

Digging up dirt on the millennial generation

A look at the cultural and religious experiences that have shaped young adults and their desires for the church

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ABBY KING-KAISER

Right now, in many congregations across America, a similar conversation is taking place—after worship over coffee, among pastors and staff, during women and men's retreats, and in session meetings. And they are all asking one thing: "How do we get young adults more invested in our church?"

It's a good question and one that this whole issue (as well as the issues of *Horizons* and *Unbound*) is dedicated to answering. Yet most of the time, this conversation turns to what sort of programs young adults like or who might staff a young adult ministry or whether the worship service has to be turned upside-down. Wouldn't it be better first to ask, "Who are these young adults, and what experiences—culturally, religiously—have formed them?"

If we want to understand this generation, we must go to the roots and take a close look at the cultural soil in which it was planted and out of which it continues to grow.

Though many elements have fed the experience of millennials (anyone born between 1980 and 2000), only a few of the most prevalent are explored here. Others, such as technology and economics, so permeate

the whole that they can be examined only in their interactions with the other elements.

This metaphor of roots and soil keeps us from committing a grave sin—namely, treating all young adults as being slightly different replications of one another (like some Andy Warhol screen print). Not unlike soil, the experiences and attitudes of young adults in the United States can radically differ because of region and social location.

Wanted, marketed, and sold

The generation of today was born after the advent of birth control, a considerable expansion of women's rights, and the legalization of abortion. Suddenly, having children became a choice. As such, today's young adults entered the world amid great hope and desire. As William Strauss and Neil Howe note in their landmark work, *Generations*, "by 1988, babies were declared a 'fad' by the *San Francisco Chronicle*." That same year, a children's political action committee was formed to lobby for children's interests, and child care became more important to voters than foreign policy. Over the course of the 1980s, states passed laws



requiring infant restraints in automobiles. Clearly this was a wanted, then protected, generation.

As the PBS Frontline documentary *The Merchants of Cool* (2001) makes clear, by the late 1990s and early 2000s, teenagers made up a \$150 billion market, which led advertisers and media producers to clamor after all that money. This generation quickly became the most marketed-to (and researched) generation in America's history.

Out of the desire to market to millennials came the rise of youth-specific TV programming. Children's cable station Nickelodeon began its meteoric rise in 1985, and teen juggernaut MTV was born around the same time as this generation (1981). The trend continues even today, as millennial Joseph Gordon-Levitt has recently launched Pivott, a TV station for, you guessed it, twentysomethings.

And so this generation, birthed amid such hopefulness and desire, quickly turned into a market and—eventually—a commodity to be sold back to itself.

So what?

In response, the church can offer what no marketing campaign can—relationships. Young adults want mentors to fill the gaps left when they age out of their parents' homes and leave behind the direct guidance of professors, advisors, and campus ministers. At the church where I serve as director of young adult ministries, I have seen what this mentoring relationship can offer.

