

THE CHURCH OF THE NAZARENE: A MILLENNIAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

My name is Danny. And I'm a Millennial. Have you ever had this feeling like people were talking about you or something you've done rather than talking with you? At times, this sensation is something shared by a generation of young pastors. In conversations throughout North America it became apparent that everyone was talking ABOUT whis this Millennial generation is without consulting us on the matter. Countless books, articles, sermons, and TED Talks were published trying to figure out what to do with those Millennials (a term by and large rejected by Millennials).

It was with this realization that a survey was put together in attempt to give Millennials a voice in the overwhelming conversation about them. This survey was compiled by a group of Millennial clergy for Millennial clergy. The survey was submitted to multiple Non-Millennial clergy and researchers for review and clarity. Dr. Mark Quanstrom (Dean of the School of Theology and Christian Ministry at ONU) was considered for theological review. Dr. Ron Benefiel (Former President of NTS) was considered for theological and sociological review. Dan Copp (Clergy Development at the GMC) reviewed the survey and pushed it through to the research arm where Rich Houseal (Research Services at GMC) provided further feedback and clarification. The drive behind the entire project was to offer Millennials an appropriate space to speak their voice in a safe and significant manner. During this essay the word "we" will be used often not because I hold every position presented, but as a voice for my peers.

The 61 question survey, distributed to Nazarene pastors born after 1980 with at least a district license, was split into 5 sections; Introduction, Theological Survey, Polity Survey, Leadership Questions, and Miscellaneous Questions. (For a full list of questions go to dquanstrom.wordpress.com.) This essay will mostly address the three main sections addressing theology, polity, and leadership. This essay will be separated into two major subsections; "The Good News;" things some might find surprisingly encouraging and "Things to be Considered;" issues and concerns particular (though maybe not limited) to Millennial pastors in the Church of the Nazarene.

If there is one sweeping generalization that can be made about Millennials it's that you can't make sweeping generalizations about Millennials. Recognizing this, the survey seeks to find trends among Millennial Nazarene clergy. One sweeping generalization often made about Millennials is that we are the "authenticity" generation. While there is truth to this, what this survey has shown is that we are not merely a generation of authenticity, we are a teleological generation; we're a generation of evident and transparent purpose! The purpose of this survey and this essay is to encourage the reader about Millennial clergy and to provide a space for

rich and honest dialog within the Church of the Nazarene about our young pastors and their future in the denomination.

The Good News

There is more good news regarding Millennial Nazarene clergy than not. When this data was presented at M15 the seminar was titled, “Strength for Today, Bright Hope for Tomorrow” because the Millennial generation of pastors should bring encouragement and hope to the denomination. The two greatest reasons to be encouraged about Millennial clergy are that Millennials are educated and that we love Nazarene theology.

The Millennial generation is the most educated cohort of Nazarene clergy in the past four generations. The question asked clergy their highest level of formal theological education. Of those holding at least a district license born after 1980, 37% have completed a graduate degree in theological education. This number includes those who have either started or begun doctoral work. When you consider those who have started their master’s, nearly two-thirds (60%) of Millennial pastors have at least started their master’s while 86% have completed a bachelor’s degree in formal theological education.

When this number is compared to Non-Millennials (Gen Xers, Boomers, and Builders were all surveyed) it might be expected that older generations would have higher levels of education. And we do see this with those who have completed their master’s, 52%. This also includes those who have begun or completed doctoral work. This isn’t surprising. Those who have been in the church longer would be expected to be more educated. Upon further analyses, however, the weight of these numbers begins to shift.

When you look at the percentages of Millennials and Non-Millennials who have at least started a Master’s degree, both are virtually the same at 59% and some change. At the undergraduate level Millennials surpass Non-Millennials. As was mentioned, 86% percent of Millennials have a completed bachelor’s degree in theology or ministry compared to 75% of Non-Millennials. The second highest percentage for Non-Millennials for the highest level of formal theological education was “Ordination Course of Study” (OCS) at 20%. For Millennials, less than 5% (4.41) have the OCS as their highest level of theological education. The implications of this will be discussed later.

