LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

ENGAGING AN UNENGAGED DEMOGRAPHIC: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

OF CHRISTIAN MILLENNIALS' ENGAGEMENT WITH RELIGIOUS AND

NONRELIGIOUS MEMBERSHIPS

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Stephanie F. Prince

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

Church membership is declining worldwide. Studies show that Millennials are less likely to belong to a church than previous generations. Even among churched Millennials, only 48% of church-attending Millennials are church members. Simultaneously, organizations such as health, fitness, and social clubs are seeing an increase in Millennial membership growth. Brand loyalty is high among Millennials, but church loyalty is low even among practicing Christian Millennials who attend church at least once per month. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how practicing Christian Millennials understand the nature of engagement with church and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. Practicing Christian Millennials were generally defined as anyone born between 1981 and 1996 who self-identified as a Christian and attended a trinitarian Protestant church in the United States at least once per month. The methodology guiding this study was Husserl's phenomenological approach to gaining insight into the phenomenon of Christian Millennials' engagement rates with religious and nonreligious memberships.

Keywords: Millennials, church membership, church engagement, church decline, membership patterns

Dedication

This work is dedicated to my beloved husband and biggest supporter, William Prince IV. Thank you for listening to my enthusiastic ideas and research about intergenerational engagement in the local church, brainstorming new theories, and supporting me in all my endeavors.

This work is dedicated to my parents, Col. Henry and Elizabeth Attanasio, who valued the pursuit of education in their own lives and their children's lives. Thank you for championing me as your daughter, a businesswoman, student, and minister. This work is also dedicated to my brother, Dr. Samuel Attanasio, whose academic achievements encourage and inspire me.

Next, this work is dedicated to all the ministers who believe in the power of a gospel-centered community and are relentlessly working to engage Millennials in their local church congregations.

Lastly, this work is dedicated to all the lost and wandering sheep searching for belonging in a tumultuous world. The fervor behind this work is evidence that the One who created you sees, knows, loves, and seeks you. I pray that you find your purpose in the safe embrace of the Good Shepherd.

Acknowledgments

This work would not be possible without the love and support of my family, friends, and church community. First, I want to acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who redeemed me through his sacrificial grace and instilled an innate passion for reaching people who feel like outsiders with the message of hope.

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Finally, I want to acknowledge the participants who contributed multitudinous data by sharing their profoundly personal beliefs and experiences engaging in various types of religious and nonreligious memberships. This study would not have been possible without their honest and valuable input.

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Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI)

Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)

International Coach Federation (ICF)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Southern Baptist Churches (SBC)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

Church membership is declining worldwide (Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021). A study by the Barna Group (2020) revealed that Millennials are less likely to belong to a church than previous generations. The Barna Group (2020) posited that there are four main categories of churchgoers based on the frequency of their attendance, including churched adults, practicing Christians, unchurched people, and dechurched populations. Churched adults are defined as anyone attending a Christian church at least once every 6 months. For older generations, nearly seven in 10 churched Baby Boomers are church members. Comparatively, only 48% of churched Millennials are church members (Barna Group, 2020). For this study, the researcher used the Pew Research Center's definition of a Millennial as anyone born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019). The U.S. Department of Labor and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics also uses the birth years 1981 to 1996 to define Millennials, providing consistency for religious and nonreligious evaluation (Freeman, 2022).

This study focused specifically on the population of churched Millennials who are practicing Christians. The Barna Group (2020) defined practicing Christians as anyone who considers their Christian faith necessary to their lives and regularly attends church at least once per month or at least 12 times per year, if not more often. While a sizable portion of Americans still considers themselves religious, it is notable that church membership is declining at higher rates than ever before. Today, practicing Christians only account for about 25% of church-attending Christians (Barna Group, 2020).

In 2019, Gallup posted a startling statistic after finding that the percentage of Americans belonging to a religious body hit an all-time low in 2018, with only 50% of Americans claiming

to belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque (J. M. Jones, 2019). By 2020, for the first time in 8 decades, this number dropped to 47% in the United States (J. M. Jones, 2021). Twenty years ago, at approximately the same age Millennials are today, 62% of the Generation X population were church members. Additional research found that 68% of Millennials identify as religious, but only 42% are church members (J. M. Jones, 2019).

Simultaneously, while religious membership is declining, Millennials' engagement with nonreligious membership is increasing. In 2019, the Young Members Research Report revealed that 87% of Millennials believe it is important to belong to an association (Personify, 2019). As Millennials disengage from the church, they seek spirituality, identity, community, and belonging in social clubs, fitness organizations, and other nonreligious memberships (Recode, 2017). For example, over the past 20 years, gym membership has increased by 95% (Galperin, 2022). However, over the same 20-year period, religious membership declined by 33% (J. M. Jones, 2021).

Peloton's founder, John Foley, claimed that where organized religion has failed, he has succeeded in creating a brand, developing loyalty, and marketing membership to Millennials (Recode, 2017). In 2017, Foley said,

> When I was growing up in the 70s, we were a God-fearing nation. People were religious and had strong associations with your church. Today, in 40 years, there has been a dramatic slide in people's association with organized religion. That is not to say that people do not still want that guidance, and ritual, and identification, and community, and music, and ceremony, spirituality, and reflection; that stuff that happened on Sunday morning in church or your synagogue is still important to human beings. It is something people want, but they are not getting as much from their organized religion. People want fitness, and they want something else. Enter instructor-led group fitness classes replete with candles on the altar and somebody talking to you with a pulpit for 45 minutes. The parallels are uncanny. Right? In the 70s and 80s, you would have a cross on your neck or a Star of David. Now you wear a Soul Cycle tank top. That is your identity. That is your community. That is your religion. (Recode, 2017, 5:27)

According to Foley, Peloton and Soul Cycle are not the only two companies building their platform on the decline of organized religion. Orange Theory, Corepower Yoga, and Barry's Bootcamp are all similar boutique fitness programs catering to a Millennial demographic. Orange Theory Fitness is 10 times bigger than Soul Cycle, and CrossFit is 200 times larger than Soul Cycle (Recode, 2017). Millennials are engaging with non-church-affiliated memberships.

Marketing research shows that Millennials have the highest levels of brand loyalty among all generations, with 60% of Millennials finding a brand they like and sticking with it (Statista Research Group, 2021). Their emotional attachment to a product or brand influences their loyalty to that brand. These emotionally solid bonds are difficult to break. Studies on brand immunity reveal that once a Millennial trusts a brand and associates positive emotions with that brand, their ability to resist negativity about that brand increases (Saju et al., 2018). Ironically, religious studies confirm that the same generation with the highest brand loyalty has the lowest level of church loyalty (Barna Group, 2020).

Church membership is a biblical practice vital to a Christian's spiritual health. Leeman (2012) defined church membership as "the church's affirmation that you are a citizen of Christ's kingdom" (p. 79). Looking at the Bible, the New Testament church is its members. Church membership enables people to engage in fellowship regularly, worship together, grow spiritually, and have a structured Christian life that serves others and enacts church discipline if needed.

While people can belong to political, professional, or hobby groups, there is a unique sense of belonging cultivated in religious groups. Church members develop religious unity through their interactions with other church members developing a sacred space for people to find belonging and thrive (Stroope, 2011). Belonging is one of humankind's basic needs, so people innately seek to belong.

In 1943, Maslow, a well-respected psychologist, presented a hierarchy of needs. This hierarchy of basic human needs includes physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-realization. As noted by Maslow and confirmed by additional social scientists, psychologists, and researchers throughout the decades, belonging is a fundamental human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Junger, 2016; Le Penne, 2017; Maslow, 1968). For example, in 2023, while examining the sequential satisfaction of needs, a group of researchers discovered that income could affect some level of satisfaction of physiological needs; however, money bore no weight on the need for safety, love and belonging, and esteem (Rojas et al., 2023).

