Generating Hope By Teaching The Millennial Generation Synchronously In Church And Academy

Abstract

As one who teaches concurrently and consistently in the congregational setting and the academic context I am extremely engaged in generating hope for future generations. It is my contention that meeting the needs of a globalized community begins by recognizing the imperative to understand teaching and specifically theological education as critical to generating hope in the world today and into the future. I further contend that this teaching imperative is best seen when viewed from the lenses of congregations and the academy simultaneously and is guided by theology.

My question is how is the millennial generation reshaping both the academy and the church? I think more research is needed in combining the questions that arise from the impact of the millennial generation in the church and the academy. The Apostle Paul proclaims in 1st Corinthians that there is faith, hope and love and the greatest of these is love. I join in with Diana Butler Bass by suggesting that hope is the primary virtue of vital Christian community. In my mind hope is vital to any community. I find hope in teaching in both the church and the academy that reaches across generations and cultures. I see teaching the millennial generation as a place of many challenges, but is where hope lies for the future of education.

The Paper

Initially, in this paper I will argue that the future of teaching is strongly connected to an analysis of the millennial generation in a postmodern culture. Secondly, this paper argues that the millennial generation challenges teachers to pay close attention to critical pedagogies. This is true for both the church and the academy. I further argue in this paper the need for critical pedagogy in our schools and in our congregations. Finally, I make my argument by analyzing some insights about teaching in a postmodern culture that has impact on and implications for the approaches of teaching in the future both in the congregation and in the academy.

My question is how is the millennial generation reshaping both the academy and the church? I think more research is needed in combining the questions that arise from the impact of the millennial generation in the church and the academy. This paper analyzes literature written by a variety of authors with various experiences. My literature review pays special attention to authors who bring a business and/or educational perspective to understanding the millennial generation. I am also interested in hearing the comments of social scientists and I am particularly driven to delve more into brain research. I will continue literature research of postmodernity, critical pedagogy, and brain research as I seek to argue the need for addressing various methodological factors of teaching and as I look at the future of teaching in a global community based on a postmodern culture.

In this paper I address historical research and give great attention to the community of
practice. As chief executive officer of Educational ministry in the Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, I have numerous opportunities to teach as a part of a community of faith and because I serve the seminary I have a plethora of times to engage that practice of teaching in the academy. It is a unique advantage to virtually have one foot in the church and one foot in the academy synchronously. It is out of this experience that I pay close attention to four millennials. One of the individuals I have taught in the church and the academy. I will refer to him as John. The others are three females that I have taught in the church. I will refer them as Sally, Jane, and Sue.

Simultaneously, I have had opportunities to research and teach in an academy and use this research to teach in a faith community. My observation in both contexts of church and academy is the absence of the millennial generation. It is because of this experience I am motivated to prepare this paper.

I want to be quick to point out in this paper that I am not interested or motivated in exploring why the millennial generation is missing, but through research about how to reach the millennial generation, one becomes informed about teaching and learning issues regarding the millennial generation. However, it is important to acknowledge and to have some insight into why this generation is missing in order to recognize the need for discontinuity. I will address the absenteeism of millennials later in the paper.

Furthermore, I intend to identify some worldviews, preferences, and expectations of the millennial generation and then relate those findings to teaching and learning issues. I think my research will enable me to gain insight into traits, values and needs of the millennial generation. It will also help me identify cultural trends and interpersonal dynamics that shape the needs and expectations of the millennial generation.

Why is this research important? Lovett Weems in his book Leading Ideas To Reach Young Adults writes, “the future of every denomination and virtually every congregation in the United States depends on their ability to reach more people, younger people, and more diverse people.”¹ I think this statement is true for the academy as well.

Furthermore, this research is important because experts estimate that by the year 2030 millennials will outnumber the previous generation called Boomers by twenty-two million people. This generation is defined by some, and it seems the majority of experts, as those born between 1980 and 1995. However, many people agree the age period should be extended to 2000. Joel Stein and Josh Sanburn write in Time magazine, “They are the most threatening and exciting generation since the baby boomers brought about social revolution, not because they’re trying take over the Establishment but because they’re growing up without one.”² They compete against huge organizations: hackers vs. corporations, bloggers vs. newspapers, terrorists vs. nation-states, YouTube directors vs. studios, app-makers vs. entire industries.

In my mind reaching is key to teaching for hope. By reaching millennials mean we must deliberately gain greater knowledge of their context. So I begin by relating some of the findings doing my observation of the four millennials I mentioned earlier.

