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**FEATURE**

**Millennial Students in Higher Education:  
Changes Needed from Christian Teachers**

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***Abstract.** Millennial students learn differently compared with the previous generations, and this variation demands changes from Higher Education (HE) teachers. Even though many studies have offered suggestions for change, there is scarcity of research, specifically related to how Christian HE teachers can be effective disciple-makers to millennial students. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to shed light on how Christian HE teachers can be effective disciple-makers to millennial students, while fostering curiosity and passion for learning. To be effective disciple-makers, Christian HE teachers can follow Jesus' model of discipleship: nurturing community, doing mission service, reflecting on experience, and intentionally developing students' character (Parker, 2012). Additionally, since actions speak louder than words, millennial students need to see a living faith in Christ modeled by their HE teachers. This paper examines these needs, approaching the topic from a post-positivist paradigm. It employs a theoretical format to review the literature, to identify key criteria for discipling millennials.*

**Keywords:** Millennial students, higher education, Christian teachers, change

**Introduction**

For Kaifi, Nafei, Khanfar, and Kaifi (2012) the Millennial generation, also known as Generation Y or *Millenials* in this paper, starts with people born after 1980. The Millennials (also known as digital natives) are used to instantaneity: instant messages, fast music downloads, cellular phones, laptops, and social networking (Prensky, 2001). Unfortunately, when “digital natives” are under the instruction of “digital immigrants,” teachers who speak the pre-digital language,

there is a language gap that hampers learning (Prensky, 2001, p. 1). Often, while students are texting or surfing, teachers are struggling to manage the classroom software or other technologies (Papp & Matulich, 2011). Hence, Papp and Matulich (2011) suggested the use of technology in the classroom to avoid disengagement of millennials. While Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964 (Kaifi et al., 2012), may have been taught by lectures, millennials have little tolerance for them (Papp & Matulich, 2011). Moreover, since millennials are generally kinesthetic and visual learners, they need interaction with each other and hands-on activities (Papp & Matulich, 2011). Therefore, teaching millennial students necessitates change in HE.

Even though many studies have offered suggestions for change (e.g. Anderson-Butcher, 2004; Aviles & Eastman, 2012; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Kaifi et al., 2012; Krader, 2010; Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Papp & Matulich, 2011; Prensky, 2010), there is a scarcity of research, specifically studying how Christian HE teachers can be effective disciple-makers to millennial students. Hence, adopting a post-positivist paradigm and based on a review of related literature, the purpose of this paper is to shed light on how Christian HE teachers can be effective disciple-makers to millennial students, while fostering curiosity and passion to learn.

The paper addresses two questions. First, what changes is the millennial generation bringing to HE teaching and learning? Second, how can Christian HE teachers reposition themselves to take advantage of these changes?

### **Literature Review**

To assess the characteristics of the millennial generation that are relevant to HE teaching and learning, this paper reviews the characteristics of Millennials, what they are like, and how they learn.

#### **Characteristics of Millennials**

In terms of their characteristics, millennials can be described as having a high self-esteem, and being very flexible (Papp & Matulich, 2011). Since millennials were raised believing “that they are ‘special’ and that they can be ‘anything they want to be’... they want to feel ‘special’ when they enter the classroom or the corporate world” (Papp & Matulich, 2011, p. 2). Although their parents were highly involved in their lives, millennials are usually ill-equipped to manage by themselves in the university life and the corporate world (Papp & Matulich, 2011). Millennials like to work in teams and are achievers, though differently than their parents and teachers (Papp & Matulich, 2011).

Tolbzic (2008) called them the “Trophy Generation” because they are used to being rewarded for participating, rather than winning. Hence, they reject politics and internal competition (Kaifi et al., 2012). Because a high proportion of them

have grown up in families affected by divorce, layoffs, and financial crisis, they avoid long-term commitments and desire flexibility (Kaifi et al., 2012). They are socially conscious, they care for nature, like teamwork (Hewlett et al., 2009), and desire to have a voice (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). Pacis et al. (2012) have summarized these traits into the seven key characteristics of Generation Y (or millennials): they are globally concerned, technologically savvy, realistic, diverse, sociable, environmentally conscious, and have a desire to achieve.

