What’s normal in the debate over millennials and the church is to have a lot of conversation…and little action. But the conversation, at least, is a place to start. Many in the church are sincerely trying to figure out the quandary of young adults missing from the church.

Some have a burden for the generation. Others are simply trying to stave off an inevitable slide into aging obscurity. Whatever the reason, churches everywhere are beginning to take seriously the lack of millennial engagement in the American church.

And more often than not, the first goal is to find the simplest solution for the problem of missing millennials. But millennials leaving the church is a complex issue that has no simple solution. It’s incredibly difficult for any church to walk away feeling that they’ve successfully solved the problem.

### **But we keep trying.**

Time after time we bought some pizza, put an announcement in the bulletin, and wondered why it didn’t work. We invited young adults to small groups. We sang “The Stand” in the worship service. Still nothing. Heck, we even started tweeting and updated our website! After enough trial and error, we come to the exceptionally normal conclusion about millennials and their disengagement from the church: it’s their fault and they need to fix it.

### **But what if it’s not their fault?**

Perhaps they aren’t the worst generation ever. It’s more likely that we blame the millennials because we’re giving up too early. A few times around the millennial merry-go-round isn’t quite enough. Maybe our failing attempts have been aimed at the wrong target and, maybe the church is actually making some mistakes. Maybe we, in the church, can take some ownership for the problem of missing millennials and start to explore how we might be going about the solution the wrong way.

THE SIX MISTAKES CHURCHES MAKE WITH MILLENNIALS

Making mistakes with millennials is a normal part of uncovering how to reach them, but of all those mistakes, I think there are six that are the most troubling and the most damaging in our attempt to reach them. There certainly are more mistakes out there, but these are systematic flaws in our overall approach to young adults and college students today.

**Mistake #1 – Speaking the Wrong Language**

I’ve been in a lot of conversations with older adults (i.e. people like me) who think they know the problem and they often start in one of two places. They either start with idea that “When I was 22, this is what I wanted,” or they begin with, “Young adults today just want…”

Both approaches guarantee that you’re about to enter the millennial conversation using the wrong language because it assumes we are the experts on the needs, wants and desires of millennials.

**We are not.**

First of all, you might have been 22 once, but you were never feelin’ 22 like T-swift was. The cultural landscape that young adults are exploring today is completely different from any generation that’s come before. Today’s young adults have a world with different technology, social media, and global awareness. Those of us who went through adolescence and young adulthood in previous generations have precious few handles to actually grasp what it’s like to be a millennial. Assuming they are “just like I was at their age” sets us up for a cascade of failures when we interact with millennials.

Secondly, no millennial “just” wants anything. The needs and desires of this generation are complex, complicated and often conflicted. It’s a generation that’s seemingly self-centered and overly altruistic at the same time.  They want to work hard and they want to do it on their own schedule. There is no simple, singular motivation for the millennial generation. They defy categorization and classification (do we call them Generation Y? Boomerang generation? Generation iY? Internet Generation?), and they require a multi-faceted approach to understanding them. It’s one of the reasons everyone is talking about them these days.

Further complicating this mistake is the fact that, not only do we not understand millennials, but many of us might not even know any at all. To start without a frame of relational connection to this generation means that we will continue to create ministry that will miss the mark for the next generation.

**Mistake #2 – Changing the Worship Style**

It’s easy to try and solve the millennial crisis in our churches by pointing to the debate over what’s relevant to a twenty-something in worship. But it’s also a terrible place to start when trying to figure out the best way to reach millennials.

Recently, I overheard a conversation between two twenty-somethings that intrigued me.  They had just experienced a “rock and roll worship set” in their normally ‘’blended” worship experience. These men were the same age. They had kids the same age. They probably worked similar jobs. Demographically speaking, they were the same.

As they left that unique service, one turned to the other and said, “I’ve been looking for something like that for a long time. That was amazing!”  The other raised his eyebrows in surprise and said, “Are you kidding? I hated every minute and couldn’t wait for it to be over!”

At that moment, I realized how pointless the “relevant” conversation was with millennials. Despite this obvious reality, the most consistent go-to strategy for reaching young adults is to “update” the worship experience by changing the worship style.

I think the debate over worship style is a red herring when it comes to the millennial generation. The more we focus on figuring out the magic stylistic formula for our Sunday service, the more we’ll miss the point of what the millennials are actually asking for. It also might cause you a great amount of pain – just ask any worship leader that’s been through the debate of “getting younger.”

Believe it or not, millennials are looking to engage in all kinds of worship experiences. High church, low church, weird church–you can find millennials drawn to all kinds of worship styles and expressions. Turning into rock band church is no guarantee of making any connection with millennials. And I’m not saying you shouldn’t change your worship style. It might be the step you need to make. I’m just saying, don’t do it because you assume that’s what will attract and retain millennials. Millennials are asking for much more from your church than what happens on your stage on a Sunday morning

**Mistake #3 – Asking the Youth Director to Do It**

One of the most common mistakes churches make in deciding to focus on millennials is to walk down the hall and tack “and young adults” to the Youth Director’s job description. It seems to make sense; you already have a staff person who has the most relationships with anyone in your church under 30. They are probably even a millennial themselves. They have the knowledge, they have the relationships, they already run a great program. Problem solved, right?

Probably not. What you have is a recipe for an underperforming ministry to millennials and a burned-out youth worker.

Youth workers are great people. They have the opportunity to run great ministries with teenagers.

**But youth ministry is not the same thing as young adult ministry.**

Assuming that the same strategies that work with teenagers will work with millennials is a surefire way to undersell your ministry to young adults. Even more, it’s a quick way to under-resource a ministry that deserves a concerted strategy for its success. If you want to do ministry “on the cheap,” go ahead and start with the youth worker. If you want to make a long-lasting ministry with young adults, you’ll need to start someplace else.

The problem of missing millennials in the church is a complex one. I’m afraid we often focus on finding simple solutions that will bring them back or somehow launch our churches into a new direction. It doesn’t work like that. Millennials don’t work like that. To get at this issue it’ll take us looking at much more complex solutions and will start with avoiding some of the most common mistakes we are already making.

#### I’ll bring you Mistakes #4-6 next week [see Part 2], but what do you think? Are you in the midst of making these mistakes?  Would you disagree that these are even mistakes?