

## **THE CHRISTIAN PROPHETIC WITNESS ESSAY COMPETITION 2016**

*Here is the winning essay in the group for 19-30 years old:*

*“Does the United Kingdom have a Christian future?”*

They say no news is good news and the Christian church would probably agree wholeheartedly with this statement. Do a Google search on “church attendance in the UK” and up pops a litany of articles predicting the doom of churches in the United Kingdom. With titles like “Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore” and “Church Attendance Drops Below a Million for the First Time” you might get the impression your own church doors will be bolted up before the upcoming weekend service. As unnerving as this all sounds, the majority of conducted surveys do clearly show an underlying theme that church attendance is in fact dropping. One survey conducted by the Church of England stated the “overall average attendances at Sunday services across England fell by 22,000 to 764,700 in 2014 – a fall of seven per cent in just five years.” It went on to say attendance of Sunday services is now roughly one third of the population who attended in the 1960s. If you read through some of the theories on why attendance is dropping you may agree with some of them. The leadership scandals, increase in secularism, and ageing population of churchgoers are all valid concerns. Other theories, like blaming World War II on the decline of Christians due to a lost faith in God, may be a little more farfetched. So while the critics’ theories may have some truth, what really is the answer to the church’s declining numbers and is it possible to slow or stop the hemorrhage before it gets out of control? Furthermore, what will this new Christian future look like if it wants to reverse these trends?

One reoccurring issue mentioned above is the loss of 1% of church members each year due to death or as individuals become housebound. On the surface this remark appears to be contradictory since there are approximately 131.4 million births in the world every year and only 55.3 million deaths every year. Additionally, it was reported that birth rates in England and Wales increased by 18% in the last decade and the population of the United Kingdom as a whole grew by almost half a million from 2013 to 2014. In this case, one would think the 1% loss of church members would theoretically resolve itself with an influx of new younger members, but it has not. Instead, a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center found that only 30% of individuals aged between 18 and 24 consider themselves religious while senior citizens reported 91% of the population as being religious. The study also found young people were twice as likely to be unaffiliated with the church compared with their parents when they were the same age. The future of Christianity rests in the hands of the next generation and based on these statistics the United Kingdom is headed for life support.

While many elders seem content playing a waiting game to see if attitudes change and church attendance rises, there are actions that can be taken now to reverse this problem. First, let’s look at the core of the issue. The statistics show the church is having trouble recruiting young members so what could be behind this? In my opinion, technology, or more specifically social media, is one of the major causes for such low numbers of young religious individuals. Myself being classified as a Millennial (born between 1982 and 2004), I have been surrounded by

electronics my entire life. My earliest memories as a youngster was starting up the Windows 95 desktop computer to play educational based computer games. From these simple days until today, the presence of technology and rise of social media has gained a once unthinkable hold on society. It has gone so far as creating laws in certain areas for “texting while walking” which in cases has led to severe injuries spurring the need for urban cities to hire guards to protect individuals so engrossed in their screens from stepping out into oncoming traffic. With so many social media options, psychologists have called this obsession with our digital devices FOMO, or the “Fear of Missing Out.” Studies have backed this notion by indicating that 71% of Millennials absorb themselves in social media daily and spend an average of 5.4 hours a day on these sites. This data shows that a majority of young people feel a sense of connection with their digital devices, which may make them feel less interested in joining a group or church to provide them with a social life. While this response may put a lump in your throat, the church is not dead in the water just yet.

The new struggle is figuring out a way to get these young people out of their screens and into the real world. One likely solution is to create the same type of social environment within the church where individuals feel included and needed. A study published in the book “The Inviting Church: A Study of New Member Assimilation” by Roy M. Oswald found that 86% of church growth was due to friends or relatives inviting new people. This statistic should not be of surprise, as most people are willing to do what their mother tells them versus a stranger down the street. However, even if members do not have direct relations in the area, visitors can still be treated like they are already family. When I was a senior in high school looking for a university to attend the following year I visited over eight institutions to see which would be a fit for me. Every school I visited added my name to their mass distribution list so I received more spam mail than I care to remember, but only one school took the time to personally call me. This was not a call to tell me how great their institutions was, instead the head professor of the department I was interested in called to see how my year was finishing up and if I had any questions. No hard sell, no pushy attitude, just a genuine conversation on how my studies were wrapping up. So, do you know which school I chose to attend? The only one who took the time to get to know me on a personal level so when the time came to move onto campus I felt like I already knew someone. Likewise, taking the time to get to know fellow members and visitors is the first and most important step. Creating visitor welcome packets or simply following up with a visitor a few days afterward can make all the difference. These personal touches can create deep long lasting friendships, more so than any social media site can. Plus, when people feel included and connected with their church and fellow members they are less likely to miss a service or leave as each member’s presence is genuinely felt.