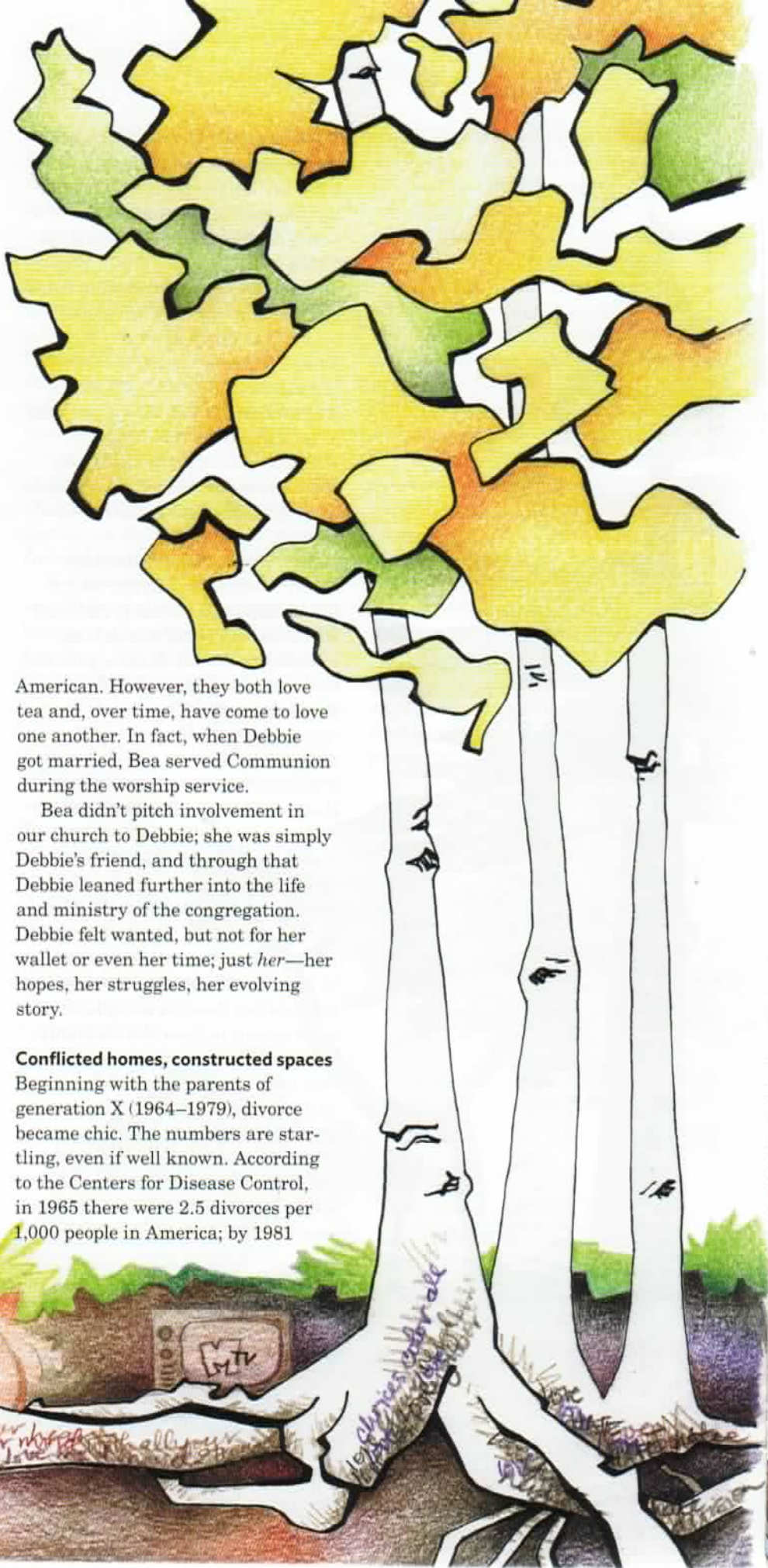
Debbie is young; Bea is older. Debbie is white; Bea is African

