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Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

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Intergenerational Factors That Contribute to Millennial Church Engagement

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Parker Sanderson

December 2023

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my wife, Tara, and my three children, Rylee, Alanson, and Paul. They have been the focus of my study and the reason why I try to live out Deuteronomy 6.

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To be where I am today would not be possible without the help of many individuals. However, the credit for my position would always go to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. The life I have that has led to this moment is only made possible by Him and by the Father.

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Abstract

Millennial church attendance has declined since the beginning of the new millennium. Intergenerational ambivalence has been known to contribute to this phenomenon. Through this action research, the researcher sought to determine what intergenerational factors have led to millennials' continued or discontinued attendance within churches. A phenomenological qualitative approach centered around interviews for this study was used to determine these intergenerational factors. The sample was taken from a 1,100-member church in a major Texas metropolitan area. The goal was to help church leaders decrease relational distancing and reduce ambivalent factors to increase millennial engagement in this local congregation.

Keywords: church, millennial, attendance, intergenerational, ambivalence, Church of Christ

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Mainstream churches across the United States have experienced a decline in attendance among millennial parishioners (born between 1981 and 1996) within the new millennium (Jorgensen, 2019; Moody & Reed, 2017). Typically, for a church to increase its number of parishioners and survive, it must have younger generations willing to raise their families and invest their time within that congregation. Adding younger families leads to the passing of leadership to the next generation. However, millennials make up the lowest percentage of adult parishioners in most mainline churches, and their attendance continues to decrease (Waters & Bortree, 2012). One example of this can be found at a 1,100-member church in a major Texas metropolitan area.

The church at the center of this study has existed for over 100 years. The church's origins can be traced back to 1914 when a small group of parishioners met in the upper room of a local drugstore. The church leadership decided to move to a location that would meet the new goals of the congregation. Their goals were focused on outreach to the surrounding community, particularly young families. They centered their outreach around the concept of intergenerational relationships. Based on Keltner's (2017) theory of power, they have had a lasting influence in their community because they take an interest in the wants and needs of others (other families). They are still growing in this location and have expanded their ministries to reach countries such as Haiti and Mexico. However, there is one crucial demographic that has been lacking and diminishing over time: millennials.

Powell (2011) discussed that the decline of millennial attendance is partly due to a lack of relationships and a disconnect between older members and millennials. This has led many millennials to disconnect from many mainline congregations, which may have increased their

social disengagement from churches (Leonard, 2020; Sumpter, 2019). The lack of intergenerational relationships may have also contributed to the member age gap between the two age groups within many churches (M. Brown, 2016; Freathy, 2006). Sumpter (2019) discussed that the lack of intergenerational relationships has also contributed to declining church participation and attendance from millennial parishioners. Powell et al. (2016) claimed that emerging adults are the most underrepresented demographic in all mainline churches, representing only 10% of the population. Powell (2011) also stated that older members investing intergenerationally in millennials in a church setting could increase their church attendance and participation. Potentially, further research may be needed to fully understand the lifetime impact that intergenerational relationships have on millennials and their families.

Problem Statement

The general problem is that millennial church engagement has declined for many years. However, this has been a slow decline (Jacobs et al., 2019; Sumpter, 2019). Church engagement among millennials is subjective to the individual millennial (Jacobs et al., 2019). However, Jacobs et al. (2019) would go on to say that it “is demonstrated both in traditional ways, such as affiliation, weekly church attendance, and overall endorsement of the church, as well as in non-traditional ways, such as changing attitudes towards institutionalized religion and towards sexuality” (p. 53). The issue remains that overall engagement has not increased (Joiner, 2016; Powell et al., 2016; Sumpter, 2019). Millennials have had no issues engaging in consumer events such as sports for their children or simply attending a park for recreational use (Kiessling & Shults, 2018). It is in a church that their engagement has declined. Many of the events they have attended are family-centric, meaning they are not exposed to other generations except for the two within the family unit and are disengaged from all other intergenerational factors (Leonard,

2020). Churches are unique in this aspect because, historically, they have hosted multiple generations at any given time. Unlike most business models, churches have the potential to host every generation living in the current cultural climate (Bengtson et al., 2018). This has directly impacted how millennials and their families are affected intergenerationally.

However, there are other issues revolving around millennial church engagement. Different philosophies have countered one another and have led to a decline in religion in most developed countries (Khrienko, 2009). Khrienko (2009) also discussed that in developed countries, religion has become more secular. Jorgensen (2019) stated that “individuals often find religion less meaningful and compelling when they are free to subscribe to plural versions of religion, especially highly personalized beliefs not supported by authoritative groups” (p. 35). This has led to younger generations, such as millennial church parishioners, dismissing the idea of church altogether (Bengtson et al., 2018). Powell et al. (2016) theorized that this diminishing generational engagement of the church would lead to many mainline churches across America becoming nonexistent in 20 years. They encouraged further study considering the timeframe’s imminent proximity (Powell et al., 2016).

These relationships could directly impact church engagement in millennials’ early adult years. M. Brown (2016) stated, “To describe their relationships, many of the emerging adults (millennials) discussed the importance of feeling a sense of belonging, witnessing the importance of fellowship or community, and feeling like the church was a ‘family’” (p. 17). He also believed that more research was needed to understand the lifetime impact of such relationships regarding church engagement (M. Brown, 2016). There may be intergenerational factors that could increase millennial engagement within churches. For this reason, if a church’s leadership is “interested in implementing intergenerational activities into their congregation, they must

patiently and continuously teach and model intergenerational concepts through various mediums of the church” (Ross, 2012. p. 143).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore what intergenerational factors contribute to a millennial’s (born 1981–1996) continued engagement within a church. As was discussed earlier, engagement is described as the endorsement or approval of the church, weekly attendance, overall attitude toward institutionalized religion, and church affiliation (Jacobs et al., 2019). However, it is unclear if millennials will define engagement differently. It is also unknown if a reduction of generational ambivalence would increase a millennial’s engagement in this local congregation. However, if this problem is not researched with a phenomenological approach, millennial church engagement could decline significantly, and their church membership could decrease over the next decade (Bengtson et al., 2018; Leonard, 2020). Therefore, an interview-based approach was used to obtain quality subjective perspectives from millennial parishioners.

Research Questions

RQ1: Are there intergenerational relationship factors that contribute to church engagement among millennials?

RQ2: Are there church practices that help millennial families to foster intimate relationships with church members from other age demographics?

RQ3: Are there any external or ambivalent factors that contribute to relational distancing among millennials within the church?

Definition of Key Terms

Attrition related to societal issues. The concept of attrition related to society is centered around cultural norms that counter the beliefs and theologies of a specific group, namely millennials. Culturally, millennials may have connected to a society whose beliefs may counter their upbringing within most mainline churches. This may have contributed to disengagement from the church. (Bock & Del Rosario, 2017; Heft, 2008; Jacobs et al., 2019; McGuire, 2018).

Baby boomers. The baby boomer generation is predominately the parents of the millennial generation. This generation is born between the years 1946 and 1969. Their role in giving financial support to their children (millennials) into adulthood is more regularly occurring than any generation before them (Fingerman et al., 2012; Furstenberg, 2010).

Church community. The surrounding long-term families and elderly parishioners of a church make up the core of mainline churches. This community of volunteers is what makes the church function on a week-to-week basis in partnership with the leadership of each congregation. The unique circumstances of the church community are that it is made up of young and old parishioners within one organization. The emotional health of these churches can be attributed to their diversity in age (Bock & Del Rosario, 2017; Kiessling & Shults, 2018; Panzer, 2019).

Church of Christ. With a foundational belief system that has been found to be tied to the Stone-Campbell American Restoration movement, this protestant denomination historically has acapella worship during its services. The initial efforts of this Restoration movement were designed to unify the different denominations that were spread throughout the country. They also tend to have meetings or services three times a week on Sunday mornings, Sunday nights, and Wednesday nights (Foster, 2016; Hicks & Weedman, 2015; Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011).

Generational investment. Generational investment (GI) is a design for churches to “grow young.” In this growth model, older generations make a monetary, voluntary, and spiritual investment in younger generations. This model results in intergenerational relationships and church engagement among younger generations (M. Brown, 2016; Kjesbo & Cha, 2020; Powell et al., 2016).

Intergenerational ambivalence. Intergenerational ambivalence is described as having both positive and negative sentiments between children and their parents. This phenomenon is common in the church. Millennials love and cherish their parents, but their theological viewpoints do not necessarily align with their parents’, resulting in an ambivalence barrier (Hout, 2017; Pillemer et al., 2007).

Millennial. The millennial generation’s parents are predominately the baby boomer generation. This millennial generation was born between 1981 and 1996. They are the largest living generation; however, they are the smallest demographic in all mainline churches and have become increasingly disconnected from institutional religion. (Fingerman et al., 2012; Furstenberg, 2010; Panzer, 2019).

Millennial online engagement. Millennials commonly interact online for social purposes and consumerism. They engage in online entertainment, shopping, education, and working remotely. This online consumerism among millennials increased during the COVID-19 era (Bock & Del Rosario, 2017; Boehme, 2013; Gharzai et al., 2020; Habibi et al., 2014).

Summary

If the church focuses on engaging millennials by investing in intergenerational relationships, there may be an opportunity for church growth. However, this will take intentionality from a church’s leadership structure to reduce the millennials’ ambivalence toward

the older church leaders. Investing in this generation may take generations to accomplish. The first step is to understand if research has been done on the decline of millennial church engagement. This topic has not gone unnoticed. However, the research on the factors causing them to remove themselves has been underrepresented. By focusing on baby boomers and millennial relationships, the Church of Christ's involvement in the church community, engagement opportunities, generational investment, intergenerational ambivalence, and millennials' cultural and societal attrition, researchers can find ways to assist churches in improving their church millennial engagement. A literature review was done to help understand what scholars and researchers have recently discovered and how these factors would hinder or further church engagement among millennial parishioners.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Millennial church engagement is in decline, possibly due to increased ambivalence toward church leaders, which could result in a lack of intergenerational relationships (Sumpter, 2019). Sumpter (2019) also discussed that a millennial's main interest in a church is not its programs, flashy services, or how much money the building costs but genuine relationships. Many church leaders are attempting to utilize the surrounding church community to offer expanded leadership opportunities for millennials to increase their church engagement. This can take many forms, but Powell (2011) theorized that the primary strategy to increase millennials' engagement in a church is through intergenerational relationships. This literature review identifies different factors that may have impacted the engagement of millennial church parishioners.

Literature Search Methods

Although research has identified a lack of millennial engagement in mainline churches, there is still a lack of knowledge surrounding the specific factors that promote millennial church engagement (Leonard, 2020). Therefore, research was done to broaden this knowledge. Specific criteria were established with specific keywords and phrases that would help facilitate the discovery of literature on how churches invest in their millennial families. The following were the criteria for specific literature searches:

- **Publications:** This study utilized peer-reviewed journals, articles, and academic books.
- **Researchers:** for use by scholars and practitioners
- **Focus of study:** This study centered around the church, millennials, engagement, and ambivalence.

- Language: English
- Concepts: millennial church engagement, psychosocial development, generational ambivalence, church behaviors, intergenerational relationships, church leadership, and generational investment
- Parishioners in the study: millennial parishioners who were born between 1981 and 1996

Framework

Leonard (2020) would argue that when millennial families are not attending church, they and their families are missing intergenerational experiences, which has the potential to lead to an increased sense of church engagement and faith practices. However, disengagement from these relational church activities could be a reason for their decline in engagement. Kiessling and Shults (2018) suggested that intergenerational factors experienced in the church have led to church practices positively affecting the well-being of young adults. Dudley and Wisbey (2000) also discussed that when these church practices are made a priority for millennial families, an overwhelming majority of these families tend to retain their attendance and faith. This could also have a potential impact on millennials due to it impacting their children (Kiessling & Shults, 2018). A study by Kiessling and Shults (2018) suggested that if a church invests in a millennial's child, it results in a higher level of investment from the millennial parents. This has the potential to lead to intimate relational habits (Maree, 2021). Zock (2018) discussed that it could also mean stagnation regarding how millennials contribute to a church with their engagement. These terms and concepts are why Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory can be used for the framework of this study (Maree, 2021).

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory

Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development offer one strategy of describing the connective tissue for a millennial's church engagement in their middle adulthood years. The theory states that during specific periods of an individual's life, they will go through eight identity crises that will determine their success or failure later in life (Linerós & Fincher, 2014). These identity crises, as he coined them, hold that "people's personalities progress from birth until old age through eight stages (crises) in human development in a prearranged sequence of psychosocial development" (Maree, 2021, p. 1110). Erikson also discussed that if these stages are navigated successfully, humans could lead more meaningful and fulfilled lives (Maree, 2021). Maree (2021) summarized the time frame of each crisis within the psychosocial development theory as follows:

Crisis 1—Trust vs. Mistrust (Infancy, 1–2 Years). During this stage, an infant is uncertain about their central world. They look to their caregivers for consistency. Success of this stage leads the child to a sense of hope and trust in others. Failure in this stage leads to the development of fear of others.

Crisis 2—Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt (Early Childhood, 2–4 Years). Children in this stage are developing a sense of their own control and independence. The success of this stage increases a child's confidence in their ability to survive in the world. Failure means a child may feel uncertain about their abilities and become more dependent on others.

Crisis 3—Initiative vs. Guilt (Preschool Age, 4–5 Years). This stage focuses on the interaction of peers and social development. Success means the child has gained a sense of self-control around others. Failure means a child would be slow to interact with others and have a low sense of creativity in social situations.

Crisis 4—Industry vs. Inferiority (School Age, 5–12 Years). Here, the child will gain a more significant role in their peer group. This leads to a greater sense of self-esteem. Success in this stage means a feeling of competence and confidence in achieving goals. Failure leads to an inferiority complex. However, a balance of the two could help with modesty in their success.

Crisis 5—Identity vs. Role Confusion (Adolescence, 13–19 Years). During this adolescent stage, the child learns the role they will have as an adult. The success of this stage leads to a confident sense of self in society and knowing their role. Failure to obtain their identity could lead to an unsure sense of self in society.

Crisis 6—Intimacy vs. Isolation (Early and Emerging Adulthood, 20–40 Years). During this time frame, adults focus on forming intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success in this time leads to happy, safe, and meaningful relationships or simply love for others. Failure to navigate this correctly can lead to loneliness, depression, and, hence, isolation.

Crisis 7—Generativity vs. Stagnation (Adulthood, 40–65 Years). This stage refers to adults showing their significance to the world that will outlast them and contribute to a positive benefit for the next generation. Success can lead to a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of usefulness. However, failure can lead to a shallow living experience in the world.

Crisis 8—Ego Integrity vs. Despair (Maturity, 65+ Years). During this final stage of a person's life, they contemplate their accomplishments and determine if they have led a successful life. Successfully navigating this stage leads to a sense of wisdom. This helps an individual with an outlook centered around closure in their life. Failure leads to a sense of despair in an unsuccessful life, which leads to hopelessness.

Erikson identified these particular crises because he asserted that identity would continue to develop throughout one's life (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2018). However, Kerpelman and

Pittman (2018) also stated that Erikson believed most of one's personality is developed in the early stages of life, particularly in adolescence. Although most of their personality is developed early, all stages are essential, and "if problems occur in any given stage, it will influence the integration of the whole ensemble" (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 29).

The Millennial's Crisis 6 and Crisis 7

According to Erikson's theory, millennials are in Crisis 6 and Crisis 7 (Petersen, 2020). This middle adulthood period is typically given significantly less attention than other periods in a person's psychosocial development, yet it is a time of vital psychosocial growth (Kuther & Burnell, 2019). Crisis 6 is intimacy vs. isolation, and Crisis 7 is generativity vs. stagnation (Maree, 2021). Maree (2021) defined the intimacy vs. isolation crisis as follows: "Emerging adults and adolescents increasingly seek intimate relationships that they can establish, maintain, and promote with key people they can trust. They need to establish relationships that allow them to acknowledge their vulnerability" (p. 111). This idea is essential in building relationships with the baby boomer generation, who are considered the leaders of most mainline churches (Carlson, 2016). The seventh crisis of generativity vs. stagnation that middle-aged millennials are navigating is defined as the ability, need, and will to care for others and not only themselves (Maree, 2021). If they can navigate this stage successfully, they tend to experience a sense of meaning or purpose in their lives (Maree, 2021). Zock (2018) found that when Erikson's theory is applied in a biblically theological sense when individuals engage with others pastorally, it helps them to become better oriented in life. Erikson also discussed that when these specific phases are navigated successfully in a spiritual sense, adults will have a stronger moral code and think more ideologically in their later years (Hoare, 2009). It can be suggested that Erikson's

psychosocial development stages of crisis could assist churches in helping millennials navigate these two stages of their lives (Zock, 2018).

Church leadership and the surrounding church community could potentially help millennials identify and navigate Erikson's specific crisis stages. Ufimtseva (2014) considered these to be "community" families wherein the village would be a secondary support system for the millennial.

Scheitle et al. (2018) also discussed a trend within the religious community that some social and cultural influences have resulted in a drastic rise in young parishioners considering themselves as "none" when asked about their religious affiliation. A form of ambivalence has developed within millennials, creating a barrier for them to develop these communities and relationships. This ambivalence has made it difficult specifically for millennials to navigate the sixth crisis stage successfully (Hout, 2017; Maree, 2021). Khrienko (2009) believed this ambivalence has also resulted in millennials considering all religions one big chasm of morals.

