Creating Space for God in the Lives of Millennials by Leveraging Technology to Practice a Spiritual Discipline Modeled by Christ — by Kelvin St. John

Purpose: The purpose of this six-week study of Millennials was to evaluate the effectiveness of how MNU undergraduates leveraged newer technology (social networking and new media) to establish and develop the daily practice of a spiritual discipline modeled in the life of Christ.

OVERVIEW: There is a larger problem confronting the church, which, while not directly addressed by this research, we must acknowledge. Is newer technology helping or hurting the church? The researcher hopes that the findings of this study will contribute to how the church can leverage newer technology for its spiritual health and deepening.

The participants chose one discipline to practice on a daily basis from a set of online vodcasts that featured twelve spiritual disciplines modeled by Christ. During the study, the students were encouraged to set a daily alarm on their cell phone or in their online calendars to remind them to practice their discipline. They selected accountability partners in dyads or triads. It was the responsibility of each person to text, tweet, IM, or email his or her other partner(s) as a means of encouraging their practice. Students joined the study's private Facebook group where they shared what they were learning from their practice with other participants. Each participant completed a private weekly journal entry in Moodle, which was only available to the researcher and the participant. Participation in a Follow-up Focus Group was encouraged, but optional.

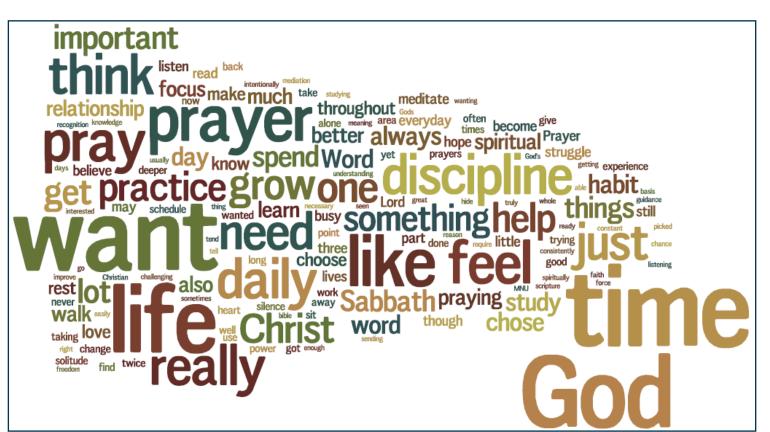
THE MILLENNIALS: Simply defined, the Millennials, also known as Digital Natives, Generation Y, Generation Why, the Net Generation, Generation Me, and iKids, are those people who have come of age in this millennium. (This study standardized on the birth range of 1981-2000.) The Millennials received this moniker because they were the first generation to come of age in this new millennium. Neil Howe and William Strauss posit a unique set of seven traits that describe the Millennials:

- Special "they are, collectively, vital to the nation and to their parents' sense of purpose."
- Sheltered they are protected and "are the focus of the most sweeping" youth safety movement in American history."
- Confident "they equate good news for themselves with good news for their country."
- *Team-oriented* they "are developing strong team instincts and tight peer bonds."
- Achieving they "are on track to become the best-educated and bestbehaved adults in the nation's history."
- Pressured they are "pushed to study hard, avoid personal risks, and take full advantage of opportunities."
- Conventional they "support convention—the idea that social rules can help." (Howe and Strauss 43-44)

Jess Rainer gives a helpful key to how the church can engage the Millennials. "Three out of four Millennials believe it is their role in life to serve others" (Rainer & Rainer 311-47). The church needs to focus on Christ's role as Servant, and his Matthew 20:28 instruction that he "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Qualitative Analysis Was Accelerated Using Wordle

The researcher created Wordle word clouds to highlight trends and topics from the qualitative data gathered by six instruments in this study. Wordle was a secondary instrument for identifying trends in the corpus of a text. Knowing the most frequent words in a corpus then allowed better and quicker analysis of study trends. The Wordle graphics were visual aids rather than analytical tools. These Wordle graphics accelerated the analysis of the qualitative data.