Not surprisingly, the older generations have more completed degrees, but the numbers reveal that a greater percentage of Millennials have begun their formal theological education. One-fifth on Non-Millennial clergy do not have a theological degree while nearly every Millennial pastor has pursued or is pursuing theological degrees. Consider our stage in life, we are more inclined to finish a master’s degree.

This is very good news for the Church of the Nazarene! A more educated generation of clergy will help keep our tradition strong theologically. Considering the invasion of Fundamentalist theology in the denomination during the mid to late 20th century a more educated generation may be the very thing the denomination needs. Denominational leaders, pastors, and congregations should not fear a more educated generation of pastors but should look forward to where our tribe will go with a generation of clergy who have committed to growing in the “grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” (2 Peter 3:18)

It might surprise some, but we love Nazarene theology. We truly do! There are disparities, but it seems to Millennials that many believe we want to throw out the historic theology of the denomination. This is by no means the case. In fact, 84% of Millennials stated that they are in full agreement with the Articles of Faith of the Manual of the Church of the Nazarene. Ninety-two percent of Non-Millennials said the same. Millennials also believe there is “coherence among Nazarene theology.” Seventy-Nine percent of Millennials either agree or strongly agree with this while 84% of Non-Millennials say the same. These two statistics speak of the general agreement among Millennial clergy, while the following will address more specific data.

We believe in Holiness. According to the survey, 69% of Millennials either agree or strongly agree with “how the Manual discusses the doctrine of entire sanctification.” Some might be surprised that the majority of Millennials are in agreement, but we do believe in holiness. Non-Millennials have a higher percentage who said the same; 83%.

This large disparity should not be overlooked. That 14% more Non-Millennials agree or strongly agree with how the manual discusses entire sanctification may cause concern. When the comments are considered, though, we see that Millennial clergy don’t disagree with the theology of holiness as much as the particular wording of the article. Most of the comments on this question talked about desiring more up-to-date language that reflects the 21st century.

Many recognized the presence of the word “instantaneously” and the omission of the word “process.” Many mentioned that the article feels “convoluted” considering the Manual gives one sentence to the articles “The Holy Spirit” and “The Holy Scriptures,” while Article X is 8 paragraphs long. When the comments are considered, it is this author’s opinion that more than 69% of Millennials agree with the “essence” of the article but desire a re-contextualized and clarified article.

The perennial question about “instantaneous” or “process” surfaces as over 20% more Non-Millennials say they agree that “sanctification happens immediately upon entire consecration.” Less than 30% of Millennials say they agree while more than 50% of Non-Millennials agree. This disparity is recognized in the question about a “common and consistent understanding of entire sanctification among Nazarene clergy.” Only 25% of Non-Millennials agree that there is a consistent understanding of sanctification across the denomination while only 16% of Millennials agree. An overwhelming majority of all

Nazarene clergy agree Nazarene pastors do not agree on what sanctification actually is or does.

The comments were filled with many young clergy voicing apprehension about how to address this question in the licensing and ordination process. They mention varied experiences on various districts depending on who is sitting in the room. Many don't feel they can speak candidly about sanctification during the licensing and ordination process.

All of this indicates that Millennial clergy are not only engaged, but deeply care about holiness! We care how holiness is discussed and lived out. We love Holiness.

We have a high regard for eschatology. More regard, in fact, than Non-Millennials. Question 23 stated, "I believe eschatology is an essential Christian doctrine, necessary to our understanding of soteriology and ecclesiology." Seventy-six percent of Millennials either agreed or strongly agreed with 65% of Non-Millennials saying the same. That 11% more clergy born after 1980 have a higher regard for eschatology than those born before 1980 is alone a significant statistic, but this information becomes important when you break down the particular eschatological beliefs.