To combat this issue of ambivalence, Kiessling and Shults (2018) asserted that church leaders must prioritize relational opportunities for millennials. This allows millennials to differentiate the church organization from the supportive church community. According to Bengtson (2018), this has been shown to assist in the millennial parishioner's continued church engagement. With the support and intentionality of a church's leadership, millennials could combat a lack of engagement (Kiessling & Shults, 2018). The following literature review identifies specific areas that could influence the success or failure of a millennial's successful navigation of Crisis 6 and Crisis 7 of Erikson's psychosocial development.

Baby Boomers

In statistical terms, the baby boomer generation overwhelmingly represents the parents of the millennial generation. Baby boomers were named this due to the significant increase in childbirths from men coming home from World War II in the 1940s (Paulin, 2018). This generation was born between the years 1946 and 1969 (DeVaney, 2015). DeVaney (2015) identified their contribution to society as “economic prosperity and their growth of the middle class” (p. 11). The baby boomers’ parents were called the GI generation or “The Greatest Generation,” and they were born in 1928 or earlier (Paulin, 2018). This generation grew up during the Great Depression and subsequently developed an aversion to high-risk investments and ultraconservative saving (Keister & Deeb-Sossa, 2001). This mindset may have impacted the baby boomers since they adopted their parents’ saving habits but accumulated more money due to the post–World War II economy (Keister & Deeb-Sossa, 2001). This helped them to become the wealthiest living generation. However, they have slowly moved away from being the largest and wealthiest living generation and have been replaced by the millennials (Taylor & Keeter, 2010).

Baby boomers have had a more active role in caring for their children (millennials) into adulthood than any generation before them (Fingerman et al., 2012). Furstenberg (2010) stated that compared to 50 years ago, “Today, regardless of their income level, U.S. parents provide roughly the same proportion of their earnings to support their young adult children” (p. 67). This may have caused an ambivalent barrier between baby boomers and their children, the millennials. It can be argued that there is a direct correlation between how baby boomers raised their millennial children and the disengagement of millennials to a baby boomer-led church (Hout, 2017). However, more research is needed to give substantial weight to this argument.

It can be theorized that poor leadership styles within the church have contributed to the ambivalent attitudes of millennials toward the church (Pomroy, 2018). Pomroy (2018) also argued that a lack of authenticity and hypocritical attitudes of a church's leadership can result in millennials not engaging with churches. Today, leadership primarily consists of the baby boomer generation (Carlson, 2016). Churches typically hand down leadership to the next generation that comes of age. However, Migliaccio (2018) discussed that millennials' priorities regarding financial responsibilities differ in how they handle certain situations. This could be a hindering force for baby boomers since it counters their beliefs about financial responsibility (Migliaccio, 2018). It is argued that they may not be willing to engage with millennials from a financial responsibility perspective in terms of leadership (Fox et al., 2021). It could also be argued that this leadership style has contributed to millennials' disengagement from the church.

Church leadership empowering millennial members in leadership positions has been shown to help churches increase their engagement over time (Powell et al., 2016). Church leaders are shown to be more successful when they utilize the social justice and empathetic perspectives of the millennial members (Powell et al., 2016). Powell et al. (2016) offered a model to help with these countering perspectives called keychain leadership: "Keychain leadership refers to pastoral and congregational leaders who are both acutely aware of the keys on their keychain, and intentional about entrusting and empowering all generations, including teenagers and emerging adults, with their own set of keys" (Powell et al., 2016, p. 22). Powell et al. (2016) also discussed that church leaders must put themselves in the shoes of their younger members instead of making blanket judgments and criticisms.

It has been suggested that the baby boomer generation is a hindering force for the millennial's church engagement (Fox et al., 2021). Fox et al. (2021) also discussed a growing

concern for millennials and their lack of religious capital within a church. Religious capital is centered around one's beliefs, religious activity, and interactions with other church members in a type of social capital central to the church (Caputo, 2009). Puffer (2018) believed that millennials' beliefs are counter to those of the baby boomer leadership. This could potentially lead to millennials having less religious capital and, therefore, less opportunity for intergenerational connections. Many of the baby boomer generation may be unable to understand the concept of generational replacement (Fox et al., 2021). Fox et al. (2021) defined generational replacement as the idea that "new generations are developing habits that make them less likely than their predecessors to hold religious beliefs, identify with religious institutions or communities, and participate in religious activities" (p. 865). Caputo (2009) suggested this dissonance between the two generations has resulted in the millennial generation's lack of engagement with the church. However, more research is needed to fully understand if there are long-term ramifications of the potential dissonance between the two generations.

Churches of Christ

The Church of Christ is a self-proclaimed nondenominational sect of Christianity that can trace its beginnings to the Stone-Campbell (or American Restoration) movement in the late 1800s (Foster, 2016; Hicks & Weedman, 2015). Early church leaders, including the Campbells, felt that denominational structures were divisive; hence, only local congregational statutes were initially set in place (Foster, 2016). However, today, thousands of congregations across the United States have meetings or services three times a week on Sunday mornings, Sunday nights, and Wednesday nights. Hicks and Weedman (2015) discussed that it is a protestant congregation with acapella worship, weekly communion, and baptism by immersion of believing individuals. This fellowship is also often one whose administrative leadership roles are facilitated by older

male members who, in many cases, are currently in the baby boomer generation or older. In these churches led by older male adults, the churches will often adhere to a reading of passages from the Bible found in books such as Titus and First Timothy that stress experience as a primary factor in the selection of leaders. Jacobs et al. (2019) emphasize this by finding a significant decline in the leadership opportunities for engagement among millennial parishioners within churches.

The Church of Christ struggles with two dimensions of social differences. The first is the avoidance of uncertainty (Foster, 2016). Uncertainty is defined as “the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations—the extent to which they need predictability in the form of written and unwritten rules” (Mor Barak, 2017, p. 175). The second struggle is the long-term versus the short-term orientation. Mor Barak (2017) discussed that this enables an organization either to look to future benefits or to stay focused on past traditions and the social obligations of any situation. The avoidance of uncertainty may be a potential struggle for current Church of Christ leaders as it relates to the passing of leadership to younger generations.

Younger church members, particularly millennials, perceive that church leaders do not have the same values as they do (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011; Puffer, 2018). This perception is widespread among millennials in congregations whose cultural atmosphere differs from those in the millennial age group (DeVaney, 2015). Although it began as a unity movement, some segments of Churches of Christ have demonstrated hesitance in developing partnerships with other churches that do not share their name or theological structures. It is possible that due to the traditional nature of the baby boomer leadership, there tends to be pushback on knowledge sharing that takes place among younger members (Fox et al., 2021). Fox et al. (2021) would go

on to suggest that the focus on traditionalism wants to keep the congregation the same without outside or inside sources interfering (Fox et al., 2021). These types of conflicts “that are an inherent aspect of communities take on greater importance when communities are faced with change, which over time they inevitably are” (Hislop et al., 2018, p. 211). Hislop et al. (2018) also suggested that sharing information across all cultural and generational lines could mitigate negative attitudes toward the millennial portion of a congregation.

Church Community

The surrounding church community is made of more than church leadership and other older invested church members. This support leads to investment from millennials and shows an increase in engagement (Kiessling & Shults, 2018). Overstreet (2010) stated that millennials are “seeking personal authenticity, genuineness, and wholeness, transcending one’s locus of centrality, and connectedness to self and others through relationships and community” (p. 240). His study also asked about the level of millennials’ spirituality to show a complete picture of this generation’s religious state (Overstreet, 2010). Authenticity and relationships through a church community could give millennials the connections they seek. Knowing this age group is seeking and valuing relationships could be pertinent for church leaders. The next step could be making opportunities for the community to be involved in the lives of millennials. Kiessling and Shults (2018) suggested that church leadership and church employees working together may have success in implementing programs that could make this possible.

These church communities have been shown to be effective in the longevity of faith amongst millennials (Ufimtseva, 2014). Ufimtseva (2014) also stated that this is a “process by which an individual or group of people come to be involved in the religious life, their assimilation of religious values and norms of behavior, and, in consequence, a change in their

relations with society conditioned by the religious laws that are professed” (p. 75). Kiessling and Shults (2018) suggested that invested church members, who would be considered the surrounding community, directly impact a millennial’s church engagement. The next step is to determine if culture is a hindering force to millennials building relationships intergenerationally within the church.

Online Engagement

Millennials did not have to catch up to the digital age like earlier generations; they were born into it (DeVaney, 2015). Unlike earlier generations, millennials have never struggled with online shopping, information gathering, schooling, or relating socially through online means such as computers and cell phones (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2020; DeVaney, 2015). Studies have shown that millennials spend more time on their computers, laptops, and smartphones than any previous generation (Brailovskaia & Bierhoff, 2020). Millennials tend to put much of their personal social lives on online platforms such as Facebook and Instagram (Ambrose et al., 2020). Ambrose et al. (2020) sought to determine why millennials use social media so extensively. They found that 95.9% used some sort of social media site (Ambrose et al., 2020). When asked why they use these sites, the top three responses were to stay “connected with friends and family, entertainment and news, and ease of use” (Ambrose et al., 2020, p. 180).

The potential exists for intergenerational relationships to be made using these sites (Larson, 2021). There has been a concern that millennials tend to interact socially through Facebook or Instagram instead of face-to-face interactions (Larson, 2021). This concern was not entirely accurate since the need for in-person interactions was filled with “other forms of online communication such as texting or calling” (Larson, 2021, p. 234). However, more research is

needed to determine if social media is a replacement for in-person relationships and if intergenerational relationships could be encouraged and fostered through social media means.

Engaging millennials through online means could be beneficial to many mainline churches in the United States. Habibi et al. (2014) discussed that many mainline churches are utilizing online communities to reach a wider variety of millennial groups. This has become increasingly obvious due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Gharzai et al., 2020). Gharzai et al. (2020) also discussed that millennials and other younger adults have an aptitude to facilitate information through social media awareness better than any other generation. Engaging them to help a church facilitate communication and foster relationships could be a paradigm shift for future generations who could become socially connected through digital means (DeVaney, 2015). Millennials tend to explore new ways to advance their social interactions through many online means (DeVaney, 2015; Habibi et al., 2014). An example of this came from the Colorado Bible College (McIntosh, 2015). Students participated in an “online communion” to remember the death of Jesus. While doing this, they pondered the question, “Is this as biblical as offline communion.” McIntosh (2015) found that “there is no tangible reason why remembrance cannot take place online, and, hence, there is no indisputable reason for opposing the practice” (p. 138).

Also, millennials tend to share, like, and comment on many posts involving them or their families (Ambrose et al., 2020). When churches take advantage of this aspect of a millennial’s online social habits, it gives the millennial a sense of connection to the church (McIntosh, 2015). However, this is not a substitute for all relationships in general. It is merely an opportunity that churches can take to invest in their members’ interests (McIntosh, 2015). This practice has been shown to build connections with millennials and increase their engagement (DeVaney, 2015).

Church leaders have a unique opportunity to engage their millennials through nontraditional means. This engagement could occur through social media, mobile applications, or Zoom communication in the post–COVID-19 era, as many churches have done in the past (Habibi et al., 2014). Because these forms of online engagement have the potential to impact a millennial’s social behavior, church leaders may have a unique opportunity to engage with them on these platforms (Larson, 2021). Millennials have been shown to be more engaged with social and cultural issues while taking an active role in them (Bock & Del Rosario, 2017). If millennials are utilizing social media for social awareness, church leaders could take advantage of these means to engage. However, as was stated earlier, many church leaders of the older generation are not attuned to online social and generational habits (DeVaney, 2015). Hout (2017) believed this has contributed to church leaders, particularly baby boomer church leaders, potentially not being attuned to the social issues of millennials. This divide could potentially be solved by church leaders participating in the online social behaviors of millennial parishioners (Bock & Del Rosario, 2017).

Generational Investment

The term generational investment (GI) is a church model of leadership. The basis for this is found in the Bible under Deuteronomy 6. This text in Deuteronomy attributes the following to Moses, the leader of ancient Israel at its founding: “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road when you lie down and when you get up” (Deuteronomy 6:6–7, New International Version). It is not a new concept for older generations to invest in younger generations emotionally, spiritually, and mentally (Powell et al., 2016). The coming together of church believers on a regular basis with intergenerational intentions can lead to church retention

and increased church practices or engagement with younger generations (Kjesbo & Cha, 2020). M. Brown (2016) discussed that over time, the modern church model has significantly decreased the importance of these investments for these generations. Kjesbo and Cha (2020) also discussed that parents and older generations must prioritize church attendance, practices, and engagement within the church model to increase church engagement with younger generations, such as millennials.

There are significant parallels between the words from Deuteronomy 6 and the reviewed research literature. Reduced investment in the church from younger generations may be an artifact of reduced investment from older generations in the younger generations. Puffer (2018) discussed that this changing church model could lead to many churches diminishing their focus on millennials. Because of this, the children of millennials have the potential to not have support from older generations within the church setting. Although the mother and father were determined to be the number one contributing factor in whether a young person retains their faith after adolescence (D. Brown, 2013), it may take extra support from the church to solidify faith retention (Joiner, 2009). Joiner (2009) also discussed that “the church and the home are each trying to do the best job they can for their children. Churches are full of programs that inspire families, and countless families participate regularly in their local churches” (p. 26). However, if the church is not accomplishing this task, millennials tend to become disengaged (Sumpter, 2019). The practices implemented within the church should also be adapted within the home and vice versa (Joiner, 2009). Dudley and Wisbey (2000) showed that when church practices are adapted within the home, an overwhelming majority of adolescents tend to retain their faith and stay engaged. If millennial families have one hour a week in the church, yet the other 167 hours are with their family, this viewpoint could be argued (Joiner, 2009). However, intentionality is

the key to this practice. Churches need to focus on millennial engagement to help them feel valued and appreciated within the church community (Kjesbo & Cha, 2020).

Generational investment is designed for faith, family, and church community to complement each other and work in tandem. These groups support one another for the betterment of the generation they focus on (Kjesbo & Cha, 2020). The literature points to a connection between all three to have well-rounded older members who inherited the faith through their parents to support the surrounding community, namely the younger generations (Powell, 2011). This partnership is specifically important for millennial church engagement. Results of GI within this generation will take time to accomplish, as was stated earlier (M. Brown, 2016). Church leaders are encouraged through scripture to ensure the growth and engagement of their younger members through GI as well as intergenerational relationships (Powell, 2011). This intentional act of instituting GI in the church could lead to growth and retention among millennial members (Kjesbo & Cha, 2020).

Intergenerational Ambivalence

A growing concern is that millennials and older church members have developed an intergenerational ambivalence toward each other due to the church's structure (Hout, 2017). Ambivalence is defined as having both positive and negative sentiments toward any given situation or context (Pillemer et al., 2007). Within the context of the church, it results in two separate generational groups having positive emotions for the church and negative emotions for how the other generation wants to structure it. This phenomenon is not limited to the church setting. (Pillemer et al., 2007). Pillemer et al. (2007) discussed that around 50% of older individuals had certain degrees of ambivalent feelings toward their adult children. This could

possibly contribute to the little experience millennials have had with intergenerational relationships (Hout, 2017).

Hout (2017) went on to discuss that the ambivalent attitudes of older people toward younger people could cause younger people to tend to stray away from older people's structures. Also, ambivalent attitudes in younger people are present toward older generations (Scheitle et al., 2018). The cause for this could be lived experiences, parental history, or culture (Jorgensen, 2019). However, more research is needed on this specific relational barrier. This ambivalence may have caused a barrier that resulted in fewer intergenerational relationships. Also, it has led to millennials having less and less respect for organized religion altogether (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). In fact, "some Americans have become ambivalent about organized religion, and over time, they become more likely to prefer no religion to naming one" (Hout, 2017, p. 58). A culture shift must occur among church leaders to help reduce these ambivalent viewpoints that hinder intergenerational relationship opportunities within the church (Kiessling & Shults, 2018).

Millennial

The millennial generation is defined as the oldest being born in 1981 and the youngest being born in 1996 (Petersen, 2020). With this birth time frame, this generation is typically the children of the baby boomer generation (DeVaney, 2015). Over 75 million millennials live in the United States, surpassing the baby boomer generation as the largest living generation (Taylor & Keeter, 2010). However, the millennial generation makes up the minority of all mainline churches. Even though their population continues to outgrow all other generations, millennials' church engagement increases at the same rate as other generations (Sumpter, 2019). Sumpter (2019) discussed that a primary reason for this decreased millennial engagement in churches is

dissatisfaction with church leaders and how they handle the overall communicative business of the church.

Millennials also have gone through more changes in their personal lives than many generations before them. These changes take the form of leaving home, attending college, changing colleges, moving to a new city for a job, changing to another job, and then finding a new church vastly different from the small-town church they were used to (P. Ryan, 2018). While common for millennials, this lifestyle would be very unusual for their baby boomer parents, who were born from 1946 to 1969 (James, 2017). This pattern is seen in their church life as well. Millennial engagement has decreased dramatically in all mainline churches across the United States (Jenkin & Martin, 2014; Panzer, 2019).

Millennials have surpassed all other generations in terms of numbers, making up most of the workforce in the United States. They also make more money than any other generation before them (Burstein, 2013). In addition, they are much more digitally adept. Burstein (2013) stated, “As first and second graders, we could write reports with a word processing program and spell check them. Through our formative years, however, digital technology began to make quantum leaps almost daily in the variety and extent of applications and functions, as well as user access and mobility” (p. 53). This has led them to become what DeVaney (2015) called a “digital native” as opposed to previous generations, which he called “digital immigrants” (p. 12). For this reason, millennials are much more consistent at interfacing through digital means with their occupation, hobbies, schooling, finances, and relationships. Because of this digital advantage, millennials have more control over their positions within forward-thinking companies as technology progresses (DeVaney, 2015).