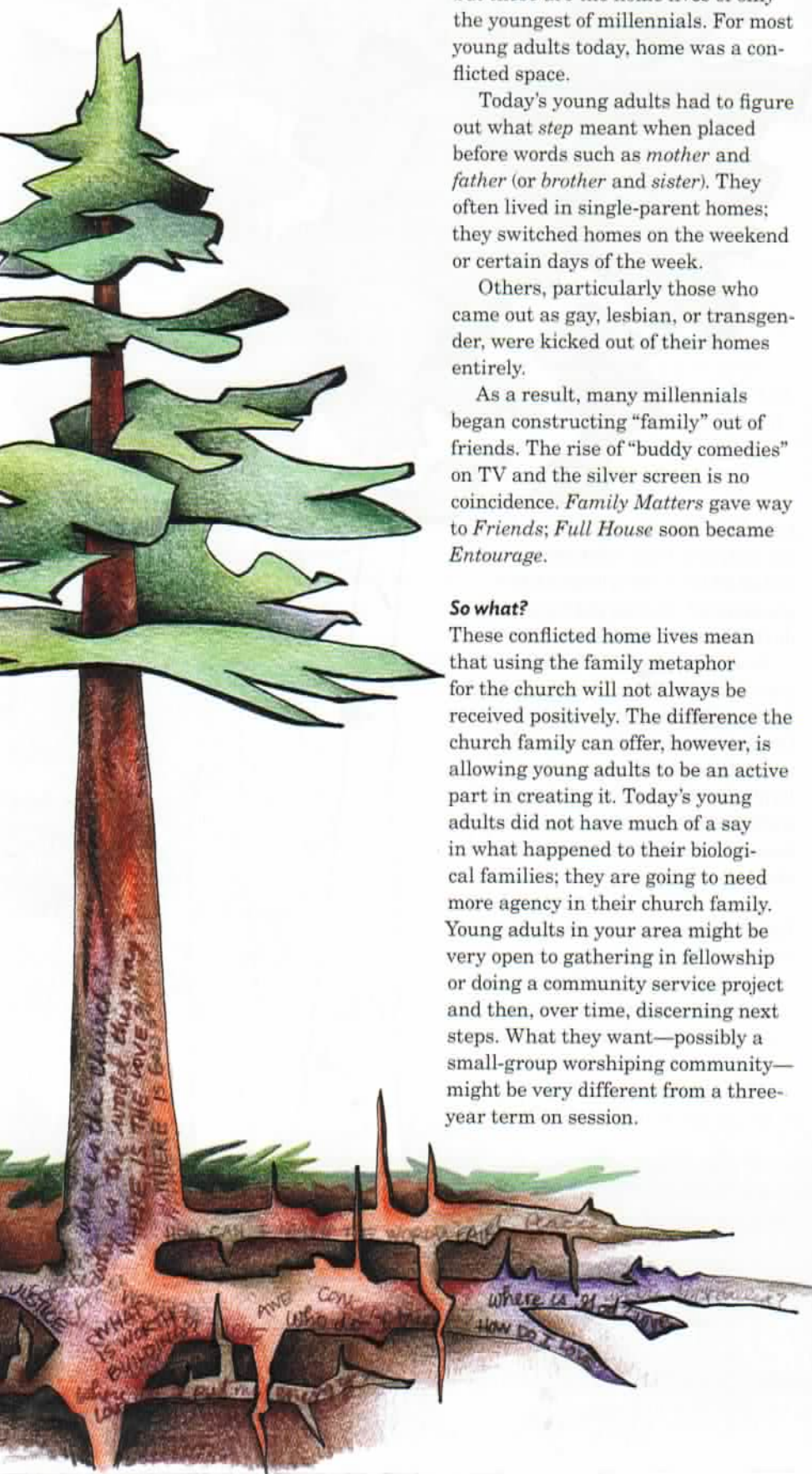
American. However, they both love tea and, over time, have come to love one another. In fact, when Debbie got married, Bea served Communion during the worship service.

Bea didn't pitch involvement in our church to Debbie; she was simply Debbie's friend, and through that Debbie leaned further into the life and ministry of the congregation. Debbie felt wanted, but not for her wallet or even her time; just *her*—her hopes, her struggles, her evolving story.

Conflicted homes, constructed spaces

Beginning with the parents of generation X (1964–1979), divorce became chic. The numbers are startling, even if well known. According to the Centers for Disease Control, in 1965 there were 2.5 divorces per 1,000 people in America; by 1981





there were 5.3. Admittedly, by 2003 the divorce rate had declined to 3.8, but these are the home lives of only the youngest of millennials. For most young adults today, home was a conflicted space.

Today's young adults had to figure out what *step* meant when placed before words such as *mother* and *father* (or *brother* and *sister*). They often lived in single-parent homes; they switched homes on the weekend or certain days of the week.

Others, particularly those who came out as gay, lesbian, or transgender, were kicked out of their homes entirely.

As a result, many millennials began constructing "family" out of friends. The rise of "buddy comedies" on TV and the silver screen is no coincidence. *Family Matters* gave way to *Friends*; *Full House* soon became *Entourage*.

So what?