More than anything else, millennials like instantaneity and being connected. Since they like networking, both virtual and physical, “they are in constant contact with each other via their electronics” (Zimmerman, 2012, p. 176). Singer (2009) argued that the complexity of networking stimulate the brains of millennial children early in life, resulting in increased intelligence. They can use technology to bring fast solutions (Zimmerman, 2012). “Their fingers tap furiously on tiny keys, their eyes and ears fixated on moving images and sound. They prefer text messaging, game playing and Internet social talk to reading books or . . . writing letters by hand” (Geracimos, 2008, p. 1). They enjoy being connected, and, thus, they work very easily on networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, MySpace, or Flickr (Zimmerman, 2012). They update their blogs, upload and edit pictures or movies almost effortlessly (Zimmerman, 2012). Nevertheless, not all millennials are alike.

An empirical study of over 800 millennials found three different subgroups—the Restrained (46%), the Entertainment-Seeking (35%), and the Highly Connected millennials (19%)—in regard to the use of social media (Kilian et al., 2012). While the Restrained millennials made less use of social media and blogs, the Entertainment-Seeking had the highest score in “passive use of social networks and file-sharing communities” (Kilian et al., 2012, p. 117). Finally, the Highly Connected millennials actively used social media (they build social networks), and they were active users of blogs and Wikipedia.

This Internet connectedness does not necessarily translate into face-to-face interpersonal skills. Interestingly, when asked about the motives for using social media, entertainment was the dominant motive for the use of social networks and file-sharing communities, while seeking information was found to be the key motive for the use of Wikipedia and blogs. Since they grew up “in the digital age” (Kaifi et al., 2012), they are very familiar with media, communication, and technology. Nevertheless, they lack interpersonal skills, both oral and written (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011).

### **How Millennials Learn**

Millennials learn better in groups and prefer to use their own digital tools. They do not like lectures, prefer to work in groups rather than alone, and prefer their own tools rather than being told what to use (Prensky, 2010). DeVries (2009) added, “Google has over 2.7 billion searches per month; while the average

student only asks a question in class about once every 10 hours. They are asking questions; it's just not to us!" (p. 1). While instructional technology usually has a predetermined operation, digital learning allows the user to customize outcomes (Davidson & Goldberg, 2010). For millennials, research employs Google rather than going to the library, and they are more likely to consult an online community than the librarian (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Similarly, a study of millennials' search behavior found that they prefer "web-based search engines such as Google, Yahoo and Bing" (Zimmerman, 2012, p. 174), but do not know (and hence should be taught) how to use the library and academic databases. They have been perceived as multitaskers and can learn new software very quickly. Their brains may have actually changed, processing information differently than previous generations (Prensky, 2010).

Millennials usually show audio/visual/kinesthetic learning styles, and prefer to learn practical knowledge. Pacis et al. (2012) listed three learning characteristics of the millennials: (1) they like to use the KWL (know, want to learn, learned) assessment tool; (2) they are AVK (audio, visual, kinesthetic) learners: they are "realistic, technology motivated (not memory), [with] short attention span" (p. 59); and (3) they like to choose what to read and research according to their preferences. Additionally, after polling 2,200 professionals, Meister and Willyerd (2010) listed the "top five things millennials want to learn" (para. 5): technical skills, self-management and productivity, leadership, practical knowledge, and how to be creative/innovative.