Social belonging is inherent to human nature. Scholars define belonging as a sense of comfortability and inclusivity with others (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Lack of social belonging can lead to unhappiness, decreased health, and societal maladjustment (Le Penne, 2017). Children from an early age are motivated to interact and engage with the people around them, trying to form secure bonds. Humans need to belong (Over, 2016). Social belonging is a two-way street. Adults need to feel like they belong in the community, and they also need to know that the community needs them. Only then is belonging truly fulfilled (Le Penne, 2017). From a religious perspective, church membership and belonging go hand in hand. Church membership affirms a person's commitment and role in a local church community and provides that person with opportunities to both receive and serve others. President of the Revitalize Network and co-owner of a publishing house, S. Rainer (2021) described the value of membership through seven critical principles to find belonging (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Seven Ways Church Members Find Belonging

```
                    ┌─────────────┐
                    │ Worshipping │
                    │ God together│
                    └─────────────┘
    ┌──────────┐                      ┌──────────────┐
    │ Putting  │                      │ Discipleship │
    │ the needs│        Belonging     │multiplication│
    │ of others│                      └──────────────┘
    │  first   │                      ┌──────────────┐
    └──────────┘                      │Serving others│
    ┌──────────┐                      └──────────────┘
    │Experinceing│
    │ giving and │    ┌───────────┐
    │receiving   │    │Honoring God│
    │  love      │    │ by giving  │
    └──────────┘      └───────────┘
        ┌────────────┐
        │Prioritizing│
        │ God's will │
        │through     │
        │ prayer     │
        └────────────┘
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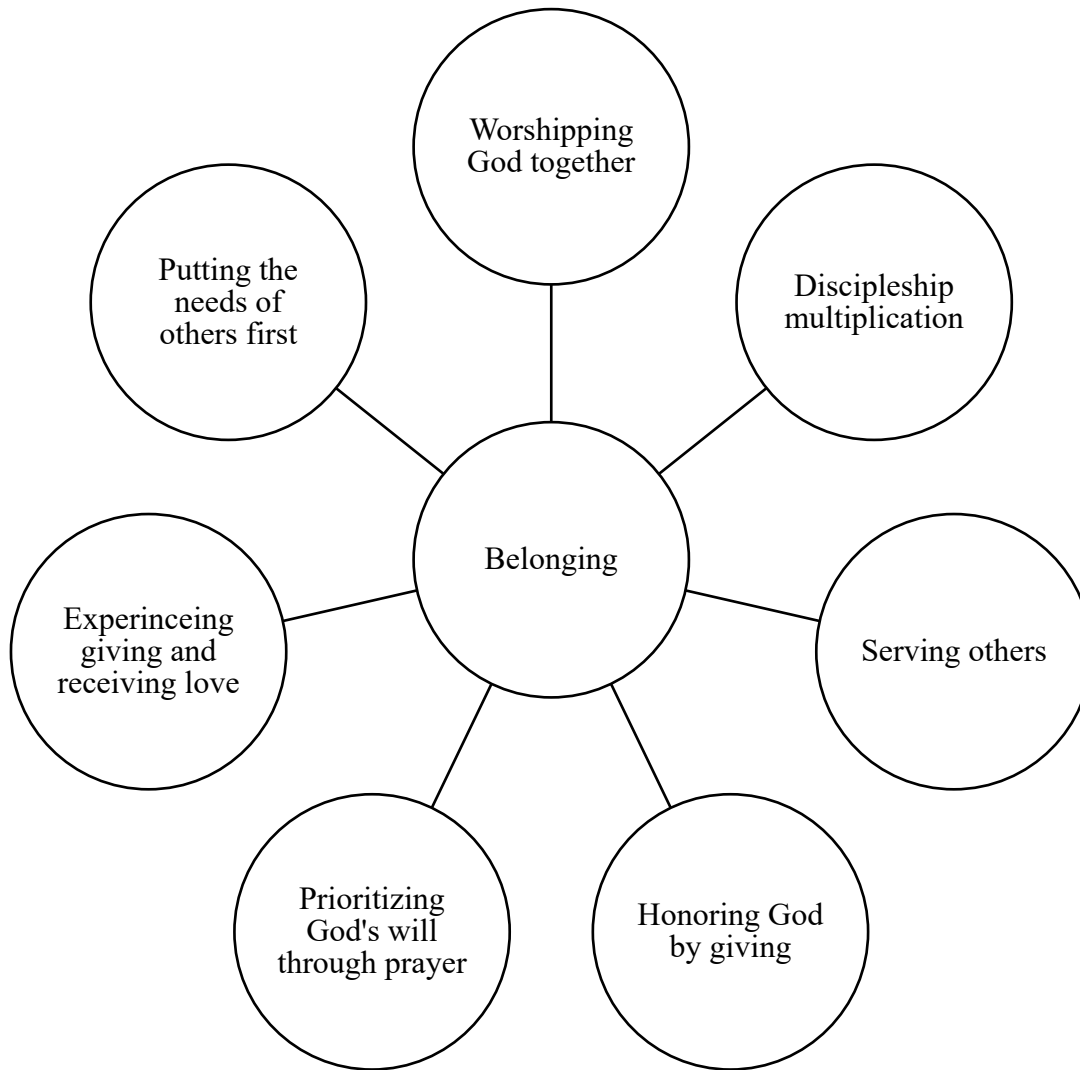
Note. Graphic created by the researcher as a summary of S. Rainer's (2021) seven principles for church members to find belonging.

Churches allow Christians to find belonging among fellow Christ-followers, yet many Millennials, even Christian Millennials, seek to find their belonging outside of the church. Many modern-day studies focus on research regarding the Millennial population that left the church in the past decade. Unfortunately, researchers are conducting little to no research regarding the

current Millennial population still involved in Protestant churches across the United States. This population is swiftly dwindling year by year, and the problem needs to be addressed from the inside before it is too late.

Background to the Problem

A study by the Barna Group (2020) revealed that Millennials are less likely to belong to a church than Baby Boomers, Generation X, or any other generation in history. A Gallup poll study from 1955 found that 49% of the respondents claimed they had attended a church service within the past 7 days. By 2021, Gallup reported that only 30% of respondents attended church within the past week (Quick, 2023). These statistics reveal a startling 19 percentage point decrease during the 66-year span.

Long before the global COVID-19 pandemic, the world began seeing a dramatic decline in church attendance and church membership. Statistical research conducted by the Barna Group (2020) between December 5–18, 2019, revealed that Millennials born between 1981 and 1996 are more likely to consider themselves religious but not affiliate themselves with any church. Twenty years ago, Generation X was the same age as Millennials today. At that age, 62% of Generation X were church members (J. M. Jones, 2019). Historically, seven out of 10 Baby Boomers are church members; however, only 42% of Millennials are church members (J. M. Jones, 2019). Furthermore, church membership is down overall across all generations but with the sharpest and quickest decline among the Millennial generation (see Table 1).

Table 1

Church Membership by Generation

Generation	2010	2020
	%	%
Traditionalists	73	66
Baby Boomers	63	58
Generation X	57	50
Millennials	51	36

Note. Data for generational church membership are adapted from *U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time*, by J. M. Jones, 2021, Gallup (https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx). Copyright 2021 by Gallup. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix A).

Church membership is vital to the life of the church. Christians trace the theological foundations of church membership back to Jesus' teachings and the formation of the early church. In addition to passages in Acts, many New Testament biblical teachings support the need for Christians to belong to a local church body. Although church membership brings value and enrichment to the lives of Christians, fewer Christians are engaging with religious membership today compared to 1, 2, and 3 decades ago. Houston (2015) reported that in 2012 over 800 churches affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) closed. In 2019, the SBC saw its 12th year of declining membership. Between 2018 and 2019, SBC-affiliated churches lost around 192,000 members (Loller, 2019).

Year-over-year data reveal a growing disconnect between Millennials and church membership. However, this decline relates specifically to religious membership, as nonreligious memberships and brand loyalty among Millennials are on an upward trajectory overall. As

engagement with nonreligious memberships rises simultaneously, there must be a reason Millennials are disengaging from church membership while actively engaging with nonreligious memberships.

Theological Context

During his life, Jesus invited all his followers to become family members in his Kingdom (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, Luke 14:12–15; Matthew 25:24). The Christian family extends beyond the biological family (Hellerman, 2009). Mark 3:33–35 (New International *Bible*, 1978/2011) says,

> "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he [Jesus] asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Church membership is a biblical practice vital to a Christian's spiritual health. Christian leaders form healthy churches on the foundations of biblical truth, reaching people through the practices of preaching, evangelism, membership, discipleship, and leadership multiplication (Leeman, 2012).

Church membership is integral to the foundation of the early church. Historians and theological researchers trace engagement patterns and commitment to the church body back to AD 30 (Leeman, 2012). It is almost impossible to explain what a church is without mentioning its members. It would be like someone trying to discuss a club, team, or family without talking about its members. It is impossible to separate the two and still accurately describe the organization (Leeman, 2012). The New Testament church is its members.

Church membership expresses affirmation that the individual believer confesses faith in Jesus Christ and commits to living a Christ-centered and Christ-affiliated life (Baker, 2018). Churches provide Christians a place to worship, fellowship, and serve with other believers. Church membership provides boundaries for healthy spiritual growth, mentorship, and oversight.

Each church member is free to learn, grow, and develop, while pastors, elders, and church leaders have the guidelines for oversight and authority to practice church discipline if needed. This structure is essential if the need for church discipline arises.

As evidenced in 1 Corinthians 5, church leaders are responsible for wisely and lovingly disciplining their members (Leeman, 2012). Specifically, 1 Corinthians 5:12 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011) says, "What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside?" God expects Christians to act like Christ's followers. No human is perfect or sinless other than Jesus himself; however, Christians who turn a blind eye to their fellow Christian's habitual sin fail to love them as God commands (Guzik, 2018). Church membership builds local spiritual families, so Christians can love each other as brothers and sisters, encouraging one another to become more Christlike and resist evil temptations.

Jesus established the church. Then, following Jesus' instructions, the apostles planted churches and cared for the individuals in those local churches across Corinth, Ephesus, Galatia, and Philippi. Hebrews 13:17 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011) says, "Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you." Without organization, there is no structure for leadership. So, when the author of Hebrews writes about submitting to leadership, the early church structure becomes recognizable (C. Davis, 2011). Within this structure, the church leaders are responsible for shepherding and caring for their flock of people. The solidification of church membership helps church leadership draw the boundary lines of their congregation, embrace God's instructions, and care for the church well (Webbon, 2018).

Historical Context

The recent decline in church attendance and membership is not a new problem. Surveys in the 20th century began publicly indicating a decline in church membership. However, the actual decline began over a century prior. While the decline in church membership in mainline churches was startling to track, the percentage of religious adherents had been steadily declining since the 19th century (Finke & Stark, 2005). Occasionally, religious revivals contributed to an uptick in religious interest, while division among Christian sects increased the number of church denominations. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, church leaders across the United States began seeing the limitations of their competition and began striving to reunite the Protestant church. Marty (1970), author of *Righteous Empire,* described the momentum of the 20th-century Protestant church as centripetal versus the 19th-century Protestant church, which was centrifugal (p. 244).

Throughout the years, government agencies and private entities have changed how religious data are collected. From 1850–1936, the U.S. Census collected data on all religious bodies in America (Finke & Stark, 2005). After the U.S. government stopped collecting religious statistics in 1940, private firms began polling the population to provide their own religious statistics. The comparison between the census poll and public opinion polling in the 1930s and 1940s was astonishing.

Whereas 85–95% of the U.S. population claimed religious affiliation, the more careful analysis revealed religious affiliation to mean nothing more than "a vague recollection of what their parents or grandparents have passed along to the family preference" (Finke & Stark, 2005, p. 14). Therefore, there became a need to differentiate between religious affiliation and religious adherence. By looking at religious adherence, the adherence to a particular religious belief

system, instead of religious affiliation, scholars can argue that in 1890, only 45% of the population was religious. The rates of religious adherence increased and decreased between 1776–1870 but then steadily rose between 1890–1980. Finke and Stark (2005) called this phenomenon the "churching of America" (p. 22). Whereas in 1776, only 17% of the American population adhered to their religious beliefs, by 1850, 34% of the American population reported religious adherence. Finke and Starke claimed that 1906 was the first year the United States saw over half of its American population as churched. These rates continued increasing over the next 50 years until 1980, when religious adherence plateaued at 62%.

While scholars can track religious adherence, no one reported on church membership in the early decades of American churches. Religious adherence and church membership are two different facets of tracking Christianity in the United States. Whereas religious adherence follows the beliefs of a religion, church membership affirms and connects a person with a particular Christian entity (Khaitan, 2021). In 1940, Gallup began tracking church membership in the United States. Since then, Gallup has reported a steady average for almost 6 decades, followed by a sharp and rapid decline between 2000 and 2020 (J. M. Jones, 2021; see Figure 2). In 1999, 70% of Americans in the United States reported that they belonged to a house of worship. By 2020, only 47% of Americans reported belonging to a house of worship (J. M. Jones, 2021; Smietana, 2021; Tuggle, 2022).

Figure 2

Adult Church Membership in the United States
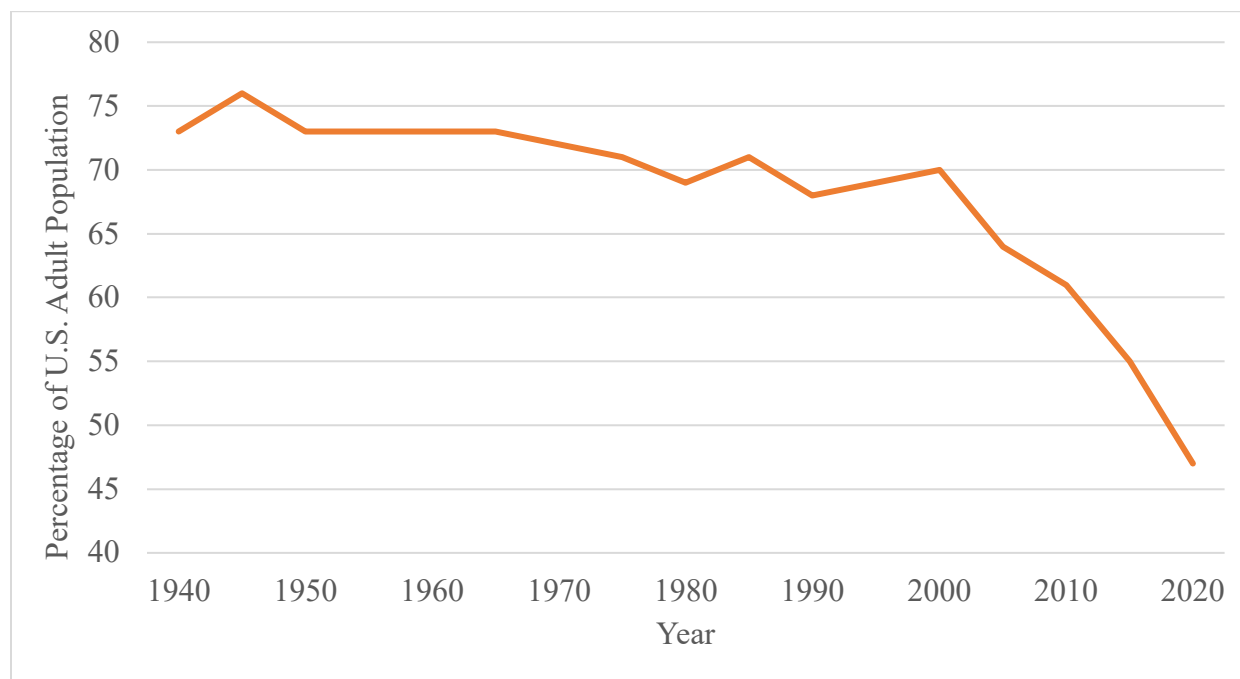
Note. Adapted from *U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time*, by J. M. Jones, 2021, Gallup (https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx). Copyright 2021 by Gallup. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix B).

In 1998, 77% of Traditionalists, people born before 1946, and 67% of Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964, were church members. In 2020, only 50% of Generation X, people born between 1965 and 1980, and 36% of Millennials were church members (J. M. Jones, 2021).

The top eight most prominent mainline Protestant denominations in the 1900s included American Baptist, Christian Church, Episcopal, Evangelical Lutheran, Presbyterian, Reformed Church in America, United Church of Christ, and United Methodist Churches. Researchers can trace denominational annual statistics back to 1935 (Luidens & Nemeth, 2019; Marcum, 2017).

According to Marcum (2017), mainline denominational membership rose between the mid-1930s and 1966, peaking at 30 million church members. Then, over the next 5 decades, mainline denominational membership began declining until 2015 when it hit 17.3 million members (Marcum, 2017).

Researchers can trace the long-term effects of secularization throughout history as the industrialization of modern-day society contributes to the decline of Christianity (Peterson, 2017). The postmodern era only reinforces the concepts of secularization, a leading contributing factor influencing Christian Millennials to believe that one can separate the Christian faith from the church. The secularization of the Western world sped up the replacement of traditionally established Christianity with *a la carte* spirituality, allowing the most recent generations of young adults to select their spirituality based on self-satisfaction and personal experiences instead of traditional institutions (Hamberg, 2018).

Theoretical Context

Every generation has a generational archetype. According to the Strauss-Howe generational theory, four generational archetypes repeat sequentially throughout history, including the prophet, nomad, hero, and artist generations (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials were born during an unraveling of social institutions after an awakening, making them a hero generation archetype. Culture wars and postmodernism are defining influences of Millennials' formative era. Millennial children were more protected by their parents and, according to generational theory, grew up to be politically powerful and overly confident adults (Van Eck Duymaer Van Twist & Newcombe, 2021).

Baby Boomers were once the most populous generation of living people. Now, Millennials are the most populous generation. As a result, there are more Millennials alive than

any other generation. In the United States, with 27 million more Millennials than Generation X, Millennials now outnumber Generation X and Baby Boomers in population size (Sumpter, 2019). Whereas family stability was high for Baby Boomers and their family policy priority was focused externally on societal needs during their childhood, Millennials experienced instability in their childhoods despite their parents focusing on providing for the needs of the children over the needs of society (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

There are several theoretical approaches to studying the Millennial generation and their engagement with religious memberships. Rational choice theory is a theoretical framework providing sociologists with a broad approach to explaining social phenomena as the outcomes of an individual's rational choices (Buskens, 2015; Wittek et al., 2013). Under the umbrella of rational choice theory, churches are considered religious firms, and their attendees are religious consumers. Since the United States is a pluralistic religious economy, churches are subject to changes in market influence. The rational choice theory states that religious firms must abandon unpopular or inefficient products for more effective, profitable, and attractive alternatives (Buskens, 2015; Wittek et al., 2013) Organizational growth of religious firms takes time and resources. For the past 2 decades, religious researchers have seen a correlation between church growth and the amount of time and money received from its members (Stoll & Petersen, 2008). People are naturally more attracted to churches with energetic members actively involved, donating their time, money, and skills to their church (Iannaccone et al., 1995).

Religious researchers have been studying church commitment for decades. Another theory, deprivation theory, suggests that people suffering from higher levels of deprivation will turn to religion for comfort (Hoge & Polk, 1980). According to deprivation theory, socioeconomic status, including income, social class, education, and psychic privilege, such as

marital satisfaction, are indicators of religious commitment. Deprivation theory predicts that people with less deprivation will have lower levels of church commitment (Dittes, 1971; McNamara & St. George, 1978). Some studies confirm this theory; however, several studies contribute opposing data, revealing that higher levels of socioeconomic status and psychic privilege lead to increased rates of religious commitment (Alston & McIntosh, 1979; Davidson, 1977; Hadaway, 1978; Hoge & Polk, 1980).

Despite socioeconomic status, the family surrogate theory is another theory relating to the engagement rates of young adults in the church. The family surrogate theory says that unmarried adults develop relationships within the church to create an alternative family (Glock et al., 1967). According to this theory, single young adults, widowers, and childless people will patriciate more in church than other demographics (Hoge & Polk, 1980). Over the years, several researchers have argued that contrary to family surrogate theory, revealing statistics prove that married church members are more active in their church families than unmarried ones. The discrepancy between findings might lie in the differences between church members and non-church members. Christiano (1986) concluded that unmarried nonmembers of a church are one third more likely to have high levels of church involvement than unmarried church members.

Sociological Context

Sociology studies human society and social groups (Giddens, 2001). There are three primary sociological paradigms, including functionalism, conflict theory, and symbolic interactionism. The functionalism paradigm argues that social institutions contribute to the social stability that creates strong and healthy societies. Theories from the functionalist paradigm recognize the need for social integration and satisfaction. People's consumption patterns reflect their need to share experiences with group members. A person can satisfy this need by aligning

oneself with a specific brand identity. Corporate brands offer consumers the opportunity to find belonging by participating as stakeholders (Hulberg, 2006). In an organization, symbols contribute to people's socialization process. Wearing a symbol of the organization demonstrates that an individual is proud to belong to that organization or group of people (Olins, 1990).

Next, the conflict theory evaluates how conflict influences society. All societies adopt sets of cultural values that are either communal or systematic. Communal values stem from interpersonal interactions and tend to be collectivistic. Systematic values tend to be efficient and individualistic. People in various societal roles will take on different values to reach their specific goals, causing incompatibility and conflict (Habermas, 1987). For example, a pastor will emphasize loving one another, a communal value, whereas a corporate executive might value high efficiency, a systematic value, over love (Bartos & Wehr, 2002).

Lastly, symbolic interactionism argues that people's social interactions through words and gestures construct their societal roles. Functional and conflict theories examine religion through a macro lens. Symbolic interactionism explores religion through a micro lens, looking at how religious experiences contribute to individual people's lives, including how religious practices contribute to the overall well-being of people's psychological needs. Religious symbols are unifying. A cross alone is simply the shape of a lowercase "t"; however, to millions of Christians worldwide, this symbolic shape holds significant religious meaning. Religion provides people with meaning and purpose in life while reinforcing social unity (M. O. Emerson et al., 2011).

Statement of the Problem

Church membership is a biblical practice vital to a Christian's spiritual health. At the center of a biblical church, one finds a group of committed people gathering, worshipping

together, growing spiritually, and serving others. Despite the importance of belonging to a church, church membership is declining worldwide. Whereas almost 70% of churched Baby Boomers are church members, just under half of churched Millennials are church members (Barna Group, 2020). Unfortunately, Millennials are disengaging from church membership faster than any other generation. Fascinating statistics show that Millennials today have the lowest levels of church loyalty but the highest levels of brand loyalty. These statistics reveal that Millennials are not forgoing all membership types, just church membership. Many modern-day studies focus on research regarding the Millennial population that has already left the church in the past decade; however, researchers are conducting little to no research regarding the current Christian Millennial population remaining in the church.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how practicing Christian Millennials understand the nature of engagement with church and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. Practicing Christian Millennials were defined as anyone born between 1981 and 1996 who self-identified as a Christian and attended a trinitarian Protestant church in the United States at least once per month. The methodology that guided this study was Husserl's phenomenological approach to gaining insights into the phenomenon of Christian Millennials' engagement rates with church and nonreligious memberships.

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join nonreligious memberships, such as fitness, health, and social clubs?

RQ2. What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join church membership?

RQ3. What are the perceived benefits of church membership according to Christian Millennials?

RQ4. What are the perceived hesitations of becoming a church member according to Christian Millennials?

RQ5. What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to nonreligious memberships among Christian Millennials?

RQ6. What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to church membership among Christian Millennials?

Church membership is declining while engagement with social clubs, fitness organizations, and other nonreligious memberships is rising among Millennials. The rationale for these research questions was to explore the disconnect between Christian Millennials' engagement with church membership and nonreligious membership types.

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

The Barna Group, Gallup, and the Pew Research Center's data unanimously show that Millennials are leaving the church in droves. In addition, other studies reveal that Millennials who continue attending church are less likely than previous generations to commit to one church body and only half as likely to formalize their church membership as compared to Generation X (Barna Group, 2020). Based on these findings, the researcher assumed most Protestant churches throughout the United States faced similar struggles. Regarding the Millennial demographic, the researcher assumed all Millennials are part of Generation Y, born between 1981 and 1996. These birth years implied that in 2023, the Millennial demographic ranged from 27–42 years old.

Studies reveal that Millennials' church involvement is declining year over year, meaning churches previously attracted more Millennials than they do today (J. M. Jones, 2021). At the same time, nonreligious organizations are attracting and retaining Millennials at all-time high rates compared to the local church. Marketing researchers see this evidence in organizations like

Peloton, Netflix, WeWork, Soul Cycle, and Class Pass, which successfully attract and retain Millennial members (Perell, 2021). Some early generational stereotypes of the Millennial demographic include resistance to commitment and dislike of memberships. However, corporate statistics dispute this bias. Based on previous research statistics, this researcher assumed there must be specific reasons why Millennials are more open to engaging with nonreligious memberships than religious ones.

Millennials' tacit opposition to committing to membership within the institutional church expresses an imminent need for evaluation. The researcher assumed that the findings of this study will have broad implications for Christian leaders trying to attract, engage, and retain Millennials in their churches. Lastly, the researcher assumed the participants of this study had the technological competencies to engage in a virtual focus group.

Delimitations of the Research Design

The delimitations of this study included the following:

1. The researcher delimited the target population of this study to Millennials born between 1981 and 1996. This researcher conducted the research in 2023, where her sample population was between the ages of 27 and 42 years old. The researcher did not consider other generations, such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Z, as potential participants for this study, including anyone younger than 27 or older than 42 years old.

2. The researcher further delimited participant eligibility to practicing Christian Millennials who self-identified as Christian and attended a Protestant church at least once per month, if not more often. Protestant denominations are trinitarian churches and included but were not limited to Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian.

3. This study did not explore Millennials attending Catholic churches.

4. This study did not explore Millennials attending non-trinitarian churches.

5. This study did not explore other demographic factors such as marital status, ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status.

Definition of Terms

1. *Baby Boomer:* Any person born between 1946 and 1964.

2. *Baptist:* A denomination of evangelical churches that associate themselves with the doctrine of baptism by immersion only and do not affirm infant baptisms.

3. *Belonging:* A sense of comfortability and inclusivity with others (Cambridge University Press, n.d.).

4. *Brand Love:* The concept of a person becoming emotionally attached to a specific brand.

5. *Brand Immunity:* The ability to resist negativity about a brand because of one's previous positive emotional connection with that brand (Saju et al., 2018).

6. *Church Membership:* A formal affirmation of someone's Christian faith and church affiliation characterized by the oversight of the local church (Leeman, 2012).

7. *Churched:* A person who attends church at least once every 6 months (Barna Group, 2020).

8. *Commitment:* Dedication to a person, cause, or organization.

9. *Dechurched:* A person who was previously categorized as a churched Christian but now attends church less than once per year or not at all (T. S. Rainer & Rainer, 2008, p. 20).

10. *Generation X:* Any person born between 1965 and 1980.

11. *Generation Y:* Any person born between 1981 and 1996.

12. *Generation Z:* Any person born between 1997 and 2012.

13. *Loyalty:* The concept of showing allegiance to a person, cause, or organization.

14. *Millennials:* A term used to describe the generational cohort of people born between 1981 and 1996 (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

15. *Nonreligious Membership:* Membership to any organization unaffiliated with the local church.

16. *Practicing Christian*: A person who sees their faith as valuable to their everyday life and attends church at least once per month (Barna Group, 2020).

17. *Protestant*: Any trinitarian church denomination birthed from the Reformation movement, including but not limited to Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, and Methodist churches.

18. *Religious Membership*: Membership affiliated with a local church body.

19. *Secular Membership*: Any non-religiously affiliated memberships such as fitness, health, and social club memberships.

20. *Self-Identified Christian*: A person who considers themselves to be a follower of Christ.

21. *Social Influence Theory*: How an individual's social behaviors contribute to the identity they communicate to others (Ozuem et al., 2021).

22. *Southern Baptist Convention*: The largest Protestant denomination in the United States of like-minded churches aligning with the evangelical doctrines outlined in *The Baptist Faith and Message* (Blount & Wooddell, 2007).

23. *The Baptist Faith and Message:* A detailed list of confessions of faith used as an instrument of doctrinal accountability among the Southern Baptist denomination (Blount & Wooddell, 2007).

24. *The "Nones":* The nonreligious population that does not affiliate themselves with organized religion, whether they believe in God, Jesus, or nothing at all (Burge, 2021; Lipka, 2015).

25. *Unchurched:* A person who does not attend church services, attends church less than once per year or has never attended church (T. S. Rainer & Rainer, 2008, p. 20).

26. *Young Adult:* People between the ages of 18–35.

Significance of the Study

Academic journals and research firms confirm that church membership is declining at an unprecedented rate. Millennials are leaving the church at a higher rate than any other generation. Even among the Millennial population continuing to attend church, research shows high levels of transient behaviors, including less commitment to one church body and a blatant disregard for formalizing their church membership. As more and more churches close their doors every year, Christian leaders must pinpoint the exact reasons for this significant departure; otherwise, the future of the American church is in jeopardy.

Every Millennial represents a soul. If nothing changes, the church's inability to securely engage Millennials in their congregations will continue to trend downward, leaving the church

desolate and creating a generational gap in the Kingdom. Understanding is the first step to re-engaging the Millennial demographic in the biblical practices of consistent worship, fellowship, and church membership. The future of the church's health and growth depends on Christian leaders' ability to reach, engage, and retain Millennials. Therefore, this study aimed to uncover essential data to help church leaders understand how Millennials view their engagement with religious and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments.

Summary of the Design

For this phenomenological study, the researcher utilized a focus group methodology as her primary research tool to gain insight into how Christian Millennials engage with religious and nonreligious memberships. This study utilized a qualitative design to evaluate the social phenomenon of the Millennial demographic's membership trends. The researcher conducted two focus groups of four to eight participants. In these focus groups, the researcher asked Millennial participants to share their insights, personal experiences, involvement, and nature of engagement in committing to church membership and nonreligious memberships.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Belonging to a church is an essential facet of a Christian's life. However, religious scholars are discovering that church membership is declining worldwide, with the most dramatic decrease among the Millennial demographic. Shockingly, nonreligious memberships are rising among the Millennial demographic simultaneously. For years, religious researchers have been baffled by the sharp decline in church engagement among younger demographics, trying to develop theories that explain and justify the loss. The following literature review confirms the biblical importance of church membership while identifying the discrepancies in Millennials' engagement rates between religious and nonreligious memberships.

Theological Framework for the Study

Church membership is a biblical practice vital to a Christian's spiritual health and the foundation for the theological framework of this study. Erickson (2015) explained that the nature of theology is that Christian doctrine deals with timeless truths about God, historical events, and reality. Erickson (2015) wrote, "The Bible is the constitution of the Christian faith: it specifies what is to be believed and what is to be done" (p. 19). In the book *Church Membership,* Leeman (2012) stated that church membership is an affirmation by the local church body that a person is a citizen of Christ's kingdom. In this book, Leeman explained that the principles of preaching, evangelism, membership, discipleship, and leadership are foundational to the church. Leeman pointed out that a thriving church must have spiritually healthy members and claimed that if the church members are not spiritually healthy, the church will not survive.

In Chapter 4 of *Church Membership*, Leeman reviewed 12 reasons why church membership matters. First, Leeman (2012) established that church membership is a biblical

practice that Jesus developed for foundation of the local church. Upon this foundation of commitment to the local church, the apostles conducted their ministry. Next, Leeman cited 1 Corinthians 11:20–33, explaining that the Lord's Supper is a meal for church members to share. In the following two points, the author said church membership is how a Christian represents Jesus' authority and how one declares allegiance to Jesus. Next, Leeman attributed the safety and intimacy of sharing identity with one's spiritual family as a benefit to church membership. In his seventh through 10th points, Leeman evaluated how church membership helps leaders identify who they are responsible for, whom to serve, and whom to discipline. Likewise, church membership helps followers know whom to follow. Leeman's last two points included the ability of church membership to provide structure to a Christian's life and build a witness to others. Leeman (2012) stated, "The very boundaries, which are drawn around the membership of a church, yield a society of people that invites the nations to something better. It's God's evangelism program" (p. 81).

The theology of church membership is evident throughout the New Testament. For example, the book of Acts illustrates a beautiful picture of what Jesus desired the church to look like after he returned to the Father. In Acts 2:42–47 (*New International Bible*, 1978/2011), St. Luke the Evangelist said,

> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

In this passage, Luke explained that there was fellowship among the believers, and they all devoted themselves to Jesus' teachings by sharing meals in fellowship. Luke recalled the integration of the early church community and how they shared their money and possessions,

took care of the poor, sang praises to God for his faithfulness, and enjoyed food, communion, and fellowship together inside their homes. Luke also noted that the Lord added to their community daily, increasing the number of individuals He saved.

Interpreting the text from Acts, Wilson (2017) took an exegetical approach, initially emphasizing that Christian leaders must attribute the growth of a church's community to the Lord's blessing (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, Acts 2:47; Acts 9:31). Beyond attribution to the Lord's blessing, Wilson mentioned the importance of noting how the biblical text highlights the quality of the community life of the Acts church. This church community shares visible acts confirming their unity to each other, their faithfulness to share the good news of the gospel, and the power of the Holy Spirit at work in and through their lives (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, Acts 6:7, Acts 11:24, Acts 19:20). These passages affirm that those outside of the Acts church were recognized by their lifestyle, words, and actions. In Acts 4:32, Luke reiterated how all the believers shared their possessions to contribute to the church's missionary work. The believers Luke described in Acts were of one heart and one mind, confirming that Christians belong to Christ and each other.

Lastly, in Acts 20, Luke instructed the church leaders to take care of their flock. Luke was not the only biblical author to imply a hierarchy of oversight for the church. Romans 12:4–5 says, "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ, we though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011). In this passage, the author of Hebrews told new believers to submit to their leaders, indicating a special relationship between the overseer and the church body member. This relationship is of such significance that God will

request that the overseers give an account for those they shepherded (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, Hebrews 13:17).

In 2007, pastor and theologian Hyde outlined how church membership forms the boundaries of those inside and outside the church. Hyde referred to Acts 2:47, where God added to the church's numbers, arguing that without a defined boundary of who is in the church, one cannot add to it. Similarly, in *7 Basics of Belonging,* S. Rainer (2021) added that these boundary lines are not protective boundaries to keep the community's problems out or isolate Christians from nonbelievers but to identify Christ-followers. In this book, S. Rainer claimed that these boundary lines are the starting line for external service. S. Rainer (2021) wrote, "We are the ones completing what began in Acts. As you serve in your church, you are doing kingdom work for Jesus. It's not really about you, or even your church. It's about Christ Himself" (p. 42).

In an article written in 2007, Hyde evaluated the tension between modern-day evangelical Christians' beliefs that one can have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ while only optionally committing to a church. He stated that salvation unifies people into communion with Christ, while church membership brings people into communion with Christ's body, the church. Hyde also reiterated that communion with Christ's body is not optional. Adding to the same line of thought, Bradley (2017) reported that God never intended for Christians to live autonomous lives as consumeristic nomads. Bradley pointed out that it is nearly impossible for a pastor to watch over the hearts and souls of those he leads if those people are all living their individualist lives apart from the church body.

Church membership is "a public pledge to find our role in the body, work alongside other members, and hold each other accountable to faithful Christian living" (Lawless, 2005, p. 74). In his book *Membership Matters*, Lawless (2005) proclaimed that the basis of biblical polity is

church membership, as church members serve together, fellowship together, and worship together. Among church members, holiness and righteousness are not biblical suggestions but God-given commandments. Lawless believes that the membership structure of the church allows God-ordained leaders to hold their specific group of Christ followers accountable to biblical growth, spiritual service, and covenant community. McCarty (2014) reported that church membership results in believers who are positioned to fulfill the Great Commission.

The Purposes of Church Membership

Church membership is a covenant commitment between a committed group of Christ-followers and the local church (C. Davis, 2011; Lawless, 2005; Leeman, 2012; S. Rainer, 2021). In his doctoral dissertation, C. Davis (2011) wrote, "Church membership involves an obligation of discipleship … and the discipline that Jesus has committed to the church to preserve its orderliness, purity, and peace" (pp. 31–32). C. Davis explained the covenantal reality of church membership and the duties of becoming a Christ-follower. The responsibilities of discipleship and discipline require orderly and formalized processes. C. Davis' study supports the concept that church membership helps bring orderliness to the local Christian congregation of believers.

Church membership provides a clear distinction between who is inside and outside the church. Whitney (1996) concluded that there is biblical evidence to support the idea that the New Testament refers to numerous physical churches in local communities in addition to the universal Christian church, a heavenly assembly comprised of all believers. Therefore, when the New Testament mentions the church, it references a network of several local churches all connected by their shared belief in Jesus Christ.