Question 24 asked which eschatological paradigm clergy would best identify with; dispensational premillennialism, classic premillennialism, postmillennialism, amillennialism, or "I'm not sure." For Millennials, 51% said, "I'm not sure." No other category came close. For Non-Millennials, 43% said, "I'm not sure" with the second option having over a 20% disparity. Most of the comments in both surveys said things like, "I reject the idea of a literal 1,000 years." These would most likely be categorized as "amillennial." Taken these two responses together roughly 80% of Millennials identified with amillennialism with 67% of Non-Millennials confirming the same. Many consider the historic Nazarene eschatology to be postmillennialism, but only 11% of Millennials chose this while only 5% of Non-Millennials did the same.

These numbers start to get very interesting when premillennialism is considered. 6.5% of Millennials would say they believe in classic premillennialism while 19% of Non-Millennials believe in classic premillennialism. With dispensational premillennialism, the only category that allows for a "Rapture," 2.5% of Millennials agree and 9% of Non-Millennials agree. Nearly 1 in 10 pastors born before 1980 believe in the Rapture, but when you pull out all of those without a theological degree, those whose only education is the course of study, this number doubles. Twenty percent of pastors born before 1980 who have only completed the course of study believe in a Rapture eschatology!

This is placed within the "Good news" portion because Millennials, pursuing more education, do not believe that eschatological teaching is secondary. We believe eschatology is an integral part of our theological formation. That which we are saved to or from has bearing on our salvation today and how we live as the church today. This is also good news because among Millennial pastors virtually none believe in Rapture theology.

According to a verbal report by Dr. Carla Sunberg at ONU's PALCON, there is a lower percentage of female clergy in the Church of the Nazarene today than there was in 1930.

Barely half of Millennial clergy believe the denomination supports female clergy (52%). When you look at just the women polled the percentage drops to 48%. The church must recognize that less than half of female Millennial clergy feel supported by their denomination.

The good news with all of this is how Millennials view female pastors. Ninety-Five percent of Millennial pastors agree with the denomination's position that women have all the gifts and graces to pastor at any and every level. For Non-Millennial pastors, this number is 87%. Only 3% of Millennial pastors disagree (with less than 1% strongly disagreeing) while 9% of Non-Millennials disagree. That nearly 1 in 10 pastors born before 1980 don't agree with the historic position regarding female clergy is a serious issue. Millennials, however, have a much more encouraging position. The good news is not just that 95% agree with the position, but that 79% strongly agree with it! This was the highest percentage of "Strongly Agree" anywhere in the survey.

Millennials also highly value creation care. This is one place where Millennials and Non-Millennials look very similar. Millennials agree at a level of 93% with Non-Millennials at 94%. Only 3% of Millennials and 2% of Non-Millennials disagree. Millennial pastors do not disagree with the position of the manual, though it was mentioned many times that this is not practiced well. We agree with the position, but many said that they think it needs to be stronger and have more practical implications.

Perhaps one of the most shocking statistics to Non-Millennials is in regard to the political leaning of Millennial clergy. The question on the survey was, "Christians ought to have a particular political position" with the response options being, "No," "Yes Liberal," "Yes Conservative," "Yes Moderate," or "Other." Many Non-Millennials were asked how they thought Millennials would answer this question and almost all of them believed that Millennials would have a much higher percentage that said Christians ought to be liberal. The results of the survey indicate that 0% of Millennial clergy believe Christians ought to have a liberal political perspective. That is, not one single Millennial pastor chose "Yes Liberal."

The majority of responses were "No" (at 46%) and "Other" (at 28%). Those in the "other" category had comments resembling statements like "Kingdom centered" or a "Biblical position." Nearly three quarters of Millennials are unwilling to say that Christians ought to align themselves with one particular political position or the other. This reveals that Millennials are more concerned with allegiance to the Kingdom of God than any other political party or organization.