Sally is a 26-year-old who lives with her mother and has an estranged relationship with her father. She has attended church most of her life. In her home is her 18 year old sister who

has recently started college in a city far away from home. Sally works and goes to school at a local community college. What I have observed is that she is concerned about her future. It seems she is in college mainly to find ways to assure herself of a very comfortable way of life. She speaks of the many majors she has considered with money in the future being her motivation. She is very excited about purchasing her first car and she relates about the responsibility associated with owning a car. It seems her greatest focus is on a relationship she has with a young man. Her parents and grandparents do not approve of the young man and Sally seems to have her own reservations. However, she wants to give the relationship a chance. She continually questions the sincerity of the young man. I have found that only after I have given Sally an opportunity to talk can I begin to approach teaching the Sunday school lesson that I have prepared. I have concluded that understanding her context is key to helping to guide her into a nurturing relationship at the church.

Sue is a 30-year old who has a five-year-old son. She is divorced. She has told me her marriage lasted for five years and ended in large part due to the abuse from her husband after the loss of an infant. Sue attended college for about two years via an online program. She stopped because of the needs of her birth family. In addition to having the responsibility of her son, she provides support in various ways to her mother who has health challenges and has a major responsibility of taking care of grandchildren who have come to her from another child. Sue has been a member of various churches and proclaims, “I have done some bad things.” She is very faithful in attendance at the church and shares openly with me about her life. As in the case with Sally, I have concluded that understanding Sue’s context is vital for a nurturing relationship to develop.

Jane is 32 years of age and married with children. She has been a member of the church all her life. She has a Masters degree and works in a professional field. Her world revolves around her church and family. She and her husband are hearing the call to ministry. I find teaching her Sunday school lessons is fairly easy because of her interest. We rarely talk about personal concerns because she is content to learn about God.

John is a 35-year old who is married with no children. The church has been a part of his life from the day he was born. He has had many struggles, ups, and downs in his lifetime, but seems to be rather steady because of his faith in God. He has accepted the call to ministry, is in seminary, and in process of becoming a pastor, although he is not certain this is the route he will take in ministry.

Sue and Sally have had very little Christian education or nurturing in the church as part of their history. They are very content with not bringing the Bible and/or other book resources. They seem to be more at ease talking about their context. Whereas, when John and Jane speak of their present situations, they seem to want to see how the Bible speaks to those situations. It has been said that the real tragedy for today’s church is not the dwindling numbers of people that have left the church or those that are considered “unchurched.” The real tragedy is with the “minimally churched.” These are the church-goers that have little to no awareness of what is going on, how anything works, or why. However, they have a firm grasp on “doing” church as it has become an ingrained habit. This relates to Search Institute’s findings in the 1990’s that basically said a key to mature faith is the involvement of people in Christian education throughout their lifetime.

At the core of our hope is that we will reach more and more generations with our

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teaching. This has led me to ask myself, “why do I teach?” Furthermore, “why do I teach synchronously in the church and in the academy?” The simple answer to both these questions is that I believe what I am teaching and I believe what I teach makes a formative and/or transformative difference in the lives of those I teach and the ones they will teach.

It becomes urgent then to reach each generation and often reaching “the next generation” is gaining insight into that generation’s world. Karen B. Tye reminds us that one of the basic building blocks of Christian education is “Participants.” In order to teach the millennial generation, we must have a strong understanding of the question ‘whom do we teach?’

This paper seeks to combine insights into teaching the millennial generation while at the same time asking how do we teach the millennial generation and what hope do we generate in doing so? Next I explore some traits and characteristics of millennials as I say more about how teaching and learning is challenged by millennials and possibly approached by teachers.

Stereotypes about Millennials depict them as self-centered, unmotivated, disrespectful, and disloyal, contributing to widespread concern about how communication with Millennials will affect organizations and how they will develop relationships with other organizational members. Positive qualities are that they work well in teams, are motivated to have an impact on organization and favor open and frequent communication with their supervisors. They are at ease with communication technologies. The Pew Research Center in 2007 called millennials the “Look at Me” generation, implying they were overly self-confident and self-absorbed. My experience as a Christian educator who practices in the church does not support or agree with these stereotypes as a whole, however, in part I find it to be true in the academy and the church as I encounter millennials. The four individuals that I have observed do not possess any of these traits that are noticeable, however, a closer examination tells me Sally, the 26-year old can be labeled as self-centered. She genuinely is concerned about what her parents are saying about her friend, but she is also very much absorbed in her looks, her new car, and the possibility of making “big” money someday.

