Flanders.



I want to send global, sky-writing airplanes telling the life-change that happens beneath a steeple. I want to install a police microphone on top of my car and cruise the streets screaming to the masses about the magical Utopian community of believers waiting for them just down the street.

**I desperately want to feel this way about church, but I don't. Not even a**

**little bit. In fact, like much of my generation, I feel the complete opposite.**

Turns out I identify more with Maria from *The Sound of Music* staring out the abbey window, longing to be free.

It seems all-too-often our churches are actually causing more damage than good, and the statistics are showing a staggering number of millennials have taken note.

According to [this study](#) (and many others like it) church attendance and impressions of the church are the lowest in recent history, and most drastic among millennials described as 22- to 35-year-olds.

- Only 2 in 10 Americans under 30 believe attending a church is important or worthwhile (an all-time low).
- 59 percent of millennials raised in a church have dropped out.
- 35 percent of millennials have an *anti-church* stance, believing the church does more harm than good.
- Millennials are the least likely age group of anyone to attend church (by far).

As I sat in our large church's annual meeting last month, I looked around for anyone in my age bracket. It was a little like a Titanic search party...

## **IS ANYONE ALIVE OUT THERE? CAN ANYBODY HEAR ME?**

Tuning in and out of the 90-minute state-of-the-church address, I kept wondering to myself, *where are my people?* And then the scarier question, *why I am still here?*

A deep-seated dissatisfaction has been growing in me and, despite my greatest attempts to whack-a-mole it back down, no matter what I do it

continues to rise out of my wiry frame.

[To follow my publicly-chronicled church struggles, check out my other posts [The How Can I Help Project](#) and [50 Ways to Serve the Least of These.](#)]

Despite the steep drop-off in [millennials](#), most churches seem to be continuing on with business as usual. Sure, maybe they add a food truck here or a bowling night there, but no one seems to be reacting with any level of concern that matches these STAGGERING statistics.

## Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church

**Where is the task-force searching for the lost generation? Where is the introspective reflection necessary when 1/3 of a generation is ANTI-CHURCH?**

So, at the risk of being excommunicated, here is the metaphorical nailing of my own 12 theses to the wooden door of the American, Millennial-less Church.

### 1. Nobody's Listening to Us

Millennials value voice and receptivity above all else. When a church forges ahead without ever asking for our input we get the message loud and clear: **Nobody cares what we think.** Why then, should we blindly serve an institution that we cannot change or shape?

#### **Solution:**

- Create regular outlets (forums, surveys, meetings) to discover the needs of young adults both inside AND outside the church.
- Invite millennials to serve on leadership teams or advisory boards where

they can make a difference.

- Hire a young adults pastor who has the desire and skill-set to connect with [millennials](#).

## 2. We're Sick of Hearing About Values & Mission Statements

Sweet Moses people, give it a rest.

Of course, as an organization, it's important to be moving in the same direction, but that should be easier for Christians than anyone because we already have a leader to follow. Jesus was insanely clear about our purpose on earth:

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” ([Mark 12:30-31](#))

“Love God. Love Others.” *Task completed.*

Why does every church need its own mission statement anyway? Aren't we all one body of Christ, serving one God? What would happen if the entire American Church came together in our commonalities and used the same, concise mission statement?

### **Solution:**

- Stop wasting time on the religious mambo jambo and get back to the heart of the gospel. If you have to explain your mission and values to the church, it's overly-religious and much too complicated.
- We're not impressed with the hours you brag about spending behind closed doors wrestling with Christianese words on a paper. We're impressed with actions and service.

### 3. Helping the Poor Isn't a Priority

My heart is broken for how radically self-centered and utterly American our institution has become.

Let's clock the number of hours the average church attender [attendee] spends in "church-type" activities. Bible studies, meetings, groups, social functions, book clubs, planning meetings, talking about building community, discussing a new mission statement...

Now let's clock the number of hours spent serving the least of these. *Oooooo, awkward.*

If the numbers are not equal please check your Bible for better comprehension (or revisit the universal church mission statement stated above).