In 1 Timothy 5:9–10, Paul instructs the overseers to keep a list of widows, indicating a structured and localized approach to caring for people in need in one's community. C. Davis

(2011) explained from a theoretical evaluation why maintaining an extensive list of all the region's widows would be impossible for one or even a few leaders to manage. Because of the difficulty, C. Davis believed it is only logical to interpret Paul's text as if Paul was talking specifically to local church leaders in this letter.

In addition to caring for the widows, Paul taught the church in Corinth that it is their loving responsibility to discipline its members. Leeman (2012) explained that God's discipline of his children and the church's discipline of its members is a compassionate way to expose sin before it spreads like cancer. He reiterated that the goal of church discipline is to save the church member heading down a path of destruction before it leads to death. For example, Hebrews 12:6 says, "For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son" (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011). Several biblical texts support the process and guidelines for church discipline. In Matthew 18:15–20, Matthew provided instructions for church discipline. In 1 Corinthians 5, Paul exemplified the church's loving responsibility to discipline its members. Additionally, in *Spiritual Disciplines within the Church,* Whitney (1996) pointed out that without the formality of church membership, it would be impossible to remove someone from the body as Matthew initially instructed.

In 1992, Lane summarized a response to the question, why should a person join a church? In his book, *I Want to Be a Church Member*, Lane (1992) said,

> God has given us four pictures of the church, not one. This is just to emphasize and prove the point by repetition, but also to say four different things about what it means to be a member of a church. To be a stone in his temple means to belong to a worshiping community. To be a part of the body means to belong to a living, functioning, serving, witnessing community. To be sheep in the flock means belonging to a community dependent on him for food, protection, and direction. To be a member of a family is to belong to a community bound by a common fatherhood. Put together you have the main functions of an individual Christian. Evidently, we are meant to fulfill these not on our own but together in the church. Now can you see the answer to the question why you should join a church? (p. 21)

Church Members Create a Family

In a journal article for *Theology Today*, Brandner (2019) portrayed a Christian community as a family of believers modeling the ecclesiological metaphor of a spiritual family. In this article, Brandner quoted a gentleman who once said to him, "We don't need an executive; we need a father" (p. 217). Brandner pointed out a solid biblical precedent for this model when referencing the spiritual family and cited passages from Matthew 12:49–50, Galatians 6:10, and Ephesians 2:19.

Witherington (1998) wrote, "As Ephesians 5:21–6:9 suggests, the direction of ethical influence moved from the primary family (the family of faith) to the secondary family, with the physical family being formed and reformed within the family of faith" (pp. 267–268). In his book, *When the Church Was a Family,* Hellerman (2009) provided an insightful look at how the church today can fulfill the family metaphor associated with the early church. In this book, Hellerman addressed the heresy of hyper-individualism and talked about the challenges of finding interconnectedness in an individualistic society. Hellerman suggested it is difficult for Western Christians to understand Mediterranean family values. Along the same lines, J. R. Myers (2003) said it this way, "With the erosion of geographically close family and the heightened mobility of our culture, many people struggle to learn healthy competencies for community" (p. 11).

J. R. Myers (2003) suggested Christian leaders use Edward T. Hall's theory from the 1960s to develop relational spaces between culture and church. According to J. R. Myers, churches should develop communities in the four primary proxemics of public, social, personal, and intimate spaces. E. T. Hall's (1966/1996) theory of proxemics stated that public space is 12 or more feet, social space is 4 to 12 feet, personal space is 18 inches to 4 feet, and intimate space

is 0 to 18 inches away from another person. J. R. Myers claimed that church members finding

belonging in one or several of these arenas is central to God's design for the church. Lastly, J. R.

Myers summarized people's search for belonging by reiterating how difficult it is for people in a

postmodern society to understand the multidimensional complexities associated with one's desire

to find belonging.

The author of Hebrews wrote a word of warning reminding Christians about the

importance of gathering together:

> And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, Hebrews 10:24–25)

In the book *The Local Church: What it is and Why it Matters,* Klink (2001) challenged readers to

understand that the church is not an extracurricular weekly worship concert but a picture of

God's family. In this book, Klink wrote that the church is God's adopted children who live out

their identities as God's children inside and outside of physical church buildings. According to

Klink, this makes the church an organism and an institute simultaneously:

> The church is an institution in a manner similar to the nuclear family, which is grounded on the biblical covenant of marriage between a husband or wife, designed by God from the beginning to be an ongoing and established human institution to create, nurture, and send. (p. 104)

Within this family, Klink illustrated how Jesus instructs Christians to use ordinary items to

remind themselves of extraordinary and supernatural things. For example, church members use

water to symbolize baptism and participate in sharing the Lord's Supper through the ingestion of

juice and bread.

Church Members Share Sacraments

Through sharing the sacraments, people can see and experience God's promises and

remember the power of the gospel message (Allison, n.d.). In "Reappropriating Sacramental

Thinking Within Protestant Evangelicalism," Elliott (2017) reviewed the three leading viewpoints concerning the Lord's Supper. In this article, Elliott credited Zwingli for symbolic memorialism, Bullinger for symbolic parallelism, and Calvin for symbolic instrumentalism. Elliott (2017) wrote, "Insofar as the Protestant tradition is concerned, it established that despite the diverse sacramental views within Reformation though and Protestant evangelicalism, in particular, the doctrine of grace is upheld as foundational for the church" (p. 1). Additionally, Brewer (2017) claimed that symbolic memorialism is the leading view preached by modern-day Protestant church leaders, implying that the bread and juice are symbols of Christ's sacrifice and remind Christians about their need for grace.

Christ instructed his followers to share sacraments to remember God's gift (Elliott, 2017; Fuad, 2018). In "The Practice of the Lord's Supper in 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 as a Socio-religious Ritual Failure," Fuad (2018) reported that the sharing of the Lord's Supper should be unifying, not dividing, as Paul rebuked the church in Corinth for their misaligned social stratification. In this article, Fuad attributed the Corinthian confusion about how to conduct the Lord's Supper to the close resemblance of the communal meal to their sacred banquets. This article demonstrated the importance of Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 10:16, reiterating the importance of the Lord's Supper as participation in the covenant with God established by the blood and body of Jesus Christ. Fuad's interpretation of Paul's teachings in 1 Corinthians is that the Lord's Supper is a communal meal, and by partaking in it, one defines their identity as a Christ follower and separates themselves from nonbelievers.

Another publicly identifying demonstration of one's faith in Jesus Christ is baptism. In an article for the *Biblical Theology Bulletin,* Chang (2022) argued that baptism is a ritual function emphasizing a metaphorical relationship between the physical immersion and the power of

communal rituals found in the New Testament. In this article, Chang cited Mitchell's (1991) work regarding using body metaphors for a social union. Mitchell's theory was that both Greco-Roman and Hellenistic Jewish cultures used the human body as a metaphor for society in political literature. Similarly, Paul conveyed the Christian community as the body of Christ (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, 1 Corinthians 12:12–13). Chang added that in Corinth, immersion by water visually separated the Christians from the political and social order as it conveyed subtle resistance to politics and alignment with new belonging in the spiritual family; thus, baptism is a community-building practice. Additionally, Choi (2017) rooted his research on DeMaris' theory, concluding that baptism by immersion creates a sense of new belonging in Christian communities.

In an article, Martin (2008) explained that Christ's baptism was the perfect example of submission. In Matthew 20:16 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011), Matthew reported on Jesus' teaching that the first will be last, and the last will be first. In the article "Baptized into Submission," Martin (2008) explained how Jesus not only taught this principle but modeled it by showing submission to God the Father, allowing John to baptize him in the Jordan River, and fulfilling all righteousness. According to Martin, baptism is an opportunity for modern-day Christians to receive the gift of submission. However, as Martin pointed out, the challenge for baptized Christians is to continue living and walking in a submissive and transformed life.

Church Members Submit to Christ's Lordship

In "Missional Discipleship in the Public Sphere*,*" Jun (2022) explained that to be a Christ follower, one must submit to the lordship of Christ as the center of their life. Jun defined lordship as acknowledging the profound nature of Christ's holiness and humans' inadequacy to restore themselves. Furthermore, the longer Christians follow Christ, the more Christlike their thoughts

and actions should become. This article referred to Paul's teaching in Galatians 5:22, as he reminded the Galatian church that the fruits of the spirit include "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011).

In their book *God and Human Freedom,* Vicens and Kittle (2019) explored how humans, because of their free will, have control over their own decisions, choices, and actions and must choose to embrace these spiritual fruits. For example, Vicens and Kittle pointed out that if two people are involved in the same difficult situation, they each have the freedom to choose how to respond. The freedom of choice means one could choose joy, holding on to God's promises, even in a painful situation, while the other remains hopeless. Furthermore, as humans can make autonomous decisions, the freedom of choice influences social institutions on various levels, including when and how a person submits to political, societal, and religious authority (Clark et al., 2013).

Religious scholars confirm that submission takes humility (Cole, 2013; Leeman, 2012; W. Smith, 1990). Hayes (2012) pointed out how Zephaniah's teachings illustrate the importance of accepting God's authority through humility. Zephaniah encouraged the people of Jerusalem to be more vigilant of their humility and submission to God, contrasting the actions of the Assyrians (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011). Regarding submission, Leeman (2012) said the invitation to engage in church membership is an invitation to practice submission to God by submitting to a local church body.

In Chapter 2, Leeman (2012) explained,

> To define the local church institutionally, then, we could say that it is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances. (p. 41)

Leeman and several other biblical scholars have concluded that God did not create humans to walk through life alone (Dandridge, 2020; C. Davis, 2011). Instead, in "The Church as Family," Brandner's (2019) research revealed how God wired humans to have an innate sense of need for belonging.

In 2010, Krause published a study on the theoretical linkage between church membership, humility, and overall health. In this study, Krause proposed the hypothesis that people who attend church more often will receive a greater level of spiritual support from their fellow church members, and those who receive more spiritual encouragement are more likely to embody humility. He believed people with higher capacities of humility tend to have more favorable health overall. However, after evaluating the results of his research, Krause concluded there was no significant difference between the health of those who regularly received spiritual support and those who did not, and for some people, higher levels of spiritual support led to detrimental health effects. In this report, Krause proposed two new theories on why some people might suffocate under the weight of too much spiritual support. Citing Altemeyer (2004), Krause concluded his report by providing evidence that hypocrisy leads to apostasy (Krause, 2010; Krause & Ellison, 2009).

On the contrary, in the article, "Why Gerontologists Should Care about Empirical Research on Religion and Health," L. K. George et al. (2013) summarized over 3,000 quantitative studies which examine the connection between religiosity and physical health, mental health, and disease prevention. L. K. George et al. and several other researchers concluded that there is a plethora of evidence suggesting religiosity and spirituality influence people's health and health behaviors (Chida et al., 2009; Koenig et al., 2001; Powell et al., 2003; T. B. Smith et al., 2003). Koenig (2012) reported out of 326 peer-reviewed quantitative studies,

only one study reported a negative relationship between wellbeing, happiness, and religion, and three reported an inverse relationship. All the remaining studies reported positive associations. L. K. George et al. elaborated on the research of Koenig et al. (2012), examining how religious beliefs affect mental health. After concluding their evaluation of the data, L. K. George et al. (2013) summarized how religion promotes hope, forgiveness, gratitude, and optimism and is scientifically proven to be beneficial to one's mental health.

In addition to mental health, research shows religious communities often promote healthy lifestyle choices, lowering risky behaviors (Koenig et al., 2012; Kvaavik et al., 2010). Stolzenberg et al. (1995) reported that organized religion, such as Christianity, discourages sexual intimacy and childbearing outside of marriage. In another study, Kvaavik et al. (2010) reported that engagement with risky behaviors is lower in religious communities as many religious leaders do not condone alcohol use, drug abuse, or sexual promiscuity. Because of this, Francis et al. (2019) theorized that submission to religiosity naturally results in healthier lifestyles. To test this theory, Francis et al. conducted a cross-sectional survey evaluating adolescent engagement with alcohol, tobacco, and cannabis use in relation to high versus low levels of religiosity. As a result of the study, Francis et al. determined that teenagers associated with a religious belief system had lower odds of engaging in alcohol and drug abuse.

Lastly, L. K. George et al. (2013) concluded that religious communities support individuals and families in ways other social institutions cannot. For example, L. K. George et al. illustrated how politics cannot help a family cope with losing an innocent child the same way a religious community can assist in their grieving process. Koenig (2012) presented 40 studies examining the relationship between religiosity and hope, revealing that 29 out of the 40 studies reported positive relationships between religion and hope and no studies found any inverse

relationships. As Ellison et al. (2001) and L. K. George et al. (2002) published more research on the association between regular worship service attendance and better health, L. K. George et al. suggested additional sociologists continue studying the connection between religious, social organizations, and individual health.

Summary of Theological Framework

Submitting to joining a church is part of submitting to God's authority and Christ's design for humanity to engage with one another in biblical communities (Dandridge, 2020; Hyde, 2007). Religious researchers report that church membership forms the boundaries of Christian communal living, separating believers from non-believers (Fuad, 2018; Lawless, 2005). There are vast amounts of theological evidence suggesting that committing to a local church body is a biblical teaching of Jesus and modeled by the early church (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, Acts 2–9). Additionally, several research studies demonstrate that Christians who are regularly involved in religious communities are healthier, experience the fruits of the Spirit more regularly, and are less likely to engage in unsafe health behaviors (Chida et al., 2009; Ellison et al., 2001; L. K. George et al., 2002, 2013; Koenig et al., 2001; Powell et al., 2003). Although there are numerous benefits to church membership, recent articles report that fewer Christians engage in Protestant church membership every year (Bendavid, 2015; Ferreira & Chipenyu, 2021; Mabry-Nauta, 2015). This next section will review the theoretical literature relating to the Millennial demographic and their engagement with religious and nonreligious memberships.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

In 2013, Schultz and Schultz claimed that church attendance is shrinking. In their book *Why Nobody Wants to Go to Church Anymore*, the authors reported that 40% of Americans claim

to attend church every week; however, the actual number is around 20%. On the contrary, Dandridge (2020) cited a 2014 General Social Survey that found that 55% of evangelical Christians attend church at least once per week. Schultz and Schultz (2013) proposed several thought-provoking questions about church attendance patterns, asking why those who love Christ do not prioritize church on Sunday mornings. They asked, when did sports leagues and brunches begin taking priority over church? Dandridge (2020) sought answers to similar questions and concluded that the church is no longer the cultural center of American life in the United States. As a result of his research, Dandridge claimed that the religion of Christianity is not collapsing. However, Christian nominalism is declining, as those who previously claimed to be Christian but never demonstrated any evidence of being a Christ-follower are slipping away into the fog of the United States' postmodern society.

In the book *The Decline of Established Christianity in the Western World,* Peterson (2017) evaluated the causes of church decline by tracing the effects of secularization from the Middle Ages to industrialization to modern-day North America. According to Peterson, secularization plays a vital role in modern-day cultural movements and contributes to the rising number of young adults participating in religious deconstruction and church disassociation. These individuals are reportedly trying to evaluate their Christian faith apart from religious institutions. One young adult said it this way: "We lost faith in an institution when we no longer believe that it plays this ethical or formative role of teaching the people within it to be trustworthy" (Terrell, 2022, p. 5).

Dellato (2021) reported that between 2011 and 2021, the United States saw an 11% decrease in the number of adults identifying with the Protestant denomination of Christianity. In the book *Ministering to Millennials,* Pitts (2017) claimed that the growth of the Millennial

demographic significantly contributed to the changes in church membership statistics throughout

North American churches. Pitts revealed that the Millennial demographic has the lowest

engagement rates in organized religion. Additionally, the Pew Research Center (2010) reported

similar findings, concluding, "They [Millennials] are the least overtly religious American

generation in modern times" (p. 2).

Terrell (2022) proposed another perspective: people have lost faith in church leadership.

In the article "Five Real Reasons Young People Are Deconstructing Their Faith," Terrell

analyzed Gallup's 2020 ethics survey, revealing that only 24% of young adults ages 18–34

believe pastors have high honesty. Adding to this data, Barna (2021) reported that Millennials

have difficulty trusting Christian pastors. Barna, alongside his research organization, the Barna

Group, strives to offer accurate insights into Millennials' lifestyle, relationships, religious, and

political influences. In his recent research, Barna (2021) discovered that Millennials express a

54% favorable view toward Christian pastors compared to a 57% positive view toward other

influencers such as government officials, journalists, authors, social media influencers, and

college professors (p. 38).

As much as the trustworthiness of a church's leadership affects Millennials, other

scholars believe a lack of discipleship and an increase in lackadaisical preaching are to blame for

the decline (Barna, 2021; Skeldon & Waller, 2018; Wulff, 2011). In his 2011 presidential

address, Wulff asked, "Are pastors the cause of the loss of church membership?" To answer his

rhetorical question, Wulff provided statistics demonstrating that younger generations, especially

unchurched Millennials, eagerly seek authentic experiences and religious spirituality instead of

tradition, religious institutions, and spiritual disciplines. Through his years of research, Wulff

concluded that pastors hold some level of responsibility for declining church membership in

America. On the other hand, in *The Passion Generation,* Skeldon and Waller (2018) argued that a decrease in biblical discipleship over the past 10 years has contributed to the decline of Millennials engaging with church membership and the rising church dropout rates. No matter who is responsible for igniting the initial decline, the question remains, what can Christian leaders do to turn it around?

An Overview of the Millennial Generation

First, Christian leaders must develop a foundational understanding of the Millennial generation. Baby Boomers were the most populous generation for decades (Beresford Research, 2023). However, Millennials are now the most populous demographic alive, surpassing Baby Boomers in their numbers (CB Insights, 2021; Sumpter, 2019). In the United States, the Statista Research Group (2023) reported that as of July 1, 2022, the Millennial generation made up 21.67% of the U.S. population, followed by an almost even number of Baby Boomers and Generation Z, with Baby Boomers making up 20.58% and Generation Z with 20.88%. Next, Generation X encompassed only 19.61% of the U.S. population, and the population of people born before 1945 made up less than 6% of the U.S. population.

As of 2021, Barna reported that the Millennial demographic encompassed 78 million individuals worldwide. In his research report, Barna (2021) provided several statistics summarizing his research with Millennials. Barna reported that 40% of Millennials identify as liberal or progressive, whereas only 29% self-identify as conservative. Barna also reported that 40% of Millennial adults do not know if God exists or do not believe God exists. In this report, Barna broke down the Christian population of Millennials by denomination, reporting that 12% of Christian Millennials are mainline Protestant, 14% are evangelical Protestant, and 21% identify as Catholic.

H. Hall and Delport (2013) released their research on the key distinctions separating Millennials from other generations. While analyzing their research data, H. Hall and Delport noticed that some of their Millennial respondents' responses seemingly contradicted each other. For example, 85% of their survey respondents claimed to hold a high view of people in authority; however, later in the focus groups, the participants emphasized the importance of being one's own authority. H. Hall and Delport concluded that it is crucial to understand that Millennials are living in a postmodern era where the rise of individualism creates a culture where people must hold their interpretation of self-expression in tandem with factual information. These researchers reported that in this era, Millennials diminish traditional value systems as the opportunities for unique and expressive lifestyles rise. Lastly, H. Hall and Delport put particular emphasis on noting that their research revealed that postmodern experiences influence Millennials more significantly than postmodern experiences influence Baby Boomers.

Barry and Nelson (2005) categorized the postmodern era as a culture where morals are rooted in one's personal behavior rules, selecting parts of religion that suit them best momentarily. In their article "The Role of Religion in the Transition to Adulthood for Young Emerging Adults," Barry and Nelson warned about the dangers of separating spirituality and religion as it removes the boundaries of interpreting the Bible, worshiping, and fellowshipping together in the context of biblical community. Considering religion in the postmodern era, Tuggle (2022) said, "Ask Americans if they believe in God, and most will say yes. But a growing number have lost their faith in organized religion" (p. 1).

Setting aside religious views, Weber and Urick (2017) examined Millennials' ethical profiles through the lens of personal values. In "Examining the Millennials' Ethical Profile," Weber and Urick reported that many corporations experience tension in the workplace because

of the diverse age range of employees, ranging from young Millennials to Baby Boomers. This article relies on Kluckhohn's value definition, arguing that values convey what is most valuable to an individual. In addition to holding their own values, K. K. Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) reported that Millennials are more knowledgeable about technology, more comfortable working together in groups or teams, and more diverse than previous generations. Through their research, K. K. Myers and Sadaghiani revealed that Millennials are open to frequent communication with their supervisor and value seeing the impact of their influence on the organization. In addition to influence, K. K. Myers and Sadaghiani also reported that Millennials desire flexible work schedules and emphasize maintaining healthy work–life balances.

A report by Goldman Sachs Research (n.d.) demonstrated that Millennials devote significant time and money to pursuing wellness, and the theme of wellness influences how Millennials invest their time and money. Adding to this theory, Madan (2017) reported that Millennials are spending more on gym memberships and diet application subscriptions than any other generation. Madan reported that consumers benefit from peace of mind when making health-related decisions. As a result of this study, Madan concluded that there are strong indicators that these health and wellness trends will continue increasing between 2015 and 2025. Additionally, Les Mills Lab (2019) reported that Millennials and Generation Z represented 80% of gym and health club memberships. Les Mills Lab also reported that these generational groups accounted for almost 90% of app-based workout subscriptions.

In the article "Creating a Millennial Generation Contextualized Church Culture," Deitsch (2012) described Millennials as a digital generation, growing up with technological connections at their fingertips. Deitsch's research revealed that Millennials crave connection and need to experience connection with other individuals. According to this research, Millennials also desire

to belong to conceptual communities bigger than themselves. According to this same study, all Millennials need to do to find this feeling of connection is go online, as the internet is full of dating websites, social media platforms, video game chat rooms, and more. As a result of the study, Deitsch concluded that Millennials do not lack opportunities to find some level of connection. Because of the vast array of opportunities in a fast-paced digital world, Elmore (2012) explained the life of a Millennial is complex and chaotic, leaving little room for additional short-term commitments. Elmore's (2012) publication, *Life Giving Mentors,* offered Christian leaders resources and innovative ideas for developing short- and long-term mentor relationships with Millennials.

Millennials' Relationship with Religion

In her article "Spirit Moves 'Church Hoppers,'" French (2012) described Millennials as spiritually curious young adults interested in finding ways to satisfy their spiritual demands outside of religious commitments. French evaluated a group of young adults who attended different denominations each week. French quoted Sarah Koscienlniak, a 22-year-old Millennial who said to her, "I didn't want to necessarily tie myself to one specific denomination and church" (p. 1). French reported that a growing number of pastors are concerned by the increase in young adults hopping from church to church.

In an article for the *Journal for the Study of Spirituality,* Percy (2019) wrote that family dynamics and other paradigm shifts contribute to the separation of Millennial behavioral patterns from previous generations. Percy reported that there is a new option on online dating websites catered toward Millennials' spirituality. In addition to the standard options for religious beliefs such as Christian, Jewish, or atheist, Percy (2019) noted a new category for "spiritual but not

religious," which inspired his research on the patterns of religion and spirituality among Millennials and Generation Z (p. 163).

Additionally, Thomas (2021) noted that political ideologies, technological advances, and cultural influences also impact the generation gap between Millennials and Generation X in churches. Thomas' study evaluated 10 Protestant churches in the inner city of Hartford, Connecticut. As a result of Thomas' study, Thomas reported that the sharpest decline in church attendance is occurring among the Millennial demographic. However, ironically, the Pew Research Center (2010) reported that Millennials engage in prayer a similar amount that Generation X did when they were their age. For a generation with the same level of spirituality expressed through their engagement with prayer, Millennials are disconnecting from the church at an alarming rate (Pew Research Center, 2010; Thomas, 2021; Waters & Bortree, 2012).

In his report, *New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence: Millennials in America,* Barna (2021) summarized his research results with four conclusions about Millennials. Barna believes the Millennial generation is in a spiritual crisis. He concluded that Millennials struggle with astronomical levels of mental health issues and cited relational conflict as one of the leading sources of anxiety among Millennials. Lastly, Barna concluded that three out of every four Millennials are currently searching for purpose and meaning in their lives. Even as Christian Millennials turn to Jesus for their questions, Barna concluded that his research reveals that 96% of Millennials lack a biblical worldview.

In a report published by the Pew Research Center, Lipka (2015) explained that Millennials are categorically known as the "nones," a shorthand term to describe the generation's lack of religious affiliation. This nonreligious population does not affiliate themselves with any organized religion, whether they believe in God, Jesus, or nothing at all (Burge, 2021; Leven et

al., 2022; Lipka, 2015; Smietana, 2021). According to Anwar (2013), who cited studies conducted by the University of California, Duke University, and Berkeley University, the population of people holding no religious preference doubled between 1990 and 2010.

As the nonreligious population grows exponentially, Zuckerman (2012) pointed out that 2009 was the first year that the president of the United States addressed the country by saying America is a nation of "Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and non-believers" (p. 175). In his book *Faith No More,* Zuckerman (2012) reported that there is little scholarly understanding of why people are rapidly turning away from religion, indicating a need for additional research. Throughout his study, Zuckerman conducted numerous in-depth interviews with people who had recently left the Christian religion. As a result of the study, Zuckerman reported that the individuals leaving the faith are highly intelligent, moral, and life-affirming individuals, contrary to stereotypes that accuse the nonreligious Millennial population of being nihilistic atheists.

In 2013, the Barna Group released a study revealing that 43% of the religious "nones" were once actively churched Millennials. Several years later, the Barna Group (2017) released another fascinating statistic indicating that their research shows 79% of unchurched Americans are technically dechurched, meaning they were once church attendees but no longer attend church regularly. In a recent Gallup publication, J. M. Jones (2021) stated, "Given the nearly perfect alignment between not having a religious preference and not belonging to a church, the 13-percentage-point increase in no religious affiliation since 1998–2000 appears to account for more than half of the 20-point decline in church membership over the same time" (p. 4). According to the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* every human has the right to religious

beliefs, choosing between religious or nonreligious affiliation, and peacefully changing their religious beliefs (United Nations, 1948/2018).

In 2021, Barna described the belief profile of the Millennial demographic, saying, "While Millennials appear to have a positive reaction to Jesus Christ and even the Bible, their behavior highlights the relatively minimal effort they put into knowing, loving, and serving Christ through biblical principles" (p. 40). The following year, Leven et al. (2022) examined a series of five U.S. population surveys, finding many people who claim no religious affiliation still believe in heaven and hell and pray regularly. Leven et al. recommended additional research to understand better the discrepancies between believing in Christian principles and engaging with local churches.

Additionally, Vermurlen (2015) reported on the findings of a Saurage Marketing Research study. Researchers for this study utilized eight focus groups to evaluate the spirituality of dechurched individuals. In this study, Vermurlen reported that researchers concluded that the Millennial population no longer sees the organized church as necessary for their individualized faith. In his dissertation, *The Religion of the Heart,* Watts (2020) blamed the rise of Sheilaism and the privatization of one's religious belief system as the leading contributing factor to the shift in American religiosity. Manning (2015) evaluated the concept of one's moral right to choose a religious worldview. *Losing Our Religion* (Manning, 2015) evaluated the rise in religious "nones" among adults under 30 years old. It illuminated the tension parents face in passing along their religious views to their children. Manning evaluated arguments regarding individuals' choices, whether to pass their own religious views onto their children or wait for their children to form their own spiritual choices and how these decisions affect the Millennial generation's religiosity.

In 2013, the Barna Group reported that 52% of Millennials are churchless. Additionally, Simmons (2015) reported 61% of Millennials who were once actively involved in church during their teenage years are now spiritually inactive. As of 2021, the Pew Research Center claimed that three in every 10 adults living in the United States are considered to be part of the nonreligious population (G. A. Smith, 2021).

In an article for the *Journal of Media and Religion,* Waters and Bortree (2012) portrayed the hierarchical structure of church authority as a stumbling block for Christian Millennials. In this publication, Waters and Bortree cited work published by Hon and Grunig in 1999 on how conventional religious organizations use an institution–congregant relationship for power. In an article published by the *Journal of Public Relations Research,* Ledingham (2003) suggested evaluating the power dynamics of an organization through the lens of commitment required, control mutuality, and trust, while Waters and Bortree suggested evaluating institutional responsiveness to help Millennials restore their relationship with organized religion.

In *Identifying Strategies Among Church Leaders to Improve Millennial Attendance in Church,* Westfield (2019) affirmed Vermurlen's (2015) conclusions and stated that the Millennial generation is overall more spiritual but less religious than previous generations. For her research, Westfield used the Delphi technique for gathering and aggregating information related to this topic. As a result of this study, Westfield's research illuminated several thematic needs that Millennials consider vital to their openness to church engagement. First, Westfield said community and authenticity are the top categories Millennials assess when deciding whether or not to engage with a local church. Next, Westfield reported that the contextualization of the gospel and leadership development are vital factors Millennials consider when evaluating the opportunity to become a church member. Lastly, Westfield reported that creative programming

influences Millennials' decision-making process regarding engagement with religious memberships. On the other hand, this next section will review the literature on Millennials' engagement with nonreligious memberships.

Millennials' Relationship with Nonreligious Memberships

Galperin (2022) reported that gym membership has nearly doubled over the past 20 years in the United States. According to Galperin, gym memberships in the United States have increased from 32.8 million to 64.2 million members. The American Survey Center reported religious college-educated Americans are engaging with sports leagues and fitness groups at a higher rate than nonreligious Americans without a degree (Cox, 2022). Foley, Peloton's founder, directly attributed Peloton's membership growth to the decline of organized religion, claiming Peloton offers a unique spiritual fitness experience (Recode, 2017). Foley said Peloton's group fitness classes incorporate building trust through transparency, developing community, and preaching for 45 minutes on an altar as the basis of his brand's offering (Recode, 2017). Peloton is one of several companies under the umbrella of the boutique fitness industry. According to market research, the boutique studio market value was $49.3 billion in 2021 and is projected to increase to $66.2 billion by 2026 (Skalska, 2023).

When it comes to marketing membership decisions, Weber and Urick (2017) published a study on the personal value orientation of Millennials, discovering that the Millennial generation relies heavily on their personal values when making decisions. Rooting their research in the data extracted from the Rokeach Value Survey, Weber and Urick report that close companionship, mature love, and freedom from conflict were three of the highest values Millennials possess. Weber and Urick noted that Millennials often find close companionship in friendships, whereas they find mature love through the exploration of both sexual and spiritual intimacy.

In 2018, Stahl reported that Daniel Saynt founded a sex-positive club in Manhattan, New York for Millennials. Stahl (2018) reported that Saynt's parents raised him in a devoutly religious household. However, Saynt acknowledged leaving his religious beliefs behind in college to explore "soul-fueling" spiritual experiences through sexual expression among like-minded Millennials. S. Jones (2022) also reported on the cultural phenomenon of Saynt's social clubs. According to S. Jones, Saynt's organization, the New Society for Wellness, now has over 8,000 established members, primarily Millennials, and receives an average of 150 new membership applications weekly. Because of this, S. Jones indicated that the influx of new applications suggests Millennials have an openness to social club memberships.

In "Millennials Seek Spiritual Community," Valente (2020) stated, "There is a hunger for connection to something larger than ourselves" (p. 32). In this article, Valente explained that the problem is that Millennials seek spiritual substance and deep communal connections outside of the church. Adding additional examples of places Millennials seek spiritual experiences through nonreligious memberships, Tripathi (2022) shared an evaluation of a new-age private club operating under a traditional membership structure. Tripathi explained that membership to this club is by invitation or referral only, but once a member, people are encouraged to socialize with like-minded people while discovering their authentic selves. In this article, Tripathi reported high levels of success among Millennial consumers.

In a report published by *The Membership Management Report,* Dotter and Kirk (2017) theorized that by hosting specialized events, fostering member-driven online communities, and measuring engagement by collecting data from individual members, social club membership will continue rising among the Millennial demographic. In their article, Dotter and Kirk recommended marketing experts hone in on Millennials' desire for positive experiences. No

