

How do we reach the under 40s?

1) Source

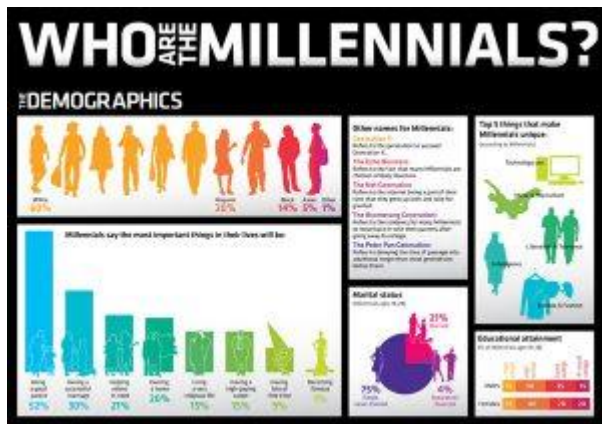
This is an extract of a [post](#) written by Ian Paul (an ordained minister in the Church of England) on his blog - <http://www.psephizo.com/> - on 12 October 2016. Ian writes regularly on issues related to leadership & mission, preaching and how Christians can engage with Scripture in a life-transforming way. His posts are insightful and challenging and well worth following and reading. In this particular post he was reporting on the recent diocesan conference at Swanwick.

2) Apologetics and the millennials

But the most moving and inspiring moments came in two addresses by [Amy Orr-Ewing](#), European Director of the RZIM Ministries which is focussed on evangelism, and a course director on the Oxford Centre for Christian Apologetics (OCCA). As a student at Oxford, she and then-fiance Francis 'Frog' Orr-Ewing [spent Easter taking Bibles to Afghanistan](#) as it was falling to the Taliban—so it is no surprise that she has a stock of remarkable stories of what she has seen God doing in various places. Having spent some years leading a church in Peckham, a deprived area of south London, they are now leading [Latimer Minster](#), a fresh expression based on a farm near Beaconsfield, in Oxford Diocese.

Amy began by offering a generally apologetic for apologetics—people are people, and people have questions to which they seek answers. She recalled a gang member in London who was exploring faith, but had questions about Christianity and science, and whether it was permissible to ask had questions. He was leaving one authoritarian system and did not want to end up swapping it for another one. (We have experienced something similar; a few weeks ago someone staggering out of a club at 4 am in the morning had questions about whether the God of the OT is the same as the God of the NT.)

But her main focus was on the two generations that the church is missing under 40—the millennials (or 'Generation Y'), born between 1975 and 1997, and those following after them, often called 'Generation Z'. (I wonder who will come after them?) The first thing worth noting is that there is a difference between these generations, and that is a symptom of our rapidly changing culture. It is not clear how or whether this will continue, or whether (as often happens) a period of rapid change plateaus out into a period of stability. A good number of these changes relate to the rise of the internet—and I suspect the internet is here to stay for the foreseeable future.



Millennials strongly value friendships and are technologically advanced. They are very aware of poverty and justice issues and statistically have the highest levels of volunteering of any age group. But they are also heavily indebted. They were told that they can fulfil their dreams (think X Factor and so on), and that anything is possible, and as a result are marked by a sense of entitlement—but they have discovered that many normal life expectations (around stable family, affordable home, and secure job) are out of their reach. As a result this group are often characterised by FOMO—the fear of missing out. (For more on this, see [Amy and Frog’s book on the millennials.](#))

Generation Z (or iGen) have some quite distinct characteristics. They have not yet reached the age of having home, career and family, so have a different focus in life. They are internet experts (having never known a time of life without the internet) and typically use multiple platforms simultaneously so that their lives are marked by constant communication. The big challenge for them to put their phone down even for part of the day (or night!). Rather would rather talk by messaging than talk to a person face to face, and as a result have strong written skills. They idolise YouTubers and other internet stars. The events of 9/11 form a big part of their youth and they experience the wider world as a frightening place in which the threat of terrorism dominates the news. They are very selective and are painstaking about researching what they buy.

Although these two groups are in many ways distinct, there are (said Amy) five challenges in reaching these two groups together for the church.

1. The church is almost nowhere on their radar.

This is in part because so few go to church, so this is a reinforcing tendency within the group. Fewer than 1% of young adults are in church in any given week; Amy has noticed that her children are the only churchgoers in their year. In 2014, the [Bible Society produced the Pass it On report](#), and it includes some alarming statistics about Bible knowledge. Fewer than 23% children heard of Noah’s Ark—rather striking when we assume

more or less universal knowledge of key biblical narratives as part of our national understanding. Many larger, city centre churches have thriving student ministries—but these often gather together those who grew up in church, which means they are not always effective at reaching others.