"If our lives do not reflect radical compassion for the poor, there is reason to wonder if Christ is in us at all." —[Radical](#), David Platt

#### Solutions:

- Stop creating more Bible studies and Christian activity. Community happens best in service with a shared purpose.
- Survey your members asking them what injustice or cause God has placed on their hearts. Then connect people who share similar passions. Create space for them to meet and brainstorm and then sit back and watch what God brings to life.
- Create group serve dates once a month where anyone can show up and make a difference (and, oh yeah, they'll also meet new people).

### 4. We're Tired of You Blaming the Culture

From Elvis' hips to rap music, from *Footloose* to "twerking," every older generation comes to the same conclusion: **The world is going to pot faster than the state of Colorado.** We're aware of the downfalls of the culture — believe it or not, we are actually living in it too.

Perhaps it's easier to focus on how terrible the world is out there than actually address the mess within.

### **Solution:**

- Put the end times rhetoric to rest and focus on real solutions and real impact in our immediate community.
- Explicitly teach us how our lives should differ from the culture. (If this teaching isn't happening in your life, check out the book [\*Weird: Because Normal Isn't Working\*](#) by Craig Groeschel)

## **5. The "You Can't Sit With Us" Affect**

There is this life-changing movie all humans must see, regardless of gender. The film is, of course, the 2004 classic *Mean Girls*.

In the film, the most popular girl in school forgets to wear pink on a Wednesday (a cardinal sin), to which Gretchen Weiners screams, "YOU CAN'T SIT WITH US!"

Today, my mom said to me, "Church has always felt exclusive and 'cliquey,' like high school." With sadness in her voice she continued, "and I've never been good at that game so I stopped playing."

The truth is, I share her experience. *As do thousands of others.*

Until the church finds a way to be **radically kinder and more compassionate** than the world at large, we tell outsiders they're better off

on their own. And the truth is, many times they are.

## **Solutions:**

- Create authentic communities with a shared purpose centered around service.
- Create and train a team of CONNECT people whose purpose is to seek out the outliers on Sunday mornings or during other events. Explicitly teach people these skills as they do not come naturally to most of the population.
- Stop placing blame on individuals who struggle to get connected. For some people, especially those that are shy or struggle with anxiety, putting yourself out there even just once might be an overwhelming task. We have to find ways to bridge that gap.

## **6. Distrust & Misallocation of Resources**

Over and over we've been told to "tithe" and give 10 percent of our incomes to the church, but where does that money actually go? Millennials, more than any other generation, **don't trust institutions**, for we have witnessed over and over how corrupt and self-serving they can be.

**We want pain-staking transparency. We want to see on the church homepage a document where we can track every dollar.**

Why should thousands of our hard-earned dollars go toward a mortgage on a multi-million dollar building that isn't being utilized to serve the community, or to pay for another celebratory bouncy castle when that same cash-money could provide food, clean water and shelter for someone in need?

## **Solution:**

- Go out of your way to make all financial records readily accessible. Earn

our trust so we can give with confidence.

- Create an environment of frugality.
- Move to zero-based budgeting where departments aren't allocated certain dollar amounts but are asked to justify each purchase.
- Challenge church staff to think about the opportunity cost. Could these dollars be used to better serve the kingdom?

## 7. We Want to Be Mentored, Not Preached At

Preaching just doesn't reach our generation like our parents and grandparents. See: *millennial church attendance*. We have millions of podcasts and Youtube videos of pastors the world over at our fingertips.

**For that reason, the currency of good preaching is at its lowest value in history.**

Millennials crave relationship, to have someone walking beside them through the muck. We are the generation with the highest ever percentage of fatherless homes.

We're looking for mentors who are authentically invested in our lives and our future. If we don't have real people who actually care about us, why not just listen to a sermon from [on] the couch (with the ecstasy of donuts and sweatpants)?

### **Solutions:**

- Create a database of adult mentors and young adults looking for someone to walk with them.
- Ask the older generation to be intentional with the millennials in your church.

## 8. We Want to Feel Valued

Churches tend to rely heavily on their young adults to serve. *You're single, what else do you have to do?* In fact, we're tapped incessantly to help out. And, at its worst extreme, spiritually manipulated with the cringe-worthy words "you're letting your church down."