Along with their progressive technological thinking, millennials are socially more progressive in many aspects of their life (Boehme, 2013). Boehme (2013) stated, “They are predominantly liberal on social issues like adults living together without marriage, having children outside of marriage, same-gender marriage, same-gender couples adopting and raising children, and in their approval of abortion” (p. 95). These progressive ideologies have contributed to their disengagement from churches because they counter the ideologies of a church’s leadership (Sumpter, 2019). Therefore, they become dissatisfied with church leaders on many social issues that counter their beliefs.

Tuff (2019) discussed three key factors that tend to keep millennials engaged in any project they are pursuing: constant feedback, feeling purposeful and challenged in their vocation, and feeling their opinions are valued before they give their all. There may be a direct correlation between their engagement factors and their inconsistencies with many church practices. This may be a reason why James (2017) would suggest this possibly counters the beliefs of their parents, the baby boomer generation. Tuff (2019) would go on to state that a millennial’s mindset is not “how can I fall in line?” but, rather, “how can I get this ‘leader’ to understand me to help me to succeed?”

Understanding how to engage millennials is vital for any organization to succeed due to the rising number of millennials in the United States (Sumpter, 2019). Relational factors could play a massive role in this (Tuff, 2019). Due to their small relational habits, millennials tend to reject a relationship on an organizational level due to the thought process of authority being involved. Even in their personal lives, one survey showed that millennials are the loneliest generation, with the highest percentage of people not having close relational groups (Ballard, 2019). However, the more that older generations empathize with millennials, the more

engagement they will have not just with the organization but on a leadership level as well (DeVaney, 2015).

Attrition Related to Societal Issues

A regression of church engagement is a real concept in a young adult's life, moving from a youth program centered around teenagers to an adult one with fewer parameters. Millennials have shown that they were unprepared or unsupported by churches to engage with the adult parishioner population (Powell et al., 2016). Church teachings may have contributed to a young adult leaving the church (Heft, 2008). Heft (2008) went on to say that "the false perception that the sacramental and spiritual life is somehow separate from intellectual and civic life should not exist" (p. 221). Young adults may perceive that their spiritual life must be separate from the "real world." Heft (2008) also suggested that there should be two sides to the same coin and that it should not be separate. Throughout a millennial's life, society and outside countering church beliefs also have the potential to diminish a millennial's church engagement (Jenkin & Martin, 2014).

The effects are evident within the research. Mueller et al. (2010) researched the impact of cultural norms vs. the moral attitude of church leadership. The primary purpose of this research was to understand the role that religion plays in the cultural and social life of millennial church members (Mueller et al., 2010). They found that through relationships with the surrounding church community, invested and involved millennials were less likely to be associated with potentially dangerous activity such as premarital sex (Mueller et al., 2010). This is a positive effect that relationships have on the well-being of millennials. A millennial's connection with an invested member, such as one from an older generation, has the possibility to hinder a dismissal of intergenerational relationships within the church due to a cultural influence (Krause, 2011).

Krause (2011) also discussed that the opposite would happen, that the relationship would cause the millennials to have a positive impact on their secular cultural activities, such as nonchurch relationships.

However, the society in which millennials have developed their faith could play a role in how they view a previous generation's moral church and moral theology, primarily the generation of their parents, "baby boomers" (Taylor & Keeter, 2010). Bengtson et al. (2018) believe this may have led them to reject the continuity of their lived religious experience that their parents instilled in them. One example theorized is that exposing a child to only one religious or nonreligious point of view could make a child underdeveloped spiritually and emotionally and possibly deter them from the church altogether (Dahl & Galliher, 2012). This has, in part, led to a rise in millennials categorizing themselves as "nones" on any personal information documentation (Bengtson et al., 2018). This would hint at millennials needing a support system to assist them in combating a cultural influence that has contributed to their continuity issues through religious socialization (Pusztai & Demeter-Karászi, 2019). Therefore, they would be more likely to combat the current cultural climate because of having a strong moral community focused on them through their formative years into their late 30s (Heft, 2008). This relational intentionality could hinder intergenerational ambivalence, but more research should be done around this limitation.

It can be argued that the diminishing spiritual life of a millennial can be directly connected to societal issues (Bengtson et al., 2018). Because of this, it can have a direct impact on a millennial's church engagement (McGuire, 2018). To show this, McGuire (2018) researched the impact of life experiences of young Black millennials versus young White millennials. The findings determined that Black millennials were more likely to maintain their

faith into adulthood than White millennials (McGuire, 2018). The findings challenged scholars that religion was more than rituals and traditions; it was a way of life that outer influences might not change (McGuire, 2018). If this type of culture combatted outer influences and different cultures to make a solid base for a young person's faith within Black millennials, this could be replicated among other cultures. However, more research is certainly needed to make this claim viable.

Summary

A case can be made for researching the intergenerational factors that lead to millennial engagement in a church congregation. One theory is that intergenerational ambivalence has led millennials to reject their parents' investment in church. Relationships could negate the ambivalence millennials may feel toward their parents and older church members or church leaders, leading to millennials adopting positive church practices or becoming more engaged. If millennial families are not present within a church organization, the next generation is absent from receiving leadership from the previous one. However, this is not a simple fix that can be corrected overnight. An intergenerational investment from older members into millennials could take years to accomplish. The first step is determining what factors lead to a millennial's continued engagement or dismissal of the church organization. Interviews were conducted among millennial church members to understand this.

Chapter 3: Methodology

As discussed, the purpose of this study is to conduct a phenomenological study on a local congregation to determine what intergenerational factors are connected to millennials' engagement with that church. Flynn and Korcuska (2018) discussed that "researchers using phenomenological research methodology endeavor to discern the essence of participants' lived experiences and to lay aside their prevailing understandings of a phenomenon to authentically explore the participant's experiences" (p. 35). It was for this reason that a phenomenological approach was used to discover why millennial church engagement across the country is in a slow decline and why overall engagement of millennial families has not increased (Powell et al., 2016). If the problem is not addressed, the church's future is uncertain. The absence of millennial families in the church is a detriment to the health of a church's membership and a challenge to its longevity (Bengtson et al., 2018). In addition, barriers to significant intergenerational relationships among millennials and baby boomers have been identified in previous research as a potential contributing factor to the reduced engagement of millennials in churches. These issues were explored in this interview-based qualitative research project.

Research Questions

The questions that guided this study are as follows:

RQ1: Are there intergenerational relationship factors that contribute to church engagement among millennials?

RQ2: Are there church practices that help millennial families to foster intimate relationships with church members from other age demographics?

RQ3: Are there any external or ambivalent factors that contribute to relational distancing among millennials within the church?

Research Design and Method

Due to the lack of knowledge on the long-term impact intergenerational factors have on millennial parishioner engagement, a qualitative approach conducted through interviews was used to determine the effects more directly (Becker & Geer, 1957; Leavy, 2017; Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). The two primary goals of using this method are (a) to give a voice to millennials on why they continue or discontinue their engagement at a given church and (b) to understand what intergenerational factors and church practices might affect a millennial parishioner's family engagement (Leavy, 2017). Leavy (2017) also stated that "the major advantage of this approach is that all relevant stakeholders are equally valued and can collectively identify core issues, problems, and solutions" (p. 20). This approach represents not just this generation but every stakeholder, from parishioners to employees, by focusing on "action, community participation, and the transformative possibilities of research" (Leavy, 2017, p. 233). This is the basis for the research questions of this study.

Setting

This study was conducted at a nondenominational church located in a major metropolitan area in Texas. This congregation had been in existence for 107 years. After its first 80 years, it moved locations to a community housing district to have more outreach. After this move, the church membership quadrupled. Now, they are a community of 1,100 members. The generational breakdown within this congregation of these two generations in this study was as follows: 31.3% were baby boomers (305 members) and 15.3% (149 members) were millennials. The gender demographic was also 47% female and 53% male.

Population and Selection Criteria

Millennial parishioners were recruited through an in-person invitation that directed them to an online sign-up on the congregation's website via Sign Up Genius. A minimum of 10 and a maximum of 25 parishioners with a two-parent mother/father household or single-parent household currently associated with the church and that meet three prerequisites were chosen to participate in the study (Appendix A). The prerequisites were as follows: (a) The millennial respondent must have at least one child from 0 to 12 years old or birth through sixth grade. (b) The parent must also not have a child who is a part of the student ministry of this congregation. This was to alleviate potential biases for myself. (c) They must have been associated with this congregation for at least 1 year. The number of participants was sufficient due to the fact that I sought to understand the respondents' lived experiences pertaining to this specific congregation. Through the in-depth interviews, I aimed to create categories from the data and then analyze participation and relational effects within each category while assessing how the lived experience of the participants could be understood (Charmaz, 2006).

Each individual millennial respondent was interviewed in a one-on-one interview over the course of 3 weeks. The determination of the order of who was interviewed was dependent on the time that the respondent could meet in the 3-week period when the interview times were provided. Each family was given dates and times of interview openings, and they selected which interview opening worked best for them. If a family requested to be rescheduled due to conflicts, they were given accommodations to schedule an interview outside of the given times.

Materials

The church building was the preferred location for the interviews. However, many of the millennial parishioners had to commute to the church building (20–30-minute drive), so a Zoom call was utilized if an in-person meeting at the church building could not be arranged.

This congregation frequently interviewed its parishioners, and the experience has been viewed positively by parishioners in the past. Each parishioner at this congregation has had the opportunity to respond to past interviews with honest and open opinions. They tend to enjoy describing the complexity of their experiences by describing their attitudes, perceptions, challenges, and successes (Patton, 2015). In this type of study, the researcher would play a vital role in collecting comprehensive and honest data from those they are interviewing (Chenail, 2011). In this specific situation, the interviewer obtaining the data becomes the actual instrument for the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). My goal with this instrument was to utilize open-ended questions that would help give more natural and honest responses.

To ensure that the interviewees' responses were captured accurately, audio recordings were used to capture the full interview. The recorded interviews were secured through a private and password-protected church hard drive to maintain the confidentiality of each participant.

Data Collection

Within a more intimate qualitative setting, interviews have been shown to give accurate and naturalistic responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Based on this viewpoint and as was stated earlier, millennial parent parishioners of the congregation where this study was being held were the participants of the interview data that were collected. The congregation's administrative church leadership and the head of the family ministry approved this interview process. Each

millennial parishioner involved with this study signed a nondisclosure consent form. Their personal information was kept private, and only their responses to the questions were used.

Once the research is published, information about the families could be known. Because millennial families interact with each other and other parishioners weekly at this congregation, considerations were made to make their identities private. All identifying factors were removed. Each millennial respondent was given a letter that corresponds to their name. “Millennial A,” “Millennial B,” etc., were used to place corresponding answers. I did not discuss the questionnaires with any millennial respondents before the interview because it could have interfered with and skewed the data during the interviews (Seidman, 2019).

Another added measure of privacy for millennial interviewees was an impartial third party to whom the millennials could vocalize issues. The administrative church leadership team appointed a person not involved with the research to receive parishioners’ questions. This was the lead family minister of this local congregation. This helped me to not have any personal biases before the interview process toward any interviewees. Davis (2017) discussed that this could directly or indirectly influence the researcher’s ability to collect and interpret the data. This third-party person relayed that information back to me, as the researcher, for clarification. This process kept me from interfering, in person, with any parameters before the interviews begin. Data were stored on an external hard drive that was password-protected. The password was only be known by me and the third-party advocate. It also was given to an IRB faculty member per the Abilene Christian University’s IRB handbook. Additionally, the Abilene Christian University’s IRB handbook requires that data be kept for at least 3 years. Therefore, after 3 years, I will destroy all data to secure the confidentiality of the parishioners who participated in this

study. Waiting this length may give other researchers or journals enough time to request data or records (Hacket, 2018).

Data were collected in an interview format with open- and closed-ended questions given to the interviewees. Having subjective interviews could help to fully understand the subjective experiences of the millennial respondent (Seidman, 2019). The interviews give context to the experiences of these millennials. The interview questions were related to specific intergenerational experiences that had possibly led to their continued engagement in this congregation. These interview questions helped to determine (a) are there intergenerational relationship factors that contribute to church engagement among millennials? (b) are there church practices that help millennial families to foster intimate relationships with church members from other age demographics? and (c) are there any external or ambivalent factors that contribute to relational distancing among millennials within the church? This was in line with the phenomenological approach, as discussed by Seidman (2019). The interviews were done with the millennial parishioners to examine what possible effects intergenerational factors had on their family and church engagement. Once again, no names were used for the data analyzed from the interviews.

Data Analysis and Coding

In this section, the interview responses from millennial respondents are analyzed and recorded to discover whether any intergenerational patterns that fit within predetermined codes occur universally among these millennial parishioners. The first step was to process each transcription quickly to help retain the efficacy needed for each interview (Thompson, 2018). The transcription software platform I used for this is Otter.ai to transfer from the audio version to a textual version. However, the analysis was done manually and in the form of an intelligent

verbatim approach. Intelligent verbatim transcription utilizes a layer of filtering where “ums,” laughter, and/or pauses are omitted from the interview (McMullin, 2023). McMullin (2023) suggested this helps with extracting the meaning from what was said. Next, coding was utilized to understand the answers given. Coding is typically utilized to process raw data and pull common responses from the questions or phrases given by the interviewees (O’Brien et al., 2014). The specific type of coding that was utilized was a form of deductive coding. Saldaña (2009) discussed that deductive coding is a top-down approach to coding where a set of predetermined codes are utilized to find themes that fit those codes. Codes were also derived from the literature that has been presented. A thematic analysis (TA) was used within the context of this coding. Castleberry and Nolen (2018) described TA as “a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 808). This form of coding can be utilized across many qualitative methods of data collecting and tends to mesh well with most forms (Castleberry & Nolen, 2018).

As was stated earlier, a deductive form of coding is most appropriate for this research. I used a computer to keep codes together with each answer from the transcriptions. Such codes are expected to revolve around intergenerational relationships, generational ambivalence, and millennial engagement. Smith and Davies (2010) discussed that this type of coding should be based on the literature that is based on this type of study. Richards and Morse (2007) also encouraged researchers to utilize a chart to determine coded words and phrases that correlate to each subject group. The goal is to break down the codes to determine the recurring themes during each interview. A combination of codes also was classified if each interview contained them. This also helped with the context of each situation. This deductive approach to data analysis

coding helped examine whether any intergenerational factors have helped millennials become more engaged within this church.

However, before coding could occur, I immersed myself in each interview in the form of transcribing. This form of immersion in the interviews occurs by listening to and observing each interview repeatedly. Transcribing the data can help to pull ideas out that may not have been fully realized the first or second time listening to and observing each interview. As was stated, the transcription software platform I was using is Otter.ai. Examining by transcribing each interviewee's answers helped to fully grasp the context of each millennial respondent and their current environment within the congregation (Thompson, 2018). Coding was utilized to show what significant themes were to be identified. This relied heavily on the questions asked of each millennial taking part in the study (Smith & Davies, 2010). Such questions centered around relationships made with other generations, and times a week spent relationally with other generations had specific coding. Additional coding may have been needed once more specific answers were given.

Based on the review of the literature and the language described in Erikson's psychosocial development theory, the following code words were utilized with each interview, and responses were assigned to each code. However, these examples may have changed as more specific questions were identified:

- generational ambivalence
- generational investment
- church community
- intimacy
- isolation

- generativity
- stagnation

Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Creswell (2014) discussed that the validity of the findings of this type of qualitative research could only be as good as the researcher's trustworthiness. As it pertains to my own research, I believe trustworthiness is the primary factor in determining the quality of the research. However, there is a common criticism "that qualitative research is subjective, anecdotal, and subject to researcher bias" (F. Ryan et al., 2007, p. 742). How I would protect the quality of the millennial participants being studied would be to let those individuals speak for themselves. The viability of this research was reinforced by the church leadership overseeing the research project with weekly up-to-date information to help maintain the quality of the interviews. Along with this, the impartial third-party individual mentioned earlier, who was the lead family minister, continued to advocate for the participants who gave their interviews to help relay questions that may have arisen as they pertain to the interviews. She also was given weekly updates to relay to the participants if needed.

Following guidelines developed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) also validated another level of trust for the participants. To ensure appropriate conduct that involves human subjects occurs, federally funded institutions require an IRB (Liberale & Kovach, 2017). Liberale and Kovach (2017) went on to discuss that this "is to protect the ethical rights and welfare of the human subjects from research risks" (p. 37). The IRB approval letter is attached in Appendix B. Consent forms were used to ensure parishioner consent was given prior to the start of the project. To better ensure the validity of the interview, I field-tested the questions on five millennial subjects. The feedback from this field-testing let me know how the questions were

perceived and if there were clarifications that needed to be made before interviewing the actual subjects for the study.

These measures helped maintain the credibility of the interviews being facilitated. The goal is to avoid inserting subjective views into the responses of those participating in the research. The benefit of this trusting relationship between the subjects being studied and me was that their information was unbiased and richer in quality. The validity of the unbiased approach was due to my not being associated with each millennial family. I am not the minister for each family or their children. Along with this detail, the children were not interviewed, only the mother or father, as stated earlier. Efron and Ravid (2020) stated, “You have to be confident that your research findings are valid in order for the results of the study to be useful for your practice and to enable you to shape your decisions and future actions” (p. 75). If the participants’ results were deemed disingenuous, the research’s credibility would become severely limited.