matter the type of organization, Dotter and Kirk concluded that organizational members should find their interactions with that organization favorable, easy, and enjoyable.

In addition to high-end and private social clubs, Apfelbaum (2019) reported that Diamond Resorts, a vacation membership organization, announced that Millennial membership accounted for 25% of its yearly growth, outpacing all other generational groups by almost 10%. Apfelbaum explained that Diamond Resorts caters to Millennials' desire for unique experiences by promoting sporting events, culinary tours, and concerts as their primary marketing highlights. At the end of the article, Apfelbaum concluded that Millennial consumers desire memberships that provide them flexibility and the ability to choose meaningful and memorable experiences.

In 2016, Plaskow published a review of Marketing General Incorporated's 2015 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report. In this article, Plaskow reported that Millennials commit to nonreligious memberships every day, as demonstrated by the 46% organizational membership growth researchers saw in 2014. Plaskow (2016) explained that the 2015 Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report also projected that over 1,000 new associations would open by the end of the year. Seven years later, Marketing General Incorporated (2022) released its latest Membership Marketing Benchmarking Report, revealing that organizations with significant percentages of Millennial members are most likely to retain their members after 5 years.

Campbell-Miller (2018) hypothesized that marketing membership to Millennials is about enhancing their lifestyle. In the article, Campbell-Miller examined a country club in Arkansas that attributes its high percentage of Millennial members to shifting from marketing its golf course to marketing an overall lifestyle experience. Along the same lines, Hackl (2020) agreed with this theoretical marketing shift, referencing how the social clubs that have been most

successful in marketing membership to Millennials are the ones who redefined their brands, promoted the experience over the products, and ensured every aspect of their communication caters to Millennial ears. Hackl concluded that successful country clubs are overcoming the cliché that golf is nothing more than "an old man's game" and are adapting their marketing models to focus on attracting forward-thinking members. In the article, Hackl mentioned the use of virtual reality experiences and the promotion of sustainable practices as two leading strategies for increasing Millennial member development.

The Loyalty Patterns of Millennials

Several studies demonstrate that once Millennials commit to a brand or organization they like, they become a loyal demographic (Faria, 2023; Fetscherin et al., 2019). In the *Advanced Learner's Dictionary,* Collins (2018) defined loyalty as support for something or someone. In this academic dictionary, Collins attributed devotion, commitment, allegiance, and attachment as synonyms for loyalty. The *Webster's New World College Dictionary* (2014) considers loyalty to be an act of faithful adherence to a person, organization, or cause. In addition, Ahuvia (2005) revealed in the journal article "Beyond the Extended Self" that when people find a brand they connect with, they devote their time, energy, and money to the product as an investment, becoming loyal to the brand.

Furthermore, according to a worldwide marketing study, Statista Research Group (2021) reported that 60% of Millennials find a brand they like and stick with it, leading to a higher level of brand loyalty than previous generations. A study by Fetscherin et al. (2019) affirmed Statista Research Group's conclusions that Millennials stick with the brands they trust. This study sought to offer a better understanding of consumer-brand relationships. The authors concluded that there are strong positive and strong negative relationships between consumers and brands.

Additionally, Faria (2023) reported on the generational relationship between brands and consumers. In her report, Faria evaluated second-quarter statistics from 2017 and concluded that Millennials are more brand loyal than any other generation, including Generation Z.

According to the research of Saju et al. (2018), emotionally solid bonds lead to long-term commitment. Once a consumer has established an emotional connection with a brand, their ability to resist negativity about a brand they are loyal to is high (Fetscherin et al., 2019; Saju et al., 2018). In a research study on the influence of generational cohort membership on brand immunity, Saju et al. tested theories on perceived brand trustworthiness, brand immunity, and emotional attachment on Generation X and Generation Y consumers. As indicated by this study, Millennial consumers have a complex relationship with brand loyalty. Saju et al. concluded there are variations in results, whereas older Millennials tend to share some of the same consumer habits as Generation X, but not all. Djamasbi et al. (2010) reported that Millennials spend an average of $200 billion annually as consumers. In an article published by the *International Journal of Human-Computer Studies,* Djamasbi et al. evaluated the online consumer trends of the Millennial demographic. In 2015, Millennials' estimated spending power, according to Arli et al. (2019), was $1.3 trillion in the United States and $10 trillion globally. Because of their wealth and spending power, scholars report that Millennials are reshaping how marketing firms promote brands, products, and services (Arli et al., 2019; Djamasbi et al., 2010).

Once again, in *New Insights into the Generation of Growing Influence,* Barna (2021) shared how the brands known previously as the "staples of America" must adapt their products to meet the growing, independent, and transparent needs of the Millennial generation. Broom et al. (1997) reported that to market any products to Millennials successfully, it took public relations scholars over 15 years to transform the marketing paradigm from strategic

communication to relationship management. For example, Kapner (2018) explained how the lower marriage rates of Millennials impacted Tiffany & Co. until new leadership rebranded their marketing strategy to include edgier marketing and inclusive ads, shifting the focus away from marriage and onto the bright blue brand. After this shift, Tiffany & Co. sales increased by 11% the following year (Kapner, 2018).

Bilgihan (2016) claimed that generational theory posits that Millennials are a loyal generational cohort. Bilgihan's research suggested that brand equity directly correlates with e-loyalty for online shopping. Bilgihan's findings support the argument that trust is the primary factor for building and sustaining loyalty among the Millennial demographic. Researchers report individual experiences are a key element of shopping for Millennials and online customer experiences influence the way Millennials make purchasing decisions.

Unlike brand loyalty, church loyalty is decreasing among Millennials (Barna Group, 2020). At the end of 2019, the Barna Group conducted a national public opinion survey. The Barna Group reported that this survey indicated that Christian Millennials are the largest demographic of church hoppers worldwide. Contrary to Millennials' high levels of brand loyalty, the Barna Group (2020) confirmed that church loyalty among Millennials is declining, as almost two in five churchgoers attend multiple churches. In their article, the Barna Group reiterates how these types of behavioral patterns are becoming more common among the Millennial demographic as Millennials piece together their religious experience.

French (2012) stated that the problem with church hopping is that it eventually becomes habitual. Instead of committing to one local church, Millennials tend to enjoy the worship at one church and the sermon at another, hopping between two or more churches, regularly robbing the individual Christian of experiencing a secure biblical community (Blake, 2022; French, 2012).

Adding to their previous data, the Barna Group released an updated study in 2022, reporting that 22% of churched Millennials attend multiple churches and only 61% of people remained at their original local church post-pandemic that they attended pre-pandemic. In addition to traditional worship service attendance patterns, this article also reviewed the influences of digital engagement on church attendance statistics, citing the addition of online church options spiked in 2020 during the global pandemic, skewing attendance numbers.

The Challenges of Engaging Millennials in Church

Deitsch (2012) reported that Millennials want to be active members of clubs and organizations. In their master's thesis *Creating a Millennial Generation Contextualized Church Culture,* Deitsch shared examples of American Idol and the Kid's Choice Awards, where entertainment first saw the shift from passive viewership to Millennials wanting to be actively engaged in the programming. Comparing this new type of engagement, Deitsch reviewed how Millennials want church worship services that actively engage them in the same way. According to this same research, over the past decade, there has been a shift from the traditional, more passive participant concept to the idea of immersive engagement. Deitsch referenced the work of Sweet (2007), which provided an inside look at the way Millennials want to be involved in an experience, not just watch an experience unfold in front of them. Deitsch credited social media and mobile video calling for this shift, presenting the idea that Millennials are a generation of participants.

As more Christian leaders discover Millennials' desire to become active participants in their worship services, Moser and Nel (2019) reported that too many churches are trying to use gimmicky entertainment tricks to persuade Millennials to attend church. Through a study on young ministry to adult ministry retention, Moser and Nel concluded that these types of

gimmicks commonly found in attractional church models do not produce long-term results. Therefore, the churches that quickly attracted young adults several years ago are now losing them due to a lack of effective evangelism strategies (A. Davis, 2017; C. F. George & Bird, 2017; Moser & Nel, 2019). Lastly, Moser and Nel suggested churches may benefit by exploring alternative approaches to building relationships with Millennials by integrating evangelism with social justice and human rights.

In the *Evangelism Handbook,* Reid (2009) explained the differences in religiosity between Baby Boomers and Millennials. Reid believes Baby Boomers, by nature of their generation's preferences, appreciate church traditions, polity, and commitment. Unlike Baby Boomers, Reid shared that Millennials prefer spirituality that intertwines social and personal transformation. Adding to this research, Bailey (2021) reported that many Millennials do not see the importance of church membership. According to Bailey, Ryan Burge, a Baptist pastor and astute professor, said, "For some Americans, religious membership is seen as a relic of an older generation.… Many Christians still attend church but do not consider membership to be important" (p. 1). Still, Burge (2021) argued that religious behaviors indicate their personal faith and commitment to Christianity. These religious behaviors include one's willingness to commit to church membership.

As the tension between personal faith and commitment to church membership continues rising, Gailliard and Davis (2017) reported a survey participant saying, "I don't feel membership is that important … My commitment is to God, not to my church" (p. 124). In their article "To Be Known, Accepted, and Involved," Gailliard and Davis evaluated how technology and globalization impact church membership. Summarizing their study on the topic, the Barna Group (2016) described the Millennial population as spiritual but skeptical and, overall, a generation

resistant to Christianity as an organized religion. Osei-Nimoh (2020) examined a common cultural belief often shared by modern-day Millennials, saying they "love Jesus, but hate organized religion" (p. 13). In a master's thesis, Osei-Nimoh reported a growing concern regarding the notion that somewhere along the lines, a leading thought idea became that one can love Jesus but hate his family. Osei-Nimoh attributed Millennials' religious patterns to this philosophy.

For example, in 2018, Mosby conducted a research study for a religious publication on the fanbase of Chance the Rapper. Mosby (2018) stated, "He [Chance] exemplifies a young adult who has been exposed to stories of Christian faith through a family rooted in a religious faith tradition" (p. 335). Mosby concluded this study by stating that Chance's fanbase is primarily Millennial followers, many of whom resonate with Chance's religious lyrics, claiming these lyrics transform lives outside of denominationally driven conversations. Atchison (2004) bolstered the argument that followership is a relational commitment anchored in trusting the person or organization one follows. In this article, Atchison exposed how distrust for fundamental religions grew and how observed hypocrisy influenced the divide. In conclusion, Atchison predicted that parents will raise more children outside of faith, impacting the decline of organized religion.

The Faith Deconstruction Movement

Another cultural trend impacting church attendance and membership is the faith deconstruction movement. According to Hamman (2015) in "The Millennial Generation and the Church," Millennials share similar values of personal transformation, community, spirituality, purpose, and social transformation with the church. However, in this article for the *Journal of Pastoral Theology,* Hamman reported that across the United States, Millennials are

deconstructing the traditional ecclesial practices of the church and reconstructing their own types of communities. Hamman illustrated these new communities where Millennials are seeking authentic ways to express themselves to one another through sexual exploration and body art.

In the book *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams,* Parks (2000) elaborated on Millennials' desire for authenticity, defining authenticity as "the correspondence between one's outer and inner lives" (p. 9). In the revised edition of this book, Parks (2000/2011) talked about how young adults need to find meaning in life; otherwise, they cannot thrive. Parks (2000/2011) wrote, "If life is perceived as utterly random, fragmented, and chaotic—meaningless—we suffer confusion, distress, stagnation, and finally despair. The meaning we make orients our posture in the world and determines our sense of self and purpose" (p. 9). Parks presented the argument that faith is more than believing in a deity; instead, faith is the comprehension process of discovering meaning. Parks explained that a person's 20s are the most faith-forming years.

As early as the 1980s, Roof and McKinney (1987) reported that religious deconstruction is not a new movement but one that began in the late 60s and early 70s when many well-educated adults departed from the church to join new religious movements or pursue individual spirituality outside of organized religion. However, , there was an evangelical resurgence in the 1970s when the Southern evangelical churches began seeing a rise in new members, quickly becoming part of the Southern culture in the United States (Roof & McKinney, 1987). In "The Decline of Cultural Christianity and the Ascendancy of the God of Self," Nesbitt (2022) defined culturalized Christianity as "a pervasive belief system based upon a material interpretation of the Bible in order to serve human means instead of spiritual ones" (p. 709). In this article, Nesbitt evaluated the literary trends of culturalized Christianity and nationalism in the United States between the early 1900s and present-day society.

In 1991, Shibley published a sociological analysis of the phenomenon of culturalized Christianity in the Southern parts of the United States. In this analysis, Shibley (1991) examined how cultural Christians contributed to the rise in church attendance and membership in the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, Inserra (2019) reported that the problem with culturalized Christians is that cultural Christians are passively participating in church activities, bolstering the numbers but are not true Christians by the standard biblical principles of the gospel. In "Are Religious Consumers More Ethical and Less Machiavellian," Arli et al. (2019) referred to these types of cultural Christians as "lukewarm" believers and noted that there is little to no difference in the worship and prayer patterns between a cultural Christian and someone who identifies as nonreligious. Inserra et al. (2019) insisted that cultural Christians fueled the jump of non-religiously affiliated individuals in the United States as culturalized Christianity diminished between 2007 and 2014. Hamman's (2015) research aligns with Inserra et al.'s reporting as he cited a Pew Research Center data report claiming Christianity declined by 8% between 2007 and 2014 while the number of those unaffiliated with religion increased by almost 7% during those same years.

Kennedy (2019) highlighted how another Pew Research Center study reported that 59% of American Millennials who were raised in the church no longer attend church. Kennedy noted that Americans have shifted away from a "just have faith" mentality, and Millennials are now approaching Christianity with questions. Kennedy concluded that over the years, churches in the United States failed to provide space for Millennials to ask faith-related questions; therefore, Millennials left the church to seek answers to their faith questions outside of the institutional church.

Attempts to Mitigate the Decline of Church Membership

As church membership continues declining year over year, Sumpter (2019) asked, "What actions can church leadership take to reinvigorate the membership of Millennials?" (p. 103). Sumpter's research indicated churches would need to become seen as less judgmental, and sermons would need to become more relevant to cultural issues facing today's young adults to reinvigorate Millennials' desire for church membership. In his dissertation, Sumpter addressed Jesus' teachings in Matthew 7:5 and John 8:7 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011) about judging others. He also expanded on Romans 2:1, concluding that if one person judges another, they are condemning themselves.

Sumpter (2019) studied five churches in Virginia. These churches altered their worship services to cater to the Millennial demographic using more advanced technology, automated multicolor stage lighting, and the pulpit as a shared stage for both the band and pastor. Sumpter reported that two churches had high success, two had moderate success, and one church struggled to attract Millennial worshippers. Sumpter pointed out that even though all five churches employed the same practices, they each had slightly different outcomes. Lastly, Sumpter notes that none of the study's Millennial respondents indicated that the church's technology, lighting, or stage influenced their decision to attend or return to the church. In their book, *The Passion Generation,* Skeldon and Waller (2018) reminded readers that Millennials can access sermons and music through technology anytime and anywhere. According to these authors, the one thing Millennials cannot receive on the internet that local churches offer is discipleship.

Social Influence Theory

Regarding digital accessibility, Ozuem et al. (2021) defined social influence theory as how an individual's social behaviors contribute to the identity they communicate to others. In a study about social influence theory, Hofmann et al. (2012) discovered that digital connectivity is highly addictive. While the ontological theory of community influence remains the same, social media and digital communities influence Millennials in the 21st century in a way that did not previously affect Generation X or Baby Boomers (Hofmann et al., 2012).

Ozuem et al. (2021) said, "Online communities have evolved to allow larger numbers of individuals to interact with other users to form a collective virtual environment influenced by members within the community" (p. 794). Whereas people historically formed community with likeminded individuals in close geographical proximity, Ozuem et al. (2021) reported that online communities, such as social media, are expanding the boundaries of geographical community. Using social media, Millennials can create an "imagined community" among their choice of targeted demographics (Ozuem et al., 2021, p. 795).

In addition, James (2016) reported that between 2004 and 2014, the number of social media users multiplied tenfold. In the book *The Secular Landscape*, McCaffree (2017) provided sociological and philosophical perspectives on how digital memberships, online programming, and virtual communities are vying for the attention of Millennials all day long, simply leaving no time left for in-person worship at a local church. McCaffree concluded that the growing number of opportunities for Millennials to communicate online with like-minded people, subscribe to podcasts, and download religious content directly influences how they evaluate their religious decisions.

Similar to McCaffree's (2017) research on the digital influence of secularization on religious engagement, Gailliard and Davis (2017) published their findings from a qualitative study on church attendance patterns. Using Gailliard, Myers, and Seibold's Organizational Index (Gailliard et al., 2010) and snowball sampling, Gailliard and Davis concluded that worldwide globalization and technological advances led to declining local church engagement. They reported that Millennials are the first generation to access online sermons, worship, and other church-related items, diminishing the perceived need for church affiliation. A study by Wilkins-Laflamme (2022) found that technological advances contributed to the passive forms of digital religion through social media. Contrary to Gailliard and Davis' findings, Wilkins-Laflamme's research revealed that Millennials often use digital religion to enhance their spiritual activities, not to replace church altogether. Researchers can find more details about Wilkins-Laflamme's research on digital religion published in the journal *Review of Religious Research.*

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

In 1943, Maslow first proposed his research on a theoretical approach to humanity's physiological needs. In this theory, Maslow proposed that humans have five levels of needs, including physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943, 1954). Maslow proposed that the next higher goal emerges after a person gratifies the previous one. Maslow (1943) reported, "Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of prepotency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. Man is a perpetually wanting animal" (p. 370).

In *A Theory of Human Motivation*, Maslow (1943) explained that "physiological needs and the consummatory behavior involved with them serve as channels for all sorts of other needs as well" (p. 373). Maslow continued to explain that a person in the United States who thinks they

are hungry may have an appetite but could also realistically need comfort, not food. According to Maslow, this type of comfort is a physiological need. In contrast, the feeling of hunger could be met alternatively by smoking a cigarette or consuming water instead of eating food. It is important to note that appetite and hunger are different, and for someone who is genuinely and dangerously hungry, nothing else interests them other than finding food. Pure hunger drives all their behaviors and defines what is and is not essential. A piece of bread holds more value than freedom, community, respect, or philosophy for someone needing food.

Maslow (1943) reported that a new set of needs will emerge once one gratifies their physiological needs. The next level of needs are safety needs, including personal security, health, prosperity, and resources. Maslow asserted that after one satisfies their physiological and safety needs, the cycle repeats itself in another layer more profound, with love and belongingness at the center. In this layer of the hierarchy, love refers to both the giving and the receiving of affection as one strives to find their place among other people.

Maslow (1943) explained that esteem needs as the fourth layer of his theory, including the need for independence, freedom, attention, reputation, and recognition and appreciation from others. These needs, when met, produce feelings of self-confidence, self-worth, and helpfulness. Lastly, Maslow claimed that self-actualization, the need for self-fulfillment and mastery of one's calling, is the last and final need. Maslow related this concept through illustration by saying, "A new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he is fitted for. A musician must make music, an artist must paint, a poet must write, if he is to be ultimately happy" (p. 382). In his 1943 publication, Maslow acknowledged that there was little clinical and almost no experimental research on self-actualization and room for growth in scientific understanding.

A recent study by Rojas et al. (2023) set out to empirically test four mainstream assumptions connected to Maslow's theory. After examining a sizeable Mexican database, the researchers reported that love and belonging, and esteem, are the top needs that contribute to a human's overall well-being. In "The Hierarchy of Needs Empirical Examination of Maslow's Theory and Lessons for Development," Rojas et al. (2023) also reported that their research revealed income can influence the satisfaction of several physiological needs; however, income does not have any direct impact on one's need for safety, belonging, love, self-actualization, and esteem.

M. Clarke (2006) broke down Maslow's hierarchy by weight, providing a multidimensional hierarchical human needs assessment, assigning greater weight to the higher needs. For example, M. Clarke (2006) explained, "As a simple linear progression is used, basic needs are weighted least, safety needs are weighted as twice as important, belonging needs three times as important, and self-esteem needs four times as important" (p. 224). On the other hand, Doyal and Gough (1984) argued for researchers to consider a dynamic integration of human needs, claiming Maslow's theory to be too linear for the dynamic intricacies of human life. In "A Theory of Human Needs," Doyal and Gough (1984) explained that one of the reasons there are multiple perspectives on "needs" is that the word "need" is employed by various people in diverse ways. According to Doyal and Gough, needs can refer to wants, strategies, aims, or goals.

Summary of Theoretical Framework

From a theoretical standpoint, social scientists have identified several theories regarding how individuals connect with one another through community, social communication in an attempt to find a sense of belonging. First, social influence theory suggests that Millennials

communicate their identities to one another through social behaviors (Hofmann et al., 2012; Ozuem et al., 2021). Next, Maslow presented his theory on a hierarchy of needs, including basic physiological needs, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943; Rojas et al., 2023). M. Clarke (2006) added additional contributions to this theory by discussing the various weights attributed to each level of Maslow's hierarchy.

Meanwhile, researchers have also spent dedicated time studying the Millennial demographic and their thought and behavioral patterns. Based on their research, Millennials are known as a generation of spiritually curious individuals (Vermurlen, 2015; Watts, 2020; Westfield, 2019). Researchers describe Millennials as highly loyal to the brands they have built strong emotional connections with (Fetscherin et al., 2019; Statista Research Group, 2021) while simultaneously being the most disloyal demographic religiously (Barna Group, 2020).

For many years, Christian leaders have been trying to attract, engage, and retain Millennials in their local churches. Several scholars report churches trying to use gimmicks and flashy entertainment to attract Millennials to their worship services, but despite their efforts to draw in Millennials, these efforts failed to be effective in retaining the demographic's loyalty (A. Davis, 2017; C. F. George & Bird, 2017; Moser & Nel, 2019). Now, researchers are scrambling to figure out how to reinvigorate Millennials' desire to seek biblical community in the local church (Skeldon & Waller, 2018; Sumpter, 2019).

Related Literature

First in 2015, and then again in 2017, the Siebert Lutheran Foundation and the Kern Family Foundation partnered with Outsight Network to co-commission a research project studying Millennials' engagement in the church. Through their research, the Siebert Lutheran Foundation (2017) found that four out of every 10 Millennials claim religion is essential to their

lives; however, many are distrustful of organized religion. According to this same study, 59% of Millennials who grew up in a church-attending family have dropped out of church over the years.

Summarizing their interviews, the Siebert Lutheran Foundation (2017) stated that Millennials can "see a fake smile from a mile away," illustrating the need for authentic relationships to draw Millennials into the church (p. 11). The Siebert Lutheran Foundation also reported that Millennials crave to be a part of a spiritual family, worship in a community that serves others, and be a part of something bigger than themselves. In conclusion, the Siebert Lutheran Foundation suggested that the modern-day church belongs in the middle of a scale, somewhere between traditional church and entertainment culture. Quoting Rachel Held Evans, their report ends with the statement, "Millennials aren't looking for a hipper Christianity. We're looking for a truer Christianity … no fog machines required" (Siebert Lutheran Foundation, 2017, p. 12).

The search for authentic religiosity continues for many young adults. The Pew Research Center (2022) studied the religious switching rates of young adults leaving Christianity to either switch religions or join the nonreligious population. In 2022, the American Survey Center also reported new statistics regarding the changing patterns of religious switching in the United States, revealing that evangelical Protestant religions have the highest retention rates, while retention rates for mainline Protestant traditions are significantly lower (Cox, 2022). The American Survey Center reported that 77% of people whose parents raised them in the evangelical church remain evangelical Christians as adults; however, only 62% of Americans raised in a mainline Protestant church remain affiliated with Christianity, and less than 59% of Catholic Americans retained their religious identities as adults (Cox, 2022).

The American Survey Center also revealed a 20-point increase in religiously unaffiliated Americans over the past 15 years (Cox, 2022). One explanation Cox (2022) provided for this increase is the number of parents raising their children in nonreligious households nowadays. This number directly correlates with the growth of adults with no religious affiliation today. The American Survey Center reported that 36% of non-religiously affiliated Millennials grew up in nonreligious households, a stark increase from the 16% of Baby Boomers raised in nonreligious households.

In their publication, *Modeling the Future of Religion in America,* the Pew Research Center (2022) presented a chart evaluating the switching trends of people ages 15–29 between 1972 and 2019. Based on the current trajectories, the Pew Research Center estimates that if nothing changes, the United States will have a 46% Christian population by 2070. However, if switching and disaffiliation rise as suggested by the most recent trends, then the Pew Research Center predicts a likely chance that the United States will end up with only a 35% Christian population by 2070 (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Projected Religiosity in the United States by 2070
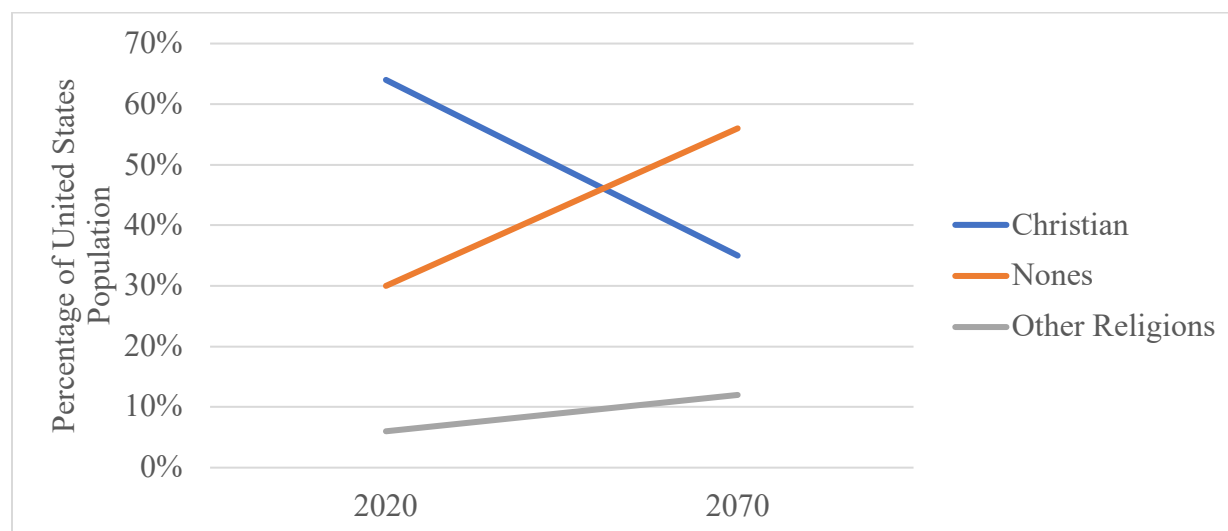
Note. Data for projected religiosity in the United States by 2070 are from *Modeling the Future of Religion in America*, by Pew Research Center, 2022 (https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/modeling-the-future-of-religion-in-america). Copyright 2022 by Pew Research Center. Used with permission.

For those Millennials continuing to attend churches post-pandemic, the Barna Group (2022) informed people in *A New Chapter in Millennial Church Attendance* that it is essential to realize that only two out of three Millennials remain in the same church they attended before the COVID-19 pandemic. This publication reported that one in four Millennials have switched churches or attended multiple churches, and one in six Millennials have stopped attending church altogether. In her dissertation, Camp (2022) reported a desire to develop strategies for engaging Millennials in the local churches, noting that for 19 years, her young adult ministry thrived by providing gospel concerts and social activities, yet in recent years, Millennials' engagement with these church activities has diminished.

Camp (2022) also reported on her church's new strategies to try and engage Millennials, such as offering a $100 gift card giveaway for the person who brought the most friends with them to church. Camp also shared that her church's leadership was exploring how to use social media to market their church to Millennials. Through Camp's research surveys, she discovered that Millennials want to see intergenerational leadership in churches, contemporary worship music, and discover a sense of belonging in the church community. According to Camp, it is of the utmost importance to Millennials that the church they join exemplifies the love of God in words and actions, affirming a sense of authenticity.

Houston (2015) reported on the failures of church incentives and explained how Millennials want to wear a metaphorical t-shirt that says, "I love my church" (p. 60). According

to Houston, Millennials want the people around them to experience the love of God through their actions and then, by and large, come with them to experience God at their church. Houston explained that Millennials are not motivated to tell their friends that they must attend church with them simply because it is church. However, because of the experience and relationships they are forming at church, Millennials will invite other people, genuinely wanting them to share the same experiences.

Marketing Nonreligious Membership to Millennials

When it comes to marketing membership to Millennials, Van der Merwe et al. (2013) contributed to an article expressing the need for companies targeting Millennial sales to market their intangible offerings over their tangible goods. In this article, Van der Merwe et al. (2013) argue that Millennials want to know why their membership is valuable to their growth or overall well-being. In an article published in *The Journal of Product and Brand Management*, Fernandes and Inverneiro (2021) presented research showing how Millennials are more attracted to self-expressive brands. The authors defined self-expressive brands as brands that enhance a person's social status and aid in a person's reflection of their inner self. Marketing self-expressive experiences is something Peloton's marketing team does well (Recode, 2017). Foley, the founder of Peloton, claimed his company succeeded in marketing a bicycle membership, not for its fitness benefits but for its spiritual and communal attribution to one's life, making it a $4 billion company in its first 6 years (Griffith, 2018; Recode, 2017).

Evaluating the marketing strategies of Peloton, Ivry (2018) reported that Brad Olson, the Senior Vice President of Member Experience at Peloton, said,

> Members were showing up with the logo tattooed on their body. There is something special about Peloton versus a traditional consumer brand because of the endorphins, and the community just makes people feel they're part of something bigger than themselves. (p. 35)

In that same interview, Olson reminded Ivry that the Peloton community is loyal to one another beyond the 45-minute workout class, and their community is the type to raise $25,000 in 48 hours for a fellow member's wife's surgery. Ivry noted that the consumers have developed a familial community where even those who have never met each other feel like they belong.

Similar to Van der Merwe et al. (2013) and Ivry (2018), Lissitsa and Kol (2016) provided insights into the online shopping experiences of Generation X and Generation Y. In their article, "Generation X versus Generation Y," the two researchers reported that products, services, or memberships that directly add value to lives through positive experiences are purchased more by Millennials.

Marketing Membership to Religious Millennials

According to Arli et al. (2019), religious Millennials have significant empathy toward ethical decision-making. Using two-step cluster analysis, these researchers studied three segments of Millennials: the religious Millennials, the lukewarm religious Millennials, and the least religious Millennials. In their conclusion, Arli et al. reported that when marketing religion to nonreligious Millennials, religious Millennials must consider religious consumerism's intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions. For example, Christian Millennials have found success in evangelizing by promoting God as a caring deity versus leading with the traditional evangelistic principles of heaven and hell.

Haskell et al. (2016) defined church membership as a Christian's commitment to living their life on a mission with the local church. To illustrate, Haskell et al. pointed out that there is a critical moment when every person attending a church must decide for themselves whether to fully engage with that church and commit to becoming a part of that church's body. Furthermore, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey is an organization known for studying churches' vitality

and worship patterns (Presbyterian Outlook, 2006). This organization claimed that 36% of church guests base their decision on whether to engage with a particular church on the quality of the preacher's sermon. The same survey reported that 32% of people base their decision on the friendliness of the church's congregants, and the other 30% base their decision on the overall worship experience (Presbyterian Outlook, 2006).

As Millennial church engagement dwindles, Sumpter (2019) provided five recommendations for reinvigorating Millennial church membership. First, Sumpter reported that sermons must be relevant to cultural circumstances and current interests. To support his point, Sumpter referenced Rick Ezell's (2018) argument that contextualizing the Scriptures to make the Word of God easy for younger generations to understand does not compromise its integrity. Next, Sumpter reported that the church needs to be relational, demonstrating to the community that its current members care about those inside and outside the church. Thirdly, Sumpter argued that "perception drives reality" (p. 109). Nevertheless, whether or not Christians are truly judgmental, judgment is what they are known for outside of the church (Barna Group, 2015; Kinnaman & Lyons, 2012; Sumpter, 2019). Next, Sumpter added that churches should develop young adult-specific ministries that focus on social aspects, career seminars, and helping Millennials understand their relationship with Christ. Lastly, Sumpter suggested that churches need mentorship programs to retain Millennials. This theory builds on Meister and Willyerd's (2010) research that found organizations with mentorship programs retained higher rates of Millennials compared to those who do not offer any type of mentorship pipeline. In their research, Meister and Willyerd discovered that Millennials crave mentorship from older, more seasoned adults, as well as peer-to-peer mentorship and even, in some cases, group mentorship.

Summary of Related Literature

Several organizations such as the Siebert Lutheran Foundation (2017), Outsight Network, Pew Research Center (2022), and the Barna Group (2022) have commissioned research studies on Millennials' engagement in the church, revealing startling statistical analysis regarding the dropout rates of Millennials from church. Many market studies point to Millennials' need for self-expressive brands and the ability to know their membership is contributing to their overall growth and development (Fernandes & Inverneiro, 2021; Ivry, 2018; Lissitsa & Kol, 2016). Comparatively, self-develop is a core value Millennials hold inside and outside the church (Meister & Willyerd, 2010). Several other researchers, including Camp (2022) and Sumpter (2019), are studying strategies to attract and engage Millennials in their local church's worship services. However, there is still a gap in the literature regarding practicing Christian Millennials' church membership engagement.

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Rationale for Study and Gap in Literature