### **Responding to the Needs of the Millennial Generation**

Best teachers are reflective practitioners, who seek improvement by changing, based on what works and what does not (Bain, 2004). This is especially true for the HE teacher, where change is truly a constant. Knight (2002) pointed out five fundamental assumptions of change in HE. The HE teacher works in an ever-changing system (teaching is dynamic), in which some elements leave the system while newer ones are added. In addition, since change is not uniform, it is unpredictable; therefore, it is painful. Moreover, since change may imperil the passion of faculty members, it is the faculty's job to handle change well. Thus, HE teachers from previous generations need to reposition themselves (change) in order to take advantage of and respond to the changes millennial students bring to the class. To address the changes needed, this section will focus on two aspects: how to foster curiosity and passion to learn and how to be effective disciple-makers.

#### **How to Foster Curiosity and Passion to Learn**

Literature offers many ideas on how to foster curiosity and passion to learn among millennials, which can be grouped into four areas: millennials can be actively engaged using technology, should be allowed to learn on their own time,

prefer interaction and active involvement, and need to receive information in small concept maps.

First, millennials can be actively engaged by using technology, online activities, multimedia, and social networks. Hence, HE teachers should utilize these means to adapt their “teaching methods and syllabi to garner millennials’ interest” (Papp & Matulich, 2011, p. 1). Since they rely heavily on Google and similar search engines but do not know how to use library search engines (Zimmerman, 2012), it is recommended that they be taught how to use online library resources (Bonk, 2009). In addition, Zimmerman (2012) suggested that libraries provide web search engines that millennials trust. They also need to provide librarian assistance.

In addition to networking, millennials use technology for learning and growing (Papp & Matulich, 2011). Hence, university lecturers can employ the use of the Internet to capitalize on the belief that if it comes from the Internet it has to be true. This use can include teaching Internet research skills, such as how to identify trustworthy sources. This activity will keep millennials in their environment while teaching them key skills. Gerow, Galluch, and Thatcher (2010), however, warned that Internet usage in the classroom may not lead to more learning, and suggested that teachers recognize the antecedents of cyber-slacking. They added that there are internal and external factors influencing students’ cyber-slacking, either by way of increasing or decreasing its occurrence. The internal factors are multitasking and cognitive absorption, while the external are social norms, distraction by other students’ cyber-slacking, and awareness of instructor monitoring (Gerow et al., 2010).

Millennials need to be taught self-monitoring skills that foster self-directedness. Practices related to the online environment can help to develop these skills. Students can be encouraged to work in the online environment to develop these skills. An exploratory study among millennial business students found that they mostly use course websites and online assessment (Aviles & Eastman, 2012). In addition, they perceive laptops, discussion groups, online assessments, course websites, and message boards as the most effective tools for learning (Aviles & Eastman, 2012). In addition, Tucker and Courts (2010) suggested the use of “multimedia items, such as animation, slideshows, announcements, blogging and even instant messaging” when designing the lesson plan (p. 37). Thus, the millennial environment is brought into their learning experience.

Second, millennials should be allowed to learn on their own time. Prensky (2010) forecasted that “the future will no doubt bring something new, including, perhaps, students learning totally on their own and in virtual groups of their own choosing” (p. 185). Since millennials like to communicate through text messages and instant messaging, educators can create active learning environments in which students can use these communications methods at any time (Watkins,

2009). Likewise, millennials favor online lectures, assignments, and tests, because they prefer “any time, any place” rather than classroom activities (Papp & Matulich, 2011). Thus, HE teachers should continuously improve and enhance their courses, adapting to students’ needs and learning styles (Papp & Matulich, 2011).

Third, while many teachers learned by lectures and readings, millennials prefer interaction, active involvement, and demonstrations (Papp & Matulich, 2011). They prefer self-paced, collaborative, team-based, and experiential learning (Ca, Griffin, & Bai, 2009; Twenge, 2006). Hence, teachers should use collaborative activities, case studies, discussions, role-playing, simulations, brainstorming, and group projects (Papp & Matulich, 2011). While teachers may have learned by lectures, they should strive to offer interactive and hands-on activities.