Assumptions

Many assumptions were made in determining the focal point and methodology of the study. One assumption was that intergenerational relationships are an essential contributor to millennial church engagement. Millennial perceptions of relationship deficits could be a contributing factor to them leaving the church if they feel that their long-term investment might not offer them an opportunity to “rise through the ranks of leadership.” If these assumptions are accurate, they highlight the importance of the role of mentoring by the church’s current leadership. It is possible that perceived distance in relationships among both generations may contribute to a felt deficit of leadership opportunities among the younger generation. Also, a perception by the older generation that the younger generation is not ready or willing to lead the church may be present. Another assumption is that each millennial respondent was honest with

their responses in the interview and questionnaire to understand what relational factors increase their engagement.

Limitations

As described by Creswell (2014), limitations are factors that would be out of my control as the researcher. This study's primary limitation was the population being in a single congregation. Churches have their own culture and have been known to evolve separately over time, regardless of any denominational similarities (Foster, 2016). Because of this, answers may be similar to one another regardless of lived experiences.

Also, minority millennial families (6%) were limited in this study due to them having little representation in this specific congregation. However, the common thread was the experiences had at this congregation.

Another limitation was my own biases as the researcher. The location of this study was the congregation where I work. Although I have taken steps to alleviate my own biased opinions, the potential is still there, which can interfere with facilitating interviews and the data analysis phase.

Delimitations

Creswell (2014) described delimitations as barriers within a study that a researcher could possibly have control of. For the purposes of this study, only millennial parents with children ages 0–12 were interviewed. As was stated earlier, this is due to the fact that I, the researcher, am not the minister of the adults or their children.

Also, the choice to have this study at one church was based on accessibility. There were no barriers between me and the parishioners that were interviewed. Accessibility was a primary factor in this decision.

Furthermore, it was not intended to exclude any millennial families. However, due to me being their children's minister, which could be a conflict of interest, these families were excluded if they had a child in my ministry program.

Epoché

This epoché is to make known my own personal biases and how they relate to the study of millennials in the church where the study took place. As a minister at this specific congregation for more than 7 years, I have had social interactions with many of the parishioners who are partaking in this study. The social interactions took place before this study was approved. However, it could have played a role in the biases I have toward this particular congregation.

Personal Experiences

As was stated, I have been the minister at the congregation where this study was taking place for 7 years. However, I am specifically the student minister. That encompasses ages 13 through 18, or 7th through 12th grade. My first draw toward interviewing millennials at this congregation was due to my ministry having fewer and fewer students entering the student ministry within the past few years. In the fall of 2021, I had my first students whose parents were millennials enter my ministry. One of the first things I noticed was that there was a possible correlation between the few students I had whose parents were millennials and the minimal church involvement from those parents. This was determined based on the church attendance of those parents.

Understanding that there may be a link between the few students that were children of millennials I had and their parents' minimal involvement helped me to determine if this was an isolated issue or if it was more prevalent in other churches. I started locally to determine if our

church was the only church facing this issue. It turned out that many student ministers in the area had similar issues with their own ministries as it pertains to having a few students whose parents are categorized as millennials. I sought relationships with many of the millennial parents who were bringing their children to events. This proved to help with communication and ongoing participation for the students. However, due to the younger millennial parents' children not being in my ministry, I did not have relationships with them as they were not associated with the ministry I oversaw. This fueled the idea of a relational ministry or intergenerational relationships to help with engagement for millennials.

My personal experiences as a minister at this church have influenced my perception of this congregation and its parishioners, as well as my purpose for this study. My position has had me involved with many issues surrounding many of the families that could participate in this study. However, I still feel this congregation is a perfect candidate to host this study due to the millennial population being below the national average for churches. This is also true due to the steps I have taken to assist in the safety of the subjects and to uphold the integrity of the data being collected.

Summary

Several steps were taken to ensure proper conduct within this research. First, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) suggested relaying information to a type of focus team. For the purposes of my research, this team was the ministry staff within this congregation. The other family ministers received the results before and after each interview to determine the validity of the findings. Having more practitioners involved helped me keep my subjective views out of the findings and let the millennial parishioners speak for themselves. Last, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) also stated that “to accurately report and analyze the findings of your research, you have to be

rigorous about recording participant responses” (p. 144). This was a section that I had to utilize to have an accurate translation of the interviews that took place for the research. To facilitate this, I recorded every interview and never omitted any response to the answers given to me. I wanted to determine if every phrase and sentence given to me through each interview was deemed a reason for millennial church engagement. The inclusion of all responses was the level of rigor I wanted to implement within this study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore what intergenerational factors contribute to a millennial's engagement within a church. A phenomenological study consists of understanding the lived subjective experiences of a person or persons within a study. This type of study has been shown to assist researchers in setting aside their preconceived notions about an event or phenomenon and to explore a subject's experiences more authentically (Flynn & Korcuska, 2018). Millennials were defined as those born between 1981 and 1996. The millennial interviews took place at a church in a major Texas metropolitan area with a membership of 1,100. As was discussed earlier, this research was pursued with the assumption that the results would (a) assist church leaders in identifying what intergenerational practices are viable for millennial engagement, (b) help pivot church leader focus to collaborate more intentionally with millennial families and to make a more engaged church experience for said families, and (c) to give current engaged millennials a richer and more meaningful church experience for their families. Due to the decline of millennials' engagement nationwide, other churches can also highly benefit from potentially discovered factors that lead to healthy millennial church engagement.

This chapter contains the results of this phenomenological study. The research questions that guided the interview questions are as follows:

RQ1: Are there intergenerational relationship factors that contribute to church engagement among millennials?

RQ2: Are there church practices that help millennial families to foster intimate relationships with church members from other age demographics?

RQ3: Are there any external or ambivalent factors that contribute to relational distancing among millennials within the church?

Out of the 54 individuals presented with the information and with the opportunity to participate, 21 volunteered to be interviewed for the sample. Of those 21, 18 (86%) agreed to do in-person interviews. Three (14%) were interviewed utilizing the video communication Zoom platform. Interviews were scheduled through a website link called Signup Genius and were completed within 3 weeks. They were audio recorded and then transcribed through another online platform known as Otter.ai. I used a thematic approach for deductive coding that was done manually. This assisted in grouping themes that led to the narrative of each question given. Additionally, other codes that were not predetermined were discovered during the coding process. There were multiple instances of answers from millennials that deserved their own code yet still answered the research questions.

In Table 1, I provide age, gender, and ethnic demographics for this study ($N = 21$). After a brief view of Table 1, it shows that the median age of participants was 38 years old. The oldest millennials were 42, and the youngest was 28, a span of 14 years. There were no outliers within this group. Gender representation was majority male. Their representation was 57%, whereas the female representation was 43%. The ethnic makeup of the group was predominantly Caucasian, standing at 81%, and the Hispanic demographic standing at 19%. No other ethnicities participated in the study. All homes were two-parent households. No other ethnicities or single-parent family millennials volunteered to participate. There were also two respondents (9.5%) who were in multigenerational marriages, meaning their spouse was from an older generation. However, both millennials still qualified for this study.

Table 1*Millennial Demographics*

Designation	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
Millennial A	38	Female	Hispanic
Millennial B	33	Female	Caucasian
Millennial C	33	Male	Caucasian
Millennial D	41	Male	Hispanic
Millennial E	41	Male	Caucasian
Millennial F	33	Female	Caucasian
Millennial G	31	Male	Caucasian
Millennial H	40	Female	Caucasian
Millennial I	28	Female	Caucasian
Millennial J	42	Male	Caucasian
Millennial K	37	Female	Caucasian
Millennial L	35	Male	Caucasian
Millennial M	41	Male	Caucasian
Millennial N	41	Female	Caucasian
Millennial O	39	Male	Caucasian
Millennial P	38	Male	Hispanic
Millennial Q	37	Male	Caucasian
Millennial R	41	Female	Caucasian
Millennial S	37	Male	Hispanic
Millennial T	42	Male	Caucasian
Millennial U	41	Female	Caucasian

In the remainder of this chapter, the results of the millennial interviews are presented. The responses to the interview questions are discussed in sequence with each research question (RQ). This means that interview questions that correlate to RQ1 are discussed first, then RQ2 interview questions, followed by RQ3 interview questions. All names were removed, and a letter was randomly assigned to protect the privacy of the participants. This was done in the hopes that their identities would be kept confidential.

The following three sections of interview questions were formed to answer this study's three research questions. Refer to Appendix C for a more extensive example that familiarizes the correlation between interview questions and research questions. The first section of results presented was determined to answer Research Question 1 (RQ1). Interview questions were designed to seek out and determine what intergenerational factors are present within this church (Appendix D).

Research Question 1: Interview Questions

RQ1: Are there intergenerational relationship factors that contribute to church engagement among millennials?

Question 1: Tell Me Your Story With How You Got Involved With This Church

The respondents' answers to this question of how their involvement came about were not so widely varied in their experiences at this church. In fact, the respondents were categorized into two groups based on their answers. The first is that they had attended this church most of their life or since birth. Associated with that, there were also those who stated they had married someone who attended this church their whole life and that was their main reason for being involved. They were put in the category of the first group. The second group stated they were

seeking another church in the area and that the sole criteria was that they had a strong children's program at that church.

Demographics of Each Category. Of the 21 millennials, 12 (57%) made up the group that either attended this congregation their whole life or married into it once they started to have children. Those that grew up here consisted of 5 men and 3 women. Those who married someone who grew up here consisted of 2 men and 2 women. The other half of the millennials, which consisted of 9 (43%) respondents, were actively seeking a church with a strong children's program. Millennial Q was the outlier to the second theme of actively seeking a church with a children's program. Although they were pleased to find a church with a strong children's program where their children could have relationships with other children as they grew, they had left their former congregation due to progressive changes made in their worship service. An added reason for attending this congregation was based on the "speaking of biblical truths, views on baptism, and acapella worship" (Millennial Q). They stated those were all the main reasons for attending this congregation. However, they were still relieved to find a children's program that suited the needs of their family.

Grew Up in This Congregation. There were two subthemes discovered for those who grew up at this church. First, of the 8 respondents who grew up at this congregation, 4 of them had a major event happen in the lives of their parents in terms of church community and engagement. Respondents discussed a church that was said to be a previous location where the millennial's parents attended. A group departure from that church to this current one happened during the millennial's preschool years. The ages of these millennials when this event took place ranged from 3 to 6 years of age. Several of the respondents expressed that there were multigenerational factors that contributed to that change. Millennial C discussed that it was a

family affair to start attending this congregation. They went on to say that “it involved grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and parents. And for the most part, they all started attending this church regularly.” Another reason given for the departure from that church is that many parents of the time were looking to grow their young family population. Other reasons why this event took place are unknown. Millennial N had a similar story with a different congregation but with fewer multigenerational factors. They had attended this location since they were 4 years old with only their mother and father. They went on to discuss that their parents were looking for another church before coming here, where there were more families with children.

Second, the remaining respondents discussed that their involvement had always been at this specific location, or there were those who married someone who had this same level of involvement since birth. As was stated earlier, if the respondent’s spouse grew up here, that determined their involvement as well. Finally, the makeup of the final respondents was as follows: 3 respondents had grown up here at this specific congregation since birth. The 4 respondents who married someone who attended here had similar experiences. The 2 women stated that their spouses encouraged involvement here due to their intergenerational upbringing at this congregation, and they made the decision to attend. The 2 men had similar stories to each other. They had some association with this congregation before marriage but eventually met their spouses here at different points in their lives.

Sought Out a Strong Children’s Program. All 9 respondents who were seeking a church sought to find a church with a strong children’s program. Although they left their previous churches for various reasons, they claimed this location due to the investment made in children’s programming. The majority of millennials did, however, speak of past churches that were declining in membership overall. Along with that, they stated that younger families were

becoming less and less frequent at those churches. Millennial F discussed that their experience in “church hopping” did not help them to find a congregation with growing families until they arrived at this congregation. They felt that this church had a strong children’s and youth program. Millennial T was an outlier to this situation of a diminishing family presence at their former church. They had left a strong children’s program at a church before their family moved to the area. Once here, their church experience at another local church was lacking in their children’s ministry program through this millennial’s perspective. They said, “We thought it (the children’s program) was going to blossom a little bit more with us being there. There was already a little bit there, and they thought us coming out would help keep it growing, and it didn’t seem like we got there and then it shrunk.” Once encouraged by their in-laws to seek out other church programs, they inevitably found this congregation and have since been members due to “the wonderful children’s ministry.” They also discussed that even though it added 20 minutes to their drive as opposed to a 5-minute drive to their past church, it was worth it for their family.

All 9 of this group of millennials were from different areas before they moved to this location. However, they all gave similar responses to their story about how they became involved with this specific church. They felt there were enough young families for their children, as well as themselves, to connect with. Also, their children would have the ability to grow within a strong faith-based children’s program.

Question 1 (Follow-Up): How Would You Describe Your Engagement Currently at This Church?

Follow-up questions to determine the millennials’ level of engagement were used at the end of several interview questions. This specific engagement question was to set a baseline for

how involved these millennials were currently. Their responses were subjective to their experiences at this church. The section below discusses how millennials had different subjective levels of engagement. However, it was primarily determined by how their children were engaged.

Engagement Determined Through Children. Many stated that attending services only on Sunday mornings was a good level of engagement. Others discussed that they could be more engaged, even though they attended all services and were regularly involved in extra events such as bible classes, children's ministry events, and bonus adult events. They gave great praise to those bonus events, which were discussed numerous times during their interviews. However, many events that had to do with their children's programming would determine their (millennials') level of engagement. Millennial R, when asked about their level of engagement, said, "We attend Sunday mornings, and our children attend bible class. We don't attend Wednesday nights but will when our children get older. Any of the children's ministry things that we possibly can, we attend." Not surprisingly, the primary theme for this follow-up question centered around the millennials' children. Many responses to the previous question dealt with seeking a strong children's program at this church. In their responses to this question, it was understandable that the millennial level of engagement was dependent on how often their children attended their children's programming and events.

Question 2: How Would You Describe an Intergenerational Relationship?

This question was formulated to understand what the respondents perceived as an intergenerational relationship. The examples given were generally the same. However, there were two examples given. First, most stated that it is a person who is in a relationship with

someone else from a different age demographic or generation. Second, there were a few that stated it is also a relationship between them and a younger generation as well as an older one.

Older Member Relationship. Many discussed the benefits of a relationship between them and an older member. Millennial A stated, “Getting to know older ladies who have a different experience, different viewpoints, and who have already gone through what I’ve gone through can offer some wisdom.” Wisdom and guidance were given many times as a type of benefit to this relationship. However, this was given in the context of how it impacts their children as well. Many stated that this type of relationship was not simply between themselves and an older member but between their children and an older member. This was not a response that was found within the literature on how it impacted millennial engagement. Surprisingly, this was a common theme throughout many of the respondents’ answers to the questions. It tended to revolve around their children. Although Millennials D and L loved spending time with older members and learning from them, they discussed how they felt joy when older members would seek out their children even though their children might not respond most of the time. They felt that type of intergenerational factor was meaningful to them, which impacted their engagement in a positive way.

Younger Member Relationship. Another unforeseen response to this question had to do with how they, the millennials, were the mentor or the older person in an intergenerational relationship. Throughout the literature, it was discussed how older members need to invest in millennials through intergenerational means in order to increase that population. However, many stated how their relationship with younger members helped them to become more engaged. As was said, it centers around their children. A few millennials responded that when they participate in intergenerational relationships with younger members that might be their own children’s age,

it contributes to their child's ability to connect with their peers. Millennial B noted that having those relationships with younger members helps their child to form closer relationships over time. Other subjective examples were given to clearly define what intergenerational relationships are. However, they were all centered around the understanding that those connections were made between two different generations.

Question 3: What Potential Value Do You See in Having Intergenerational Relationships With Others at This Church?

In terms of how respondents answered this question, there was a common theme that branched off with multiple examples through stories. It was unanimous that each millennial found great value in having an intergenerational relationship at this church. Examples ranged from gaining life lessons and wisdom from older church members to learning how to parent in a Christian environment such as a church. However, it was discovered through the findings that having various levels of support from older members was the primary theme that comprised the following categories.

Parenting Support. Millennial B's first thought was the value it gives through parenting. They stated, "Because I do have two young girls, and I don't know what I'm doing, I think it's helpful to have those relationships with people who have been there and experienced it and gone through it." This aligns with the Generational Investment (GI) model that was discussed earlier of older members investing in younger members for the benefit of faith retention for the millennial's children. This particular millennial felt that gaining a relationship with an older member would directly impact the faith retention of their children, which aligns with GI. Many of the female respondents echoed this specific sentiment. Learning from older generations to gain wisdom, experience, or life lessons was the predominant theme throughout each interview.

Support in Life Issues. A few millennials touched on when going through life struggles; they felt compelled to reach out to older members for guidance. Millennial G responded with this answer that intergenerational relationships are pivotal to stressful situations in life. Another millennial mirrored this sentiment through infertility. Millennial R gave a specific example of infertility and how they and their spouse were able to seek advice from another couple that is in an older generation. They went on to say, “It was beneficial to us to have somebody that had the same faith as us to ask that advice from.” These relationships were found to be highly valuable in helping millennials navigate through specific times in their life. Particularly, Erik Erikson’s Crisis 6 in his psychosocial development theory discusses that a person in this age range is looking for intimate relationships to help navigate life, or they isolate themselves and lead less meaningful lives, which negatively impacts those around them (Maree, 2021).