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Christians currently make up the largest religious group in the United States; however, James (2016) predicted that the nonreligious population will grow by more than 52 million people, and by 2050 the nonreligious population would be the primary category for American religious beliefs in the United States. Parrish (2021) reported that Christian Millennials are selectively disengaging with church membership faster than Generation X and Baby Boomers. As a result, if nothing changes, the Pew Research Center (2022) predicted that Christians will eventually make up less than half of the U.S. population, and by 2050 there will be 1.2 billion nonreligious people worldwide. Parrish (2021) shared that fellow researchers are studying the migration patterns of Millennials, church leadership behaviors, and generational gaps; however,

they are still struggling to conclude precisely why Millennials are disengaging with church membership at such a startling rate.

Consequently, if the church continues failing to secure Millennials in church membership, society will continue providing alternative membership options for their spiritual journeys, depriving them of experiencing true biblical community and spiritual family inside the church. This study aims to fill the research gap by seeking to understand how Protestant church-attending Christian Millennials view their nature of engagement with church membership and nonreligious memberships. The researcher collected and analyzed qualitative data from two focus groups to determine the primary leading factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding which membership types are most beneficial to them.

Profile of the Current Study

Research confirms that Millennials are quickly disengaging from church membership at high rates while simultaneously increasing their commitment to nonreligious memberships. Over the past decade, many researchers have studied the population of young adults who left the church. However, not many are studying the current population of Christian Millennials remaining involved in the church in some capacity. As proven by marketing research, the concept of membership itself is not the problem. Millennials have no issues subscribing to nonreligious memberships despite hesitating to commit to church membership. By studying this unique population of practicing Christian Millennials, this researcher gained a better understanding of the disconnect between the Millennial demographic's involvement with church versus nonreligious memberships.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how practicing Christian Millennials in the United States understand the nature of engagement with church and

nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. The researcher

facilitated two virtual focus groups and generated insightful data. One benefit of the focus group

methodology was the ability for conversations to flow freely and for each participant to

contribute to other participants' input. This cooperative data gave the researcher more in-depth

insights than individual interviews. The researcher required that participants be born between

1981 and 1996, self-identify as Christian, and attend a Protestant church at least once per month

to qualify for participation in this study. The researcher used ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted

qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS), to create an intelligent verbatim transcription of

the audio data recorded during the focus groups. Then, the researcher used ATLAS.ti to assist

with the examination, organization, and coding of the individual participant's responses and the

collective group contributions. Finally, the researcher summarized and reported her findings.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This phenomenological study explored how practicing Christian Millennials understand the nature of engagement with church and nonreligious memberships. For this study, the researcher facilitated two focus groups and then aggregated the data through values coding and thematic analysis. Chun Tie et al. (2019) defined coding as "an analytical process used to identify concepts and conceptual reoccurrences in data" (p. 16). The researcher used the focus group data to generate a better understanding explaining the unique behavioral patterns of the Christian Millennial demographic. This chapter includes an in-depth look at the research design and methodology, including the selection of participants, the role of the researcher, ethical considerations, and the data collection and analysis procedures.

Research Design Synopsis

This section provides an overview of the research design. The research design includes a summary of the research problem and the purpose of this study, which was to explore how Christian Millennials view their nature of engagement with religious and nonreligious memberships. This section also highlights the researcher's six research questions and details how the researcher used focus groups for data collection.

Research Problem

Millennials are selectively disengaging with church membership faster than any other generation. Even the Millennials who still attend church engage less with church membership. For example, when Generation X was in their 20s and 30s, 62% were church members (J. M. Jones, 2019). Comparatively, today, less than half of the church-attending Millennials are formal church members (Barna Group, 2020). In addition, churched Millennials are the largest population of church hoppers, showing little to no commitment to a single church body (French,

2012). With low levels of religious commitment, society often labels Millennials as noncommittal or disloyal; however, those labels are inaccurate because despite the steep decline in church membership, brand loyalty and nonreligious membership engagement is rising among the Millennial audience.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how practicing Christian Millennials understand the nature of engagement with church and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. The methodology guiding this study was Husserl's phenomenological approach to gaining insights into the phenomenon of Christian Millennials' engagement with church and nonreligious memberships.

Research Questions

RQ1. What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join nonreligious memberships, such as fitness, health, and social clubs?

RQ2. What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join church membership?

RQ3. What are the perceived benefits of church membership according to Christian Millennials?

RQ4. What are the perceived hesitations of becoming a church member according to Christian Millennials?

RQ5. What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to nonreligious memberships among Christian Millennials?

RQ6. What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to church membership among Christian Millennials?

The rationale for these research questions was to explore the disconnect between Christian Millennials' engagement with church membership and nonreligious membership types.

Research Design and Methodology

This study used a qualitative research methodology. Researchers often conduct

qualitative research in a natural setting and use the researcher as the primary instrument. There

are six main forms of qualitative research, including phenomenological, ethnographic, grounded

theory, case study, historical, and narrative methodologies (Nieswiadomy & Bailey, 2017).

Phenomenological research seeks to understand a phenomenon by investigating people's lived

experiences (Bliss, 2016; Groenewald, 2004; Qutoshi, 2018). This type of research seeks to

suspend the researcher's preconceived assumptions about the phenomenon to hear the subject's

insights (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022; Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). For this study, the researcher used a

phenomenological methodology to explore the nature of engagement of Christian Millennials'

commitment to church membership and nonreligious memberships.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are a tried and tested methodology for collecting qualitative data in neutral

environments dating back to the 1920s (Liamputtong, 2011). Healthcare researchers, social

scientists, and development researchers use focus groups to gain insights into participants'

thoughts and feelings toward specific topics. The advantage of using a focus group over

individual interviews is that focus groups allow participants to feed off each other, adding their

own experiences to the conversation. This type of research is helpful when discussing human and

social problems or phenomena in society (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Conradson (2005) explained that focus groups help researchers fill in the "gap between

what people say and what they do" (p. 131). It is one of the most practical methodologies to

explore how groups of people evaluate decision-making or form their beliefs about issues. The

purpose of a focus group is to elevate the individual voices of the participants by removing the

researcher as the authority and empowering the focus group members to be the authority on the topic. A group setting also allows participants to provide historical information and examples as they discuss their beliefs. The data help the researcher build an illustration of the culture and social patterns at play (Barbour & Morgan, 2017).

The researcher submitted all the research questions to Liberty's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval before the execution of the study (see Appendix C for the IRB approval letter). For this study, the researcher formulated a basic set of prompting questions to ask participants during the focus group to spark conversations (see Appendix D for the focus group discussion prompts). After conducting two focus groups, each with a unique set of participants, the researcher transcribed the data using ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). The researcher then coded and analyzed the data using the same ATLAS.ti software for assistance. Lastly, the researcher reviewed the data for accuracy and summarized their findings.

Setting

This study focused on practicing Christian Millennials living in the United States. Practicing Christian Millennials are a population of Christian adults quickly diminishing in churches across the United States. The church membership rates of Millennials are declining quicker than other generations; therefore, it was vital to study this demographic's beliefs and behavioral patterns independent of older or younger generations. This study focused on Christian Millennials who attended any church affiliated with a trinitarian Protestant denomination in the United States, including but not limited to Baptist, Methodist, Pentecostal, or nondenominational churches (Pew Research Center, 2015). This study did not include Catholic or non-trinitarian

church attendees like those who attend a Mormon church such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

For this study, the researcher used Microsoft Teams, an online video conferencing service, to conduct two virtual focus groups. The digital component allowed participants to live anywhere in the United States and participate from the comfort of their own settings. The researcher understood that creating a nonthreatening and safe environment was vital to the success of a focus group; therefore, the researcher asked participants to minimize distractions during the study. For example, the researcher asked participants to participate in a quiet space without children, other people, or pets present. In addition, the environment must be conducive for natural conversations to occur. Each participant was required to be alone for the focus group video conference, promoting honesty and vulnerability while minimizing distractions. Confidentiality was crucial, so the researcher required participants to review an information sheet during the prescreening process, affirming they understood how the researcher would use and protect their personal information. The researcher assigned each participant a pseudonym before the focus group began and requested that they use it as their screen name during the virtual focus group.

Participants

The researcher identified a sample of homogenous participants to use as participants during the focus group studies. The sample population was practicing Christian Millennials who self-identified as Christian and attended one or multiple trinitarian Protestant churches at least monthly. The researcher required all participants to be Generation Y born between 1981 and 1996 to classify as part of the Millennial demographic. Participants could be male or female; gender did not influence their ability to participate in this study. Participants were

not asked about their ethnicity, as their race did not affect their ability to participate in this study. All participants had to be self-identified Christians who attended a church affiliated with a trinitarian Protestant denomination in the United States. This study did not include Catholic mass attendees or non-trinitarian religious sectors.

This researcher followed the focus group methodology recommended by Glaser and limited the group size to ensure participants could share their perspectives without being disorderly (Nyumba et al., 2018). According to scholars, four to eight participants are ideal for focus groups (Creswell, 2014; Huang & Phillips, 2009; Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2023; Spencer et al., 2003). Having the correct number of participants in each focus group was critical to successfully facilitating discussion during the data collection process. Too many participants can cause disorder and fragmentation, while too few provide limited insights into the problem. Therefore, this researcher aimed to have four to eight participants in each of her focus groups.

Researchers have used focus groups for decades to explore why people think the way they do about particular issues (Liamputtong, 2011). The researcher selected this methodology to elevate the participants as the experts on the topic in a neutral, non-judgmental setting. Furthermore, allowing the participants to share their beliefs, values, and behavioral patterns honestly enabled the researcher to observe social patterns as she strived to connect the missing links between nonreligious memberships and church membership engagement rates among the Christian Millennial demographic.

Participant Qualifications

To select the participants, the researcher used random sampling, a standard research sampling procedure, to ensure an unbiased statistical sample population (R. W. Emerson,

2015; Latpate et al., 2021). The target population for this study was Christian Millennials who attended a trinitarian Protestant church at least once per month in the United States. The researcher sought to identify members of the sample population who fit these characteristics through email and social media recruiting. The researcher used Facebook and Instagram posts targeting Christian Millennials to recruit participants for this study (see Appendix E for recruitment materials).

The researcher required all potential participants to complete a pre-screening survey. This sampling procedure was vital to ensure that all participants fit the demographic requirements. Since this phenomenological study explicitly targeted Millennials born between 1981 and 1996, the researcher disqualified any person born outside of this date range from participating in this study. Lastly, this survey confirmed that the participant attended a trinitarian Protestant church at least once per month, if not more often (see Appendix F for the complete list of questions on the pre-screening survey).

From the recruited pool of potential participants, the researcher assigned sequential numbers to each subject on the list. Next, the researcher divided the population pool into evenly-spaced numbers. For example, if 30 people were on the potential sample list, the researcher selected participants: 1, 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, 19, 22, 25, and 28. From there, this number was divided evenly until the number of participants per group ranged between four to eight people. For this example, the researcher assigned participants 1, 4, 7, 10, and 13 to the first focus group and participants 16, 19, 22, 25, and 28 to the second group. This technique minimized bias as each member of the potential participant sample population had an equal chance of being selected to participate in the study (Latpate et al., 2021).

Once the researcher selected the correct number of participants, she emailed the

corresponding participants, notifying them of their selection and informing them of the next steps. The following steps included scheduling the date and time of the focus groups and assigning participants their pseudonyms. Participants who completed the entire 75-minute focus group were emailed a $25 Amazon e-gift card as gratitude for their time.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in this study was to facilitate the focus groups and interpret the data after they concluded. As a facilitator, the role of the researcher was to create a safe, non-threatening environment, ask questions that spurred honest conversation among participants, and take notes. The researcher did not speak as the authority on the topic but let the participants maintain power over their thoughts and behaviors. Liamputtong (2011) recommended using questions that are probing, follow-up, specifying, and interpreting questions.

As a certified Christian life and leadership coach, this researcher was confident she could formulate powerful non-leading questions that encouraged critical thinking, open conversation, and honest answers among group participants. The International Coach Federation (ICF) has strict guidelines for training and certifying coaches. Through the life coaching certification process, this researcher participated in over 80 hours of ICF-approved training and 50 hours of mentor coaching practice. In addition, this researcher has conducted five previous focus groups for two research projects and was confident she could serve as a neutral facilitator for this focus group study.

After the focus group concluded, the role of the researcher was to transcribe, code, and analyze the data collected. For this focus group study, the researcher used ATLAS.ti to create an intelligent verbatim transcript. The researcher then evaluated the transcript and assigned codes, labeling keywords, concepts, and repeated phrases. Next, she categorized the codes, grouping

related codes together. Then, the researcher summarized the codes, generated potential themes, and reviewed the themes in the broader context of the study.

Ethical Considerations

There are many ethical considerations to consider when conducting human subject research. Confidentiality is a vital ethical consideration to prioritize for focus group studies. All participants engaged in this research voluntarily. Focus group participants must feel safe enough to reveal their honest thoughts, feelings, and experiences with the group and facilitator. Therefore, the researcher required participants to read through the information sheet before agreeing to participate. Christians (2005) recommended in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* that researchers discuss the information sheet in the focus group before beginning the session. Therefore, the researcher opened the focus group by introducing herself and the nature of the research, followed by a verbal reminder of the information initially agreed to on the pre-screening survey.

The information sheet was available to the participants to read virtually during the pre-screening process (see Appendix G for the information sheet). The researcher sought to safeguard participants by using pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. The researcher assigned pseudonyms to the participants before conducting the focus groups and emailed each participant their assigned pseudonym (see Appendix H for emails to the participants). Then, the researcher instructed participants to use their pseudonyms as their screennames on Microsoft Teams during the focus group. In addition, the researcher asked focus group participants not to share each other's information outside of the group. Finally, all data and transcripts were stored securely on a password-protected computer to prevent unwanted exposure to personal data.

This type of research required the researcher to secure approval from Liberty's IRB before she could begin executing the study. The IRB's main purpose is to ensure ethical practices and protect the people participating in research studies (Roberts, 2010). The IRB requires researchers conducting qualitative research with human subjects to participate in Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training. This researcher participated in an introductory course, the social and behavioral research course, and the social and behavioral research refresher courses. In 2022, this researcher completed the required CITI training for her study and received a valid certification. This certification will remain valid through 2025.

Next, the researcher submitted recruitment materials, the information sheet, proposed instruments, focus group discussion prompts, and an application to Cayuse IRB. The researcher attached each of these required items to the Cayuse IRB application in individual Word documents as required by the IRB instructions. Per the IRB regulations, the researcher will keep all IRB submissions for at least 3 years after she completes the research. The researcher will store all documentation related to the study on a password-protected computer with an automatic lockout of 2 minutes of inactivity. Subsequently, if necessary, the researcher will shred hard copies of documents, information sheets, and data to dispose of personal data securely.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

The researcher collected qualitative data from participants in two virtual focus groups. In preparation for the study, the researcher sought IRB approval for her proposed focus group discussion prompts. The researcher conducted the focus groups virtually using the Microsoft Teams platform. Microsoft Teams is a web-based video communication software that provides

accessibility for multiple people in various areas of the United States to communicate online while recording the interaction. Open-ended question prompts were the main form of instrumentation in the focus groups.

Collection Methods

Focus groups require prompting questions that spur discussion (Stewart et al., 2007). One benefit of the focus group methodology is the ability for conversations to flow freely and for each participant to contribute to other participants' input. This cooperative data can give the researcher more in-depth insights than individual interviews. The facilitator is responsible for creating the environment in a focus group and making participants feel safe. Before the focus groups began, the researcher assigned participants pseudonyms to use as their screen names.

Next, the researcher prepared to facilitate the focus groups. First, the pre-session preparation included familiarizing oneself with the discussion question prompts, confirming the equipment was operational for the meeting, and preparing to facilitate group dynamics. The second piece to successfully executing a focus group was facilitating the group itself. Facilitating the focus groups included introducing oneself as the researcher, reviewing the information sheet with the participants, and sharing the confidentiality protocols, such as referring to oneself only by their assigned pseudonyms. In addition, to lead these focus groups, the researcher facilitated the discussion by asking probing questions and recording detailed notes (Nyumba et al., 2018).

Instruments and Protocols

The researcher developed a set of discussion question prompts for the focus groups and used Microsoft Teams to conduct two virtual focus groups. Each focus group was approximately 75 minutes in length. To help with time management, the researcher developed an outline charting the focus group from the introduction to the conclusion and used a timer to maintain

accurate timing. Managing tight timelines ensured that participants in each focus group had an equal opportunity to respond to the discussion prompt. Ensuring each focus group had a time limit on each question increased confirmability. It allowed this researcher to duplicate the group and any future researchers to replicate the focus groups consistently.

The researcher began each focus group with a 3-minute introduction, including a brief statement about the purpose of the research, a review of the information sheet, and a reminder about confidentiality. Next, the researcher asked a series of seven questions providing participants with 10 minutes for discussion per question. Lastly, the researcher used 2 minutes to conclude the focus group with gratitude and a reminder that the participants would receive a $25 Amazon e-gift card via email within 1 business day. Table 2 outlines the time allotment and question prompts for the focus groups (see Appendix I for additional details about the focus group timeline).

Table 2

Focus Group Timeline

Time Allotment	Question
3 minutes	Introduction
10 minutes	What types of memberships do you currently belong to, and how long have you belonged to each membership?
10 minutes	What factors do you consider when deciding whether to join nonreligious memberships such as fitness, health, entertainment, or social clubs?
10 minutes	What factors do you consider when deciding whether to join church membership?
10 minutes	From your perspective, what are the benefits of becoming a church member?
10 minutes	From your perspective, what are the hesitations about becoming a church member?

Time Allotment	Question
10 minutes	If you are a member of a nonreligious organization, what factors contribute to your commitment to that membership?
10 minutes	If you are a member of a church, what factors contribute to your commitment to that membership?
2 minutes	Conclusion

Note. This table demonstrates the time allotment for each discussion question in the researcher's focus groups.

Microsoft Teams virtually recorded each focus group in real-time. While Microsoft Teams recorded all the audio during the group, the researcher also used a Microsoft Word document on her computer to jot down critical notes as participants communicated. The researcher then used ATLAS.ti to transcribe the focus group audio recording. The researcher reviewed each transcript at least twice, reviewing the transcripts for accuracy. Then, the researcher coded, analyzed, and interpreted the data using ATLAS.ti to assist with the process.

Procedures

First, the researcher needed to recruit participants for this study. The researcher actively recruited participants through email conversations and online through the Facebook and Instagram social media platforms. Public Facebook and Instagram posts targeted a broader population of sample participants outside the researcher's circle of influence. Individuals must have been born between 1981 and 1996 to qualify for research participation, self-identified as a Christian, and attended a trinitarian Protestant church at least once per month. Prospective participants were required to submit a pre-screening survey affirming that their date of birth met the criteria of the Millennial generation and confirming that they attended a trinitarian Protestant

church a minimum of once per month. The researcher submitted the pre-screening survey and the recruitment materials to the IRB for approval before recruiting participants.

After recruitment, the researcher selected a random sample of the potential population. The researcher coordinated with the selected participants to organize two virtual focus groups and placed participants in each group according to their date and time availability. Each participant was required to participate in one 75-minute virtual focus group. Before the focus group started, the researcher emailed each participant an assigned pseudonym. The researcher required participants to use their pseudonyms as their screen names. The researcher asked participants to keep their web cameras on during the focus group. Web cameras allowed participants to look at each other and see the facilitator the same way they would look at each other during an in-person focus group (Daniels et al., 2019). The researcher asked the same discussion question prompts to participants of both focus groups to obtain comparable data for evaluation.

The researcher conducted these focus groups virtually using the Microsoft Teams online platform because it offered a way to record audio and securely store the sessions on OneDrive. Contents stored on OneDrive are private, password-protected, and secured by a unique AES256 encryption key (Microsoft, n.d.). The researcher stored the recordings and transcripts on OneDrive. In addition, the researcher stored all her field observation notes, information sheet, and any other documentation related to this study on OneDrive. The researcher will keep all data for 3 years following the conclusion of this study.

Data Analysis

The researcher analyzed all data collected during the focus groups. For this study, the researcher used ATLAS.ti to assist with coding and data analysis. The researcher coded the data

in stages to further explore the phenomenon. First, the researcher used values coding to capture the participants' keywords, concepts, and repeated phrases used to express their thoughts and feelings about the topics discussed.

Values coding is the "application of codes onto qualitative data that reflect a participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview" (Saldaña, 2009, p. 100). Values are important attributes, and attitudes are how a person thinks or feels about an idea. Beliefs are a combination of values and attitudes contributing to an interpretive perception of the social world (Saldaña, 2009). Next, the researcher categorized the codes. Lastly, the researcher executed a thematic analysis summarizing the codes, generating potential themes, and reviewing the themes considering the broader context. The goal of thematic analysis was to identify patterns and interpret the data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Analysis Methods

Focus group data analysis begins during the focus group. Creswell and Creswell (2018) recommended that researchers prepare an observation plan before the discussion. Even though Microsoft Teams recorded the entire session, the researcher prepared a Microsoft Word document to type her own field notes. The researcher's notes flowed downward chronologically, so she could refer to her notes from the focus group sessions later during the analysis process.

Before analysis occurred, the researcher was responsible for transcribing the focus group data. Many types of technology offer transcription services and support qualitative research, such as CAQDAS. CAQDAS can help researchers efficiently manage data while maintaining transparency in their data analysis. Of course, qualitative researchers cannot rely solely on CAQDAS to do all the work; however, they should use CAQDAS to assist in the data analysis process (Vignato et al., 2022).

This researcher used ATLAS.ti, a transcription service, and CAQDAS software. After the researcher transcribed the original audio from both focus groups using ATLAS.ti, she reviewed the transcripts for accuracy. For security, the researcher stored the transcriptions on Microsoft OneDrive, a secure cloud platform accessible to the researcher on a password-protected computer. OneDrive is private, password protected, and secured by a unique AES256 encryption key (Microsoft, n.d.).

The researcher prepared an intelligent verbatim transcript. An intelligent verbatim transcription transcribes every word, removing stutters and correcting grammatical errors (McMullin, 2021). An intelligent verbatim transcription aims to maximize readability and optimize clarity. Transcribing the focus group data is integral to the data analysis process (Evers, 2011; Hammersley, 2010; Lapadat, 2000; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). The analysis process was time-consuming, but not as time-consuming as without computer-assisted software. Based on prior qualitative averages, the researcher knew she needed to plan 4 to 8 hours for every hour of recorded focus group data (Bloor et al., 2001; Evers, 2011). Each focus group was approximately 75 minutes; therefore, the researcher knew she needed to set aside 10–20 hours for transcribing the audio files. While transcribing the focus groups, the researcher familiarized herself with the data in preparation to organize and analyze it during the next steps.

Data Organization

Once the researcher transcribed the data, she evaluated and summarized the data. Organizing the data included highlighting repeating concepts, words, and themes. Initial coding was the first step of data analysis (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2006; Nyumba et al., 2018). The researcher looked for repeated words or similar phrases expressed by participants and

assigned codes to each word and concept. The researcher used ATLAS.ti to assist with the organization of her coding.

Since this study examined the nature of engagement of a particular demographic, the researcher decided values coding was an appropriate approach to initial coding. Values coding is the process of assigning codes representing the participant's beliefs, values, and attitudes. The researcher paid attention to the times participants responded with phrases such as "I feel…" or "I think…" as those phrases can indicate the expression of values. For enhanced trustworthiness, scholars recommend that qualitative researchers code their field notes, ensuring the transcribed data and the field notes corroborate the coding (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Saldaña, 2009). Therefore, the researcher coded her field notes as well as the transcripts. Next, the researcher grouped related codes into categories. Lastly, the researcher conducted a thematic analysis, generating potential themes and reviewing these themes considering the broader context. Thematic analysis helps researchers tie together the themes and theories of the research data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Birks & Mills, 2015).

At this stage in the data analysis process, the researcher discovered themes in the data. Thematic analysis is foundational to qualitative studies. As the researcher considered all the codes and categories, she drew relationships between codes and looked for reoccurring ideas. The researcher also conducted a micro-interlocutor analysis of the data. A micro-interlocutor analysis allows researchers to evaluate the group by considering the individuals' responses (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009).

The goal of thematic analysis is to identify interesting themes in the data. Thematic analysis is more than simply summarizing the responses to the main interview questions (V. Clarke & Braun, 2013). There are two levels of thematic analysis: semantic and latent (Braun

& Clarke, 2006). First, the researcher looked for semantic themes. Semantic themes analyze the words verbally expressed to search for a surface-level meaning. Next, the researcher looked for latent themes or the underlying ideas, ideologies, or assumptions expressed through the participants' responses. Together, the semantic and latent themes created an informed understanding of the data.

Next, the researcher validated the data by reviewing the focus group data and comparing it to the original research questions. Validation of qualitative research is confirming the reliability of information and ensuring that the data are consistent with the study's parameters. Lastly, the researcher summarized the data from the data analysis process and provided succinct insights for Christian leaders, including pastors, to consider when evaluating the future church membership of Millennials in their churches.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is vital to qualitative research. Reliability includes the work's credibility, the sources' dependability, confirmability of the findings, and data transferability. Therefore, the researcher took crucial measures to ensure that her study was trustworthy and reliable. By conducting multiple focus groups, the researcher elevated the trustworthiness of the data collected. Additionally, the researcher executed values coding during the data analysis process. Adding the values codes to the researcher's field notes, in addition to the transcripts, corroborates the data and enhances the trustworthiness of the findings (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Saldaña, 2009). Lastly, the researcher provided most of her research data in the report or appendices, and the researcher agrees to make any additional data not included in the report or appendices available to future researchers at their request.

Credibility

Credibility begins with participants. The researcher did due diligence when selecting participants, ensuring they fit the demographics of the study and were voluntarily willing to discuss the issue at hand. A pre-screening survey helped the researcher narrow down potential participants, disqualifying those not meeting the research study's requirements. Qualitative studies seek to "establish meaning of a phenomenon from the views of the participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 17). Therefore, the participants were considered the experts in this study, and the researcher did not share any biased input from her own experiences.

Next, the data analysis process is critical to credibility. When the findings of the focus group align accurately with reality, it is easier to consider the source credible. Additionally, this researcher confirmed group consensus on specific issues by coding and categorizing the participants' responses to the discussion questions and comparing them with the initial research questions. The researcher analyzed the data from each focus group individually and then compared it with the other group's data to ensure credibility.

Dependability

The data must be dependable, as well as the process and procedures used to gather them. The dependability of focus group studies dates to the social science research of Emory Bogardus in 1926 (Liamputtong, 2011). Throughout history, social sciences have considered focus groups a highly dependable avenue for gathering information on thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Not all participants need to agree on everything; however, the major thematic elements of the group dynamic should confirm the dependability of individual participants' responses. Conducting multiple focus groups increased the validity and reliability of the study (Vince & Margaret, 2013). For a researcher to consider the data dependable, the focus group must be replicable, and

researchers must be able to repeat a study with similar findings. Therefore, the researcher conducted two focus groups with different participants in each group. The focus groups were limited to 75 minutes, with each of the seven questions receiving 10 minutes for discussion. By keeping a strict timeline, the researcher set herself up to replicate the focus group again with different participants. The researcher also clearly outlined her processes, protocols, and discussion questions so future researchers can replicate the study if desired.

Confirmability

Focus groups are a reliable way to gather information on a particular topic or issue. The researcher used the audit trail process to offer confirmability to the focus groups' data. By transcribing the focus groups and analyzing common themes presented by multiple participants, the group itself confirms the reliability of the responses. Careful documentation is also vital to the success of a focus group study. In addition, the researcher made observational field notes in real time during the focus groups. The researcher then compared the observational notes to the transcripts to ensure accuracy. To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher coded both the transcripts and her field notes. A thorough audit trail includes maintaining videos, observation notes, records, and transcripts for at least 3 years after the study. The researcher is storing all these items on a password-protected computer. Any additional data and transcripts not included in the final report will be available to other researchers upon request.

Transferability

This researcher understands that research studies are only valuable if the results are transferable to people and contexts outside her academic community. This research aimed to help Christian leaders better understand Christian Millennials' nature of engagement with church and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. Insights into Christian

Millennials' perceived benefits and hesitations of engaging with church membership will benefit Christian leaders across the United States as churches struggle to see a continual decline in commitment every year. This researcher believes a better understanding of the thought patterns, values, and belief systems of Christian Millennials will help church leaders develop strategies to successfully attract, engage, and retain Millennial church members, changing the trajectory of religiosity in the United States.

Chapter Summary