Last, since millennials process information differently than Baby Boomers (Twenge, 2006), they need to receive information in concept maps, which may foster retention. “They process information using concept maps and visual cues while faculty generally process information linearly and logically” (Papp & Matulich, 2011, p. 5). Since they are usually turned off by lectures, they can learn more by reflection and building concept maps outside of the classroom (Papp & Matulich, 2011). Papp and Matulich (2011) suggested breaking the class in small ‘chunks’ (10-minute each), using different learning techniques, giving them time to reflect and interact, and using relevant experiences that will be meaningful to them.

### **How to Be Effective Disciple-Makers**

Christian HE teachers can follow Jesus’ model of discipleship. Parker (2012) calls for “a reinventing of Adventist higher education according to the discipleship model of Jesus” (p. 38). Interestingly, it appears that Jesus’ model of discipleship is fit for the millennials. Jesus not only transferred truth (information), but also molded character in seeking to transform His disciples (Parker, 2012). In addition, millennials often have no close ties with pastors (or other adults), and end up making lifestyle decisions under the sole influence of peers (Wells, 2010). Given the importance of decisions made during college years (for instance, choice of career, worldview and belief systems, faith commitments, dating, and marriage), having a Christ-like role model is vital. The discipleship method of Jesus may be the basis for enabling HE teachers to transform their millennial students (Parker, 2012).

Parker (2012) offered four practical aspects of Jesus’ method of discipleship that HE teachers can follow: nurturing community, engaging in mission service, reflecting on experience, and intentionally developing character. The first of Jesus’ approaches was to form a small group (disciples) with which a sense of community could transform the world (Parker, 2012; Coleman, 1993).

Since millennials are excellent team players (Krader, 2010), students should be encouraged to work in groups. For instance, Parker (2012) believes that a cohort of freshmen college students who take all classes together and work as a team enjoy more opportunities for mentoring, increased engagement, bonding, and sharing inside and outside of the classroom.

Second, just as Jesus engaged His disciples in missionary service, HE teachers can nurture in their students the love to serve others by setting a good example, encouraging volunteerism, and assigning them to mission fields (Parker, 2012). Since millennials are concerned with community service, medical students who are provided with medical missions may be happy and less stressed (Krader, 2010). Anderson-Butcher (2004) called for a transformation of schools into 21st century centers of volunteerism and community service. When millennial students see their teachers serving others, they will follow, they will experience service, they will see themselves as part of God's mission, and they will be transformed (Parker, 2012).

Third, after Jesus taught and modeled for His disciples, He sent them to learn by experience (Matthew 10). Likewise, HE teachers should allow students to learn through experience and to reflect on the learning experience (Cao et al., 2009; Parker, 2012). For instance, students can engage in real-life workplace experiences (through internships or service learning opportunities) for a period of time (Parker, 2012). With this type of learning, however, it is important that teacher feedback be focused on behaviors rather than the students. Internships can be challenging; and since millennials have trouble recognizing failures, they tend to take negative feedback personally (Krader, 2010). Christ-like tact is a critical component of making real-life experiences work for millennials.

Finally, Jesus intentionally developed His disciples' characters. The previous items are ineffective if there is no "intentional character development" (Parker, 2012, p. 43). HE teachers should intentionally mold their students' characters. Character development should involve different areas of character, such as intellectual (how, rather than what students learn), moral (good intentions and behavior), civic (passion for communal well-being), and performance (doing the plan) (Shields, 2011). To target these areas, for instance, teachers can share their failures, ask students to create a "personal growth plan" after taking a spiritual assessment, meet annually to check the progress on their character goals, or take regular personality tests (Parker, 2012, p. 43). Since millennials are more open than other generations to mentoring (Meister & Willyerd, 2010; Krader, 2010), there should be intentional modeling.

As with any learning process, it is good to assess how students (and teachers) are growing as disciples of Jesus. Since it is designed for youth, the Growing Disciples Inventory (GDI) (Bradfield, 2012) is a good tool to assess the spiritual development of millennials who already made a decision to follow Jesus.