The political statistics are particularly significant in their connection with how Millennials view the church. Should there be any concern about Millennials stepping into positions of leadership in the church, let this final addition to "The Good News" be an encouragement. Millennials love the church! In fact, Millennials have a higher ecclesiology than Non-Millennials. The question on the survey was "I believe that participation in the local church is necessary for salvation" with 40% of Millennials agreeing. Compare that to Non-Millennials at 26%! Millennials also disagree at 40% with Non-Millennials disagreeing at 54%. Some surveyed mentioned issues with the word "necessary." Perhaps "essential"

would have been a better word than “necessary” but that 14% more Millennials agreed that the church is “necessary” for salvation reveals the high regard we have for the church! In connection with the political question, we can discern that Millennial pastors see the church as the greatest hope on earth.

The church of the Nazarene will be in good hands in the future as Millennial pastors continue to fill pulpits and other positions of leadership. Millennial pastors are educated and are continuing their education. We also love Nazarene theology. We believe in holiness, we believe eschatology is integral to our theological formation, we believe women are not only capable, but should be clergy, we believe in creation care, and we absolutely love the church! When Millennials leave the Church of the Nazarene it is almost never because of our theology. Unfortunately, though, many have left or are leaving. The next section will address the issues that this teleological generation desires to address.

Things to be Considered

Some of these issues for consideration may be considered “Hot Button,” but perhaps these are so hot because they warrant much discussion. The following topics were chosen for this section for two reasons: first, they indicate some of the areas where Millennial clergy appear to deviate from Non-Millennial clergy, and second, these are the areas where Millennials are desiring serious and safe conversation.

The first issue revealed by the survey is that of debt. Millennials have exponentially more school debt than previous generations. The cost of education and living have continued to climb while salaries have not. Considering ministerial salaries, student debt can be crippling. Of Millennial clergy surveyed, 73% are concerned about balancing their school debt with the current or expected ministerial salary. Only 17% said that their school debt is not concerning. That less than 1 in 5 Millennial pastors can say they’re not concerned about their debt indicated that we need to be having some hard conversations about how to either make education more affordable for clergy, or how to support those who struggle to serve the church because of their debt. Many clergy begin their ministry with an automatic salary cut by a few thousand dollars.

The issue of debt must be considered because school debt isn’t simply hurting clergy, it is hurting our churches. Our churches are stuck trying to compensate for their young pastor’s debt in one of two ways; financially or pastorally. It is nearly impossible for smaller churches (where Millennials become lead pastors) to compensate financially for school debt. Budgeting and raising an extra few thousand dollars a year is a burden most of our churches simply can’t bear. If they can’t compensate financially they compensate pastorally. Many churches that desire a full time pastor cannot afford to pay young pastors a livable wage, in large part because of that pastor’s school debt.

Millennials, by and large, reject systematized theology. We have been taught and have formulated a theology that is much more integrated. This is evident in the data already shared about ecclesiology and eschatology. We believe these particular schools of thought have implications on one another. What we believe about eschatology says something

about what we believe about salvation, which influences how we live as the church etc. Nearly 70% of Millennial clergy indicated that fundamentalism in the Church of the Nazarene is concerning. With this, it seems to many that we may be trying to fit a Wesleyan theology into a fundamentalist paradigm. Many Nazarene leaders are attempting to put forth alternatives to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral¹ and Millennials, with a less segmented or bifurcated theology, want to see deep conversations taking place about our formal theology. (Especially considering the lack of consistency regarding sanctification.) Many Millennials have indicated how the Wesleyan Quadrilateral does not mention Christ, who is so obviously the foundation of our faith. We desire to see a theological paradigm consistent with our Wesleyan heritage.

Perhaps some may have expected this, but the survey indicates that Millennials want to be able to discuss human sexuality. Of Millennials, 73% said that they agree with the Manual's position on human sexuality with 19% disagreeing. Of Non-Millennials, 93% agree and only 5% disagree. The biggest issue taken with the denomination's position is in regards to homosexuality. Many of these comments articulate a belief that the language of the article is dangerous. It isn't so much that Millennials desire to promote gay marriage or homosexual relationships, it is that the only place the manual mentions the "wrath of God" is in reference to homosexuality. Millennials would like to have conversations about how we can have more charitable, gracious, and consistent language regarding our understanding of human sexuality, in general, and homosexuality, in particular. Many comments questioned why the "wrath of God" doesn't appear within other articles.

