

# What Missionaries Ought to Know about Millennials in Adulthood

The Pew Research Center has been following the Millennial generation since the first ones were born in 1981. This generation now ranges in age from 18-33, and it now comprises one third of the people from which missionaries are selected. Because they are now adults, the Pew Research Center conducted three surveys between January 23 and February 26, 2014.

New generations always differ from previous ones, and that has been the case with the Millennials. At the turn of the century, they were different from the Builders, Boomers, and Busters, but those differences between the generations were primarily cultural. A decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> century Pew research revealed that some of the differences included more important issues of morality and religion.

The results of the 2014 studies were released in early March as *Millennials in Adulthood: Detached from Institutions, Networked with Friends* available at <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/03/07/Millennials-in-adulthood/>. This 68-page document reveals that the majority of Millennials have some characteristics that may require the attention of mission agencies. Even the subtitle of the 2014 report is quite different from the 2010 report which was “*confident, connected, and open to change.*”

## Different

Many of these differences between Millennials and previous generations are

neutral and potentially valuable advantages. The first paragraph of the report describes Millennials as “relatively unattached to organized politics and religion, linked by social media, burdened by debt, distrustful of people, in no rush to marry, optimistic about the future...and racially diverse” (p. 4). Some of these characteristics are neutral or positive.

- Unattached to organized politics
- Linked by social media
- No rush to marry
- Optimistic about the future
- Racially diverse

However, other characteristics may be a hindrance to being a missionary.

- Unattached to religion
- Burdened by debt
- Distrustful of people

Additional characteristics found in the majority of Millennials in the studies may be even more problematic. These characteristics are listed below and include the page numbers on which they appear in the report.

## Not religious

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the Millennials did not see themselves as religious. Only 36% of them said that the phrase “a religious person” described them very well (pp. 14,45). In addition more than four in ten (42%) of Millennials said that they either did not believe in God or were not sure about his existence (p. 13). Nearly three-in-ten (29%) said they were not affiliated with any religion at all, the highest levels that Pew studies have found while conducting this series of generational studies (p. 4).

If an agency’s goal is to provide humanitarian aid, Millennials may be effective in that work. However, if the agency’s goal is

to bring people to faith in God, people who see themselves as nonreligious and question God’s existence are not likely to be effective missionaries. They would not be likely to believe that Jesus is “the way, the truth, and the life,” and that there is no other way to God other than through him (John 14:6).

## Unmarried—with children

Nearly three quarters (74%) of Millennials were unmarried, and the average age of first marriage was 29 for men and 27 for women, the highest ages in modern history (pp. 5, 9). Fewer Millennials were married (26%) than was true of any of the other generations when 18-23 years of age.

Not marrying does not mean that Millennials were avoiding co-habiting and sex outside marriage. Millennials had more out-of-wedlock births than any of the other generations. In 2012 nearly half (47%) of births to Millennials were to women who were not married (p. 10).

Like the other generations, Millennials believed that it was a “bad thing for American society that more children are being raised by single parents” (pp. 43). However, Millennials lead all generations in out-of-wedlock births (p. 10).

If the agencies’ goals include promoting sexual purity and intact families, many Millennials may be poor examples.

## Support homosexual marriage

More than two-thirds (68%) of Millennials favored allowing gays and lesbians to marry (p. 31). More than half (51%) of Millennials said that “a supporter of gay rights” described them very well (p. 14). More than a third (35%) of Millennials said

that it was a good thing for society if gay and lesbian couples raised children (p. 42).

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament (Leviticus 18 and Romans 1) forbid homosexual behavior. Millennials seem to be very much like the people mentioned in Romans 1:32, those who know God’s decrees but continue to violate them and approve of others who violate them as well.

In the USA, homosexual activity was considered a sin, then it became a crime, then it became a psychological disorder. Finally, in 1973 it was declared to be just an alternate lifestyle. Until about a decade into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, marriage was only between a man and a woman. Then some cultures redefined marriage. If the agency believes that marriage is between men and women only, Millennials may not be a good fit.

## Distrust people

More than three quarters (81%) of Millennials said they did not trust people. When asked, “Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can’t be too careful in dealing with people.” only 19 % of Millennials said that most people can be trusted (p 7). Older generations were more likely to trust people.

Millennials may be less likely to trust others in their agency and less likely to trust nationals, even leaders of the national church. This may lead to creating discontent or even premature departure from the field.

## Burdened with debt

Two-thirds of millennials recently receiving bachelor’s degrees have unpaid student loans, and their average debt is about \$27,000. Millennials are the best-educated

generational group in American history. A third of Millennials ages 26 to 33 have a four-year college degree (or more); however, they also have record levels of student debt. Two decades ago, when the Gen Xs were graduating, only half of them had college debt, and the average debt was only \$15,000 (p. 9).

Many agencies do not accept individuals with debt, so two thirds of the Millennials will not be acceptable, and it will be years before they will be able to serve. By the time they have paid off their loans, many of them are likely to have roots in their communities and a mortgage to pay.

## Less Conservative

More than two-thirds (69%) of Millennials support the legalization of marijuana (p. 32). There is nothing wrong being less conservative on some things, such as politics, and Millennials are more liberal politically (p. 23, 39). However, previous sections show that they are also less conservative on social issues, such as supporting homosexual marriage and bearing children out of wedlock. They are less conservative about many social issues, including the use of drugs.

Many agencies have policies about the use of psychoactive drugs, and such liberal views may conflict with those policies. Also, if Millennials are serving in a country that exports marijuana or other drugs to the USA, such positions may cause problems.

## Implications

This brochure is not intended to be a summary of the Pew report. That report is 68 pages long and covers many other issues, such

as political trends, social trends, and technology. Readers are urged to download the report and to read not only the pages cited here but also the entire report and the appendices giving the details of the research including exactly how the questions were worded and asked. The issues discussed here have been chosen by the author as ones likely to lead to difficulties if Millennials become missionaries. Here are suggestions about actions that may help agencies and missionaries on the field.

**First, selection.** Some agencies may prefer not to have people with such views as members. Knowing that the majority of Millennials hold these positions, as well as many others covered in the report and previous Pew reports, those agencies can detect and screen potential members out during their selection process.

Questions about these issues may be included in written information requested when potential missionaries apply, and then interviewers can explore them in depth and interpret them in the context of the person as a whole.

**Second, supervision.** If the agency wants to admit people holding such positions, it may want to have some sort of supervision in place to monitor how these positions influence performance during service. This may be in the form of mentors assigned to the candidates or in the form of field directors observing what the candidate is doing relative to these issues.

Again, this is not meant to imply that all Millennials in that 18-33 year old category have any or all of these characteristics. It is meant to point out that they are very prevalent in this group of people and agencies need to be aware of them.

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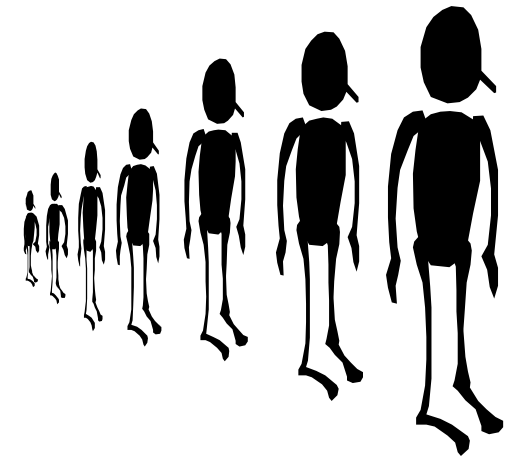
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