These conflicted home lives mean that using the family metaphor for the church will not always be received positively. The difference the church family can offer, however, is allowing young adults to be an active part in creating it. Today's young adults did not have much of a say in what happened to their biological families; they are going to need more agency in their church family. Young adults in your area might be very open to gathering in fellowship or doing a community service project and then, over time, discerning next steps. What they want—possibly a small-group worshipping community—might be very different from a three-year term on session.

Education equals success

While home lives were conflicted, parents of this generation clung to one hope above all: education equals success. As a result, more members of this generation than any other have gone to college. On the outside this fact looks like the kingdom come.

But student-loan debt now threatens to impoverish this generation long into adulthood.

As the most marketed-to generation of young adults in America's history, the greatest "product" ever sold to them was a college education. Worse yet, they bought it. They trusted their elders (almost always a good thing) and buckled down, sweating out standardized tests, walking dogs from the shelter, playing three sports, singing in the glee club, and working a part-time job—all to demonstrate that they were "college material." Now, after it all, many are indeed the right material but don't know why it matters.

So what?

The suggestion that education is all about prosperity is squarely challenged by the church, which educates for discipleship and service. Congregations should take time to talk about the purposes of education. When they educate, it should be *field* education: justice-oriented mission in the community. And, of course, the best applied education young adults can receive is mentorship in life, mission, and ministry from older congregants.

Diversity—our parents' children

If aspects of this article have felt like a harsh critique of millennials' parents, then this section is a soothing balm. While racial injustices and racism still abound, the successes of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s have given birth to America's most diverse and accepting generation yet—like, literally gave birth to it. As the *Washington*

Post reported after the 2010 census, "The number of mixed-race babies has soared over the past decade, . . . a result of more interracial couples and a cultural shift in [the way] many parents identify their children [racially] in a multiracial society."

This diversity has created not only new challenges but also a new consciousness. While baby boomers may be best known for their pursuit of racial and gender justice, today's generation has added religious pluralism and sexual identity to the list.

So what?

As a result, millennials are reluctant to be part of any institution—particularly the church—that creates double standards for LGBTQ persons or sounds jingoistic in talking about Islam. The recurring fear, of course, of older generations is that a deep form of relativism is settling in, such that categories of right and wrong no longer apply. What this means for congregations today can only be answered as they openly engage these questions with their young adults.

Yet what remains clear is that an open-door policy toward diversity in local congregations is not enough. Congregations—particularly those that do not resemble the racial-ethnic diversity of their community—must go beyond church doors and seek out difference. Young adults, native to this diversity, may be a congregation's best guides.

The congregation where I serve, for instance, is close to Carnegie Mellon University (CMU), which has a robust international student population. A walk along CMU's campus feels like a lunch break at a United Nations summit. But no matter how open our doors were, these students weren't showing up for worship. It wasn't until the church started going to campus that the international students started coming to the church.

Justice-aware but not always engaged

Every element in the soil of young adult experience has the opportunity to both nourish and poison. This reality is perhaps seen best in millennials' encounter with justice. To be sure, theirs is a justice-oriented generation. Much has already been made of their rates of volunteerism. Keen social awareness and a great desire for consumer integrity are hallmarks. They know that a T-shirt bought in Milwaukee will affect a worker in Thailand. They have protested Walmart and scorned Nike. They have forced corporations to market one-for-one sales (one item donated for every item purchased).