However, one of the most positive observations about all four of my subjects is that of their favoring of open and frequent communication with their supervisors and or teachers. I have often observed this with millennial students in the academy and the church. This speaks volumes to the need for small groups so that these frequent and open conversations are more available to millennials. It seems to me that in order to reach more millennials we will need more teachers or small group leaders who can be conversation partners with students. This leads me to say we need more critical pedagogy in classrooms with millennials. This is a way to use the self-esteem that is associated with millennials. This along with their ability to work well in teams makes critical pedagogy ideal for millennials.

Millennials are prime candidates for critical pedagogy where teaching/learning groups are established, decision making is being taught in real time, sharing of information, coordination among teachers and learners all seems to lead to an excellent teaching/learning environment. Use of critical pedagogy with millennials may negate conversations about the lack of self-motivation which actually may be associated with antiquated and ineffective pedagogy which is a result of not paying attention to context.

The four individuals that I observed all had self-esteem which is one of the characteristics

often given to millennials. However, they were not fame obsessed. Reflecting upon my conversations with all four individuals, none of them had been star athletes or beauty pageant participants during their younger years. I say that because millennials have been exposed to the numbers game all of their lives. They have had to compete for aptitude tests and many are thrust into beauty contests and athletics at an early age where the name of the game is winning. This leads me to say a word about narcissism.

Although all four my subjects use facebook on a regular basis, only two say they regularly post pictures of themselves or “selfies.” Many people say that millennials are narcissists as evidence by the use of “selfies” and other actions that seem to be self-promoting.

Studies have noted the following:
- Increasing narcissism has occurred alongside increasing usage of social networking sites such as Facebook.
- When asked “what makes your generation unique”, 24% of millennials said “use of technology.
- Three quarters of American Millennials have a social networking site.
- More than 90% of US college students have Facebook profiles.
- Studies also indicate that people with high levels of narcissism engage more frequently in Facebook.
- Emphasis on the individual has been growing for decades.

An underlying, but very pervasive question surfaces as I explore teaching millennials synchronously in church and academy. Why are so many millennials absent from the church, but also from the religious academy? Most see evidence of this absence in church, denominations/communions, and theological institutions of higher education.

I argue that in large part it is a result of many factors, including pedagogical ineffectiveness and continuity without discontinuity. I will return to this thought, but for now I will address the why Millennials are absent. At the top of the list is choices. This generation has always had choices of what to eat, where to eat, and when to eat. They always have had the choice of what to watch, what to listen to, and where to go. Not only have they have had many channels, but many channels devoted to one thing.

When one has many options, decisions can be deferred. The 30-year old that I observed is an example. Although she lives in a small town, she has almost as many options as a person living in a large city when it comes to going back to school. The Internet, distance learning, and online classes with degrees has made it easy to defer the decision of returning to school. In addition, there is an option to go only to night classes, go to accelerated programs, and of course just stay at home and go to school.

Added to this is the fact millennials value individual choices. My now deceased wife and I saw evidence of this when our son called home from college and informed us he was going to the Peace Corp. There was no discussion even with our practice of open communication.

Another strong implication for the need to constantly assess and evaluate our teaching and learning strategies is that millennials bring a source of accountability. They are seeking authentic teachers, that is, those who practice and teach the same. They are looking for answers to the whys of their lives.

Attracting millennials requires allowing them to put things together with their skills,
ideas, and resources. This is another reason critical pedagogy is appealing. Along that line it is important to allow millennials time to create networks, conversations, seek new ways of doing things.

Connections and relationships are central. Structure has its place, but millennials need room for creativity and expression.

Teaching and learning is akin to worship in the church. We must do it well and with clarity. It need not be watered down, but well explained. Teaching and learning must be experiential. Millennials are doers not spectators. We must take advantage of their good team player abilities.

As we teach in the church and the academy formation has to be at the front of our teaching goals. Information is still important, but formation is equally or more than important. Our teaching must be creative/innovative and authentic.

I now return to the idea I first heard from Walter Brueggemann, continuity and discontinuity. I see it as essential as we approach teaching millennials. As he points out the necessity of education for communities to survive, he explains that continuity is maintaining ones’ self-identity, but at the same time in order to be relevant in new times and situations it becomes necessary to have discontinuity. It is teaching in a way that brings new life to a people.7

As I continue to research I will expound on critical pedagogy and its value to teaching and learning for millennials. I will also give attention to how teaching millennials in a postmodern culture has to be considered. And finally I will look at brain research as I raise the concern that some millennials are youth, some are emerging adults, and others are young adults.

Bibliography
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