Lastly, the survey indicated Millennials desire to discuss our position of abstaining from alcohol. Of those polled, 33% of Millennial clergy said that they agree with the Nazarene stance of total abstinence. Fifty Percent disagree with the position, and 17% neither agree nor disagree. The ratios are virtually reversed with Non-Millennial clergy; 54% agree, 29% disagree, and 17% neither agree nor disagree. At M15, the seminar on Alcohol was overflowing with young clergy and laity who were largely hoping for a challenging dialog, yet many left feeling let down. In that seminar, and rightfully so, the issue of justice was brought up in relationship to alcohol. The historic position of the Church of the Nazarene is abstaining from alcohol "for the sake of the other;" it's a justice issue.

Millennial clergy do not want to challenge the aspect of justice, but many commented on how it seems that we only discuss justice when it comes to supporting established positions. That is, we use justice as a means of justifying our position rather than having our ethic flow out of a sense of justice. Millennials believe that if justice were the primary driving force in the denomination it would shape more of our practices than this issue. Many of the comments in the question on alcohol followed this sentiment "I practice the position, but do not fully agree with it for one reason or another."

These particular topics are brought up to indicate what Millennial clergy believe about the Church of the Nazarene. They have not been presented in order to take one side on an issue or another, but to indicate that our denomination needs a safe space for honest and,

¹ See T. A. Noble's "Holy Trinity, Holy People" or William Abraham's "Canonical Theism."

potentially, difficult conversations. Millennials want to be able to ask how our mission drives our ethic or whether our ethic is driving our mission. Where do we begin: with practices or with mission? And we want to know that we can ask hard questions without losing our credentials.

Is There Room?

This is the question many Millennials find themselves asking. Millennial clergy do not desire to leave the denomination, but many are curious if the denomination has a place for them. Far too many female pastors are serving outside of the Church of the Nazarene because they believe this question has already been answered for them. If the Church of the Nazarene wants to know what Millennials believe about theology and polity, if she wants Millennials to know there is room, it has to be shown that the climate is safe for honest dialog. Because of situations at Nazarene Universities this last year, Millennial clergy feel that the denomination is not safe for these conversations. In truth, the particular circumstances regarding decisions at multiple Nazarene institutions are rather inconsequential because it feels to many Millennials that if you ask hard questions or push people theologically you will have a target on your back. This is not stated as a defense of one position or another, but to recognize how these situations are impacting young clergy.

To many Millennial clergy it seems that you can be as conservative as you want, even outside of Nazarene theology and polity (see those who do not affirm female clergy), and have a place at the table. But if you ask hard questions at the other end of the spectrum, even if you're within Nazarene orthodoxy (such as contentious objection), many Millennials believe you would have a target on your back.

In various places Alan Hirsh has talked about making space for mavericks.² He talks about how John Wesley was a maverick within the Anglican Church. The Anglican Church did not have room for him. It wasn't that Wesley pursued leaving the institution as much as the institution left him. Roughly 110 years later, within Wesley's followers' institution (Methodism), another maverick appeared. The denomination did not know what to do with Phineas Bresee. It wasn't that Bresee sought to leave the Methodist church as much as the Methodist church left him.

There may be some mavericks among the Millennial Nazarenes. Roughly 110 years from the last great maverick of our lineage we must ask ourselves if there is room for another maverick within the organization or will we perpetuate our lineage? Mavericks help bring about great revivals and we want to know if there will be room for our mavericks, or will we see this revival outside of our walls?

The results of this survey indicate that Millennial clergy want to engage in rich, meaningful, teleological dialog. Not in order to be obstinate, but out of deep love. After all, we love the church. We truly do.

² <https://vimeo.com/114696108>