This phenomenological study investigated the discrepancies between rising nonreligious memberships and decreasing church membership among Christian Millennials in the United States. The researcher submitted all research questions, recruitment materials, and an information sheet to the IRB for approval before beginning recruitment through email conversations and social media posts. Once participants were selected, the researcher conducted two virtual focus groups using Microsoft Teams. After the focus groups concluded, the researcher used ATLAS.ti to assist with transcribing, organizing, and analyzing the data. The researcher used codes to organize the data and provided a summative data analysis. To ensure confirmability, the researcher maintained an audit trail throughout the data collection and analysis processes, accurately documenting the study's design, processes, and procedures. The researcher believes Christian leaders across the United States currently struggling to engage Christian Millennials in their church membership will benefit from the results of this research.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

This phenomenological study explored how practicing Christian Millennials understand the nature of engagement with church and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. The methodology guiding this study was Husserl's phenomenological approach to gaining insights into the phenomenon of Christian Millennials' engagement with church and nonreligious memberships. Chapter One explored the rising rates of nonreligious memberships and the simultaneously declining rates of church membership among the Millennial demographic. Chapter One also highlighted the scope of the phenomenon and provided historical and theoretical background for the research. Chapter Two reviewed the current literature and included this study's theoretical and theological framework. Chapter Three outlined the phenomenological methodology, identified the study's sample population parameters, and acknowledged the data collection and analysis processes. Now, Chapter Four will present the compilation protocols, demographic and sample data, and the results of the data analysis process.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

This study explored how practicing Christian Millennials engage with church and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those ongoing commitments. Qualitative studies seek to "establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the views of the participants" (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 17). The researcher identified a significant gap in the literature after studying the rise of nonreligious memberships and the decline of religious memberships among the Millennial demographic. Therefore, this study sought to provide new and impactful insights addressing the disconnect between Christian Millennials' increasing participation in

nonreligious memberships and their decreasing commitment to church membership. By studying

the nature of engagement, this study aimed to identify the leading factors shaping Millennials'

commitment to memberships. The researcher built the protocols for this study around the

following research questions:

RQ1. What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join nonreligious memberships, such as fitness, health, and social clubs?

RQ2. What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join church membership?

RQ3. What are the perceived benefits of church membership according to Christian Millennials?

RQ4. What are the perceived hesitations of becoming a church member according to Christian Millennials?

RQ5. What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to nonreligious memberships among Christian Millennials?

RQ6. What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to church membership among Christian Millennials?

Data Collection

This study collected data through two virtual focus groups. From the pool of potential

participants who completed the pre-screening survey, the researcher selected 16 participants and

assigned eight to each focus group. The researcher emailed the selected participants the date,

time, and an invitation to a Microsoft Teams meeting for their assigned group (see Appendix H).

Next, the researcher emailed the remaining potential participants, informing them they would not

be a part of the study because it was complete (see Appendix J).

In Focus Group 1, all eight participants participated in the study. In Focus Group 2, only

five out of the eight participants showed up and participated in the group, making up 13

participants. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), there is not a defined number of

minimum participants; however, most qualitative studies operate under the theory that there

should be a minimum of 10 participants for a study to be sufficient. Both focus groups lasted

between 70–75 minutes. The researcher acted as a facilitator and asked the participants of each

focus group the following questions:

1. What types of memberships do you currently belong to, and how long have you belonged to each membership?

2. What factors do you consider when deciding whether to join nonreligious memberships such as fitness, health, entertainment, or social clubs?

3. What factors do you consider when deciding whether to join church membership?

4. From your perspective, what are the benefits of church membership?

5. From your perspective, what are the hesitations about becoming a church member?

6. If you are a member of a nonreligious organization, what factors contribute to your commitment to nonreligious memberships?

7. If you are a church member, what factors contribute to your commitment to church membership?

Microsoft Teams recorded each focus group. Microsoft Teams offers an automatic

transcription service for their recordings, so the researcher utilized this transcript as a starting

point. Then, the researcher uploaded the audio recordings and the initial transcripts to ATLAS.ti.

In ATLAS.ti, the researcher developed an intelligent verbatim transcript by working through

each transcript, correcting spelling, adjusting grammatical errors, and removing stutters. An

intelligent verbatim transcript aims to optimize clarity and maximize readability (McMullin,

2021). The intelligent verbatim transcripts from the focus groups provided the data for this study.

Next, the researcher coded and analyzed the transcripts using ATLAS.ti to assist with organizing

the data.

Demographic and Sample Data

The demographic for this study was practicing Christian Millennials who self-identified

as Christian and attended a trinitarian Protestant church in the United States at least once per

month. Once the researcher developed the data collection methodology, the next step was for the researcher to identify a population sample to study. The researcher recruited people she knew might fit the target demographic through emails and then publicly recruited people through social media posts on Facebook and Instagram. The researcher posted one Instagram post and then shared that post to her Instagram story. The researcher then posted two Facebook posts on her personal page, which were publicly shared twice by other users, expanding the reach. Additionally, the researcher also posted six Facebook posts on Facebook Groups, expanding her reach beyond her acquaintances.

This study aimed to recruit between eight and 16 participants from the sample population. Within 7 days, 829 potential participants responded to recruitment requests and completed the pre-screening survey. This study used the random sampling procedures outlined initially in Chapter Three to select 16 participants from the sample population, eight for Focus Group 1 and eight for Focus Group 2.

For Focus Group 1, eight of the eight selected participants showed up and participated. For Focus Group 2, five out of the second set of eight participants showed up and participated, resulting in a total of 13 people participating in this study. The participants were all self-identifying Christian Millennials who attended a trinitarian Protestant church at least once per month, if not more frequently. Eight participants were formal church members, and five participants were not traditional church members but regular attendees. Table 3 shows a list of the participants categorized by their participant identification number (ID), pseudonym for the study, age, focus group assignment, and church membership status.

Table 3

Focus Group Participants

Participant ID	Pseudonym	Age	Focus Group Assignment	Church Member
51	Eliza	29	Focus Group 1	Yes
102	Jacob	30	Focus Group 1	No
153	Jamie	30	Focus Group 1	No
204	Sarah	32	Focus Group 1	Yes
255	Max	34	Focus Group 1	Yes
306	Peter	29	Focus Group 1	Yes
357	Chloe	27	Focus Group 1	Yes
408	Olivia	28	Focus Group 1	Yes
510	Parker	28	Focus Group 2	No
612	Frank	30	Focus Group 2	Yes
714	Andrea	29	Focus Group 2	Yes
765	Ryan	32	Focus Group 2	Yes
816	Ava	30	Focus Group 2	No

Data Analysis and Findings

After conducting the virtual focus groups, the researcher sorted, organized, coded, and interpreted the data. Organizing and coding the data were two crucial pieces of the data analysis. Taking the recommendation of LeCompte and Preissle (1993) and Saldaña (2009), the focus groups' transcripts and the field notes were coded. The research questions for this study explored the disconnect between practicing Christian Millennials' engagement with church membership

and nonreligious membership types and the factors contributing to their commitments. The following section highlights the study's findings correlating to each research question.

Research Question One: Factors for Nonreligious Memberships

The first research question asked, What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join nonreligious memberships, such as fitness, health, and social clubs? The desired outcome for this question was to identify the factors Christian Millennials consider when evaluating the opportunity to join nonreligious memberships.

Christian Millennials are involved in a variety of nonreligious memberships. The researcher began Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2 by asking the participants to identify their nonreligious memberships. Participants identified nonreligious memberships in the categories of fitness, professional, social, and subscriptions (see Figure 4). Fitness memberships included gyms, boutique fitness programs, and sports leagues. Professional memberships included networking and career-enhancing organizations for professionals in the fields of medicine, music, and photography. One participant chuckled and said, "If we are including subscriptions, then if they have it, I probably pay for it."

Next, social memberships included book clubs, online dating, and a nightclub. Lastly, subscriptions included iPhone applications, photograph and video editing software, Amazon Prime, and entertainment memberships. Under the entertainment category, participants identified a movie theatre pass and common streaming platforms as their primary sources of entertainment memberships. The participants primarily used their streaming memberships for movies, television, and music.

Figure 4

Nonreligious Memberships
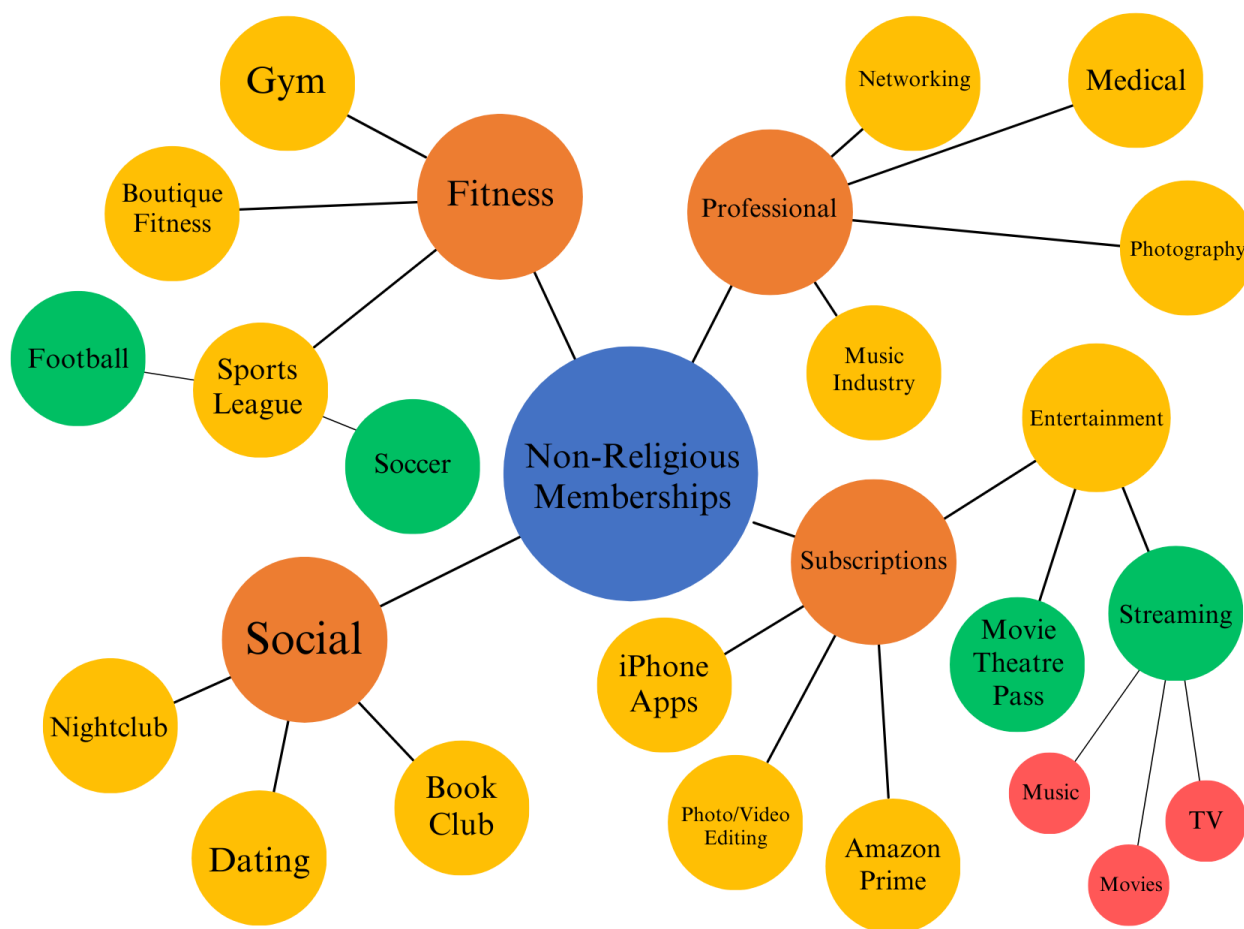
Once the participants in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2 identified the numerous memberships they engage with regularly, the researcher shifted the discussion to the factors the participants considered when choosing to join these nonreligious memberships. According to this study's participants, the top five factors Christian Millennials consider when evaluating nonreligious memberships are value, affordability, community, reputation, and convenience (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

Factors for Nonreligious Membership

Value

The leading factor for Christian Millennials in choosing nonreligious memberships was value. For this study, value refers to a membership's beneficial contribution to a person's life. For example, Chloe is willing to pay for something if it saves her time and work or improves the quality of her life. Participants in both focus groups noted that many jobs require them to maintain professional memberships. However, for Andrea, it is not only an obligation for her to maintain professional memberships; she also believes these memberships fulfill their purpose and enhance her career.

In Focus Group 1, Max mentioned that the two leading factors for him when considering nonreligious memberships are affordability and career advancement. He said, "I want to know about the cost, but then what do I get from that, too? Would this advance my career in a way that being outside of this would allow things to remain stagnant?" Olivia quickly added to Max's

thought, interjecting that for her, it is not only career advancement, but she is interested in memberships that provide her with steps toward accomplishing goals in various aspects of life.

Frank mentioned an interesting point about balancing personal networks and formal organizational membership. He believes some people prefer to rely on their personal network of connections to advance in their careers. While developing these personal connections comes naturally to some people, others need formal organizations, memberships, and intentional opportunities that push them to collaborate with others. In Focus Group 1, Sarah mentioned a concern about the different natural abilities of introverts and extroverts to find community, friends, and career growth independently of memberships. Like Sarah, some people who are naturally more introverted may benefit from systems that help them secure external relationships outside their immediate family.

When considering nonreligious memberships, Ava asked, "How can it improve my livelihood or current situation with work?" For Ava, the quality of the service is equally as important as the benefit of the service. Jacob added that he examines each aspect of the benefits before joining a new membership. He said, "I check on the benefits and evaluate every benefit I'm supposed to get." For Jacob, these decisions did not solely rely on what the membership offers but on how it benefits or enhances his life.

In today's fast-paced world, Christian Millennials seek nonreligious memberships that add value to their lives. These memberships must be beneficial and significantly contribute to their lives, whether saving them time or enhancing their quality of life. Memberships that offer steps toward achieving various goals are becoming increasingly popular among Christian Millennials. Lastly, it is essential to remember that some introverted individuals rely on memberships to help them meet new people, develop friendships, and enhance their careers. By

considering this factor, organizations can provide Christian Millennials memberships to meet their needs and enrich their lives.

Affordability

Affordability was the second leading factor Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to join nonreligious memberships. For Christian Millennials, affordability is a constant battle between the beneficial value a membership offers and the price point related to their budget. Peter explained, "I usually just read about the service they are offering, and if the quality of service matches the price and it's within my budget, then I will entertain it." On the flip side, Peter said, "If it is outside of what I think is worthy of what they are selling, I would not give it a second thought." All the participants in Focus Group 1 agreed with Peter's statements throughout this discussion.

Another participant shared about their involvement with an AMC movie theatre membership. She and her husband both have movie theatre passes that allow them to see multiple movies per week at a local theatre for an affordable rate. She believes the membership is worth the money since they save more than they would spend purchasing individual movies. A participant in Focus Group 1 asked, "Do nonreligious memberships include subscriptions?" Chloe and Olivia agreed that if nonreligious memberships include entertainment streaming services, they are willing to pay for online subscriptions if their price point seems reasonable and the services cater to their interests. In Focus Group 2, Ava added, "It comes down to the value for money and what I like and what are my interests."

Christian Millennials are conscientious to not overspend on low-quality products or services. Organizational leaders must understand that Christian Millennials will evaluate the quality of products or services and compare the price points before joining nonreligious

memberships. However, affordability is not a "one size fits all" concept. In a way, affordability is a relative term, as each Christian Millennial balances what they believe is an appropriate amount of money to spend on their hobbies and interests.

Community

The third leading factor Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to join nonreligious memberships is community. Community is the concept of a group of people caring about one another. The word "community" summarizes the codes related to searching for belongingness and seeking to find places to spend communal time with friends. This concept appeared numerous times throughout both focus groups.

One participant talked about how they are introverted, and it is hard to forge their way out into the world to make new friends. However, by finding common interests with people, such as a television show on Netflix, they can engage with their friends and find a sense of community. Similarly, in Focus Group 1, Chloe discussed her AMC movie theatre pass. As much as affordability was a top consideration, she claimed going to the movies was more about the communal time spent with friends than the movie's storyline. While the movie pass is an affordable subscription, Chloe told the group she would cancel her membership if her friends dropped their memberships or moved away.

Participants in both focus groups mentioned their involvement in book club memberships. Olivia wants to know upfront about the community aspect of memberships. She seeks out community involvement through extracurricular activities outside of the church, searching for people who can experience life with her and share various opinions from different perspectives to enhance her life. She wants to know not only how the community of membership

will impact her own life but also how that community impacts the lives of the people around them.

Interestingly, most participants are using nonreligious memberships to find community. The more participants spoke and shared stories, the more evident it became to the researcher that the value of community was central to their decision-making process. For Chloe, who has an AMC movie theatre membership, it is less about the movies she sees and more about the opportunity to go to the movie theatre regularly with friends. For Sarah, it is less about the shows that Netflix offers and more about the ability to watch and discuss familiar storylines with friends.

In Focus Group 2, Ava began conversing about online dating applications. Ava mentioned that her involvement with Hinge, an online dating application, was more about "spending $10–15 per month to find companionship and community" than finding a spouse. She said she could "find actual friends on Hinge and through similar platforms." Ava and other participants discussed how moving around as an adult can be lonely, especially if one's job requires frequent travel. Nonreligious memberships provide Christian Millennials, especially single young adults, opportunities to find community, new friends, and a sense of belonging in a new place.

Christian Millennials are on a never-ending hunt to feel belongingness in the context of community. The desire to belong and spend time with friends in communal settings repeatedly appeared in both focus groups. Many participants spoke about how difficult it is to make new friends as an adult, especially if their jobs require frequent travel or relocation. Nonreligious memberships allow Christian Millennials to meet new people, forge a sense of community, and experience life with others.

Reputation

Next, Christian Millennials consider an organization's credibility and the current members' reputations when joining nonreligious memberships. Jacob listed evaluating the benefits of membership as his top priority, followed by looking at the credibility of the organization and its reputation. The reputation of membership or the standing of the current members can sway Jacob's decision about joining for better or worse. Parker consistently evaluates memberships first and foremost by their online star ratings. Then, he considers the membership by cost and what they offer him. Next, he evaluates the way a secular organization treats its employees. For example, Parker openly admitted to being a Christ follower who is a member of a local strip club. He discussed the difficulties in finding a club that respects everyone's background and religion. As for reputation, he wants to know that the staff cares for the women who work at the club psychologically and relationally.

While discussing nonreligious memberships, Ava shared how she envisions her lifestyle regarding community, fitness, and spiritual well-being. She asks herself, "Does this membership coincide with the lifestyle I want to have?" If a membership helps Ava achieve her goals of portraying the lifestyle she wants to communicate to others, she will likely consider joining it.

Christian Millennials want to make sure the members of nonreligious organizations are satisfied with their membership before joining. They are looking for people they can relate to and share their values. This demographic will hold testimonials and online reviews from others in high regard when choosing nonreligious memberships. Christian Millennials may also research an organization's mission and values to ensure they align with their values. Organizations with positive reputations will gain the business of Christian Millennials. Therefore, organizational

leaders must understand the importance of online reviews, their website's information, and the external perception of their company's membership experience.

Convenience

Lastly, convenience was mentioned several times by participants in both focus groups. For Christian Millennials, convenience includes products or services that save them time, money, or effort and seamlessly fit into their schedule. For Chloe, convenience is about enhancing her life. She said,

> I am most likely to sign up for a subscription or membership based on their affordability and convenience. I am willing to pay for something if it saves me time or work or increases the quality of my play, work, or relaxation.

For other participants, convenience was about choosing memberships that save them time in their daily lives. Another participant discussed how they evaluate membership opportunities by the convenience of how that membership's service fits into their daily or weekly schedule. Sarah mentioned that they do not wake up on the weekends before 10:00 a.m.; therefore, they would not consider joining a nonreligious or religious membership that required early morning activities. For Sarah, another aspect of convenience is location. Sarah keeps a close relationship with her parents. The distance from Sarah's parents' house is also a deciding factor.

Convenience is a top priority for Christian Millennials when considering memberships. They want to spend money on products or services that save time and effort and fit their schedule. The concept of convenience makes proximity an important deciding factor for Christian Millennials. Organizations that wish to attract Christian Millennials should focus on offering memberships that save members time, money, and effort, enhancing their overall lives. Companies need to make it easy for potential members to find information about the benefits and features of a membership.

Research Question One Summary

The first research question identified the main factors Christian Millennials consider when joining nonreligious memberships. The study's participants identified a variety of nonreligious memberships, including fitness, entertainment, social clubs, and career-oriented vocational organizations to which they belong. When asked about the factors contributing to their consideration of nonreligious membership opportunities, participants mentioned that value, affordability, community, reputation, and convenience are their top five considerations. Christian Millennials are concerned with the quality and price of services, community involvement, potential for personal or career growth, convenience, and other members' ratings of an organization. Christian Millennials are most likely to join nonreligious memberships if their job mandates membership. Whether or not job-oriented memberships are mandatory, Christian Millennials agree that there are benefits to being members of vocational organizations that help enhance their work or provide career growth opportunities.

Christian Millennials are mindful of their budgets and want to join affordable memberships. They might be willing to pay more for a nonreligious membership that offers high-quality benefits, but they are not willing to overspend. Christian Millennials are more likely to join nonreligious memberships if they provide new friends or consistent opportunities to spend time with their current friends. This demographic is looking for memberships that offer social activities and opportunities to participate with friends. Christian Millennials are also more likely to join nonreligious memberships with good reputations that enhance the portrayal of their lifestyle goals and provide opportunities for career growth. They will read reviews, ask others for recommendations, and visit the company's website before deciding. Lastly, Christian Millennials want to join nonreligious memberships that suit them. For this demographic, convenience

includes how the product or service helps enhance their life, saving them time and effort, as well as proximity and ease of access. Overall, Christian Millennials are very intentional when selecting which memberships to join and will most likely remain a member after joining unless the price for the service suddenly changes dramatically or their friends leave the membership for any reason.

Research Question Two: Factors for Church Membership

The second research question asked, What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join church membership? The desired outcome for this question was to identify the factors Christian Millennials consider when evaluating the opportunity to join church membership and see if the factors are similar or different than those for considering nonreligious memberships. The top two leading responses to this question were core beliefs and community. Core beliefs include biblically accurate theology and faithful preaching of the gospel. Community includes assessing communal opportunities, diversity, age demographics, and the ability to find belongingness among a group. Soul care was next on the list. Participants identified how pastors' care for their church staff and congregants directly affects their decision to join a specific church. Participants who have worked at churches said seeing how the pastors treat one another off-stage is essential. Other participants expressed the need to feel like their pastor shepherds them as children of God beyond using or exploiting them for their time, talents, or treasures. Lastly, Christian Millennials seek convenience and family programming if they have children. See Figure 6 for a visual representation of the major factors that participants mentioned in deciding on church membership.

Figure 6

Factors for Church Membership

Core Beliefs

Christian Millennials evaluate the core beliefs of a church when deciding on membership. They evaluate the biblical accuracy of the church's theology, how pastors articulate the gospel, and how well church members live out the mission and vision. In Focus Group 1, a participant said, "The biggest thing I look at is, are they teaching biblically accurate theology, or are they just trying to create an experience for people?" They added,

> I am not willing to join a church for that because I can go to a concert to have good music. I join a church because I want to be a part of the community, and I want to be a part of people who actually believe in and practice what they say according to Scripture.

In Focus Group 2, Parker shared that finding a good church is more than just finding someone good at storytelling because the Bible is more than a fictional story; it is God's truth. It is vital to Parker to commit to a church where the pastor confronts sin and challenges people to live good lives.

In the first focus group, Olivia shared that she evaluates how well the church's public speakers communicate the gospel from the platform. She mentioned that it is not just a requirement that the lead preacher or senior pastor can clearly share the gospel. She also wants to hear the gospel clearly articulated by the worship minister, lay leaders, or anyone speaking on stage. In Focus Group 2, Andrea said, "For me, it is really simple. It comes down to foundational truths, so it is that the gospel is preached first and foremost every single Sunday, every service, at every event."

When deciding whether church membership suits her and her family, Andrea also evaluates how a church confronts current culture and conforms to the teachings of Scripture above the popular pathways of society. She wants to be a member of a church that stands firm in its convictions of teaching conservative theology. However, other participants in Focus Group 2 disagreed on how churches should confront sin, share judgment of one's lifestyle choices, or accept members whose choices do not align with someone else's morals. A handful of participants expressed the need to see a church and its leadership stand firm against immorality, gender identity agenda, and other theologically divisive opinions. Like Sarah in Focus Group 1, other participants expressed the need to find and join a more flexible church on its theological boundaries. Referencing the controversy over sexual orientation, Sarah said, "I don't want to be caught in the crosshairs of church members and church leaders. You expect pastors to be rather homophobic, but this is something I expect churches to be flexible on."

In Focus Group 2, Ryan mentioned that someone could learn much about a church by how the congregation sings and serves. He wants to see the proof that the congregation lives out throughout the week what they claim to believe on Sunday mornings. Ryan said he has been a part of churches where there "might have been a party on the inside, but no signs of life on the

outside." Because of that experience, he said, "I want to see proof that you believe what you believe." Overall, all participants agreed that the faithful preaching of the gospel message that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior is the top factor when considering joining a church.

Christian Millennials seek churches that teach biblically accurate theology and have a missional focus. They want to be members of churches committed to preaching the gospel clearly and concisely, confronting sin, and living out the Bible's beliefs in the world. Several Christian Millennials in this study wanted to commit to a church that teaches the hard truths of the Bible, even when it is difficult; however, others looked for churches that project acceptance and are more lenient on the moral issues surrounding controversial topics like homosexuality. Despite disagreements over theological boundaries, Christian Millennials generally seek churches reaching the lost and engaged in the local community. Christian leaders must consider how their church portrays their core values, mission, and vision and accurately communicate the gospel. They must also consider how their church offers opportunities for Christian Millennials to connect with other believers and grow in their faith. Lastly, Christian leaders must consider how their church's members live out the mission and vision in the local community and worldwide. Christian Millennials want to commit to churches, making a difference in the world.

Community

After evaluating the theology and core beliefs of the church, participants shared the importance of assessing the community. For Christian Millennials, community is the connection with other people in the church. Several participants echoed each other's concerns when they attended a new church and saw a generational gap. In Focus Group 1, a participant said one of the first questions they ask themselves is, "Does this church have a generational bias against Millennials?" A commonality among participant responses was that they want to be a part of a

church that cares about the Millennial age demographic as much as the other generations. Along those same lines, participants noted their need to evaluate the diversity of ethnicity and opinions in addition to generational diversity.

In Focus Group 1, Jacob shared that he seeks a church that provides social opportunities to build relationships with others. Peter then piped up and explained the difference between attendance and membership. He said becoming a church member is becoming a family member in a spiritual family, and there is a level of commitment that comes with that decision. Several participants also explained how they evaluate a church's small groups as a primary factor in evaluating their community.

Ava claimed that the community is what makes a church feel like home. She explained how she moved around multiple times, and each time, as she walked through the process of finding a new church, it was the community that influenced her final decision. For her, it was the community that turned the church from a corporate gathering into a home in a new town, and although she is not a formal church member currently, that was the leading factor for her in past church membership decisions.

Frank explained that when he finds a new church, he asks, "Do I feel nourished and comfortable?" He claimed that finding a sense of community where people will accept him, support him, and encourage him to reach his spiritual goals is vital for church membership. He indicated that when he finds meaningful connections and friendships, he knows that a church is home.

Other participants added that evaluating how the church community interacts with the surrounding neighborhoods in the external community dramatically influences their decision on whether to join a specific church's membership. Outreach plays a crucial role in the evaluation

process for many Christian Millennials, and the factor lies somewhere in between the church's

verbally expressed value for outreach and Millennials' ability to see the value lived out among

the church's members. When evaluating a new church, Christian Millennials ask themselves, do

the promotional words of this church match the current members' actions?

Christian Millennials are looking for churches that have a strong sense of community.

They want to be a part of a church that is generationally diverse in terms of age, offering all

different ages opportunities to connect with each other. When evaluating a church's membership

opportunities, Christian Millennials want to see diverse congregations where church leaders and

members welcome people of various backgrounds and celebrate the diversity of God's people.

Christian Millennials need communities of fellow believers where they can feel safe to disagree

with others' perspectives but still feel safe, loved, and accepted. Some Christian Millennials find

community by joining a small group, whereas others seek an overarching family feel within the

larger congregation. To engage and retain Christian Millennials, church leaders must develop

pathways for Christian Millennials to connect to the church's community quickly. This study's

participants expressed how their ability to establish community within a church defined how a

church shifted from being a corporate gathering to a church home.

Soul Care

The third leading factor Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to join a

church through membership is soul care. In this context, the construct of soul care encompasses

how pastors care for the spiritual health of their staff, volunteers, and congregants. Regarding

soul care, Max asked, "Will I be shepherded well?" Max also asked, "Can I serve in a way that

lets me be me, rather than trying to fit into a box of someone else's idea of what I should be?" He

wants to know that he will be cared for as an individual if he joins a new church.

After Max raised this question, the participants in Focus Group 1 discussed the need to see that a church's staff and volunteers are healthy. Many participants shared stories about times they were personally burnt out by aggressive church leadership, asking them to serve too much with little to no rest. Evaluating the church's volunteers can tell someone much about how the senior leadership treats their staff and leaders. Olivia and Jacob added to this conversation by discussing how the pastor of a church is the shepherd of the church and how their care for their members impacts the church's life. They believe the availability of pastors and their willingness to provide pastoral care is another vital consideration. In Focus Group 2, Ava explained,

> After knowing the core values in the community, I look at how they treat their staff and the people that work for them. Seeing how you treat the people that serve everyone is really big, in my opinion, because they are the ones bending over backward to make the services work. It is seeing the corporation and how the business side of the church treats the people who then go and disciple others.

Christian Millennials are looking for churches that value soul care. They want to commit to a church where they feel confident the pastor will care for them as individuals and help meet their spiritual needs. Christian Millennials seek pastors who are available to them, listen to their needs, and help them grow in their faith. Christian Millennials want Christian leaders to value them for their inherent worth, not just the spiritual gifts or contributions they bring to the church. Before committing to a church, Christian Millennials must see that the pastoral staff takes care of their volunteers and does not perpetuate a culture of burnout. Therefore, Christian leaders and pastors must prioritize the well-being of their church's staff, volunteers, and congregants.

Convenience and Programming

Lastly, for Christian Millennials, convenience and children's programming were two additional points for inquiry during the membership evaluation process. In Focus Group 1, Jamie mentioned that the church's views on family, family values, and parenting are at the top of her list when evaluating whether a church is right for her family to join. Another participant

expressed the importance of convenience and proximity to their house as leading factors. Sarah discussed how weekly rhythms impact church attendance. She mentioned having no desire to wake up early for church on Sunday mornings, So if her church did not offer a late-morning worship service, Sarah would choose not to participate on Sunday mornings.

For one participant in Focus Group 1, who attends the most prominent African-American church in southern California, the convenience of attending with his family is a priority. He shared that he feels responsible for seeing his parents regularly throughout the week as an only child from Syria, so even as a grown adult living in California, he finds that attending church with his parents is one convenient way to stay connected to his relatives. From the parents' perspective, three participants with young children mentioned the importance of evaluating age-appropriate opportunities for their children as another leading factor for membership. Before committing to joining a church, ensuring the church offers something for everyone in the family is crucial.

Christian Millennials are busy people, many with young families and children of various ages. Their busy lifestyles and other commitments make finding time to attend church difficult. For some, the desire to sleep in on Sunday mornings impacts their church attendance. Without late morning or early afternoon services, some Christian Millennials may opt for a few extra hours of sleep instead of making church a weekly priority. Therefore, each region in the United States needs churches that offer various worship options throughout the day. The number of churches in a local area allows Christian Millennials the ability to choose one that is most convenient to their schedule. Once in Focus Group 1 and twice in Focus Group 2, participants shared that they do not believe churches are a "one-size-fits-all" construct.

As Christian leaders seek ways to attract and engage Christian Millennials in their churches, they must remember that many Christian Millennials are married with young children. As parents, children's programming is a driving factor for church membership. The availability of kids' Sunday school classes and childcare during worship services are vital factors for Christian Millennials with young children. Christian leaders can ensure their church's children's programming is safe, fun, engaging, and educational.

Research Question Two Summary

The second research question identified the factors Christian Millennials consider when joining church membership. This study concluded that there are several factors Christian Millennials evaluate when considering joining a church. The top two factors are the teaching of biblically accurate theology and the ability to find a sense of community within a church. Christian Millennials want to know the core values of a church and whether that church's members live out what they teach. Christian Millennials also want to know that pastors genuinely care for the people in the community, especially their staff and volunteers. They want to see diversity in age, demographics, and ethnicities. Lastly, family-friendly programming is evaluated in the membership consideration process if the Christian Millennials have children. Finding the right church can be time-consuming, but Christian Millennials believe it is worth the time and effort to find a church that aligns with their core beliefs, meets their need for communal relationships, and offers their families engaging programming for children.