It is based on the Together Growing Fruitful Disciples framework (Beagles & Balisasa, 2012), a model for discipleship growth made of four processes: connecting, understanding, ministering, and equipping. Each process includes a set of commitments and indicators, from which the 84-item GDI was developed. While connecting involves “growing in relationship with God, self, and others”, understanding deals with “growing in knowledge of Jesus and His teachings” (Together Growing Fruitful Disciples Framework, 2012, p. 19). Ministering is defined as “growing in participation in God’s mission of revelation, reconciliation, and restoration”; and equipping is described as “growing the Body of Christ by walking alongside other disciples in order to support, nurture, and strengthen in love” (Together Growing Fruitful Disciples, 2012, p. 19).

Bradfield (2012) offered five ideas on how to use the GDI in HE. They can be applied in a course on Christian life, as preparation for mission service, as reflection on personal spirituality, in small groups of Bible study, or in counseling (Bradfield, 2012). After taking the GDI, respondents can develop a growing plan according to the levels of each indicator. Besides students, HE teachers can take the GDI to assess their own strengths and weaknesses as disciples and disciplers, because their actions and commitment to follow Jesus “speak louder than their best curriculum, instruction, or assessments” (Bradfield, 2012, p. 29). The GDI can be taken online at <http://growingfruitfuldisciples.com/gdi>.

Finally, as with every other Christian, Jesus commissions Christian HE teachers to be “the salt of the earth” (Matthew 5:13). How can they be the salt that millennial students need? According to White (1958), God wants His children to “become agents in saving others” (p. 165). As the salt has preserving qualities, “Christians who are purified through the truth will possess saving qualities that preserve the world from utter moral corruption” (White, 1958, p. 166). Conversely, “without a living faith in Christ as a personal Savior it is impossible to make our influence felt in a skeptical world. We cannot give to others that which we do not ourselves possess. It is in proportion to our own devotion and consecration to Christ that we exert an influence for the blessing and uplifting of mankind” (White, 1958, p. 167). In addition, when Christ’s “love fills the heart, it will flow out to others” (White, 1958, p. 168), especially impacting the lives of millennials, who are more open than other generations to mentoring (Krader, 2010; Meister & Willyerd, 2010). Therefore, HE teachers who have a living faith in Christ, who nurture Jesus’ love in their hearts by a personal devotion and consecration to Him, and who are purified by the truth, can be effective disciple-makers to their millennial students.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The purpose of this paper was to shed light on how Christian HE teachers of previous generations can be effective disciple-makers to millennial students, as well as foster curiosity and passion to learn. Hence, this paper addressed two



issues. First, what changes the millennial generation brings to HE teaching and learning, and, second, how Christian HE teachers should reposition themselves to take advantage of those unique changes.

The millennial generation has brought changes to HE teaching and learning in three aspects: who they are, what they like, and how they learn. Millennials are very flexible, and can be described as having a high self-esteem. They like instantaneity and being connected with their peers and the world. Millennials learn better in groups and prefer to use their own digital tools. They usually show audio/visual/kinesthetic learning styles, and prefer to learn practical knowledge and skills. Therefore, to take advantage of those changes, Christian HE teachers should reposition themselves by (1) changing the way they foster curiosity and passion to learn, and (2) by changing their approach to discipleship. First, curiosity and passion to learn can be achieved by using technology, online activities, multimedia, and social networks, allowing them to learn on their own terms, using interaction, active involvement, and demonstrations, and giving information in small concept maps. Second, to be effective disciple-makers, Christian HE teachers can follow Jesus' model of discipleship: nurturing community, engaging in mission service, reflecting on experience, and intentionally developing character (Parker, 2012). Finally, since actions speak louder than words, HE teachers need to have a living faith in Christ, and show His love, if they want to be effective disciple-makers to their millennial students.

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