On this same topic of personalization, there seems to be more and more talk revolving around megachurches, or congregations over 2,000 people. With a number of smaller churches closing their doors, many question if this is the future of the United Kingdom. While it has been said that young people are often attracted to the high-tech rock star like performances these types of churches are known for producing, they severely lack a personal touch. These congregations often have the manpower to promote and advertise themselves to the larger community including young people looking for a ministry to join, however they often have their own agenda and care little about getting to know anyone. One of our own church members came from a megachurch and did not realize what she was missing and how she was misled until she joined our small,

close-knit group. She tells stories how the pastor was always surrounded by security guards and after the message was given he was whisked away and never even attempted to meet or understand the needs of his congregation. Furthermore, he would guilt people into paying sums of money as repentance for their sins. As scary as this sounds, the sad reality is events like this do unfortunately happen which are why people are seeking out congregations where they know their pastor and have trust and faith in them and the message being delivered. So while the current hype may be centered on these Tesco type operations, I believe they will ultimately lose their appeal as members search out more sincere places to worship.

Churches who don't have their own dedicated marketing team to find new members are creating other ways to grab the attention of Millennials. One way is breaking away from the typical service only given on Sunday mornings, and instead exploring multiple ways to connect to this generation on their terms. Examples may include hosting Christian bands, planning volunteer opportunities in the community, or starting informal study groups held outside the church in coffee shops. Some people may feel these "extras" distract from the real message being taught in the church, however spreading out into the community and hosting special events are an excellent way to introduce individuals to the wonders of the Bible who at first may be quick to label themselves as non-religious. When you really think about it, how can we possibly reach new people if efforts are being spent on luring people to come to us instead of reaching out to where these people are and tapping into their own interests?

Another factor to breaking away from a traditional Sunday service is that Millennials are looking for flexibility. The Sunday morning worship time may not work for everyone especially the younger age group who typically take entry level positions which may require them to work on weekends. If they are available on Sunday mornings, many still long for greater flexibility as seen in the once regimented corporate world. Today the typical eight to five workday established in the 1940s is loosening the reins as the younger generation enters the workforce. Many companies are giving individuals an option of where they choose to work from which may include their living room sofa or a sandwich shop down the street. Even if these employees are required to work from an office building, they are no longer sequestered behind tall cubical panels, but instead are given options like working in collaborative lounge areas. This harkens back to the advancements in technology where today many individuals only need a phone or tablet to complete their work, where before the large CRT computer monitors made employees prisoners to a desk. Working hours are also becoming flexible as companies care less when people are working, and more about making sure the work is completed by the deadline. If this generational shift is occurring in the workplace, don't you think these same individuals are looking for options when it comes to how they worship too?

The last item I want to touch on is how this evolving digital world affects not only how we worship, but how we study and interpret the sacred text that Christianity is centered around. Our digital devices are not only monopolizing our time, they are also changing the way we communicate with the creation of a texting language known as SMS. This new written dialect is based on short abbreviations for common phrases; an example of this would be "TTYL" which would equate to "Talk To You Later." After texting developed, widespread social media sites developed their own shorthand language. This involved creating hashtags which allowed the user to simply label content to make it easier to find and eliminate the need for detailed descriptions.

In both cases, concern was raised about the potential negative effect on literacy as young people opted to forgo developing complete sentences, and instead chose to embrace this new digital language.

As you can reasonably assume this shorthanded speech is in complete contrast to the wording structure found in the Bible. Where today someone would simply say no, in the Bible it may read something like, “God forbids it.” Imagine walking through the grocery store with a small child who has their sight set on a particular item, and responding with, “I forbid it!” The other customers in the store will undoubtedly throw some odd looks your way. So herein lies a challenge for all of Christianity moving forward: how to use the content found in the Bible to really relate and connect on a personal level. It is a delicate line and I’m not suggesting it needs to be reduced to bread and water, however I do believe taking the steps to better communicate with this texting generation will be rewarding not just for the church, but for young people as well. I myself happen to know individuals who shudder at the fact of having to read the Bible and stumble over the unfamiliar wording structure. While there are a number of resources available which can provide a worthy transition from a manuscript written thousands of years ago to our present day syntax, I think we will continue to see this segment evolve. The message will still need to remain true, however it is essential we remain vigilant of how our modern day language is evolving and prevent stumbling blocks to deter future generations of Christians.

Making up a quarter of the United Kingdom’s population, it would be naive for the church to turn a blind eye to the way Millennials are shaping the world in which we live and how this likewise affects the religious community. While the church may appear to be heading in a downward spiral, the real struggle lies in how to remain fresh and current in the eyes of a generation who grew up knowing how to turn on the computer before saying their first word. Instead of waiting around for secular attitudes to change, we should be focusing on creating a sense of FOMO in the church now if we hope to attract and retain members for years to come. Are we as a Christian body ready to tackle this challenge? I leave you with this reminder, “Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.’”  
(*Matthew 19:26*)

**SARAH BROOKS**