Research Question Three: Benefits of Church Membership

The third research question asked, What are the perceived benefits of church membership according to Christian Millennials? The desired outcome of this research question was to hear the perceived benefits of church membership according to the practicing Christian Millennial

demographic. The researcher found extensive literature hypothesizing about the perceived

benefits and hesitations Christian Millennials feel toward church membership; however, the

researcher wanted to elevate the voices of practicing Christian Millennials and hear directly from

them how they view both the benefits and the hesitations of committing to church membership.

Therefore, the third and fourth research questions focused on answering these inquiries.

The data from this study revealed several perceived benefits of church membership,

including finding a sense of belongingness, spiritual support, and additional opportunities only

available to formal church members (see Figure 7). Participants shared that if someone is part of

a congregationalist tradition, church voting privileges are a leading benefit, too.

Figure 7

Benefits of Church Membership

Belongingness

In Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2, participants discussed how deeper involvement in

a committed community leads to a more profound sense of belonging. Belongingness is

the quality or state of being an essential or important part of something. It implies how someone is a part of as opposed to apart from. Thus, a sense of belonging is a human need, just like the need for food and shelter. (New York University, 2023)

Participants shared how pastors can verbally tell people they will find a sense of belonging in church; however, there is a moment for many church members when belonging shifts from an intriguing concept to reality. Peter said, "It's the difference between being told you belong here to actually belonging, and I think that is a really important distinction to make."

Participants shared that church membership typically leads to a deeper level of involvement. Peter considers his fellow church members as family. He believes that when someone commits to church membership, they are committing to becoming a part of the church family. Family ties are harder to break than friendship ties, meaning there is an opportunity for someone to build a deeper connection. As friends come and go throughout the seasons of life, the family remains consistent. When members commit, the church can provide a stable family for many community members, especially young single adults. One benefit to this view on church membership is that people notice when someone is missing from family gatherings. Several participants shared the importance of other church members reaching out and noticing their absence.

In Focus Group 1, Chloe pointed out a critical distinction between the early church and the modern-day church, sharing that the early church met in people's homes and how much easier it would have been for a church leader to notice if someone was absent one week. She shared how desperate people are to find that type of belonging in the modern-day church, many of which are larger and easier to slip in and out of unnoticed. In Focus Group 2, Ava and Andrea discussed their church experiences. Ava has spent most of her life attending megachurches in the United States, while Andrea was born into and grew up in a small-town country church. The

ability for others to notice someone's absence varies among the size of the church and the person's level of involvement in the church's community.

Olivia, who attends a smaller church, appreciates the days she misses church and church leaders, the pastor, or church members send her text messages. These people always take the time to let her know they missed seeing her at church. Olivia says it can be as simple as "we missed you" or "hope to see you next week," which lets her know people see her when she is present and absent. Olivia admitted she longs to fulfill a sense of belonging and community, and these text messages contribute to fulfilling that need. The impact of belongingness is so strong that Olivia has stayed at her church despite other issues. Throughout Focus Group 1, Olivia discussed her desire to look for a new church. Still, she kept returning to the fact that her church family kept her locked into her current church commitment.

Christian Millennials, like all humans, have a deep need to belong. Churches are one of the places where Christian Millennials can find a sense of belongingness. However, based on the size of the church, Christian leaders must intentionally create a culture of belongingness within their congregation. From the experiences of this study's Christian Millennial participants, researchers can deduce that church membership typically leads to deep levels of involvement in a church, and deeper involvement in a committed community typically leads to a more profound sense of belonging.

The impact of belonging is so significant that the influence of friendships in a church can override other issues. Christian leaders must know the importance and prioritization of finding belongingness for Millennials. Christian leaders can cultivate a culture of belongingness by encouraging their current members to reach out to one another, notice each other's absences, and genuinely care for one another as a family cares for their members.

Spiritual Support

Another benefit of church membership is that it provides Christians spiritual support, including consistency, accountability, and discipline. In Focus Group 1, Olivia pointed out that she can accomplish much of what she views as church membership through church attendance, with or without membership commitment. For her, what changes in the membership commitment is the gaining of accountability. She said, "Then, you are accountable to a group of people. You are accountable to the church." In Focus Group 1, Max and Sarah echoed Olivia's thoughts. Sarah discussed how church membership taught them consistency and collective decision-making. One benefit Sarah mentioned is the ability for someone to bring a problem to the church community and receive guidance and wisdom from others. The benefit of church membership is that one no longer must make decisions alone but has a community of believers supporting them, brainstorming with them, and walking alongside them.

Another participant added that church discipline should happen within the context of church membership. Chloe said, "And while those words may sound scary, church discipline is actually a beautiful opportunity for believers to show grace and accountability to one another in a covenant community." Participants in both focus groups spoke to the concept of accountability, whether for Christlike living, discipleship, spiritual growth, or church discipline; many participants appreciate the deeper level of accountability that being a committed church member provides them. In Focus Group 2, Frank talked about the practicalities of accountability and how fellow church members hold him accountable to his faith commitments in practical ways by serving as mentors in his life.

Ryan added that while he appreciates other church members discipling him, church membership also holds him accountable for discipling others. Matthew 28:19 (*New International*

Bible, 1978/2011) says, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." When considering God's commandment to multiply disciples, Ryan said,

> Three words come to mind: ownership, accountability, and unity. Ownership is that I have a part to play. I am not just a consumer but a participant. Accountability is being held to being a disciple who makes other disciples. While that can happen outside of membership, I think membership is a pledge we're communicating about accountability and unity.

As Ryan explained more about how accountability and unity go hand in hand, he illustrated how church membership is a powerful evangelism tool. Ryan shared how membership unifies churches comprised of different people with different perspectives, different backgrounds, and some even with different beliefs in certain areas. He said that church membership unifies the body of Christ and communicates to a divided and divisive culture that "we are going to say the same thing at the same time in the same way" about the gospel.

Church membership provides Christian Millennials with spiritual support by making them accountable to fellow church members and the church. Christian Millennials acknowledge that they grow in spiritual health when engaging in consistent rhythms of worship, discipleship, and fellowship, which can help them grow in their faith. Christian Millennials want to commit to churches where mentors, pastors, and leaders help them stay on track with their faith and make wise decisions. Christian Millennials believe in God's command to make disciples and desire accountability in fulfilling this commission. As Christian leaders evaluate their membership pathways, they must consider how spiritual support is vital in Christian Millennials' decision-making process.

A Voice to Vote

Additionally, from a congregationalist viewpoint, participants in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2 shared the importance of church membership, allowing congregants to share their

voices and vote for budgetary and staffing decisions. In Focus Group 1, Max explained it this way: "As opposed to someone who is just showing up and attending, church membership gives you a voting voice or some kind of pull in weighty church decisions."

In Focus Group 2, Andrea expressed that the benefits of church membership revolve around having a voice in big church decisions like delegating trustees and voting for deacons. These are items that nonmembers cannot participate in; therefore, church membership elevates one's voice in crucial leadership decisions. If it were not for the voting privileges, Andrea expressed how she sees little to no difference between the ability for someone to attend a church and the need for them to become a church member. When it comes to the importance of membership, she said, "I think membership looks different to different churches, and I think membership is kind of in the eyes of the beholder."

For congregationalist denominations of trinitarian Protestant churches, church membership is essential to congregational polity. Church membership allows members to make leadership decisions by nominating and voting for important leadership roles. Christian Millennials want to have a say in how leadership runs their church. In many churches, voting provides Christian Millennials with the opportunity for their voices to impact budgeting, staffing decisions, and policies.

Open Doors to Opportunities

Another benefit to church membership is the opportunities it provides for its members. Many large churches in the United States, especially megachurches, operate as a business. In Focus Group 2, Ava shared her experiences attending multiple megachurches throughout her adult Christian life. While discussing this topic, she mentioned formal church membership made little to no difference in her attendance, tithing, or worshiping routines; however, the advantage

of becoming a church member at that particular church was that she received access to the church's gym, early access to programming, and discounted concert tickets for worship events. These are all materialistic benefits to Ava; she sees no real spiritual difference between being a regular church attendee and a formal church member.

Other participants in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2 expressed how church membership leads to open doors to share the gospel and opportunities to go on mission journeys worldwide. In Focus Group 1, Eliza said,

> Churches are often involved in various outreach programs ranging from community service initiatives to mission trips. Being a member of a church provides me with an opportunity to get involved and make a positive impact on the lives of other people.

Other participants explained that formal members of various churches receive discounts on mission journeys, making it an enticing benefit for regular attendees to commit to formal membership. Since mission journeys are often expensive, the deal is a big incentive to join the church before going on a mission trip.

Church membership provides Christian Millennials with opportunities nonmembers cannot receive. These benefits include discounted concert tickets, scholarships for mission journeys, early access to programming, and opportunities to impact the lives of the people around them. While Christian Millennials view some of these benefits as materialistic, others view the discounts as a more affordable way to travel and share the gospel with others. In conclusion, Christian Millennials believe church membership offers its members various beneficial opportunities.

Research Question Three Summary

The third research question identified the perceived benefits of church membership according to practicing Christian Millennials. As mentioned by this study's participants, the top perceived benefit of church membership is finding a sense of belongingness in a religious

community. Church membership can provide a sense of belongingness and community for people who may otherwise feel lost or isolated. It can help people connect with others who share similar values and beliefs. This sense of belongingness leads to the development of spiritual families and provides Christian Millennials with support and encouragement. Another benefit of church membership is spiritual support. Members of churches often learn from each other and challenge each other to live Christ-centered lives and provide guidelines, discipline, and accountability for those struggling with sin patterns or decision-making.

Church membership also allows Christian Millennial congregants a voice to vote on budgetary and staffing changes, helping them feel more invested in the church body. Additionally, Christian Millennials identify opportunities for deeper involvement in church activities and mission trips as a benefit of church membership. These discounts give Christian Millennials of various income levels a fair chance to travel and share the gospel worldwide. Overall, Christian Millennials can identify numerous benefits of church membership for individual believers and the Christian community.

Research Question Four: Hesitations of Church Membership

The fourth research question asked, What are the perceived hesitations of becoming a church member according to Christian Millennials? The data from this study revealed several uncertainties about church membership. Participants in both focus groups emphasized how previous wounds from churches, pastors, or other church members make it increasingly harder to commit to church membership nowadays. Other hesitations included the public perception of a church, doctrinal beliefs, confusion on the importance of church membership, and a lack of ability to commit to weekly activities (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Hesitations about Church Membership

Prior Wounds Impact Present Decisions

Prior wounds from negative experiences with churches in the past are directly impacting the current decisions of Christian Millennials. In Focus Group 1, Jacob shared a story about losing his father. Jacob's family were active members of a local church. When his father died, Jacob was devastated. He shared how deeply hurt he was when no church member reached out to check on him or his family. The pain was so deep that Jacob ultimately walked away from the church and God for a season. He recalled, "My mom, she is the church type. She goes to church every time, she prays, and despite all that, my dad still died. So, I lost faith in God." He mentioned that because no one reached out from the church during that challenging time, it reiterated the internal lie that he was alone. Not until last year did Jacob find spiritual support from a pastor who taught him that God is still God in all situations.

Jacob's story inspired other participants in Focus Group 1 to share how their own or their parents' church-related wounds directly impact their hesitancy to join church membership. Chloe

recalled her parent's journey through a hurtful church experience that ultimately led to them moving and hopping around from church to church for the next several years. Even after they found a new church they liked, Chloe shared how hesitant they were to commit to becoming formal church members. For 6 years, Chloe's parents apprehensively attended their new church. Chloe felt her parents were "cheating themselves of the chance to be deeply known and loved by a faith community." However, after lengthy conversations with her parents, she finally realized how harmful past experiences can be for people. Chloe equated the fear of being hurt again to pouring salt in a wound. Then, Chloe shared how when someone one loves hurts them, it stings more, and when a church community does not live up to its godly standard, it can be detrimental for the people caught in the crossfire.

Another participant, Olivia, is currently in the process of finding a new church home. She shared that she was a part of this magnificent church community for many years until one leader stepped down and a new one replaced him. After one poor replacement after another, the church she once knew and loved looked utterly different and disbanded, displacing her and her small group of friends. As Olivia looks for a new church, she finds herself stuck between attending and committing, asking, "Is this going to be worth the time, effort, and emotion to connect to somewhere new when eventually, what if it falls apart again? What if that happens? What is the point?" For both Olivia and Chloe's family, there was a direct connection between fear of being hurt again and hesitation about joining church membership.

These were just a few examples of how church-related wounds impact Christian Millennials' decisions. Although there was not enough time for each participant to share their own story of church hurt, many participants agreed they had similar experiences in their own lives. Christian Millennials are hesitant to join church membership due to prior negative

experiences with churches. These negative experiences include incidents where they felt

unloved, unsupported, or betrayed by their church's community. The fear of being hurt again can

be a powerful deterrent for Christian Millennials when deciding whether to formally commit to a

church's membership. Christian leaders need to be aware of these concerns and take steps toward

creating welcoming and supportive environments for Millennial members.

The Public Perception of a Church

In addition to the scars from previous church wounds, participants in both focus groups

mentioned the importance of public perception. Several factors can influence the public

perception of a church, including the church's teachings, leadership, and involvement in the

community. If Christian Millennials commit to church membership, they will attach their name

and reputation to that church. If a church uses offensive rhetoric, shares political ideation, or

presents itself as judgmental, it is difficult for Christian Millennials to associate themselves with

that church formally. One participant said, "My witness to the gospel is going to be attached to

that, so I want to make sure I can cosign all of those things and say that I agree with those things

before committing."

Max mentioned he is unwilling to attach his name to a church through membership unless

he is willing to "go down with the ship." Max must fully believe and support the church's

teachings to be ready to put his reputation on the line for the church. Before joining his current

church, he asked himself, "If this church goes down, am I happy going down with it? Will I be

smiling, or will this ruin not only the church but myself, my witness, and my ability to move on

from this?"

Other Christian Millennials hesitate to become church members if the church is perceived

as judgmental or holds beliefs they believe are offensive. In Focus Group 1, Sarah and Peter

discussed the hesitations of church membership relating to the community's perception of the church. They do not want their name or professional career associated with negative perceptions. Christian Millennials are hesitant to join a church that could damage their reputation. Churches that wish to attract and retain Christian Millennials must be conscious of the language they use from the platform, avoiding offensive rhetoric, political alignment, or hateful judgmental statements. In the same way, Christian Millennials evaluate the online ratings, reputation, and people's reviews of nonreligious memberships, they evaluate churches through the same lens of public perception. Churches that are transparent about their beliefs and practices will help Christian Millennials make informed decisions about whether or not to join the church.

Doctrinal Beliefs

Another hesitation for Christian Millennials regarding committing to church membership lies in the vast array of doctrinal beliefs. Even inside the umbrella of trinitarian Protestant churches, there are several denominations, each expressing its unique set of opinions on various doctrinal issues. Some participants of this study have struggled to find a Protestant church accepting their and their friends' beliefs on baptism or sexual orientation. Ryan shared a story about a good friend who attends church with him regularly. Ryan's friend is almost entirely committed to being a part of the church body, except he is not a formal member. Ryan's friend attends regularly, worships, and serves consistently, but his view of baptism does not align with the church's view. Since Ryan attends a Baptist church, this church requires baptism by immersion as a requirement for their membership. Ryan's friend was sprinkled with water as an infant and does not believe someone must baptize him by immersion as an adult. Because of this disagreement, Ryan's friend will remain fully committed to his congregation but never become a member.

For other participants, lackadaisical preaching on certain doctrines can bring up hesitation when considering committing to church membership. In Focus Group 2, Andrea shared that the inability of a church to teach about the Trinity or explain that Jesus is the son of God creates hesitancy in her. For her, the things that make the most hesitancy are also the leading questions she asks regarding core beliefs when evaluating a new church. Andrea wants clear boundaries drawn and preached regarding biblically controversial topics. In Focus Group 1, Chloe mentioned similar desires, seeking to determine if a church teaches biblically accurate theology before committing to membership.

On the other hand, other participants expressed the need for churches to be inclusive and nonjudgmental. One participant said, "Some individuals are hesitant to join a church if they perceive a discrepancy between the teachings and actions of the members." To this point, Frank shared how many of his friends feel anxious about being judged or rejected by Christian church members, and that anxiety keeps them from committing to church membership. To him, churches must be inclusive communities where members welcome, value, and accept each other. Frank expressed that the fear of not fitting in or being unable to find one's place is the most considerable hesitation he has experienced regarding church membership.

Similarly, Parker wants to be a part of a church that does not send people away from God. He believes Christians are instructed not to judge anybody, and he looks for a church where church leaders help members retrace their steps back to God instead of isolating them. If he senses church leadership trying to control, manage, or manipulate people, he hesitates about joining that church.

Christian Millennials are hesitant to join church membership due to the vast array of doctrinal beliefs among Protestant denominations. Some Christian Millennials desire strict

doctrinal beliefs, while others expect modern-day churches to be more lenient. It is essential to understand that Christian Millennials highly value sound theology and profoundly want everyone to feel included and accepted. Amid this conundrum, Christian leaders must balance creating a culture of inclusion and acceptance while not compromising their doctrine.

Confusion About Membership

Next, Christian Millennials are hesitant about joining church membership simply because they do not understand the purpose and meaning of church membership. In discussions about church membership in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2, participants expressed their confusion about the difference between being a church attendee and a church member. Many of this study's participants see church attendees experiencing the same things as church members and wonder why the added level of commitment is necessary. In Focus Group 1, Olivia said, "So much of what I view as church membership can be accommodated in church attendance." In Focus Group 2, Ava asked, "If nothing ever kept me from being involved in the community, leading service trips, and making disciples out of disciples, then membership didn't help me." Outside of voting privileges, participants pondered the benefits of church membership versus church attendance and expressed their confusion on the importance of membership as a leading hesitation.

For some Christian Millennials, it is not just the hesitation about importance but also confusion about pursuing membership if desired. For example, Ava has experienced situations where she is new to a church, and the pastor gets on stage and welcomes the new guests, showing slides and sharing announcements. During this segment of the church service, Ava recalled a pastor saying, "If you want to become a member, get more info." However, Ava mentioned that the pastor never shared the importance of membership, what it entails, or a direct-action step to learn more about it. Ava said, "I really didn't learn about the importance of being a

member of a church until my 20s; it was just never really explained to me." Adding to Ava's lack of understanding about the importance of membership, Andrea mentioned how she was born into a small church where new babies were automatically members. In this church, no one talked about membership; people just assumed that if someone was born into a church family, they were a church member. As an adult, when Andrea and her husband moved to a new church in a different part of the United States, she realized she needed to learn more about what church membership entails and the membership process.

In both focus groups, one participant after another shared how churches do not adequately teach about church membership, leading to confusion and hesitation. Participants discussed how church membership was a process set up long ago and never reevaluated for today's culture. Some participants took responsibility for never researching or asking questions about membership, while others put the blame back on the church to communicate the importance of membership better. Olivia asked, "When is the right time to join?" During Focus Group 1, Olivia mentioned her hesitation regarding the appropriate time to wait or try out a church before becoming a member.

Christian Millennials are confused about the differences between being a church attendee and a church member. They wonder what benefits church membership provides that regular church attendance does not and if those benefits are worth the commitment. Christian Millennials are also confused about how to become a church member. In their perspectives, every church seems to have different protocols and processes for becoming a member. When the pathway to membership is confusing, Christian Millennials default to hesitation and will not commit until it becomes clear. Christian leaders working in churches can better articulate the benefits of

membership and the process of becoming a member. This clarity will help minimize the hesitancies of Christian Millennials when evaluating church membership.

Constraints of Commitment

Lastly, the constraints of commitment are a significant hesitation for Christian Millennials regarding church membership. For example, at her life stage and age, Ava has moved around a lot. Like many Millennials in their early 30s, Ava has spent several years building her career. Ava shared with Focus Group 2 that she is a self-made businesswoman and runs her own company. Much travel and moving around is involved in her industry, so Ava rarely stays planted in one place for long. Ava shared how difficult it is to commit to a church when she knows she might be traveling or moving again soon.

In this discussion, Ava expressed appreciation for the virtual church and the churches that allow her to watch Sunday services online when she is out of town. Because her current local church is small and does not broadcast its worship services, Ava splits her time occasionally attending in-person at her local church and watching a different church online. Ava said, "It's hard to become a member or invest in a place because I can't permanently be there all the time." Ava's inability to commit to a weekly routine prevents her from formally joining her local church membership.

Similarly, in Focus Group 1, Sarah hesitated about the time commitments of church membership, sharing how difficult it is to balance a spiritual schedule on top of an already full professional and social schedule. As Olivia discussed the difficulties of finding a balance between committing too soon and never committing, she said, "How long do I wait to see if it's a good fit?" To Olivia's point, participants discussed their hesitations regarding the appropriate

amount of time and energy to invest in a potential church home before deciding whether or not to commit.

In Focus Group 2, Frank brought up a point about how nonmembers are free to explore, whereas church members may feel constraints to stay committed to one church. Frank hesitates about church membership because if something in the church's value system changes and the church's values no longer align with his, he will feel trapped in his commitment. Frank believes people can achieve their spiritual goals outside of church membership.

Christian Millennials are busy people balancing work, school, family, social, and other commitments. There are several reasons commitment to the church raises hesitations for Christian Millennials. First, for Christian Millennials who travel for work, the lack of stability in weekday and weekend schedules provides uncertainty. They do not want to commit to something like church membership if they cannot fulfill their commitment regularly. Next, a lack of clarity on the expectations of commitment to church membership heightens hesitation among Christian Millennials. Lastly, some Christian Millennials desire the freedom to explore spiritual growth outside the confines of one singular church's membership.

Research Question Four Summary

The fourth research question identified the perceived hesitations of church membership according to practicing Christian Millennials. Negative past experiences and church hurt contribute to Christian Millennials' reluctance to join a church through membership. Most of this study's participants expressed a need to take church membership seriously. While several participants agreed that church membership is valuable, they shared stories of being hurt or let down by previous churches. These past experiences, personal or witnessed by family or friends,

directly contributed to Christian Millennials' hesitancy about joining church membership. For many, the fear of being hurt again keeps them from committing.

Other hesitations about becoming a church member include the church's reputation in the community. With so many stories of pastors stepping down for various reasons and many people in the community seeing churches as judgmental or homophobic, some participants noted their hesitation to associate themselves with a church formally out of fear it would end up being a deterrent between their gospel witness and their friends of various sexual orientations or identities. Confusion about the importance of membership and the lack of ability to commit to weekly services also hinder some Christian Millennials from committing to church membership.

Research Question Five: Commitment to Nonreligious Memberships

The fifth research question asked, What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to nonreligious memberships among Christian Millennials? The literature in Chapter Two provides enough evidence that Millennials are members of nonreligious organizations. Therefore, the researcher formulated this research question to examine the factors contributing to practicing Christian Millennials' continual commitment to nonreligious memberships. First, Research Question One addressed the factors contributing to evaluating and signing up for nonreligious memberships. Next, this research question addressed the factors that keep practicing Christian Millennials committed to these nonreligious memberships. According to the data, the community was the leading answer to this question. Other factors for commitment also include job enhancement and the consistency of a subscription's services (see Figure 9).

Figure 9

Factors for Commitment to Nonreligious Memberships

Community Leads to Commitment

The ability of Christian Millennials to make friends through nonreligious memberships is the leading factor for their commitment to these memberships. When discussing the importance of community, Olivia summarized her response by saying, "Community makes it worth the time and money for me to participate. The trainers at my gym invest in my life, not just in my health journey, but in my life in general." For Olivia, community goes beyond being physically present in the same room as other people; it includes a sense of belongingness and investment in other people's lives. Next, Max shared an example of a vocational organization he is a member of that focuses on providing fellowship opportunities for non-country musicians living in Nashville, Tennessee. Max informed the group that Nashville is commonly known as country music's "Music City." He discussed how being a non-country musician working in Nashville can be challenging and lonely. He claims that while this organization has an aspect of potential job advancement, the community keeps him committed to the organization's membership.

Other participants in Focus Group 1 discussed how their friends contribute to their membership decisions. One Millennial said she is a member of AMC's Stubs A-List, a monthly movie pass allowing members to watch up to three movies weekly in theatres. In her own words, she explained, "The reason I have it is so that I can go with friends. I mainly go for the social aspect, which is also why I am more unlikely to unsubscribe from it." She went on to share how if it were not for her friends, she might see a movie by herself occasionally, but she would not be a member of this program.

Christian Millennials make friends and find a sense of belongingness in the context of community. They are more likely to remain committed to nonreligious memberships if they build secure relationships with other members. Those close relationships continue to keep them committed to renewing their memberships. For example, as Olivia illustrated, Christian Millennials will involve themselves with fitness organizations or sports teams to find friends. They will remain committed if their teammates and coaches provide them with support and encouragement.

Career Enhancement Leads to Commitment

Two participants in Focus Group 1 and two in Focus Group 2 expressed career enhancement as a leading factor for commitment to nonreligious memberships. In Focus Group 2, Andrea said her company's policies require her to maintain certain memberships. She shared that some of her nonreligious memberships are simply out of obligation. Still, while mandatory, other memberships are also enjoyable, providing Andrea with opportunities to learn from like-minded people in her field. Andrea felt like these memberships enhanced her professional life and increased her knowledge of her area. Likewise, Ava also belongs to several nonreligious memberships related to her field of work.

In Focus Group 1, Max and Peter belong to various music organizations. Max lives in Nashville, a town known primarily for its country music artists, but he works in the popular music industry. Without his nonreligious membership to a musician's organization, Max indicated that Nashville would be lonely for a non-country musician to live and work. He values his nonreligious membership because it provides him with opportunities to socialize with other non-country musicians and provides him with a network of job advancement opportunities.

Unlike Max, Peter is not a musician but works in the music industry. Peter shared that he is a member of a musical society that allows him to vote for songs within a musical association. Alongside the other 4,000 members in this organization, Peter's membership enables him to vote for new music. He believes this voting privilege is important because it allows him to directly influence the songs that will be published, which furthers his career in the music industry.

Professional development is a leading factor Christian Millennials consider when committing to nonreligious memberships. Nonreligious memberships, especially career-oriented memberships, provide Christian Millennials with opportunities to learn new skills, stay up to date on industry trends, and network with other professionals in their industry. These memberships offer relationships with potential employers, clients, and colleagues. All of these are relationships that can be invaluable for career advancement. This study's participants shared stories illustrating how nonreligious memberships can be valuable resources for career enhancement. Christian Millennials will remain committed to these organizations' memberships when they feel they are gaining professional development, networking opportunities, and community.

Diversity in Learning Leads to Commitment

Along with the community and self-development aspects of nonreligious memberships, Olivia added to the discussion about the importance of learning from other perspectives within a community. For example, in book clubs or career-focused groups, it is vital for Olivia to fellowship with people who hold different opinions from her. Similarly, Sarah summarized commitment by explaining the value of responsibility regarding social, mental, and physical contributions to one's life.

Christian Millennials crave opportunities to learn from people who see the world differently than they see it. In Focus Group 1, Olivia mentioned that she joined her book club to intentionally seek an opportunity to learn from people with different perspectives. She claimed that her favorite organizations are the ones that provide her with consistent opportunities to learn from others. Olivia likes for others to challenge her beliefs and believes she grows because of their relationship and input. In Focus Group 2, Andrea mentioned something similar about enjoying opportunities to learn from others. Likewise, Andrea's book club also fulfills this role in her life.

Similarly, other participants echoed the need for diversity in learning. If a membership holds them accountable to hearing from multiple perspectives, they will remain committed to that organization. Contrarily, if an organization becomes an echo chamber for social or political views, Christian Millennials will quickly resign and seek new opportunities to learn from diverse perspectives.

Christian Millennials are open-minded and want to learn from people with different beliefs and experiences. They are hungry for growth and want to expand their horizons. They believe learning from other people of diverse opinions will strengthen their views and help them

grow as individuals. Christian Millennials are not afraid to be challenged. They want others to expose them to new ideas and perspectives. For participants in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2, nonreligious book clubs provide Christian Millennials with opportunities to hear and learn from others with different perspectives. As long as Christian Millennials continue to see growth and challenge, they will continue their commitment to nonreligious memberships like these book clubs.

Consistency in Subscriptions Leads to Commitment

Christian Millennials claim they will remain committed without reconsidering it as long as the membership or organization maintains its end of the bargain, for example, the price, values, and attributes advertised. Therefore, consistency in subscriptions leads Christian Millennials to ongoing commitment. In both focus groups, participants expressed their commitment to subscriptions as a "set it and forget it" mindset. In Focus Group 2, Ava provided an example of a subscription membership as she talked about paying for an entertainment membership that allows her to listen to music by various artists on her laptop while she works. This membership is on automatic payment, so she does not consider it often. It has just become part of her daily life.