Analysis based on the Wordle graphic: The participants explained in the Pre-Study Survey the reason for selecting their study discipline. The Wordle fasting, Sabbath rest, meditation, and silence and solifrequently chosen study disciplines.

Summary of Major Findings

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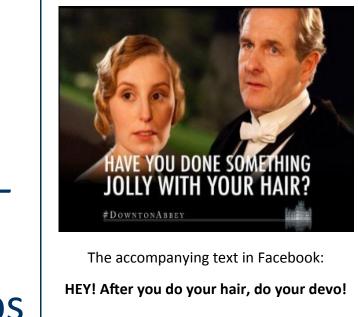
book and Twitter accounts.

them.

The five significant findings of this study are listed here from 1 through 5, followed by two additional findings of lesser significance.

1 Online courses can propagate the spiritual disciplines. This study

was a positive response to the problem posed in this study, namely, how to reach the 1,000 plus undergraduates at MNU with a course in Spiritual Formation. This study effectively built a community of practice out of the study participants. Such a



The accompanying text in Facebook

community is defined as "groups L of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." One participant observed, "This [study] really opened my eyes that I need to make a conscience effort to connect with Christ." Another summed up the impact the study made on him by asserting, "I love Jesus more now!"

2 Millennials tolerate technology. They are not as dependent on

technology as culture portrays them. At times, they even feel "caught" by technology. The quick answer is, "We don't yet live in a generation that is all technology, all the time." One respondent simply said, "I don't think that we are as immersed in technology as everyone says we are." In effect, these Millennials feel as if technology is being forced upon

3 Millennials prefer immediacy and convenience in the technology they use. They want information and communication to come



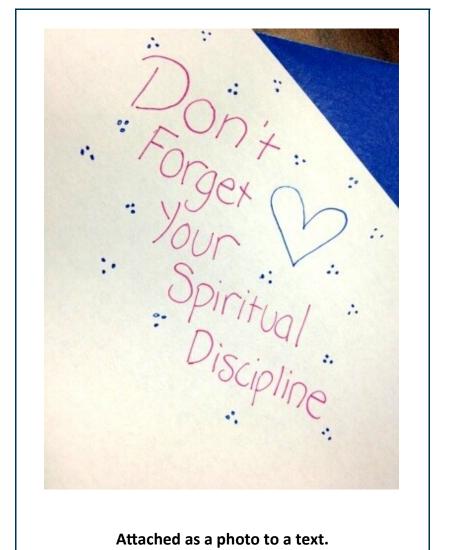
directly to them rather than having to wait and login to a password protected application. Texting is the most preferred kind of communication. Millennials view email as "for business only." Texting and Twitter provide short bursts of 160 or 140 characters of information. Email often requires a login delay and offers text that is less concise and at

times can be quite bloated.

4 Millennials value face-to-face relationship. Whenever feasible, they prefer to be relationally in touch rather than virtually in touch. During Week Four of the study, 23 percent of 52 respondents chaffed

at not using face-to-face accountability. One of the study participants clearly stated, "We are designed to desire personal relationships."

5 Technology has a "halo effect" on the accountability. Technology amplified accountability in both the MNU community and in the participant's virtual social network. Participants who used social media to post reminders or encouraging notes to their accountabil-



ity partners discovered that they had effectively broadened the group of people to whom they were accountable. Non-study friends would ask them how they were doing with the study thus holding them sec-



ondarily accountable. In addition, the size of the study on campus caused an accountability "buzz." Non-study participants would ask how the study was going. At times, participants received collateral reminders whenever they overheard other accountability pairs talking about the study.

6 Use of technology varied over the course of the study. While technology did not benefit all students, its use did

vary by increasing for some and decreasing for others. Interestingly, the participant's success in completing the study was the reason for both the increase and the decrease in use of technology. Some discovered they needed more tech reminders, others needed less.

Technology doubly drove accountability. Prior to our current wired and wireless technology, accountability depended either on memory or on written notes. Study participants discovered that technology alerts to remind their partner also effectively reminded the individual to practice their own daily discipline.