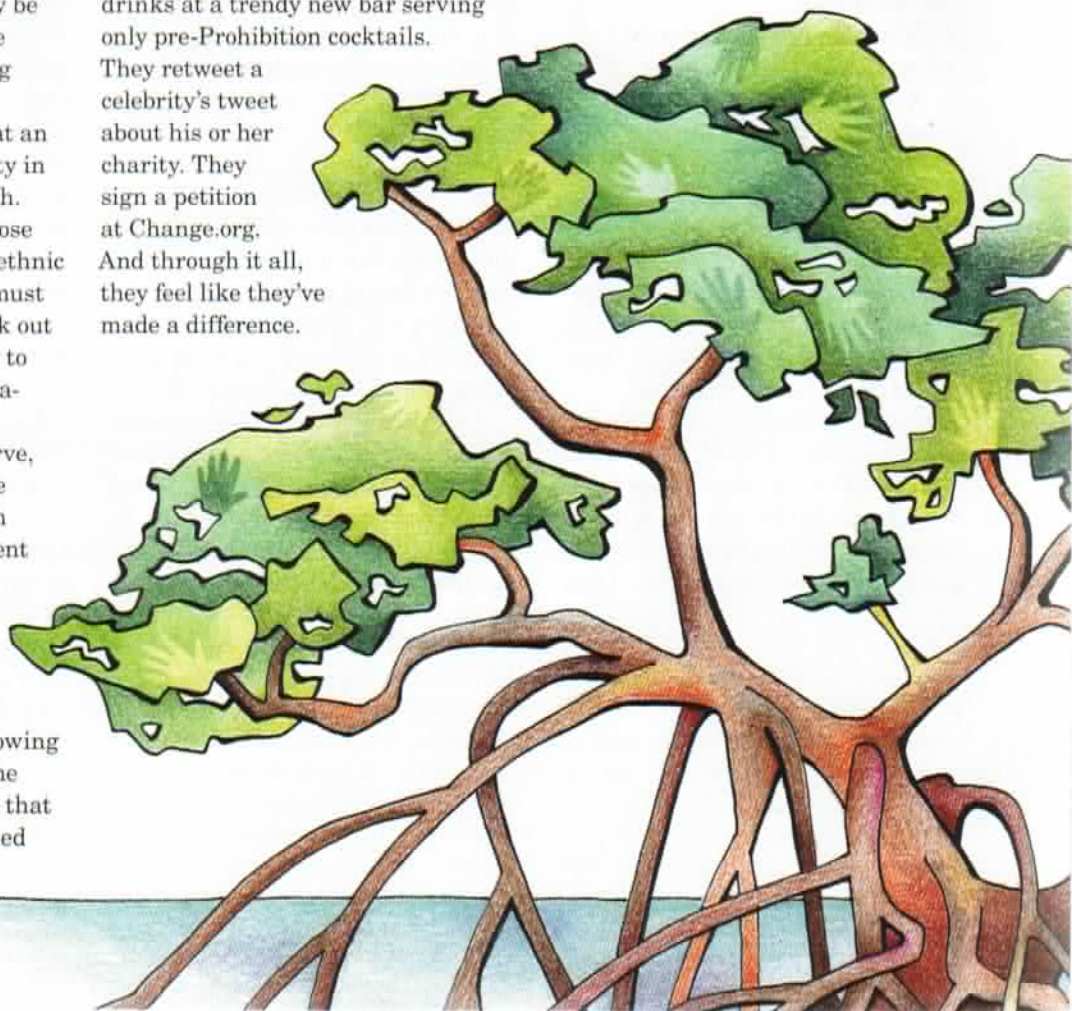
But this is where it gets poisonous. Millennials are also tempted to become the "slack-tivist" generation. A typhoon hits there, an earthquake hits another place, and millennials rush to their smartphones to text a \$10 donation via the Red Cross. And they do this while drinking \$10 drinks at a trendy new bar serving only pre-Prohibition cocktails.

They retweet a celebrity's tweet about his or her charity. They sign a petition at Change.org. And through it all, they feel like they've made a difference.

If it appears as if millennials have the vision but lack the backbone, it may be because of the self-serving ways that they were taught to volunteer. Many high school students volunteered in order to get into the right college. In fact, some high schools have a volunteer requirement for graduation. It was supposed to make them civil servants. It may have made them civil self-servants.

Economics have also been a factor. The same member of this generation that can afford to drink both a \$10 drink and send \$10 of relief aid (using a \$30 data package on a \$200 smartphone) is the privileged member of this generation. For that person, justice is an action of consumption; it's another thing to be bought.