Faith-Based Support. There was one interviewee’s response that should be noted. Millennial Q found that although intergenerational relationships are beneficial, they do have one condition for their family. They discussed that if that person from an older generation is taking their walk with God seriously, then the relationship is beneficial. However, if they are not, then the relationship does not impact them or their engagement. They went on to discuss that there are more faith-based issues with the millennial generation currently. However, the fact that this particular respondent made a condition from a faith perspective would show, through their perspective, that the church and Christianity must be at the center of this relationship. There is a direct correlation between this millennial’s response to the GI model for faith retention. Due to spirituality being a central factor in investing relationally, this viewpoint would parallel the GI relational model (Powell et al., 2016).

Question 4: Who in This Church From Other Generations Do You Feel Connected to, and Could You Describe That Relationship?

Due to the phenomenological nature of this study, a number of different members were mentioned as connection points for the respondents. A diverse response of church leadership (elders), ministers, parents, and current older members were mentioned as individuals with whom millennials felt they connected. However, a few respondents mentioned that they had connections to some of the younger children due to their own children having friendships with them. They would also discuss that this helped them to have connections with their parents, even though many of them were also millennials.

Long-Term Relationships. Among the leadership and members mentioned in the interviews, the connections to these individuals had been established over an extended period. For example, Millennial K mentioned that they had known their influencer since their childhood. They would note, “They had always been a safe place to go to.” This would parallel other respondents’ sentiments toward knowing their connection point from a very young age. Other respondents discussed their parents as being their main connection. In this church, based on the response of the millennials, many of them attended this congregation with their parents. This was understandable because more than half of the respondents stated they grew up at this church or married someone who grew up at this church. Many of those who married an individual who grew up at this church stated their in-laws were someone they felt connected to.

Ministerial Relationships. This congregation refers to their church leadership as “elders.” It also has different designations for its ministers. For example, the family minister and worship minister, as they are called, were brought up in multiple instances by different millennials. At one point, these two ministers were called the children’s minister and preschool

minister, respectively. They were both ministers to the millennials' children for a significant period of time. Each of these ministers had been employed at this church for 19 years. For those respondents who were raised at this church, it is understandable that they would have formed a connection with these two specific ministers during their formative years of parenting. The relationship here was described as a type of parental mentor relationship. Those who stated a minister for connection mentioned that they felt comfortable discussing parenting topics with them due to their long-standing relationship. It should be noted that each of these ministers is from an older generation.

Specific Elder Relationships. Out of the 12 church leaders or elders who reside on the board of this congregation, three were mentioned as being a connection point for millennials. Millennial D felt one particular elder was very influential in his own church development and engagement. They recalled, "It's impressive how involved he is in the church and how well-versed in the bible he is. He's so nice to everybody and greets everybody. I want to grow up to be him." A very similar response was given by millennials, who mentioned elders as a person they connected to. Something of note is that many elders' wives were also mentioned as a generational connection in the lives of these millennials. The theme of relational empathy and time management in terms of involvement away from the church was also mentioned. Also, of the 21 respondents, only 1 (Millennial U) could not think of a person from another generation to whom they felt connected. Their connection to a person from an older generation came from their occupational demands.

Question 4 (Follow-Up): What Helped You in Making That Relationship?

Parent's Social Circle Means. Of those mentioned who were not ministers, church leaders, or parents, the connections made to them were through the millennial's parents. Many of

the millennials who were raised at this congregation noted that the intergenerational relationships they are involved in are due to natural interactions between their parents and the older members they mentioned. Millennial N said, “I really made those connections through my parents. They were their friends. So, I’ve just kind of grown up with them. I’m connected to them through my parents.” For those who grew up at this church, their response was similar to their response to how they became involved. In this case, they simply had known these older members through their parents from a young age of being involved. There was a direct correlation between being raised in this church and forming relationships with older members who had preexisting relationships with the respondents’ parents.

Church Staff Relational Means. For those who did not grow up here or married someone who grew up here, they noted that the ministers and elders filled the gap in relational connections. Although many of the tenured older members who were mentioned by those who grew up here were a great relational connection for those millennials that did not grow up here, the respondents who did not grow up here still mentioned many times those three elders, two ministers, and the spouses of each as relational connections. Millennial I mentioned that the relationship with an elder had increased as a result of their spouse’s increased engagement in a ministry overseen by his particular elder. This was a result of that elder intentionally engaging this millennial’s family for this said ministry.

Church Programming Means. Only 2 respondents mentioned relationships with younger members. Millennial Q stated their relationship with the younger members of this church was natural due to the family events they participated in. For example, they stated, “The church family camping trips have been good. We spent time with people that we already knew. And we spent time with people that we don’t really talk to at all. And now we will because

we've met them and their kids." They went on to discuss that it is about the intentional time spent that helps to foster these relationships. Intentionality in the relationship was a common theme throughout the respondents' answers to this follow-up question.

Question 4 (Follow-Up 2): How Has This Impacted Your Engagement at This Church?

In general, responses were positive in how these relationships had helped the engagement of millennials. As a common theme became known, particularly through this question, many felt this would benefit their children over time. Millennial I discussed that "it makes you want to come back and want to be more involved, especially when they start getting involved in my son's life." Many respondents felt that it impacted their engagement by how the relationship impacted their children in the future. However, respondents expressed overall positive sentiments regarding these relationships and their potential impact on their engagement. Specifically, it was noted that their level of involvement would likely increase as their relationships became more meaningful through various means. Millennial N was the only respondent who stated their relationships with other generations had no impact on their engagement at this congregation.

Question 5: Give Examples of How Well Older Church Members Do and Do Not Understand What Is Going On With Your Life or Others in Your Age Demographic

Themes given for why older members do not understand revolved around two central points. The first was the hardships of modern parenting. The second was the millennial's ability to adapt to a fast-paced social and technological culture.

Do Not Understand Modern Parenting. One frequent theme of how they did not understand centered around the challenges of modern parenting. Respondents, particularly women, noted that older generations do not accurately understand the intricate nature of how to

raise a child in this era. It became evident that the perception is that the misunderstanding comes from how they, older members, were raised or how they raised children and the unique challenges presented to parents today. Numerous reasons were given by the respondents for the lack of understanding. Much of it revolved around the use of a fast-paced evolution of technology and progressive societal norms. Additionally, one topic discussed was how well older members are reluctant to adapt to changes over time, highlighting the differences in their experiences and viewpoints. Additionally, they addressed how this could skew their perspective on the specific difficulties of parenting or navigating societal issues.

Millennials' Fast-Paced Society. Millennial S discussed that they feel older members did not understand or agree with their fast-paced ability to adapt to change. They went on to give examples of how millennials are riskier in their job opportunities and will “no longer be at the same job for 35 years.” This parallels the literature depiction of the baby boomer generation. They would also theorize that if they, millennials, do not feel valued in their church, they would move on. Their central viewpoint was that institutional church loyalty is nonexistent if the intergenerational understanding is not compatible. This was further emphasized by Millennial B's perspective on progressive social norms. They said, “I don't think we ever talked about homosexuality growing up, I don't think we talked about transitioning, I don't think we talked about sexuality. I can't imagine the older members ever wanting to talk about that.” Progressive social issues are impacting the millennial family unit based on previous literature (Jacobs et al., 2019; McGuire, 2018). The millennial participants reiterated that many older members do not understand the everyday occurrence of these issues in their lives and how it affects their parenting.

Do Understand Certain Aspects of Parenting. However, many millennials stated that they felt that older church members did understand that it is hard to parent by today's standards. Participants acknowledged that, regardless of generational differences, they felt that older members understood that the challenges of raising children remained universal. Millennial T stated, "I feel the older generation can always see what the younger generation was at that age. They have the oversight of how to handle certain situations and share that information." This would emphasize an earlier point of relying on the older generation for parental advice and affirmation. However, they encourage more understanding on a contextual level of how parental demands have changed. Millennial R did note that they felt if older members had relationships with this millennial age demographic, it would bridge the gap in understanding fully what is going on in the lives of that generation.

The following section of interview questions sought to answer Research Question 2 (RQ2). Questions were designed to understand if there were practices that church leaders could utilize to help foster relationships among millennials and other generations.

Research Question 2: Interview Questions

RQ2: Are there church practices that help millennial families to foster intimate relationships with church members from other age demographics?

Question 1: There Are Times We Feel Connected in Church and Not Connected. Could You Tell Me About a Time That Made You Feel the Most Connected to This Church?

In terms of connection to this church, the theme that was most prevalent from participants was that of intergenerational ministry programs. Numerous programs were shown to contribute to intimate relationships among the respondents. Much of the participants' perceived connection to this church was a direct result of the programs that this church offered that encouraged

intergenerational relationships. It was found that this church offered many opportunities for millennials to connect with others from another generation. Below is a list of programs that millennials discussed that they felt contributed to a sense of connection to this church and fell under the category of intergenerational programs.

“Heartfelt”—A Program for Women. As discussed by the female respondents, this is an intentional intergenerational relationship ministry. It takes place between September and May of every year. On average, it consists of 10 or more groups of women made up of “Sisters” and “Mothers.” The “Mothers” are the leaders of the group. They are made up of older women from the congregation who do not have children living in their homes. The “Sisters” are typically younger women from the congregation who do have children in their homes. Each group, on average, has six to eight of each of these designations (Sisters and Mothers) in their group makeup. They meet once a month for a time of fellowship, sharing a meal, and devotion in the home of one of the “Mothers.” Many of the female respondents felt that Heartfelt was the primary way they felt connected to this church. They gave many examples of women who had impacted them through this ministry. Millennial A stated, “Probably when we started up Heartfelt, I started to feel more connected from whatever we’ve done when we first started coming here. Heartfelt is where I’ve gotten to know people and the older ladies.” There was one millennial who discussed the impact Heartfelt had on them, although they had not participated in the program. They felt compelled to become involved in the next season due to the level of church connection that it provided.

Small Groups. As the name suggests, this is a small group of members that also consists of different generations. It takes the place of a typical bible class on a Sunday morning. It is also made up of individuals who primarily meet for a time of discussion and fellowship. There are

anywhere between 8 and 24 groups that are formed. The number of groups made is dependent on the participation of the parishioners. Each group is multigenerational and consists of 16 to 20 members. These are closed groups and stay together from September to May. They also meet once a month outside of Sunday morning for a meal and fellowship at one of the small group leaders' houses. This leader is typically an older member. On a gender-specific note, many of the male respondents felt this was a great point of connection for them. Millennial E, in particular, said they were not as involved as they could be. They felt their involvement in the church was self-admittedly lacking on their part. However, they stated, "I was a little bit hesitant to do the Small Groups on Sunday mornings. It's really hard for me to reach out to people. So, I would feel most connected when we had the Small Groups." Others would mention that the casual nature of Small Groups, where discussion of life could happen, was impactful for their connection.

Youth Programs: Past and Present. Several of the respondents mentioned connections through their children's programming at this church. They also discussed programs they themselves participated in as children when they attended this church as young members. One youth program mentioned was "The Vine." This program is a preschool that operates on Tuesdays and Thursdays throughout the school year. Millennial O perceived that how they feel "the most connected to this church definitely has to do with our kids and them in The Vine. We know the parents, and we spend this time together, and we have shared experiences and kids the same age." Their children's investment was their main point of connecting to this church. This response is in line with several respondents. Millennial P would reiterate this by stating, "What makes me feel connected or proud of being a part of the church, the main moments are whenever I see the things that they do for my daughter." However, it should be noted that they did discuss

the difficulties of answering this question because they had not genuinely felt a connection for themselves, only that they felt a sense of connection when their child is being invested in by older generations.

Of the respondents who grew up at this congregation, they would discuss their past youth program experiences and how that has contributed to their connection to this church. Millennial S noted that one of the most connected times they felt through this church was their time in the youth program. Millennial S's background belonged to the participant group that grew up in this congregation. They would note that "there's a lot of time and effort spent investing in you when you're that age. You have really good leaders, you know, who care about you." This view contributes to the GI model that they received while at this congregation in their teen years. Several respondents discussed that intergenerational practices have been evident through many of those who belonged to this church at a young age. Millennial R, in particular, would note that during their junior high and high school years, the various camps and volunteer opportunities made an impact on their connection and how they attended this church currently. Many would also discuss this as being a relevant point in why they continued their membership at this church in their adult years.

Church Community Support. A church community focus also became a theme that was not programmatic in nature and occurred several times. Many respondents discussed that times of struggle made them feel connected to this church through the outpouring of other members. Millennial M discussed the impact this church made on their family when their father passed. They discussed, "I can remember specifically when my dad passed away, like feeling the most connected because of all the reach outs, all the things people provided, and all the things that

were done for our family during that time.” They would go on to say that it possibly happens at other churches as well but that it is prevalent here at this congregation.

Question 1 (Continued): Could You Tell Me About a Time That Made You Feel the Least Connected to This Church?

In terms of how respondents felt disconnected from the church, the theme of increased distance became evident. This theme came in the form of leaving the church for a short time in terms of their postsecondary years and the countrywide shutdown due to COVID-19.

Postsecondary Departure. Millennial Q simply stated, “You feel connected to the church as you keep showing up to church.” To emphasize this, they and many other respondents would discuss multiple reasons why the disconnect would happen in the form of simply not being at the church. The first is their time away from the church during their college or postsecondary years. Many of the participants discussed their past or time spent away from the church after they graduated high school. Their time spent at a college would generally manifest in a sense of disconnect due to the proximity being minimal. Millennial C gave a specific example of their time at Texas Tech University. They would suggest that the disconnect in college “was partly due to distance.” They would note that it was a 9-hour drive, and although they had family check on them from time to time, they experienced a growing sense of disconnect from the church the longer they attended the university. A few would also discuss that there was a minimal number of programs for that age group after they had graduated from their earlier youth programs. Others who moved away for various reasons would also suggest that their disconnect increased the longer they were away.

COVID-19 Departure. Another topic discussed was that of time spent away due to emergencies. The main event was the countrywide shutdown of COVID-19. In 2020, this church

discontinued its in-person services due to COVID-19. Their Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night services no longer met in person but gave an “online” experience through various means. Also, their regularly scheduled programs that took place during the week were canceled for the foreseeable future. However, this church’s leadership and ministers offered solutions to continue their services. Respondents discussed that this was an understandable measure. However, the disconnect was a side effect of the physical closure. Millennial K said, “COVID was pretty hard. I think those years especially, not being able to come in and see those smiling faces and actually physically interact with others in the church.” Others would discuss the difficulties of navigating COVID-19 as a church. However, when discussing Millennial Q’s statement, “You feel connected when you show up to church,” a basic theme forms from the perspectives of the respondents. It shows that when there is simply a decrease in proximity to the church, the disconnect increases.

Question 2: What Experiences at This Church Have You Had That Are Meaningful to Your Family?

Responses to this question primarily came in the form of three practices that are experienced at this church for young families, which results in intergenerational connections. Below is a list of the programmatic experiences that respondents felt were meaningful to them and their families. It should also be noted that each of the experiences mentioned heavily revolved around the children of the respondents.

“Feed My Starving Children”—An Outreach Event. One such event frequently discussed was a volunteer opportunity called “Feed My Starving Children.” This event is multigenerational and consists of packing meal bags for other countries. Each meal can feed an entire family for a day. Many participants discussed that the fact that they could participate in

this event with their children and other members from other generations was especially meaningful to their families. Millennial S discussed the intergenerational benefits of this specific event. They stated, “You know, something I didn’t mention before, I think I do have a pretty good relationship with ‘Member A.’ So, ‘Member A’ and I have a relationship; we do this event with our kids, and now my kids get to have a relationship with them.” Children five and older are allowed to participate in this event and are also allowed to facilitate many of the same jobs as adults. However, they facilitate them together. The opportunity for younger members and older members to interact and volunteer together is greater within this event. Millennial D noted not only that this made them feel connected but also that it was especially meaningful to their family. This event was a primary experience that millennials felt benefited their family.

Baby Blessings. Many participants found another meaningful experience for their families. This took the form of a church-led tradition they call “Baby Blessings.” At the beginning of a newborn’s life, during the church service, the family, the church leaders (elders), and the church’s ministers all participate in this experience. While on stage, the lead minister presented a children’s bible and delivered a blessing of encouragement to the family and the newborn. After this, the elders prayed over the child and asked the church community to help the parents with any needs the child might have in the future. When discussing the “Baby Blessing,” Millennial C said, “This is a church committing to you; you’re not in this by yourself. You are a part of something bigger than yourself. And that means that your child is loved here.” They felt this confirmed that their child, through this experience, would grow in a church that invested in them relationally.

Birthday Sunday. Another experience that few discussed, similar to the “Baby Blessing,” was also mentioned. This church calls it “Birthday Sunday.” On the first Sunday of

every month, children 0–18 are welcome to come to the stage who have a birthday that month, and one elder speaks words of encouragement, says a prayer, and sings a happy birthday song to them. An intentional time during the service is allotted for this event. Millennial I noted this was a meaningful experience similar to the “Baby Blessing” and how it was facilitated. It should be noted that many of the participants’ responses had to do with events that their children or they and their children could be involved in, which correlated to rich and meaningful experiences.

Question 2 (Follow-Up): How Has This Impacted Your Engagement at This Church?

Overall, most of the respondents felt that many of their experiences helped to enrich their engagement within the church. Millennial H shared that many experiences were different here, and they led to engaging with many different people. They would go on to discuss how it impacted their engagement by saying, “It’s getting to be engaged with different people at different times when you get involved in the different experiences rather than just coming on Sunday.” Their perspective was that it took more than simply attending services on a Sunday morning for it to impact your engagement. This would align with many of the respondents’ thoughts on the volunteer event they discussed called “Feed My Starving Children.” This experience took place on a Saturday. Several said this would impact their engagement by causing them to continue to do more than just the typical worship service this church provides. As many discussed, children’s events are an impactful experience for their engagement. Millennial N discussed that “having a child that’s engaged kind of helps the parents get engaged and to get plugged in.”