Millennials are told by this world from the second we wake up to the second we take a sleeping pill that **we aren't good enough.**

**We desperately need the church to tell us we are enough, exactly the way we are. No conditions or expectations.**

We need a church that sees us and believes in us, that cheers us on and encourages us to chase our *big crazy dreams.*

Solutions:

- Return to point #1: listening.
- Go out of your way to thank the people who are giving so much of their life to the church.

## **9. We Want You to Talk to Us About Controversial Issues (Because No One Is)**

People in their 20s and 30s are making the biggest decisions of their entire lives: career, education, relationships, marriage, sex, finances, children, purpose, chemicals, body image.

We need someone consistently speaking truth into every single one of those areas.

No, I don't think a sermon-series on sex is appropriate for a sanctuary full of families, but we have to create a place where someone older is showing us a better way **because these topics are the teaching millennials are**

**starving for.** We don't like how the world is telling us to live, but we never hear from our church either.

### **Solutions:**

- Create real and relevant space for young adults to learn, grow and be vulnerable.
- Create an opportunity for young adults to find and connect with mentors.
- Create a young adults program that transitions high school youth through late adulthood rather than abandoning them in their time of greatest need.
- Intentionally train young adults in how to live a godly life instead of leaving them to fend for themselves.

## **10. The Public Perception**

It's time to focus on changing the public perception of the church within the community. The neighbors, the city and the people around our church buildings should be audibly thankful the congregation is part of their neighborhood. We should be serving the crap out of them.

We desperately need to be calling the schools and the city, knocking on doors, asking everyone around us how we can make their world better. When the public opinion shows 1/3 millennials are ANTI-CHURCH, we are outright failing at being the aroma of Christ.

### **Solutions:**

- Call the local government and schools to ask what their needs are. (See: Service Day from #3)
- Find ways to connect with neighbors within the community.

- Make your presence known and felt at city events.

## 11. Stop Talking About Us (Unless You're Actually Going to Do Something)

Words without follow-up are far worse than ignoring us completely. Despite the stereotypes about us, we are listening to phrases being spoken in our general direction. Lip service, however, doesn't cut it. We are scrutinizing every action that follows what you say (because we're sick of being ignored and listening to broken promises).

### Solutions:

- Stop speaking in abstract sound bites and make a tangible plan for how to reach millennials.
- If you want the respect of our generation, under-promise and over-deliver.

## 12. You're Failing to Adapt

Here's the bottom line, church — you aren't reaching millennials. Enough with the excuses and the blame; we need to accept reality and intentionally move toward this generation that is terrifyingly anti-church.

"The price of doing the same old thing is far higher than the price of change." —Bill Clinton

"The art of life is a constant readjustment to our surroundings." —Kakuzo Okakura

"Adapt or perish, now as ever, is nature's inexorable imperative." – H.G. Wells

### Solution:

- Look at the data and take a risk for goodness sake. We can't keep trying the same things and just wish that millennials magically wander through the door.
- Admit that you're out of your element with this generation and talk to the millennials you already have **before** they ask themselves, *what I am still doing here*.

You see, church leaders, our generation just isn't interested in playing church anymore, and there are real, possible solutions to filling our congregations with young adults. It's obvious you're not understanding the gravity of the problem at hand and aren't nearly as alarmed as you should be about the crossroads we're at.

You're complacent, irrelevant and approaching extinction. A smattering of mostly older people, doing mostly the same things they've always done, isn't going to turn to the tide.

Feel free to write to me off as just another angry, selfy-addicted millennial. Believe me, at this point I'm beyond used to being abandoned and ignored.

## **The truth is, church, it's your move.**

Decide if millennials actually matter to you and let us know. In the meantime, we'll be over here in our sweatpants listening to podcasts, serving the poor and agreeing with public opinion that perhaps church isn't as important or worthwhile as our parents have lead us to believe.

***About the Author:*** *Sam Eaton is a writer, speaker, and in-progress author who's in love with all things Jesus, laughter, adventure, hilarious dance parties and vulnerability. Sam is also the founder of [Recklessly Alive Ministries](#), a mental health and suicide-prevention ministry sprinting towards a world with zero deaths from suicide. Come hang out with him at*

[RecklesslyAlive.com](http://RecklesslyAlive.com).

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