

Book Review

Changing Shape: The Faith Lives of Millennials

Ruth H. Perrin

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Millennials are frequently identified as one of the generations missing in churches and significant in the depressing trajectory of church attendance in contemporary Britain. But there are exceptions, which is why Ruth Perrin's research and her book is important. By analysing the faith narratives of millennials, Perrin has harvested significant insights from the paths their faith and their relationship with the church have taken to make some well-informed suggestions for church leaders to urgently attend to. All the participants were Active Affirmers in their twenties characterised by their involvement in church, a committed personal faith, and in many cases an emphasis on evangelism.¹ In examining their stories, Perrin has attempted to identify some of the factors which have influenced whether their Christian faith has flourished, faded, or died during their early adulthood.

The book is based on a small-scale piece of research involving 47 individuals aged between 29 and 37 years living in the North East of England. It provides a rich description of their faith journeys as well as evidencing the challenges this generation faced in their twenties and thirties as they negotiated the unstable context of their Emerging Adulthood. Although each participant has told their unique story, Perrin has extracted trends and common themes to provide some very helpful

¹ You can find a definition of 'Active Affirmers' in M. Guest, K. Aune, S. Sharma, & R. Warner, *Christianity and the University Experience: Understanding Student Faith* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp 41-43.

insights for mission and ministry. Her experience of 20 years of ministry with young adults and her credentials as a qualitative researcher give the work a robust, self-reflective edge, which adds weight to both the analysis and claims throughout the book. For the sake of our churches, this research, at the very least, should stimulate further research to address the paucity of our knowledge of this generation and their faith experience in the UK today.

Changing Shape is written in an accessible style and manages sufficient criticality and nuancing to satisfy both an academic and practice-focussed readership. Perrin is adept at weaving together sociological and psychological material and applying them to her qualitative data. From her interviews, she has garnered a significant number of common themes which she uses well to organise the text. Each is well illustrated and evidenced from extracts from the participants' narratives to produce a compelling and coherent argument. At the very least, the content of several of these stories is disturbing and many highlight issues that the Church ignores at its peril. However, those who desire any theological reflection on the faith journeys documented in this text will be disappointed. That is not to say that theological issues are absent; but rather that Perrin chooses not to engage with them preferring to move from her well informed analysis to practice. Hence, when participants disclose issues of theodicy, Christian ethics, the authority of scripture and hermeneutics, and doctrine they are recorded but that is all. This is most apparent on the issue of human sexuality, a topic on which a third of participants expressed their concerns about the church's attitude and teaching and one which Perrin suggests if asked directly 'it would have been an issue for the vast majority' (p. 146). The complexity of how the church handles this is not in doubt, but given the significance of it for both the participants' faith trajectory and their relationship with the institutional church, it warranted more attention.

The book is set out in three sections. Part I - Setting The Scene: Being an Emerging Adult begins by defining millennials and the concept of emerging adulthood, before identifying and justifying the key values of authenticity, tolerance, and collaborative participation for this generation. Then, three chapters explore the main themes which emerged from the participant interviews namely, economic and financial challenges, health issues, friends and family relationships, romantic

relations and parenthood. As this group of Millennial Active Affirmers have navigated broken relationships, debt, mental and physical illness, regrets, and setbacks they have looked to their faith in the God who they have come to expect to be compassionate and omnipotent to make sense of these experiences. Yet as Perrin points out, sadly, 'they often have limited theological resources or narrow frames of reference' (p. 113) from which to draw upon and more troubling still is the observation that the opportunity to share these experiences with a significant other or their faith community is a vital factor in their well-being and the continuation of their faith and one which many found lacking.

Many Millennials struggle with relationships, marriage, infertility, parenting, and singleness. In our post Christendom culture of alternative lifestyles and ever increasing fluidity in gender and sexual relationships, Christian values and a hetero-normative model of sexuality are constantly being challenged. Without good pastoral support and validation from peers, family, or their community, many of these Millennial Active Affirmers struggled to hold on to their faith and Christian identity. As Perrin so ably articulates, '[r]eligious faith can provide resources that help negotiate identity formation among these transitions' but 'religious communities can compound the sense of 'other' or fail to recognise the challenges Emerging Adults face' (p. 114), when the latter occurs it has a significantly negative effect on their faith and their relationship with the institutional church.

Part II moves on from the challenges of Millennials' life experiences and focusses on faith development. Beginning with models of faith development including Fowler and Tisdell, Perrin argues that the cultural and social changes since the 1970s have altered patterns of faith development and forming a faith identity today is more complex and has a longer trajectory extending beyond the twenties into the thirties. She follows this with some reflection on the key factors that have shaped the faith narratives of her sample and the resources they have drawn upon to sustain or develop their faith. However, the most compelling chapters are those which examine the participants who have lost their faith, and those who have a faith but are no longer part of a church congregation having become disillusioned with organised religion. Those who had lost their faith told stories of church communities failing or deceiving them, discovering a convincing alternative world view, or

finding the exclusivity and sexual ethics of the Church oppressive and irreconcilable with their experience and desire for tolerance and authenticity. They also gave accounts which pointed to frustrations with church leadership, theological emphases, struggles to establish meaningful relationships and the marginalisation of certain groups. Likewise, the disenchanting group told stories of pain and a significant period of struggle before finally leaving the church. Perrin identifies five themes in these accounts: aborted leadership; church conflict and resistance to change; relationship failures; and lifestyle conflicts and priorities. There is a lot for the Church and its leaders to reflect on in these chapters, much of which is taken up by Perrin in her final chapter which outlines suggestions for a response.

Perrin's concluding reflections underline the importance of this book. For faith to flourish in our younger generations it seems, that they need some kind of experience of God's presence and goodness, and intellectual assent to the Christian worldview all whilst holding this in tension with the capacity to live with the dynamics of mystery, uncertainty and faith, a supportive community, and a sustaining vision or vocation giving them a sense of purpose. Every church leader and congregation should take heed of this book. It is not to be taken lightly and to deepen the level of engagement at the end of each chapter, Perrin has provided questions for discussion, making it a rich resource for any intergenerational house group. I warmly commend *Changing Shape* to be read as widely as possible.