Question 3: Give an Example of a Time Your Family Felt Valued at This Church, If Any

Like the experiences that were meaningful to the participants, many discussed the same events as a time when they felt valued. As was mentioned earlier, many events were

intergenerational in nature and function. Surprisingly, however, many of the moments that respondents discussed were events where the result was an increase in relationships among other church members. Likewise, this resulted in a stronger connection with those with whom they already had a relationship. The following two themes were found to be associated with perceived value from the respondents.

Value Through Focus on Family. When the family was given an intentional focus or showed exemplary status through various means, the value was felt by the respondents. Millennial L would remember a time when their family was fairly well represented at this church: “It felt valuable to know that they were helping as an example, to shape this community, to be an example to those who were coming into the community.” Others would note that when certain events occurred, such as a Baby Blessing or Birthday Sunday, it helped them to invest in other members. Millennial I felt this helped them to invest in other families when the events focus on their family. Several respondents also felt valued when their children were highlighted, which also resulted in stronger relationships with others. Respondents’ children participating in their own church programming is what made them feel a sense of value. Millennial H detailed another program called the “Christmas Musical” that is for the K–5th-grade students at this congregation. They felt value in seeing this congregation offer this program for their child. Likewise, simply noticing their children gave these respondents a sense of value. Millennial S said, “People are always asking about our kids. They’re always asking about how they’re doing. And so, that definitely makes you feel like we’re valued.” Children simply being noticed gave value to the family in many instances through their examples.

Value Through Leadership Service. Another theme that was evident through several millennials’ perspectives was that of service. Many stated that they felt valued when they were

utilized to serve or given leadership positions through different church programs. One millennial noted an event that took place in their early childhood years called “The Building Campaign.” This was a time when funds were raised through the congregation to build the church building that exists today. This “milestone,” as they called it, helped them to see the value the church saw in their family, and they stated, “Supporting that process is what ultimately helped us to be where we are today (in this church)” (Millennial M). Several other respondents discussed that they volunteered in service projects or other church programs that gave them and their families a sense of being valued by the church.

Question 3 (Follow-Up): How Has This Impacted Your Engagement at This Church?

Not surprisingly, the answer to this question was overwhelmingly positive. Many respondents felt the moments of feeling valued contributed to their engagement in one form or another. A few simply stated that it impacted their engagement for the better. Others gave specific examples. Millennial U discussed that those times helped them to engage with others in the church community outside of the typical Sunday morning church service. As discussed, Millennial R noted a time when a minister from another generation asked them and their spouse to take on a leadership position within the Small Group program. They stated, “We would have kept teaching kids. But through that [Small Group leadership], we have talked and built some relationships with other families where we might not have built those relationships.” The value they felt from this leadership position contributed to the intimacy that came from the relationships made. The respondents felt the times of value in which their families were invested contributed to how they interacted with others at this church. Millennial L would go on to say that the value they felt through the example of relational fellowship is how they engage in the church today. This led to a desire for more intimate relationships within the church. Millennial N

was the only outlier who could not think of a time when their family felt valued, and therefore, it had no impact on their engagement.

This final section of interview questions sought to answer Research Question 3. It centers around any external or ambivalent factors that may cause a distancing in relationships with other members, particularly older members, within the church. Questions centered around ambivalence and secular issues were used to determine if this phenomenon was prevalent.

Research Question 3: Interview Questions

RQ3: Are there any external or ambivalent factors that contribute to relational distancing among millennials within the church?

Question 1: How Would You Describe the Differences Between Your Desires for This Church and the Older Generation's Desires for This Church?

There was a common theme throughout this particular question. It was centered around the topic of ambivalence. As was discussed earlier, ambivalence is defined as having both positive and negative sentiments toward any given situation or context (Pillemer et al., 2007). The topic of worship, women's roles, and attitudes toward the LGBTQ+ community were mentioned as differences in desires for this church. Those following subthemes were found to be associated with ambivalent attitudes from the millennials toward the older generations.

Progressive Ideologies. When asked about desires for this church, there were prevalent differences that respondents felt were evident within the congregation. The worship style at this congregation is an acapella worship style. Historically, this church has never used instruments and encourages a form of congregational singing. Many millennials found this to be a traditional view and not biblical. Their desires for worship were not to do away with this style but that they did not feel a sense of obligation toward that tradition. Millennial E remembers their childhood

growing up in a congregation with a piano and organ. They discussed, “I’m from a Methodist Church. I’m used to the organs, choirs, and pianos. So, it was different for me coming” (Millennial E). Of someone who grew up in this congregation, Millennials S and J discussed this generation may want something different out of their worship service. Millennial J especially stated that “the different generations, they’re all good with how we do classes, for the most part, and the activities that we do outside of Sunday morning. It kind of all goes back to how we do worship service. I think that’s where a lot of the differences are happening.” Others would consider that there is a subtle difference in what this generation may want for the future in terms of how their worship service is facilitated.

Women’s Roles. Although there was no push or agenda for women’s roles to be expanded in the worship setting, many respondents did not feel it was counter to biblical beliefs, particularly if it positively impacted their children. An example of this would be the children’s minister on stage speaking to their children. However, women’s leadership roles in this church were perceived to have been minimal. Many women noted that they feel valued and proud when they volunteer or help facilitate an event. However, when leadership roles from a biblical perspective are designated, they are given to a man in this congregation. Millennial M, who grew up in this congregation, discussed that if one were to poll the congregation, at least half would be comfortable with a woman in a leadership position. Millennial B gave their opinion by saying, “I love the idea of seeing more women in leadership roles at the church. I think there are a lot of men, there’s that. I don’t know, but I feel like there should be more (women leaders).” Of those who discussed women in a leadership position, they felt that it would benefit or be accepted by their generation at this church. However, it could be a struggle for older generations to cope.

Progressive Social Views. A few discussed how the church views the LGBTQ+ community. They felt this topic was taboo and not one that was mentioned or discussed by the older generation. Millennial B went on to say that their opinions toward this community were possibly different from those of the older generation: “I feel like there can be a lot of judgment. I think that sometimes the older generation is kind of stuck on certain things being bad or being a sin.” There was another specific example of how their opinion has changed over time with this topic. When giving their thoughts on this topic, Millennial C said, “We live in a time where just because you don’t agree with somebody, that doesn’t mean that you are disregarding them as a person and that you basically hate that person.” This topic was perceived to be a difficult point of controversy for the older generations to understand and, thus, how to navigate it. This centers around the basic concept of changing viewpoints over time. Millennial A noted, “In general, a lot of the older generations’ desires for the church is for it to just stay the same.” Overall, there was a general sense that change needed to occur within these topics for this church but that older members may be reluctant to accept those changes.

Question 1 (Continued): How Would You Describe the Similarities Between Your Desires for This Church and the Older Generation’s Desires for This Church?

There were two dominant themes that were found to be similarities between the two generations. This manifested in the overwhelming majority of respondents in different forms throughout the interviews. It was the concept of loving others and the connection of members. It should be noted that this generation felt that spreading love to others outside of the church and loving each other inside the church through connection is what the older generation and the millennial generation agree on wholeheartedly. The following are excerpts from respondents when asked about similarities between the desires for this church:

“We want to love each other, and we want to treat each other the right way. But I think everyone desires for this church to be a place where people can come and feel valued”

(Millennial S).

“I think the older generation wants to connect with each other and with the younger generation, and I think they want to guide them in the right direction” (Millennial B).

“The similarities are, we all want to make the same connections. We all want to grow our families here” (Millennial F).

“Because we’ve all been saved. We all know the love of Christ. And I think in the end, our goal is to let others know that, feel that, and to serve as we’ve been called” (Millennial K).

“Everybody’s goal, I think, no matter what generation is in the church, is to get to heaven and to get the most people that we can to heaven” (Millennial N).

“I would think that both want the church to be a place where you worship God and feel a connection with people” (Millennial R).

“The desire that I have the most is very much family oriented. Everybody feels connected and loved and wants to be here. That’s where I’m similar to the older generation” (Millennial H).

Many followed up with responses of how they show love or connect with one another, which could manifest in different ways. This means that ambivalent attitudes could contribute to how the two generations facilitate these two themes. However, it was generally understood that the many generations that attend this church agree on the two viewpoints of love and connection.

Question 2: How Would You Like to See This Church’s Leadership Address Concerns From Your Age Group?

An overall general sense of access to church leadership, a proactive relational approach on their part, and openness toward hard topics were themes that were evident with how

generational concerns can be addressed. However, the topic of proactivity came from several respondents in how the church leadership could address these concerns.

Proactive Approach. Millennial M would note that “it requires a proactive reach out rather than from the person with the concern.” Several respondents discussed how the church leadership should take time to seek them out. They went on to give examples of how church leadership, in the past, would attend various Small Groups and ask those in this age demographic what their concerns and challenges were. This was an event that contributed to an awareness of the needs of the millennials by the church leadership. Millennial R would emphasize that their proactive means of relationship building would help foster better communication between the two groups. They suggested that taking the time to get to know the millennial generation could lead to a healthier engagement of conversations with church leadership. They went on to say, “I think it’s easier to have a conversation with your church leadership when you know them a little better.” Proactive relational measures that help to foster healthy communication were discussed as a way of addressing concerns.

Accessibility. Others noted the church leadership available to discuss concerns would be helpful. Millennial N found that they did not feel the church leadership’s presence during regular church services. They would also discuss that they were not aware of the roles of each individual leader, particularly in the administration portion of the church leadership. Once again, their perspective was that fostering relationships would lead to a clearer understanding of the roles and positions held by the church leadership.

Question 2 (Follow-Up): What Would This Mean to Your Family?

This follow-up question to the addressing church leadership concerns question was mostly positive. Several respondents felt this would impact their family on some level in a

meaningful way. Notably, Millennial P gave a unique response by stating, “If the leaders took the time to see what it was that would get us more engaged, they would recognize that asking more of us is not the right answer.” They would suggest that they (church leadership) may recognize that they need to stop asking more questions and, in turn, get to know them (millennials) through an intergenerational relationship. This would be meaningful to their family. Others believed that being acknowledged or engaging in conversation about their concerns demonstrated care from the church leadership. This was found to also be meaningful to their families.

Question 3: What Is Your Opinion on Your Generation Having Ambivalent Feelings Toward Older Generations at This Church or This Church’s Leadership?

As was discussed earlier, ambivalence is the concept of having two opposing feelings toward someone or something. This definition was given to each respondent. However, it should be noted that a few participants were still unclear about this definition. They were given examples of this concept when asked for one. Also, church leadership is solely made up of the baby boomer generation. Thus, this would possibly be a part of the ambivalent attitudes toward older generations that were discussed earlier in the literature review. Two themes were made evident through their responses, which consisted of perceived ambivalence of older generations and actual ambivalence of church leadership.

Perceived Ambivalence. First, many felt they did not have ambivalent feelings toward this generation. However, they did perceive that many in their generation (millennials) might have them. Millennial D felt that they did not have these feelings toward older generations and that they were “very positive about older generations and what they know, their ideas, and their experiences.” They also would suggest that it was inappropriate to have these dismissive feelings

toward the older generation. Millennial C gave a unique response. They felt that ambivalence, although present between the two generations, is a natural feeling to have in any relationship. In fact, they felt that ambivalence is “part of a healthy relationship.” This was given in the context of having to navigate disagreements in any situation. Although many felt they had not experienced these sentiments toward older generations but understood other millennials might, there were those who did feel they had experienced these feelings directly. Millennial S discussed their perceived sentiments by stating, “I know there’s a ton of value in that (connections). However, the mixed feeling is that even though I know there’s a ton of value, you don’t always get the sense that they value your generation the same as we value theirs.”

Church Leadership Ambivalence. The second theme that arose dealt with church leadership specifically. As was stated earlier, this church has a designation for their leadership that they call “elder.” Many admitted to experiencing ambivalent feelings toward church leadership at some point in their involvement with this church. In fact, Millennial L stated, “I think there’s a lot of ambivalence toward the church’s leadership, more so, toward the elders. First off, I don’t know if you can go to anyone in my generation and ask them who the elders are. I don’t think you can get anybody to answer a full list from memory.” They felt that worldly topics needed to be discussed with elders. However, their inability to seek out and maintain relationships with millennials had created a level of inbuilt ambivalence. However, Millennial L did note that “it may feel as though there’s a mutual ambivalence on both sides.” Millennial N would discuss that they did not have any ambivalence toward older generations, but it was mainly focused on the elders. They went into specific instances that negatively impact them that the church leadership may be involved in away from the church, such as social media posts. The sentiment of “not knowing who the leadership is” was mentioned several times by respondents.

Countering Ambivalence. Generally speaking, many felt that a disconnect of a relational nature is what contributes to the sentiments of ambivalence. This concept was mentioned several times through various perspectives. Some stated that it was due to the Elders being uninvolved. Others stated that simply taking the time to get to know them would close the gap. Millennial S noted that even though they felt that they had not experienced too many ambivalent feelings toward older generations, they felt that what would help to diminish those feelings would be relational bonding. They stated, “If me, them, and some of the other people in our same age group are getting together on a weekly basis, then we would build a connection with each other (millennials and older generations), and then you wouldn’t have those feelings.” Intergenerational relationships were discussed as a factor that would help diminish ambivalent feelings among respondents.

Question 3 (Follow-Up): Can You Give Examples of Times You Felt Disappointed in the Church Leadership But Continued to Engage With This Church?

COVID-19 Response. Two follow-up questions were asked to determine if there were specific instances where the respondents were disappointed or were proud of the leadership decisions made by the church leadership. When asked about disappointments in leadership, there were mixed responses. Although there were some who could not state an instance of feeling disappointed, there were a few specific examples mentioned several times. Millennial G discussed the first. Their response centered around COVID-19 protocols the church leadership enacted. How those were communicated to the church was an example of disappointment for them. Although there were those who felt their responses toward COVID-19 were disappointing, others felt the church leadership did the best they could with the information they had at the time.

However, the leadership decisions toward COVID-19 did not cause them to disengage from the church.

Tithing Discussions. Another relevant topic was discussed in the form of tithing. Tithing is a form of donation that comes from a parishioner. It is how the financial stability of the church continues. Every week, a voluntary contribution is made by members of the church toward the financial needs that help to initiate ministry programs and facility upkeep. Once a year, a member of the church leadership (elder) makes a statement and reports on the financial needs of the congregation. This could come in the form of how financially sound they are or how much of a financial deficit they are in. The latter contributes to them asking the congregation for an increase in their monetary giving. This was the discussion that many felt disappointed in regarding the elders. Millennial P's perspective was that of a relational example. They felt that the elders were nonexistent in the life of their child or their family. This led to a sense of contention toward them. They would say, "Here comes a person who's been invisible for the last 11 months, begging me to give more to the church." Millennial C would discuss their disappointment with how the encouragement of tithing would be presented. They would reiterate this sentiment by stating, "There are times when we'd have those discussions. Shortly thereafter, you would hear about a new position, a new paid position, opening up at the church. And in my mind, it was one of those 'this doesn't seem like a responsible choice.'" They would go on to discuss that if the intention behind the increased giving was made known, they would have felt less disappointment toward the topic of increased financial giving. Although the topic of tithing had different subjective circumstances, this was shown to be a negative on behalf of several respondents.

Question 3 (Follow-Up 2): Can You Give Examples of Times You Felt Proud of Their Leadership, Which Contributed to Your Engagement With This Church?

COVID-19 Response. As COVID-19 was mentioned above as a point of disappointment, there were several who discussed that they were proud of how the church leadership handled the protocols for the shutdown parameters. Millennial S noted, “I think as we went through COVID, I felt like there were some hard decisions that needed to be made, and they made those decisions. I think you felt like they were making the decision that was best for the church, and so I agree with that.” Some respondents would acknowledge elders’ challenges of navigating numerous points of view centered around the pandemic but also recognize that they were making the best choices based on the available information regarding COVID-19. However, Millennial N did note that although they felt the leadership did a fantastic job through the pandemic, “it’s not the elders per se but that I’m very proud of the minister’s leadership.” They went on to mention that through that leadership perspective, they felt proud that this church continued to thrive.

Children’s Ministry Investment. Not surprisingly, many respondents felt proud of church leadership on their stance on the children’s programming that this church facilitates. Millennial C would discuss this in detail around their time growing up at this church. They felt this church had always had a strong stance when it came to children’s programming: “The eldership, considered to be the people that make these decisions, have a great children’s program” (Millennial C). Millennial B also would note they felt proud to have their children attend the worship service with them due to their stance on how important the children’s program is. Some would note specific instances that specific elders had done that contributed to their engagement. Millennial I would recall when a specific elder made an announcement during

the worship service regarding what this church calls the “Children’s Moment.” It is an intentional time during the worship service where the preschool and elementary children have a time of devotion with their children’s minister. Due to the current nature of minimal women’s roles during the worship service, few parishioners felt this may be a point of discomfort due to the children’s minister being a woman. However, Millennial I gave their perspective on the positive response from the leadership. They went on to discuss that the church leadership’s decision to have this event (Children’s Moment) during the worship service was for the betterment of the children. They would describe what this specific elder announced:

He got up [during the service], and he was like, “This isn’t trying to push anything or upset people, that kind of thing. It’s just something that we feel is a good, engaging, and enhancing aspect of our church.” That made us proud and felt more engaged.

Many would note that direct decisions from the leadership toward the children that would impact them positively would help to foster positive emotions toward church leadership.

Question 4: What Secular Issues Have You Experienced, If Any, Outside of the Church That You Believe May Have Impacted Your Engagement Within the Church?