The truth is that many millennials, knowing just how deep the rabbit hole of injustice goes, would prefer signing an online petition to confronting the deeper issues that seem nearly impossible to overcome. The



institutions that were supposed to be capable of tackling such issues—the church, the government, the United Nations—have often proven corrupt and inadequate to the task. So when young people do take on systemic injustice (and a great many do), they tend to focus on local need—because success seems possible.

So what?

Among the three kinds of mission (evangelism, compassion, and justice), Presbyterian congregations are best at compassion. But millennials realize that compassion without justice will equal only more compassion in the future. They desire—though many clearly lack the vision—to change the structures that create the need for compassion in the first place. Bringing this generation into conversation with previous generations' justice workers is deeply needed.

Sex and murder

Much hand-wringing and scolding followed Miley Cyrus's "twerking" at the MTV Video Music Awards last August. Cyrus herself stayed on the offensive as condemnations continued to rain down. Absent from most complaints was any acknowledgment of the culture that created Cyrus—or, maybe more appropriately, Hannah Montana, her alter ego.

A few weeks later, when Cyrus hosted *Saturday Night Live* on October 5, 2013, she wore the same hairstyle from her VMA performance, clearly indicating she was still in the mood to challenge society's standards and norms. That night she received great applause when she said, "I'm not going to do Hannah Montana, but I can give you an update on what she's been up to: she was murdered." And there's the subtext to all her youth sexuality. Cyrus's desire, maybe even need, to "murder" Hannah Montana is an example of how this generation has sought to define sexuality on its own terms—to

cast off, even violently, the sexualized identities placed on it.

So what?

This need to redefine sex and sexual identity is one of the great blessings the LGBTQ community may be able to bring to the church. Typically, the debate in the church is whether or how to include the LGBTQ Christian. Rarely is it asked how these brothers and sisters might bless the church. However, their experiences of having to define their sexuality to the culture has given them deep resources for encouraging fruitful and faithful conversations about sex, gender, and identity in the church.

LGBTQ Christians know how damaging the imposition of identity can be to the soul. They may yet prove to be the church's greatest hope of creating a space where sexuality isn't imposed, but nurtured; isn't mandated, but created; isn't subverted, but supported. Miley Cyrus clearly needs this help, and so too may the young adult in the pew next to you—however much this need goes unspoken.

Violence

Violence is a tragic thread in the American tapestry; it isn't unique to millennials, but it has shaped us in some important ways.

Half of this generation was born amid the Cold War, many hung yellow ribbons during Desert Storm, and all were somewhere between the crib and college when four planes were hijacked on September 11, 2001. It has been primarily members of this generation who have fought the longest wars in America's history, on two fronts: Iraq and Afghanistan.

School shootings have become a nearly annual occurrence in American life since the harrowing events in Columbine, Colorado, on April 20, 1999. Every student in that high school on that tragic day would have been a member of this generation. The violence followed

students from the hallways of high school to the pathways and commons of college, including Case Western Reserve University (2003), Virginia Tech (2007), and Northern Illinois University (2008).

Finally, this generation has perpetuated violence. Indeed, the tragic Columbine shooting that killed 12 millennials was perpetrated by two millennials who felt bullied and harassed by *other* millennials.

Both George Zimmerman and Trayvon Martin are millennials. Jared Loughner, who shot congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords, is a millennial. James Holmes, who opened fire in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, is a millennial. Having been surrounded by violence all their lives, this generation is finding it difficult to follow the Prince of Peace.

So what?

In response, congregations need to be safe spaces. They need to preach about bullying and violence. They need to care for the returning veterans and service personnel in their communities. They need to be sensitive to the combative postures their infighting perpetuates. And, most of all, churches need to offer opportunities for young adults to learn how to respond to violence in our communities in a faithful way.

Replenishing the soil

We can't change the soil that has fed young adults. But, together as the church, we can replenish it. We are called to heal poisoned ground while nurturing those elements (like concern for diversity and justice) that promise to create a better church and society. As we mix our soils and become genuinely intergenerational, we can't be sure what will grow, but we can patiently work the soil in trust of the One who tends all seeds.

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