How do we get on their radar? Amy highlighted the importance of having an attractive physical space for our church meetings, which is accessible and welcoming. She also highlighted the importance of being church when not gathered—the vital understanding of ‘every member ministry’ applying to [all church members in their daily occupations](#). But she also highlighted the importance of our online spaces. Many young people won’t go somewhere without checking that place’s web presence and reading reviews. Our church websites need to be clear, up to date, and welcoming. And we need to be on Facebook because this is now the number 1 source that is driving people to web sites, having this year overtaken the use of Google searches.

(I would add here two further things: Messy Church; and the Church of England’s work in schools. These statistics show how important schools work is—but also raises questions about how effective this work has been so far.)

2. The material struggle to make ends meet is a huge crushing reality.

Amy told stories about the real-life situations of people with demanding lives and massive debt—and that as a result, many of this generation do not have the leisure time that was forecast. They will not easily come to church unless there is a clear benefit to them to do so. They have a sense of trying to rebuild the social structures which baby boomers tore up.

And that means that they won’t come unless we offer things that are going to materially help—enrichment in their lives, relationships, a sense of family, a place that they can call home, and a sense of security and belonging.

3. Anxiety

Amy talked about the epic proportions of fear that mark these generations as they grow up. In 2013, there were 82 million cases of anxiety recorded—and we have a National Health Service which is struggling to cope with the dramatic rise in cases of mental health issues.. Women are twice as likely as men to suffer from anxiety, and there is a noticeable increase in self harm amongst women. As is often the case, it is the poor and disadvantaged disproportionately affected because they have fewer resources to draw on which enable them to cope. The perennial question is: Is there more to life?

There is also an increase in suicide amongst men in Britain. Amy told the story of a policewoman in London, who said that of last seven deaths she had been called to, every single one was a suicide.

This means that we must have empathy as a primary quality, and find creative ways in the church to work with those who are struggling. It occurred to me in listening to all this that, contrary to the story we are often presented with, this generation aren't staying away because they are happy and have everything that life could offer—quite the opposite.

4. Intellectual challenge

These generations have been fed a constant media diet that belief in God is unwarranted and that the evidence isn't there. Religion or Christianity is for weak people and church is controlling and manipulative. Church is at best a club getting on with its own agenda, and at worst a place of child abuse and power abuse. So Amy issued the challenge: Can we be present in their space with interesting and thought-provoking pieces which challenge that narrative?

This is a whole area of exploration in its own right, and Amy pointed us to the [youth apologetics site Reboot](#). We need to be equipping our congregations to think about their faith.

5. Challenge of the closed loop of church.

Many of our church communities are socially closed, with people meeting who know each other, share a subculture, and know what to expect when they come—they understand all the unwritten rules and liturgies that we make use of from week to week. It is hard to overestimate how massive a step it is for most people to come into church where people are very different. This is the social equivalent of the 'echo chamber' effect of the internet; when we mostly associate with people who agree with us, it is a shock when we discover that other people think quite differently—which is why so many Remain voters were amazed at the Brexit vote.

Again, we need here to recapture the connective power of the laity. Where we go the church goes. And we need to build a church family which is really representative of our locality—and then the church will often be the only place in the community where all the different people meet together.'

So there are the challenges, and there are some answers. I was very conscious that this kind of exploration can be empowering and enabling for those who like these big pictures—but can also be daunting and disabling for those who lack resources and cannot see the way forward, and discussion afterwards on our table highlighted these different reactions. It is also possible that dramatic stories of what God has done can build faith—but can also function to establish a large gulf between what God appears to do elsewhere and what I see him do in my life, in my church, in my community. It was to Amy's immense credit that

people generally responded in the first way and not the second, and found her immensely engaging and building of faith.



But the main thing I was left with was Amy's sense of passion about seeing God at work, and her confidence both in what God can do and the credibility of Christian faith. We were left in no doubt that her observations were not techniques or strategies that could be employed on their own, but were answers to the challenges facing us once we were committed and determined to share good news, and once we had immersed ourselves and our situation in prayer as we desired to see God at work in power. If we are to reach these generations, it is the passion and faith that we are going to need as much as any technique or strategy. It is here that we really need renewal and reform.