There were two themes that would impact the respondents’ engagement within the church. Occupational demands and relational family time away from the church were found to be external factors that impacted the engagement of millennials. Family time was divided into two categories: extracurricular activities and non-church-related family bonding.

Occupational Demands. Many would note that either their job or their spouse’s job would impact their engagement on a weekly basis. Due to the subjective nature of engagement, many would note this would keep them away from the worship service on Sunday mornings. Millennial S noted it starts off small by skipping a few services. They would discuss their

personal work schedule by saying, “Growing up, I was at church Wednesday, Sunday, Sunday evening. Then it starts with, ‘I can’t make it Wednesday nights anymore. I can’t; I just can’t get off work.’” Also, others would note that it impacted them in how they engaged with members away from the typical Sunday morning service.

Extracurricular Activities. Those who made mention of family time away from the church had many perspectives. Several would note that extracurriculars would have the entire family disengage from the church. This was the main impactful event that contributed to disengagement. Millennial J would discuss the difference between their time in this church as a young child and how their children are navigating these outside influences. They would recall their time in their youth programs and how sports would not interfere with the worship services. Now, they say, “I really do not like it when kids’ sports events take up so many Sundays. I can understand the occasional, like for gymnastics, we had to travel a couple of times for out-of-town gymnastics meets. But to have tournament after tournament, Sunday after Sunday, like, man, come on.” Their disappointment at how sports can take up so much of their church engagement time was evident. Others would reiterate this sentiment and were not aware of the level of demand these activities and events made for their families initially. Especially with how much time it would take away from the engagement within the church. Millennial P’s experience with their child’s extracurricular activity was that it possibly negatively impacted their engagement within the church: “Does that impact our engagement? I mean, sure because we’re doing something outside of the church. As a result of that, it’s taking time away from our engagement.”

Nuclear Family Bonding. Not only were extracurriculars found to be a point of impactful disengagement at this church, but many also noted that the family time at home led them to disengage from the church. Another viewpoint would be that it led the family to attend

only certain services that this church provides or to simply not come to the church at all. Millennial L would exemplify this with the stage of life that their children are currently in. Due to their young age, they attended the earlier service provided on Sunday mornings. This church has an early and late service. They stated this was due to their nap schedule. For example, they stated, “A lot of our decisions are made around that aspect (children’s schedule). If there’s an event that’s outside of that timeframe, if there’s an event outside of bedtime, if there’s an event that involves something that we do not believe is a priority for our kids, we’ll turn it down.” This includes Wednesday night services and other church events that may take place during their “family timeframe.” An interesting point they made later consisted of all the decisions that would be made; they would be centered around spending time together as a family. Otherwise, they would choose to skip that event. Not surprisingly, the level of response toward disengagement that the family had away from the church was represented well. This was due to the level of engagement made together through personal family time or extracurricular events. However, the result was engagement together but away from the church.

Summary

This phenomenological study produced enriching results from the millennial respondents who participated. Through their lived experiences at this church, respondents discussed that the practices and relational opportunities facilitated by this church have contributed to their engagement. Their responses also contributed toward discovering how to possibly navigate Erik Erikson’s psychosocial development theory, specifically Crisis 6 and Crisis 7, successfully in a church setting. The themes that arose from the narrative were the GI of millennials and their children, the successful implementation of intergenerational programming, and specific

ambivalent attitudes toward older members as we all as possible approaches to diminish those attitudes.

Within the findings of RQ1, respondents discussed church upbringing, investment from older members, strong children's programming, and investment of their own children as key factors that encourage their engagement at this church. However, the factors discovered impacted not only the respondents' engagement but their children's as well. The practices respondents discussed within RQ2 were numerous. The practices mentioned that contributed to their intimate relationships were Heartfelt, Small Groups, youth and children's programming, Baby Blessings, Birthday Sunday, and Feed My Starving Children. Each of these programs was designed with intergenerational relationships as the foundation. They were discussed as meaningful and valuable relational conduits.

Finally, respondents discussed multiple ambivalent and external factors that contributed to RQ3. They discussed progressive ideologies, cultural and social views, time away from church, disappointment in church leadership, and perceived ambivalence of older generations due to lack of relationships as factors that decreased their engagement. However, they also discussed ways in which ambivalence could be reduced through specific relational means. Although their responses contributed to answering each research question, more research is needed to fully understand a millennial's engagement within a church. This is especially warranted as they are increasing in age and will eventually enter into a new crisis of Erikson's theory. Thus, successful navigation of their current crises of Crisis 6 and Crisis 7 is vital within a church setting.

In Chapter 5, the findings are presented, highlighting how they relate to existing literature. Interpreted results are discussed, and recommendations are given for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

Through the research presented in this phenomenological study, I sought to understand what intergenerational factors contribute to a millennial's church engagement. This study is central to a church located within a major metropolitan area in Texas. The respondents were millennials (born between 1981 and 1996) who had children 0–12 and who were a member for at least 1 year at this church. This would contribute to consolidating millennials' shared life experiences because each respondent belonged to the same church demographic.

Most mainline churches are experiencing a reduction in church attendance among millennials (Jorgensen, 2019; Moody & Reed, 2017). If churches are seeing a reduction in their engagement, there may not be enough millennial parishioners to take leadership of the church in the upcoming years. Therefore, with the framework of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory, I sought to understand what intergenerational factors contribute to millennial engagement.

In Erik Erikson's theory, there are eight crises that an individual will navigate in their life. Currently, millennials are within Crisis 6 and Crisis 7 of this human development theory. Crisis 6 revolves around intimate relationships. Crisis 7 centers on being generative in any given circumstance. In this study, it centers around generative attitudes toward the church as a result of relationships. Responses were analyzed through this lens to uncover what factors would contribute to the successful navigation of these two crises for millennials. Simply put, the researcher wanted to discover what could help form intimate intergenerational relationships that would then lead to positive generative engagement in the church. Due to the intergenerational nature and generative need of parishioners that a church requires, Erikson's theory was found to

be the most appropriate guide for formulating this study's research questions. Below is Maree's (2021) more in-depth overview of these two crises:

- Crisis 6—Intimacy vs. Isolation (Early and Emerging Adulthood, 20–40 Years).
During this time frame, adults focus on forming intimate, loving relationships with other people. Success in this time leads to happy, safe, and meaningful relationships or simply having love for others. Failure to navigate this correctly can lead to loneliness, depression, and, hence, isolation.
- Crisis 7—Generativity vs. Stagnation (Adulthood, 40–65 Years). This stage refers to adults showing their significance to the world that will outlast them and contribute to a positive benefit for the next generation. Success can lead to a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of usefulness. However, failure can lead to a shallow living experience in the world.

As was discussed, there were three research questions that sought to uncover the factors that contribute to millennial engagement within the church. Many themes were presented throughout the interviews based on the subjective lived experiences of the millennial respondents. The following discusses the findings of each research question.

For RQ1, “Are there intergenerational relationship factors that contribute to church engagement among millennials?” it was determined that there are intergenerational relationship factors that contribute to a millennial's engagement at this church. At the center of this research question is the term “factor.” Due to this term having a wide range in meaning, phenomenology sought to establish a more focused meaning. The subjective nature of phenomenology was determined as the best way to define what factors contributed to engagement through respondents' lived experiences at this church. Through each open-ended interview question,

designed with “factors” in mind, respondents were able to express what contributed to their current and past engagement through intergenerational means. Five themes that had a correlation to the deductive coding process were uncovered through their responses. These specific themes were shown to be the primary contributors that increased millennial engagement. However, each theme had a direct connection to a number of intergenerational situations that were articulated by the respondents. The following are themes that emerged from the interview process and their specific deductive codes:

- millennial church upbringing (Generational Investment “GI,” church community, generativity)
- strong children’s programming for millennial children (GI, intimacy)
- millennials having a mentor or being a mentor (GI, intimacy, church community, generativity)
- valuing or intentionality in intergenerational relationships; parents, ministers, and a few from church leadership (intimacy, generativity)
- church leadership understanding progressive social views and modern views of parenting (generational ambivalence “GA,” church community, stagnation)

For RQ2, “Are there church practices that help millennial families to foster intimate relationships with church members from other age demographics?” it was also found that intentional practices are present at this church that contribute to millennial relationship building with other generations. The second research question focused on specific practices that this church provides. How this relates to phenomenology is that within lived experiences, certain events and practices that occur regularly were found to be beneficial for millennials to engage in relationships with older members. Surprisingly, events that focus on a millennial’s child were

found to be the most impactful on millennial engagement. However, there was one specific theme that impacted them that had no correlation to their children. Giving leadership opportunities to millennials was also found to contribute to their engagement. This research question's themes are listed below with their respective deductive codes:

- intergenerational programming (intimacy, generativity, GI)
- intergenerational events (GI, intimacy, generativity)
- focus on millennial's children (GI, church community)
- increase in proximity to the church (intimacy, church community)
- millennial leadership opportunities (GI, generativity)

For, RQ3, "Are there any external or ambivalent factors that contribute to relational distancing among millennials within the church?" there were many factors found at this church that contributed to relational distancing among millennials. Relational distancing has a specific meaning in that the effect is it creates less proximity for millennials and older members relationally. If intergenerational relationships can contribute to engagement, this research question sought to understand what factors may cause a millennial to pull away or not engage in those relationships. Through their lived experiences, specific topics and perceptions were found to be at the center of what millennials feel would cause relational distancing. Ambivalence was highly found as a perception between the two generations. However, it was not a perception of ambivalence but a fact that millennials viewed church leadership in an ambivalent manner. Church leadership solely consists of the baby boomer generation. The following are themes that were discovered through the interview questions that were designed around this research question with their deductive codes:

- modern topics countering church traditions (GA, stagnation)

- love and connection among older generations counters relational distancing (intimacy, generativity)
- disengagement of church leadership (isolation, stagnation, GA)
- perception of ambivalence toward church leadership and older members (church community, GA, stagnation)
- occupational demands and personal family time (isolation, stagnation)

Throughout the remaining chapter, the goal is to provide a clear interpretation of the findings. This will be done through the discussion of findings, limitations, implications, and recommendations sections.

Discussion of Findings

As was stated many times, I sought to simply understand intergenerational factors that would increase engagement from millennials within a church. Due to the subjective nature of each respondent's lived experiences, not surprisingly, multiple findings were uncovered within each research question. However, the overwhelming majority revolved around the topic of intergenerational relationships and how the church invests in the millennials' children. The goal of the research questions that guided this study was to understand how to make change happen within this church. This was done in the hopes that church leadership could have a clearer understanding of what millennial parishioners want from said church. The following discussion will interpret each research question and take an in-depth look at how these questions guided the interview process.

Intergenerational Relationship Factors

In RQ1, the relationship factors discussed started when many millennials were in their preschool years. They grew up in a church congregation where they felt investment from older

church members. Simply, they were experiencing GI. In this growth model, older generations make a monetary, voluntary, and spiritual investment in younger generations (Powell et al., 2016). This contributed to their strong sense of church loyalty, which many stated as a reason why they continued to attend this church into their adult years. This suggested that investing in children from birth would lead to church retention over time. For those who did not attend this church from a young age, that would obviously not be the case. However, due to the history of GI at this church, those seeking a church home for the investment of their children were glad that GI was practiced among the parishioners.

Another interesting factor was that of their understanding of intergenerational relationships. Due to the self-explanatory nature of said relationships, it was clearly understood what this relationship was. However, there was an added caveat. As was mentioned, GI was practiced at this congregation for many of the respondents. It would make sense that many found an intergenerational relationship to not only be between themselves and an older member. However, they also mentioned that it would be between them and a younger member as well. GI and their church community had a major impact on how they see this church and their own involvement. It was clearly evident that intergenerational relationships played a major role in their engagement currently at this church. Additionally, it also contributed to how they engage with younger members.

Finally, having intentionality in those relationships, which would lead to the understanding of one another, was found to have a strong presence in the respondents. The concept of ambivalence was found within this research question. They were present in how the respondents perceive the older generation. The literature discusses that the church community is a primary source for millennials to become engaged long term (Ufimtseva, 2014). Additionally,

Overstreet (2010) discussed that millennials are seeking authenticity and a sense of genuineness through community and relationships. Through their responses, it would seem that their desire for intentional relational practices would parallel the literature. The ambivalence found was that older church members did not understand the current cultural norms for millennials. Their fast-paced, progressive outlook on society was found to be a key factor for the ambivalence perceived. Additionally, the minimal understanding of modern parenting from older members was also found to contribute to ambivalent feelings from millennials. The difficulties of raising a child by current standards were found to be a point of contention between the two generations. However, it was also discussed that many found that intimate relationships would hinder or help diminish these feelings. This would also parallel the literature in that relationships between individuals result in the understanding of one another (Tuff, 2019).

The intergenerational factor themes discovered for RQ1 have aligned with the progression of Erikson's development theory (Maree, 2021), which contributes to a successful navigation of Crisis 6 and Crisis 7. During the early stages of many of the respondents' lives, older members displayed generative attitudes toward them, which subsequently contributed to establishing and maintaining intimate relationships during their early adult years. It would seem that generative attitudes were being expressed through this church before many were in either crisis. Expressing generative attitudes from older members was found to be a key factor in the upbringing of many millennials who attended this congregation at a young age. However, this did not simply impact them but also impacted millennials who would seek out a generative congregation for their own children. The generative culture this church provided would help to produce intimate and intentional relationships for many millennials in their later years. Not surprisingly, many felt compelled to contribute in the same manner they were invested in. It is

understandable why their definition of an intergenerational relationship was not only between themselves and older members but also between themselves and younger members. They had intimate feelings toward the older generation for investing in them in their formative years. This would exemplify the consistency between Crisis 6 and Crisis 7, where intimate relationships lead to a more generative lifestyle (Maree, 2021).

Church Practices

The themes presented for RQ2 were made up of specific church practices that have positively influenced millennial engagement. However, the coincidental factor consists of them being heavily intergenerational in nature. The programs mentioned several times were Heartfelt, Small Groups, and youth/children's programming. Heartfelt was designed to connect younger and older women. Topics were not limited to the bible but everyday family living, such as modern parenting. It resulted in an increased proximity that hindered ambivalence. This was shown to be a major form of engagement due to the intergenerational nature of connection through fellowship. Likewise, Small Groups facilitated the same culture. This gave respondents a chance to have fellowship and connection instead of the typical class structure that this church historically facilitated. This type of shift in structure is what Kiessling and Shults (2018) would deem necessary for engagement among this generation. However, this church counters what M. Brown (2016) discussed, that over time the modern church model has significantly decreased the importance of these investments for these younger generations. From the respondents' perspectives, it would seem that this church has increased its investments in the millennial generation.

A theme that paralleled the literature was that of millennial leadership roles within the church. Agreeing with the findings of Jacobs et al. (2019) of minimal millennial leadership

opportunities, the need for those roles was made present. Several respondents mentioned leadership positions in the church with an emphasis on how they impacted them. As was discussed, DeVaney (2015) noted that an increase in empathy toward millennials could increase their leadership engagement. It was not surprising that when asked, they felt it meaningful when older members of leadership would give them, the millennials, a leadership position within the church. This contributed toward their engagement in a positive way and gave a positive enforcement of the church.

Similar to the intergenerational factor themes, the church practice themes discovered during the interview process also align with Erikson's psychosocial development theory (Maree, 2021). It was found that they also contributed to successfully navigating Crises 6 and 7. Female respondents specifically found many programs were a means to connect for relational purposes. This contributed to alleviating ambivalent feelings, specifically views on modern parenting. This also resulted in close, intimate relationships. Several programs at this church are specifically designed to contribute to this type of relationship. Therefore, Crisis 6 could be navigated successfully. More specifically, Small Groups were also found to connect younger and older members, which alleviated ambivalent feelings and formed intimacy among the group members. Consequently, they were presented with practices where older parents and younger parents could have relationships and discuss matters such as modern parental views or social issues. This was a church culture shift that Kiessling and Shults (2018) discussed must take place in order to retain the younger generations. It also assisted in alleviating the lack of proximity to the church many respondents mentioned contributed toward their disengagement. Millennial Q emphasized this by stating the more you attend, the more you are connected.

Finally, events and programs that focused on the millennials' children were heavily prevalent in the engagement of the millennials. The level of response for this theme was a surprising outcome. It was again discussed by Kiessling and Shults (2018) that if a church invests in a millennial's child, it may result in an increased level of investment from their parents toward the church. This would be an accurate statement based on their responses. The generative nature of the children's programming and events was an attractive aspect of the church for millennial parents due to their seeking a strong children's program.

External and Ambivalent Factors

The external and ambivalent themes presented for RQ3 were discovered as a proactive means of hindering relational distancing among millennials. Respondents were clear there are factors that happen outside the church that influence their engagement within the church. Also, there are ambivalent feelings toward older members and the church leadership of this congregation. It should be noted that every member of the church leadership is of the baby boomer generation. Firstly, the contribution toward ambivalent feelings was shown to be a modern issue. This took the form of modern parenting, outdated church traditions, or modern cultural norms. As many respondents expressed, they felt that older members or church leaders did not understand the difficulties of parenting by today's cultural standards. Respondents suggested that they sympathized but did not empathize. As DeVaney (2015) stated, empathy is central to a millennial's engagement. Also, the disengagement of church leaders has played a part in their ambivalent attitudes. Many respondents felt that church leaders from the baby boomer generation were decreasing in their presence within the church setting. There was no sense of why this was taking place. However, the disengagement and lack of empathy from them (church leadership) seemed to contribute to millennials' increased ambivalence toward them. It

was deduced that the perceived lack of empathy from church leaders and older members was a factor that could contribute toward relational distancing.

Outdated church traditions were found to be a source of contention among the respondents in how they perceive the older generation. This would emphasize the literature's view of millennials having a more progressive view on many aspects of their life (Boehme, 2013). Although minimal, it was present in their responses to the differences between the two generations. It was also reiterated in the literature that many church leaders nationwide do not have the same values as millennials (Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011; Puffer, 2018). Many felt that women having a leadership role in the worship service was a great addition. Once again, the reasoning centered around their children. They felt this intentional time contributed to their engagement due to the correlation of the church investing in their children. There was a sense of apathy toward their traditions as well. Many felt that instrumental worship versus acapella worship was simply a tradition and had no impact on their engagement. However, they felt there was no issue with utilizing it either. Progressive social issues were also discussed in the form of premarital sex and homosexuality. Boehme (2013) specifically mentioned these social issues in how millennials are not only aware they exist but are also more inclined to be accepting of such views. Again, the progressive ideologies have given a sense of ambivalence toward older generations and church leaders as a result of countering views (Sumpter, 2019). Mor Barak's (2017) two dimensions of social differences, as discussed within the literature, are relevant to the respondents' results. Many of the respondents felt that older members need things to be the same or predictable. That would coincide with the first dimension of uncertainty (Mor Barak, 2017). The second dimension of long term versus short term would be to look to the future benefits—in this case, the millennials—and center around their desires and family needs (Mor Barak, 2017).

Millennials felt this may be a struggle, particularly with social issues, for the older generation and the church leadership.

Finally, the external factors that contribute to a millennial's disengagement from relationships at the church were occupational demands and their own family time. Being the outliers to the literature, it was surprising they contributed to a millennial's disengagement. An argument can be made based on their responses that church and family time should remain separate (Heft, 2008). However, the response of how important the church is to their family could also negate that argument. This also parallels McGuire's (2018) theory that church and one's life should be synonymous. Occupational demands causing respondents to have a decrease in proximity to the church was an obvious understanding. If work demands are present during scheduled church practices, they are physically not able to engage with the church. The family time theme requires a more in-depth analysis. As the respondents discussed, there were extracurriculars and family-centric events that would supersede their involvement with the church. The fact that the family itself was an external factor did not arise in the literature as a potential societal issue that would lead to disengagement. This also mirrored their earlier sentiments that their engagement revolved around how their kids engage within the church. It stands to reason that millennials might decrease their proximity to the church as a result of the external schedules and events of their children. However, it was clear that the church was important as long as the investment was greater than their current scheduling and involvement with outside activities.

Where RQ1 and RQ2 discovered successful navigational strategies for Crisis 6 and Crisis 7 of Erikson's psychosocial theory (Maree, 2021), RQ3 sought to determine what could contribute to the unsuccessful navigation of these two crises. First, perceived ambivalence was a

contributing factor to isolation from church leadership. This isolation could contribute to millennials' disengagement if they do not take on future leadership roles. And if leadership does not pass to subsequent generations, then stagnation could occur. As Boehme (2013) discussed, the increase in ambivalence may be due to combating progressive cultural ideologies that agree with the literature. Disappointment in church leadership also plays a role in their disengagement. Difficulties in understanding and empathizing with millennials could contribute to isolation from church leadership or older members, and this may lead to an increase in stagnant attitudes in the future. As was mentioned earlier by Tuff (2019), relationships could hinder this perspective due to the increase in proximity, relationally, between the two groups. The respondents agreed that an increase in the presence of church leadership would be a relational factor they wish to pursue.

Implications

The implications that arose through this study have three categories. First, results would contribute to the idea that for a church to increase its millennial population, a significant culture shift needs to take place that heavily and intentionally focuses on the millennial parishioners' children. Through increasing funds, focus, and engagement within the children's programming, opportunities for intergenerational connections can be made with not only millennials but their children as well. The data suggest this would give millennial parishioners a sense of priority for church programming over many external factors. However, a lack of focus on their children may significantly diminish their endorsement of the church. Therefore, based on their responses, their priority tends to sway toward outward activities such as extracurricular activities or their own family-centric priorities. A sense of urgency toward engagement decreases the more time spent away from the church due to the potential lack of focus on their children.

The results would also indicate the second implication may be to have a more focused increase on intentional intergenerational adult programming. Intergenerational programs are essential for long-term engagement among millennials. This could potentially impact any future generations that would engage with the church. Intergenerational relationships through adult programs were found to increase engagement among the millennial population. Therefore, adult programs centered around developing these types of relationships could play an important role in gaining millennial endorsement of the church. This intergenerational focus may provide the opportunity to establish intimate relationships among older members as well as younger ones. This could also contribute to the long-term engagement of millennials through other leadership opportunities, specifically when established with the endorsement of church leadership. This holds the potential to impact even younger generations. Generational investment may continue to increase through a millennial's experience of Crisis 7 of generativity or stagnation (Maree, 2021). A culture of generativity could continue to exist long past the millennial's future leadership of the church if navigated successfully.

The last category is that of ambivalent attitude reduction through intergenerational connections. The similarities between millennials and older generations are evident in that they both seek loving relationships that connect consistently. However, intentionality must be present within the relationship on both ends of the relational spectrum. Relational connections were found to decrease ambivalent feelings over time. The primary mode of ambivalent reduction was for the older generation to seek an establishment of the relationship first. Or simply initiating the relationship as a mentor. This would contribute to generative attitudes for the church from the millennial. Especially when initiated by the church leadership. When relationships are established, the potential exists for progressive topics of parenting and cultural norms to be

understood more clearly by both parties. Relationships between millennial families and old members were found to increase engagement and somewhat reduce ambivalent feelings. Simply put, increased proximity holds the potential to change perspectives.

Limitations

Four limitations of this study include the church culture, singular location, lack of participant diversity, and my own personal biases. The first limitation of church culture centers around the idea that denominational churches are ideologically independent of one another. Many churches have their own history and development. This specific congregation has been in existence for over 100 years. With 100 years of cultural development, the experiences and factors of another church's respondents may be different than this church's millennials due to the culture that has been developed independently. Millennials could have been impacted differently at this church as opposed to how another church's culture would have impacted their own millennials over time. Therefore, the responses that participants would provide could vary.

Likewise, the second limitation is that of a singular church from this specific denomination. Hicks and Weedman (2015) specifically discussed their traditional worship style of acapella worship. Similar to church culture, this one church has its own set of rules and traditions, such as acapella worship. This tradition, as well as other experiences discussed by respondents, might not be experienced at another church denomination. Specifically, the millennials have their own set of traditions at this church. Therefore, the interview questions asked may not be applicable to the research questions if performed at another congregation. Respondents' experiences and viewpoints were through the lens of the traditions of this singular church, which may not be experienced by millennials at another church denomination.

A third limitation is that of participant diversity. Not only were there few minorities but there were no single-parent households that volunteered for the study. However, it should be noted that no single-parent families attended the information meeting about the study. This may be in part due to the minimal demographic makeup of this congregation. A minimal number of millennial families qualified for the study that would be in the category of a single-parent household. Along with this factor, only a few Hispanic respondents volunteered to participate in this study. Being a predominantly Caucasian congregation, the racial diversity was minimal. Because of this, a study with a predominantly Caucasian pool of participants may not be significantly applicable to a racially diverse congregation. As Willis-Wallace and Bell (2021) discussed, having a more racially diverse pool of participants can help to lessen the generalization of studies.

The final limitation is that of my own biases. Not only am I a minister at this congregation, but I am also a millennial. I am passionate about generational faith and how that impacts the millennial generation. I may have interpreted the participants' responses based on my own passionate perspectives. Because impartiality is not possible, I understand there may be a biased perspective on my part. However, although biases are not uncommon, they still may exist. The goal would be then to be aware of the possibility of a biased viewpoint and to work with an objective lens so as not to skew the results.

Recommendations for Practical Application

Investing in children's programming is a priority for this millennial population. Millennials put a significant amount of focus on ministry programs that center around their children. In instances where churches are encountering challenges expanding their children's

programming, utilizing strategies addressing this issue may prove beneficial for congregations experiencing a decline in their millennial population.

Similarly, millennial-centric programs should be increased in churches to give this generation of parishioners a sense of value within the church as a result of intergenerational relationships. Due to baby boomers accounting for the majority of parishioners in most mainline churches, it may no longer be strategically viable for churches to prioritize attention on this demographic. Churches should be encouraged to understand how to accommodate the increase of millennial-centric programs in correlation to how they impact the baby boomer generation.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should be encouraged to broaden the pool of participants from other church congregations and denominations simultaneously. Due to churches having their own culture, it would be beneficial to discover if relational practices are found to increase engagement among them as well.

Similarly, the population of this sample was predominantly Caucasian. This research may not be applicable to other churches that have a higher minority population. Willis-Wallace and Bell (2021) emphasized this from a global perspective by stating, “Up to 80% of research participants can be described by the ‘WEIRD’ acronym—White, educated and from industrialized, rich and democratic societies” (p. 10). Only 12% of the world lives by the “WEIRD” standards (Willis-Wallace & Bell, 2021). This would make the specific findings of this study more difficult to associate with a racially and socioeconomically diverse congregation.

In addition, gathering data from single-parent households would be immensely valuable. Increasing the pool of participants to include diversity across economic, ethnic, and other types of households would help to better understand the role played by intergenerational relationships

among different populations. This research had no single-parent participants who volunteered for the study.

Conclusion

Through the research questions presented, I sought to understand intergenerational factors that lead to engagement, church practices that lead to intergenerational relationships, and ambivalent or external factors that decrease those relationships within the church. Each research question was viewed through the framework of Erikson's psychosocial development theory (Maree, 2021). More specifically, Crisis 6 and Crisis 7 are intimacy versus isolation and generativity versus stagnation, respectively. Following the research, many conclusions emerged that had implications for a millennial's successful navigation of these two crises through relational means.

First, for intimate relationships to be made, which could lead to generative attitudes in the church, it may be beneficial for churches to create relational opportunities for older and younger members to engage with one another. This can be done in the form of intergenerational programming or intergenerational worship. Regardless of the means, this study's respondents emphasized the importance of the relational opportunities that contributed to their engagement within the church. Interestingly, this was contrary to the literature on increased social media engagement. Respondents found it important, or even vital, for in-person relationships to be made for the generative nature of the church.

Secondly, an unintended conclusion was identified in the research that contributed to a millennial's engagement. The emphasis on their children's ministry programs was found to be a significant factor. The respondents confirmed through their lived experiences that having a surrounding community in their younger years helped to affirm their engagement in the long

term. This has now been associated with their children, and thus, millennials seek intergenerational programming for their children as well. This has also contributed to their investment in children's ministry programming. It was found to contribute to a generative faith and viewpoint toward the church due to intimate relationships but at a young age.

The last of the conclusions would suggest that the practicing of diminishing ambivalence over time contributes to a millennial's church engagement. Although this is a current issue within this church, it is not possible to hinder generational ambivalence quickly. Several participants found that the perception of ambivalence exists. However, it was understood that a possible contribution to diminishing ambivalence is close proximity through relationships. Therefore, the former two conclusions were found to be the primary ways of diminishing ambivalent attitudes over time: investing in the millennial's child and the millennial themselves through relational means.

The findings identified that a substantial commitment to enhancing the engagement of the young millennial family could support long-term church growth and engagement. Generational faith is how churches have survived since the early days of Christians congregating. If one generation is lacking in their engagement, the next generation will follow in the same manner due to the generational structure of mainline churches. It may be potentially beneficial for churches to continue these relational factors and to practice them weekly, which may result in strengthening the engagement of millennials. Although this may be a cultural hindrance for older members to have such a high level of focus on younger families, it could possibly produce high levels of engagement long after their association with this church has passed. This drastic emphasis on millennial families relies heavily on church leadership to continue to make these intergenerational factors a priority for them and the church.

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Appendix A: Parishioner Solicitation Letter

Hello,

I am doing a research study entitled "Intergenerational Factors That Contribute to Millennial Church Engagement." The purpose of this study is to understand why and how Millennials stay engaged at this church. To qualify for this study, you must:

- 1) Have been born between 1981 and 1996.
- 2) Have been a member at this church for at least one year.
- 3) Have a child between the ages of 0 – 12 (Birth – 6th Grade)

Participation would require a one-on-one interview with 12 questions asked. Interviews will take one to two hours of your time. The interviews will be recorded through an audio format and securely stored.

If you are interested in participating, please email me at _____ and you will be presented with a Consent Form with more info.

Sincerely,



Primary Investigator

Appendix B: IRB Approval Letter

Date: April 10, 2023

PI: Parker Sanderson

Department: ONL-Online Student, 17250-EdD Online

Re: Initial - IRB-2023-88

Intergenerational Factors That Contribute to Millennial Church Engagement

The Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *Intergenerational Factors That Contribute to Millennial Church Engagement*. The administrative check-in date is --.

Decision: Exempt

Category: Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

Research Notes:

Additional Approvals/Instructions:

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable. All approval letters and study documents are located within the Study Details in Cayuse IRB.

The following are all responsibilities of the Primary Investigator (PI). Violation of these responsibilities may result in suspension or termination of research by the Institutional Review Board. If the Primary Investigator is a student and fails to fulfil any of these responsibilities, the Faculty Advisor then becomes responsible for completing or upholding any and all of the following:

- When the research is completed, inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs. If your study is Exempt, Non-Research, or Non-Human Research, email orsp@acu.edu to indicate that the research has finished.
- According to ACU policy, research data must be stored on ACU campus (or electronically) for 3 years from inactivation of the study, in a manner that is secure but accessible should the IRB request access.
- It is the Investigator's responsibility to maintain a general environment of safety for all research participants and all members of the research team. All risks to physical, mental, and emotional well-being as well as any risks to

confidentiality should be minimized.

For additional information on the policies and procedures above, please visit the IRB website <http://www.acu.edu/community/offices/academic/orsp...> or email orsp@acu.edu with your questions.

Sincerely,

Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board

Appendix C: Research and Interview Question Matrix

Purpose Statement	Research Questions	Interview Questions
1. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to research what intergenerational factors are connected to millennials leaving or continuing their membership with churches	1. Are there intergenerational relationship factors contribute to church engagement among millennials?	1. Tell me your story about how you got involved with this church. a. How would you describe your engagement currently at this church?
		2. How would you describe an intergenerational relationship?
		3. What potential value do you see in having intergenerational relationships with others at this church?
		4. Who in this church from other generations do you feel connected to, and could you describe that relationship? a. What helped you in making that relationship? b. How has this impacted your engagement at this church?
		5. Give examples of how well older church members do and do not understand what is going on with your life or others in your age demographic?
	2. Are there church practices that help millennial families to foster intimate relationships	1. There are times we feel connected in church and not connected. Could you tell me about a time that made you

	with other church members from other age demographics?	feel the most connected to this church?
		2. Could you tell me about a time that made you feel the least connected to this church?
		3. What experiences at this church have you had that are meaningful to your family? a. How has this impacted your engagement at this church?
		4. Give an example of a time your family felt valued at this church, if any? a. How has this impacted your engagement at his church?
	3. Are there external or ambivalent factors that contribute to relational distancing among millennials within the church?	1. How would you describe the differences and similarities between your desires for this church and the older generation's desires for this church?
		2. How would you like to see this church's leadership address concerns from your age group? a. What would this mean to your family?
		3. What is your opinion on your generation having ambivalent feelings toward older generations at this church or this church's leadership?

		<p>a. Can you give examples of times you felt disappointed in the church leadership, but continued to engage with this church?</p> <p>b. Can you give examples of times you felt proud of their leadership, which contributed to your engagement with this church?</p>
		<p>1. What secular issues have you experienced, if any, outside of the church that you believe may have impacted your engagement within the church?</p>

Appendix D: Interview Questions

- 1) Tell me your story about how you got involved with this church.
 - a. How would you describe your engagement currently at this church?
- 2) There are times we feel connected in church and not connected. Could you tell me about a time that made you feel the most and least connected to this church?
- 3) How would you describe an intergenerational relationship?
- 4) What potential value do you see in having intergenerational relationships with others at church?
- 5) Who in this church from other generations do you feel connected to?
 - a. What helped you in making that connection?
 - b. How has this impacted your engagement with this church?
- 6) What experiences at this church have you had that are meaningful to your family?
 - a. How has this impacted your engagement with this church?
- 7) Give an example of a time your family felt valued at this church?
 - a. How has this impacted your engagement with this church?
- 8) Give examples of how well older church members do or do not understand what is going on with your life or others in your age demographic?
- 9) How would you describe the differences and similarities between your desires for this church and older generations' desires for this church?
- 10) How would you like to see this church's leadership address concerns from your age group?
 - a. What would that mean to your family?

11) In this study, I am exploring the idea of ambivalence. I am defining ambivalence as having two opposing feelings towards older generations or leadership simultaneously or negative and positive sentiments towards them. Simply put, a “love/hate” relationship. What is your opinion on your generation have ambivalent feelings towards older generations at this church or this church’s leadership?

- a. Can you give examples of times you felt disappointed in the church leadership, but continued to engage with this church?
- b. Can you give examples of times you felt proud of their leadership, which contributed to your engagement with this church?

12) We’ve been talking about events and engagement within the church. Now let me ask a question about secular events or issues away from the church. I’m defining “secular issues” as any type of event or activity that has no correlation to the church. However, it could impact your engagement within the church in a positive or negative way. What secular issues have you experienced, if any, outside of the church that you believe may have impacted your engagement within the church?

- a. e.g., child’s sports team activities, child’s school extracurricular activities, occupational demands, or non-church related volunteer opportunities.
- b. Could you explain?