In Focus Group 1, Peter said, "I mean, I have a ton of subscriptions. I have a movie pass, Netflix, Amazon Prime, all those things." Regarding these subscription-based memberships, Christian Millennials are less likely to micromanage their memberships or cancel them if they are not using them daily. Participants in both groups shared that unless a membership begins straying from its initially proposed offering or price point, they will not consider unsubscribing or canceling their memberships. Overall, the participants' responses in this study indicated that Christian Millennials are a committed and loyal demographic.

Research Question Five Summary

The fifth research question identified the perceived factors contributing to Christian Millennials' ongoing commitment to nonreligious memberships. As the participants in Focus Group 1 and Focus Group 2 discussed the factors contributing to their commitment to nonreligious memberships, they mentioned community, career enhancement, consistency in subscriptions, and opportunities to learn from diverse perspectives as some of the most influential factors contributing to their ongoing commitment to nonreligious memberships. Christian Millennials are social creatures that want to feel like they belong to a community of people. If the community members show loyalty to a Christian Millennial, they will return that commitment.

Additionally, if the price, benefits, and expectations of membership remain consistent, Christian Millennials will continue staying committed to their pre-existing memberships. Altogether, Christian Millennials believe these factors make membership more valuable to them and are motivated to remain engaged and loyal to their membership commitments.

Research Question Six: Commitment to Church Membership

The sixth research question asked, What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to church membership among Christian Millennials? Whereas Research Question Two addressed the factors Christian Millennials consider when joining church membership, Research Question Six examined the factors contributing to the continual commitment to church memberships. In both focus groups, participants expressed that their community of friends directly influences their commitment to church membership. The participants also shared their need for church leaders to see them as valued members of the church's community (see Figure

10). Lastly, Christian Millennials will remain committed to a church if its mission, vision, and action remain consistent with their beliefs.

Figure 10

Factors for Commitment to Church Membership

The Influence of Friendship on Commitment

For Christian Millennials, friends' decisions directly influence their commitment to church membership. In Focus Group 1, participants shared stories about how their friendships with other believers in the church directly influenced their commitment level to church membership. For example, Olivia shared how she remained a church member long after she stopped believing in the capability of the pastor simply because her friend group remained intact. Once her friends decided they no longer trusted the pastor, they collectively decided to leave the church, and Olivia went with them.

A participant in Focus Group 1 shared about their desire to find authentic connections with people in their churches. She said, "Once I find those relationships, they are hard to break." Jamie added that her friends give her a sense of belonging at church. She appreciates that they

see her and know her well. That keeps her committed to the church and the church's community. In Focus Group 2, Frank shared how his friends' mission and impact on the community influenced his commitment to the church. He desires to remain involved in a church where he and his friends can serve the community together.

Christian Millennials will most likely remain committed to a church with their friends. Christian Millennials understand how challenging it can be as an adult to find and make friends, so when they connect with people in a church, they are more likely to stay committed to that church. Suppose churches want to retain the commitment of Christian Millennials. In that case, they need to cultivate a culture of authentic community and provide opportunities for Millennials to build deep relationships with other believers.

A Valued Member of the Community

Throughout both focus groups, participants expressed their need to feel valued by church members. They did not want to be appreciated for what they provided to the church but simply because they are a child of God. In Focus Group 1, Max and Chloe claimed that if Christian Millennials feel like they are a tool for the church to use, they will reconsider their membership and leave. Max pondered the question, "How valued am I?" as he reminisced about leaving a church because they saw him as a tool to be used instead of a person with limits. He said he "needed a quieter and safer place to go to church." Now, at his current church, he feels valued as a church member for who he is, not what he can do, and that provides him with a feeling of safety and security necessary for a long-term commitment.

Subsequently, over half the participants in Focus Group 1 expressed their need to feel valued as community members within a church. Jamie mentioned how she appreciates when church members notice her absence and call to check on her. That contributes to her sense of

belonging. Chloe mentioned how she received multiple text messages from people after missing a Sunday service. She said, "It's about being seen when I am there and seen when I am not there. That's what keeps me coming back to a church." Olivia added that it can be as simple as a text message from the pastor or a friend that says, "Hey, we missed you on Sunday." It is people noticing their absence that keeps Christian Millennial church members consistently coming back week after week.

In Focus Group 2, Ryan shared how he wants to be a part of a church that lives out their beliefs. He wants to believe in the power of the community to do good for the gospel. Frank added that community increases accountability, and the deeper level of responsibility keeps him committed to regularly attending church. Frank enjoys when other church members show their care for him by holding him accountable to living a godly life and engaging in righteous behaviors. While accountability can include discipline, which is not always fun, this is a sign of love and support.

Christian Millennials desperately want to belong to a community. They want to know they have a place in God's family. In some ways, service opportunities are a double-edged sword. Christian Millennials want to share their gifts and be a part of a community that serves together while knowing they are valued, with or without their contributions. Christian leaders must be mindful of this balance to prevent Christian Millennials from burning out. Maintaining this balance will elongate Christian Millennials' commitment to church membership.

Consistency in Mission and Vision

Christian Millennials believe consistency in a church's mission and vision is crucial to their commitment. In Focus Group 1, Peter identified the similarities between how he evaluates his commitment to nonreligious and religious memberships. For example, he stated, "Church

membership is something to take seriously." He shared that he would only leave that commitment if his community of friends deteriorates or there is a destructive leadership failure. As for consistency, Peter said, "Similar to secular membership, if what I committed to is no longer consistent with what I signed up for, then I would consider leaving. For church, I signed up for certain values and theological commitments." In Focus Group 1, Sarah agreed with Peter's points. In Focus Group 2, Andrea said,

> I believe in the mission of our church. I trust the leadership of our church, and I have found a great community within our church. And for those three reasons, I feel confident being committed to the church where my membership currently lies.

Andrea also explained that she has no way of knowing what the future will hold and that someday, the Lord might randomly call her and her family to move to Colorado; however, in the meantime, she intends to remain fully committed to continuing her membership at her current church.

Ryan agreed with Andrea. He said, "Simply, I believe in the mission and vision of our church, and that is why I am still a member of our church." Ryan believes his church has a compelling mission statement and an ambitious vision statement. He actively wants to remain a part of that church's mission. That is what keeps him committed to his church membership. Similarly, Frank shared that his commitment to his current church is strong. He sees his church's positive impact on the people in the local community, and he wants to continue being a committed part of that transformative work.

Christian Millennials want to remain committed to church membership. However, if the church's mission and vision are inconsistent, Christian Millennials can view the church as untrustworthy and unreliable, making it challenging to maintain their commitment. Christian Millennials want to be a part of a church that lives out its mission, vision, and values in the community. Consistency across these three constructs builds trust and credibility for Christian

Millennials, making them more likely to commit to church membership and remain committed long-term.

Research Question Six Summary

The sixth research question identified the perceived factors contributing to Christian Millennials' ongoing commitment to church membership. In this study, participants expressed a need to feel safe and valued. Christian Millennials need to know that church members see them as belonging to the church community. Participants discussed the differences between being told that one belongs to a church family and the actual feeling of belonging. Many participants in Focus Group 1 appreciated how their pastors or fellow church members check in on them when they miss a Sunday worship service. Sometimes, it is as simple as a text message saying, "We missed you today," acknowledging their absence and making them feel genuinely seen and missed.

For Christian Millennials, commitment also relies on the church's ability to maintain its mission and vision. As long as a church stays true to its projected course, Christian Millennials will remain committed to their church's membership. Lastly, commitment hinges on their ability to be loved and valued as a child of God outside of the spiritual gifts or talents they contribute to the church. If needed, there must be freedom to take a break, and the church's leadership must see people as humans with limits. If church leaders ask members to serve, serve, serve, with no break, they will burn out and likely reconsider their commitment.

Evaluation of the Research Design

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how practicing Christian Millennials understand the nature of engagement with church and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. The researcher developed six research questions to

guide this study. The researcher engaged 13 participants split between two focus groups for this study. This study met all the guidelines and followed the protocols of Liberty University's IRB.

To evaluate the validity and reliability of this study, one must understand the advantages of utilizing focus groups over conducting individual interviews. For over 100 years, social researchers have used focus groups to collect qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Creswell and Creswell (2018) noted that this type of research is helpful when investigating societal phenomena. The researcher selected a focus group methodology for this phenomenological study because it allowed participants to express their thought patterns by sharing their lived experiences. These thought patterns impact the way Christian Millennials engage with memberships of all kinds, making it vital for researchers to study both religious and nonreligious experiences.

The virtual focus group setting allowed participants across the United States to converse collectively about membership engagement. Researchers often consider using focus groups as a means to connect the dots between what a group of people say and how they act (Conradson, 2005). Focus groups are one of the most practical methodologies that elevate the participants' voices to a level of authority as the experts on their thoughts, behaviors, and actions. The researcher hoped the group setting would allow participants to contribute their historical data to the collective discussion, and together, that data would help the researcher build a clearer picture of their social behaviors. Additionally, the consensus of the participants also contributed to the internal consistency and validity of the data. As often as one participant would share a story, several other participants verbally agreed or added their contributions or stories, enhancing the argument.

Evaluation of Research Dependability

The dependability of this study hinged on the researcher's ability to replicate the study successfully. Researchers demonstrate dependability through the ability of the researcher to document in-depth details about their methodological design so the research may be repeated with different participants, resulting in similar findings (Northcentral University Library, 2023). Therefore, this researcher carefully documented her methodology and protocols and replicated the focus group study for a second time. Both focus groups were conducted in similar settings online using Microsoft Teams; however, each group had a unique set of participants. The groups were asked the same questions and provided the same amount of time to respond to each question. Both groups contributed similar data to this study, confirming its dependability.

In Chapter Three, the researcher provided a detailed walk-through of the selected methodology in case additional researchers desire to replicate the study and to continue expanding the scope of this study in the future. Additionally, the researcher maintained an audit trail for each process step and saved all electronic data to a password-locked computer. During the coding process, the researcher utilized ATLAS.ti to organize and keep track of her codes. As part of the audit trail process, the researcher coded her field notes and the transcripts from each focus group, confirming accurate alignment.

Evaluation of Research Transferability

Transferability reflects the ability of qualitative data to be transferred to other contexts. In these focus groups, similar patterns emerged between the engagement and commitment factors for church and nonreligious memberships. The correlation between participant responses represented a general shared perception about the need to find community and belonging in memberships. The data revealed that similar factors contribute to Christian Millennials'

commitment to nonreligious memberships as they do to church membership. This alignment demonstrated that Christian Millennials apply their core values to other contexts, inside and outside the Christian context. While this researcher could only select a maximum of 16 sample participants, the fact that she received 829 pre-screening surveys indicates a desire for the sample demographic to discuss this topic. The researcher believes that further studies among an expanded sample population would likely enhance the trustworthiness of this study.

Chapter Summary

This study delved into the lived experiences of Christian Millennials and their engagement with church and nonreligious memberships. This study emphasized identifying the factors that shape those commitments. Chapter Four introduced the initial data findings, summarizing the participants' responses to each of the six research questions. This chapter also evaluated the methodology and protocols used for the data collection process. For this study, the data collection process involved conducting two virtual focus groups and asking participants open-ended questions about their membership experiences. Lastly, Chapter Four concluded with an evaluation of the research design, including an assessment of the dependability and trustworthiness of this study. The researcher's ability to replicate the focus groups using the same research questions, a similar virtual setting, and two unique sets of participants to yield similar results enhanced the dependability of the data findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This phenomenological study explored how practicing Christian Millennials understand their engagement with church and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. The methodology guiding this study was Husserl's phenomenological approach to gaining insights into the phenomenon of Christian Millennials' engagement with religious and nonreligious memberships. Following an in-depth analysis of the focus groups' data, this chapter presents the conclusions, empirical implications, and practical applications for the data findings. In Chapter Five, the researcher draws theoretical and theological conclusions linking previous research with her data's contributions and corroborating the data for enhanced dependability. Lastly, this chapter explores the research limitations and the researcher's suggestions for future research.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how practicing Christian Millennials understand the nature of engagement with church and nonreligious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. Practicing Christian Millennials were defined as anyone born between 1981 and 1996 who self-identifies as a Christian and attends a trinitarian Protestant church in the United States at least once per month. The methodology guiding this study was Husserl's phenomenological approach to gaining insights into the phenomenon of Christian Millennials' engagement rates with church and nonreligious memberships.

Research Questions

The researcher utilized the following research questions to guide this phenomenological study:

RQ1. What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join nonreligious memberships, such as fitness, health, and social clubs?

RQ2. What are the primary factors Christian Millennials consider when deciding whether to formally join church membership?

RQ3. What are the perceived benefits of church membership according to Christian Millennials?

RQ4. What are the perceived hesitations of becoming a church member according to Christian Millennials?

RQ5. What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to nonreligious memberships among Christian Millennials?

RQ6. What are the perceived factors contributing to commitment to church membership among Christian Millennials?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

After thoroughly analyzing the participants' beliefs, stories, and experiences, this study concluded that Christian Millennials strongly desire to find a sense of belongingness, value, growth, and transcendence in their religious and nonreligious memberships. The participants expressed a deep need for meaningful relationships, a sense of purpose, and personal, professional, and spiritual development opportunities. They value transparency, authenticity, and inclusivity in their communities. Because of this, organizations that can help them accomplish their goals attract Christian Millennials. Christian Millennials seek a more holistic and integrated approach to their spirituality that aligns with their values and enables them to feel a deeper connection to themselves, others, and the world around them.

Theme One: Belongingness

Belongingness was the first theme that emerged from this study. Christian Millennials base their membership decisions on the construct of belonging. New York University (2023) defines belongingness as

the quality or state of being an essential or important part of something. It implies how someone is a part of as opposed to apart from. Thus, a sense of belonging is a human need, just like the need for food and shelter.

Belongingness is more intricate than being acquainted with others. It is a deep desire to know other people and have other people know oneself. There are aspects of attention, support, acceptance, and closeness connected to belonging. Belongingness helps shape the meaning of one's life, providing one with a sense of inclusivity and purpose (New York University, 2023).

Christian Millennials have an innate need to find belongingness. They seek belonging by seeking friendships and communal experiences in book clubs, fitness programs, social clubs, and churches. According to this study's participants, Christian Millennials utilize nonreligious memberships to provide opportunities to connect with friends through shared experiences. For example, Christian Millennials see beyond the surface-level benefits of owning a movie theatre pass. On the surface, the benefit is discounted movie tickets, but Millennials are joining these types of memberships for their communal value. Memberships like this allow Christian Millennials to share everyday experiences with friends regularly.

Similarly, this study's participants sought opportunities to find belongingness in their relationships with personal trainers and workout partners. Christian Millennials want to build relationships with people who genuinely care for their well-being, thus leading to a fulfillment of belongingness. As Maslow (1943) claimed, consummatory actions typically have multiple motivations. For many Christian Millennials, the desire for a person to be known by others outweighs the other, more typical benefits of fitness memberships like increased health or better sports performance. In this case, the value for the participants was not in the physical fitness gains but in the trainer's ability to know the participants' lives, stories, struggles, and goals, providing them with a secure sense of belongingness. The influence these types of memberships

have on their overall life is the driving force for joining and remaining committed members of nonreligious organizations.

Christian Millennials also seek belongingness in religious memberships. Christian Millennials seek connection with other Christians, desperate to find a sense of belonging in churches and religious small groups. They look for communities where they feel valued and appreciated. Christian Millennials open up and share their lives with other believers in the context of religious communities. They will build friendship bonds if they find authenticity and acceptance in these relationships. Through these bonds, Christian Millennials build relationships with others, giving them a sense of belonging.

Christian Millennials have a strong need for belongingness that shapes the meaning of their lives. Joining communities where they feel valued and appreciated is crucial for them. It is vital for Christian Millennials to feel like other people value them and authentically know who they are as a person, creating a sense of belonging. This deep desire for belongingness motivates Christian Millennials to seek memberships where they can spend time with others, build friendships, and share honestly about their life experiences. Christian Millennials need to know that other people care about them and that they belong in society.

Theme Two: Value

Value was the second theme that emerged from this study. The theme of value includes humans' needs to build self-esteem, find purpose in life, and experience acceptance among others. Christian Millennials often seek to find value by engaging in professions or hobbies. This study revealed that Christian Millennials want to be a part of something bigger than themselves and to find purpose in serving others. They also need others to recognize their contributions to society and their inherent worth as a human.

When considering church membership, Christian Millennials will evaluate how a church's pastor shows value for their volunteers and members. Christian Millennials want churches' leadership to acknowledge their contributions to the church's community. However, Christian Millennials do not want church leaders to see them as a tool for the church to exploit, using them only for their talents and gifts; they want to be seen as unique and important individuals valued for simply being a child of God. Therefore, recognition and the freedom to take a break from serving and attend a church without any responsibilities is also essential.

Christian Millennials' need for value also elevates the importance of an organization's outreach opportunities. Christian Millennials have a profound desire to serve others. Church membership often provides Christian Millennials with more opportunities to serve on mission locally, nationally, and globally at a discounted rate, inspiring Christian Millennials to join the church to receive the discount. In these scenarios, Christian Millennials' desires to serve others might even outweigh their other hesitations about church membership.

The theme of value is an essential factor for Christian Millennials as they seek to find a sense of purpose and fulfillment in their lives. As this study examined the attitudes and behaviors of Christian Millennials towards memberships, the researcher concluded that Christian Millennials want to be a part of something bigger than themselves and find purpose in serving others. When considering church membership, Christian Millennials seek opportunities to utilize their gifts without feeling exploited for their talents. Instead, they want church leaders to value them as God's children. They appreciate the opportunity to worship and connect with others without feeling pressured to participate in leadership, activities, or programming. This freedom helps them recharge their batteries between high-output seasons and also helps them feel more connected to their church community, thus creating a secure sense of value.

Theme Three: Growth

Growth was the third theme of this study. Participants identified personal, professional, and spiritual growth as leading factors contributing to their investment in religious and nonreligious memberships. Christian Millennials crave opportunities to learn from people of different opinions and perspectives. They do not want to protect themselves in an isolated echo chamber but want to engage with people who will challenge their thought patterns and beliefs. Christian Millennials also need mentors who can encourage them to reach their full potential, grow spiritually, and develop professionally.

Millennials are at the age and life stage where professional growth is essential to their lives. Christian Millennials are always on the lookout for growth. They seek opportunities to learn through literature, sports, corporate organizations, and church in this quest for growth. For example, before committing to a nonreligious membership, Christian Millennials often ask themselves if that membership will enhance their lives, add to their knowledge, or enhance their career. If the answer is yes, the membership will contribute positively to their personal life or boost their professional career, then they have little to no hesitation in signing up for that membership. Christian Millennials take responsibility for their professional growth and work hard to achieve their goals; therefore, the growth potential is one of the driving factors Christian Millennials evaluate when committing to membership.

Hoffman (1988) noted that the construct of growth correlates with a human's need for self-actualization, which is "a continual process of becoming rather than a perfect state one reaches of a happy ever after" (p. 238). Christian Millennials understand that growth is a lifelong journey, not a destination. Therefore, they constantly seek opportunities to enhance their minds, bodies, and spirits. Because they are not afraid of different opinions and perspectives, Christian

Millennials will seek opportunities to engage with people who may share unpopular or minority views, hoping their conversations will expand their way of thinking. Christian Millennials do not mind trying new things if it leads to a more profound discovery of one's purpose in life.

Theme Four: Transcendence

Transcendence was the fourth theme that emerged from this study. Transcendence needs go beyond the personal self and include religious or spiritual experiences (Mcleod, 2023). Christian Millennials need to feel connected to something larger than themselves and larger than the boundaries of their physical life. However, unlike previous generations' social norms, Christian Millennials believe they can find profound spiritual experiences outside their organized religion. In the early 1970s, Maslow (1970b) predicted that more people who reject their inherited religion find transcendent experiences outside of organized religion. Maslow claimed that no matter how beautiful a religious symbol or eloquent a spiritual saying is, mindless repeating without action has little to no influence on people.

Christian Millennials are combating the influences of the cultural Christianity movement where, in the 1900s, the church became a once-a-week cultural tradition (Inserra, 2019; Nesbitt, 2022). With the increase of podcasts and digital media, this study's participants shared how their religious practices of worship, listening to sermons, and fellowshipping with other believers expand beyond the traditional Sunday morning church experience. Some Christian Millennials use digital media as a substitute for regular church engagement, while others use it as supplementary to church involvement.

There has been a national shift among the Millennial demographics in the United States. This shift is moving Christian Millennials from passive participants of cultural Christianity to a new resurgence of authentic religious experiences. These authentic religious experiences happen

throughout the week and enhance Christian Millennials' relationships with Jesus Christ.

Christian Millennials seek spiritual experiences inside and outside the church. For some, small

boosts of happiness, belonging, and acceptance in nonreligious memberships and communities

contribute to their spiritual needs. For others, Christian communities like small groups provide

safe spaces to learn and grow spiritually. Additionally, Christian Millennials seek spirituality

through religious media, music, and podcasts.

Christian Millennials are diverse people with a wide range of approaches to finding and

fulfilling their need for transcendence. However, one thing that many Christian Millennials have

in common is a desire for authentic religious experiences. They seek meaningful ways to

consistently live out their faith in tangible ways. Christian Millennials are open about the variety

of ways, inside and outside of church, that they fulfill this need. They are not shy about using

digital media, social communities, and small groups to experience spiritual transcendence.

While some Christian Millennials are comfortable exploring their faith outside of the

constructs of the church, others believe the confines of the biblical church community enhance

their spiritual development. They appreciate the boundaries churches provide their members and

experience spiritual growth regularly within their churches. According to this study's

participants, this happens in churches where the congregation puts their beliefs into action.

Christian Millennials are more comfortable exploring their spiritual beliefs in these churches,

where members live out the gospel's teachings and positively impact the community around

them.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical implications of this study include a modern-day correlation between the

needs of Christian Millennials, Maslow's (1954) motivation theory, and Howe and Strauss'

(2000) generational theory. Additionally, there is corroboration between Kelman's social influence theory and how Christian Millennials utilize digital media. Many social scientists study the nuances of the Millennial demographic, but few researchers connect the dots between Christian Millennials' needs and their consummatory and membership behaviors. However, the results of this study affirm the continual relevancy of Maslow's theory of motivation as it relates to consummatory behaviors.

Motivation Theory

The top four themes that emerged from this study include belongingness, value, growth, and transcendence. There is substantial overlap between the principles of these four themes and the constructs of Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs. Maslow presented belongingness, self-esteem, and self-actualization as the highest three needs of humans after physiological and safety needs. Additionally, decades of research affirm that social belonging is an inherent human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Le Penne, 2017; Maslow, 1943, 1968). Like all humans, Christian Millennials have an innate need to find and feel a sense of belongingness.

Maslow's (1954) research indicated that, theoretically, a person must meet their lower-tier needs before they are capable of searching for higher-tier needs. Maslow argued that the next level of need emerges once the person meets the previous needs to some extent. This theory is known as motivation theory. People often know this theory by its nickname, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, visually represented using a triangle.

Maslow (1954) demonstrated the process of identifying humans' needs in his publication *Motivation and Personality* by explaining that if hypothetically need A is only met 10%, then the person might not see need B at all. Whereas as need A becomes increasingly satisfied, need B will begin emerging. Once need A is satisfied a significant amount, need B may become more

predominantly visible to the person. Then, the person will focus on satisfying level B's needs instead of A's. Once need B is satisfied to a decent extent, then need C emerges.

Underneath the umbrella of Maslow's (1954) theory, Christian leaders must understand how the satisfaction of one need and the emergence of the subsequent need correlates to how modern-day Christian Millennials are making decisions about religious and nonreligious memberships. According to Maslow, once a person has secured their physiological and safety needs, the next level of need is love and belonging, which people can find through friendships, intimacy, acceptance, and the giving and receiving of love (Mcleod, 2023).

Next on Maslow's hierarchy of needs is esteem. Maslow (1943) claimed, "All people in society (with a few pathological exceptions) have a need or desire for stable, firmly based, high evaluation of themselves, for self-respect, self-esteem, and for the esteem of others" (p. 381). This study's themes of value and growth directly correlate to Maslow's description of esteem. Maslow believed that "human motivation is based on people seeking fulfillment and change through personal growth" (Mcleod, 2023, p. 10).

Self-actualization is at the top of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1943) described self-actualization as "the person's desire for self-fulfillment, namely, to the tendency for him to become actualized in what he is potentially" (p. 382). Self-actualization is a person's need to discover personal growth and meaning in life. Self-actualization is not static but is a continual process of becoming (Hoffman, 1988; Maslow, 1968; Mcleod, 2023).

Today, many Christian Millennials share similar characteristics with Maslow's (1970a) list of 15 characteristics of self-actualizers. Among these 15 characteristics are the abilities to tolerate uncertainty, accept themselves for who they are and where they are in their unique journeys, and experience a deep appreciation for essential life experiences. Self-actualizers and

Christian Millennials also share resistance to enculturation, a general concern about the welfare of humanity, a need to establish deeply satisfying interpersonal relationships with others, and a democratic attitude. Lastly, there is overlap in their spontaneity in thoughts and actions, creativity, and value of peak experiences.

These characteristics paint a picture of Christian Millennials' modern-day needs and motivations. Throughout this study, Christian Millennials identified their desire for others to accept them for who they are as a person. They shared their ability to accept others wherever they are in their unique journey. They enjoy being spontaneous in their actions, creative, and unconventional. Because of Christian Millennials' deep desire to build meaningful relationships with friends, they often engage in entertainment and social club memberships, seeking public arenas to share experiences with others. Lastly, Christian Millennials seek authenticity and honesty in the church's gospel communication and are unafraid to elevate their feelings above the voice of tradition. All these qualities and characteristics align with Maslow's (1970a) description of self-actualized people.

In 1970, Maslow added additional research to his motivation theory of hierarchized needs to include transcendence as a subcategory of self-actualization. Maslow (1970b) stated,

> Being religious, or rather feeling religious, under these ecclesiastical auspices seems to absolve many (most?) people from the necessity or desire to feel these experiences at any other time. Religionizing only one part of life secularizes the rest of it. (p. 40)

Regarding religion, Maslow (1970b) claimed that no matter how beautiful a symbol or eloquent a saying is, mindless repeating without action has little to no influence on people. He said, "But this is true only if he experiences them, truly lives them. Only then do they have meaning and effect" (Maslow, 1970b, p. 43). For this reason, Maslow predicted that more people who reject their inherited religion find transcendent experiences outside of organized religion.

Maslow's (1954) motivation theory supports this study's conclusions. As Maslow predicted, consummatory behaviors are attempts to meet physiological and psychological needs. The way Christian Millennials engage with religious and nonreligious memberships, seeking belongingness, value, growth, and transcendence, affirms the influence of motivation theory, consummatory behaviors, and a deep desire to fulfill one's needs.

Generational Theory

Looking at Maslow's (1943) theory through the lens of Howe and Strauss' (2000) generational theory, researchers begin seeing relationships between the upbringing of Millennials and the satisfaction of needs. According to Howe and Strauss, over the past 7 decades, there have been two significant shifts in the priorities of family policy. Whereas the parents of Baby Boomers focused on meeting the needs of the community and the parents of Generation X focused on meeting the needs of the adults, focuses began shifting in the late 1980s when the parents of Millennials began focusing on the needs of children (Howe & Strauss, 2000, p. 50).

Howe and Strauss (2000) noted that Millennials are unique because they are more affluent and better educated than any other generation. The parents of Millennials spent exorbitant amounts of time, significant energy, and resources on identifying and meeting the needs of their children. In *Millennials Rising,* Howe and Strauss (2000) said, "America has grown kid-fixated … more cash is being spent on them, as anyone who has recently visited a typical kid's bedroom can attest" (p. 14). Millennials' parents provided abundantly for their basic needs.

Because the general population of Millennials who grew up in the United States had their basic needs met early on, adult Millennials have the capacity to identify their need for the top three pieces of Maslow's (1943) hierarchical list. Today, Millennial adults are between the ages

of 26–42. In this study of Christian Millennials, the participants of both focus groups indicated that their greatest needs when seeking memberships, commitment, and community are components of belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization.

Recent studies by researchers reveal that the needs of Millennial employees also align with belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization (Gunn, 2014). Gunn (2014) explained, "Millennials are unafraid of job hopping to find a company that meets their demands and fulfills their needs. Whereas older generations had around five jobs during their career, most Millennials will hold upwards of twenty" (p. 3). Christian Millennials show similar behavioral patterns when considering church membership. Christian Millennials have no issue hopping from church to church until they find a church that aligns with their values, beliefs, and fulfills their need to belong.

The organizations that provide Millennials with opportunities to find belongingness, build friendships, learn from others, and strive toward reaching their full potential are the ones that are thriving. On the other hand, companies, organizations, and churches not actively providing these opportunities struggle to attract, engage, and retain Millennials. The findings of this study are invaluable for Christian leaders as they strive to comprehend the motivational and generation theories that influence the way Christian Millennials evaluate, join, and commit to memberships.

Social Influence Theory

Social influence theory is a framework for understanding how those around them influence people through compliance, identification, and internalization (Papagiannidis, 2022). The first construct of social influence theory is compliance, which refers to the influence of recognition. Incentives, compensation, and verbal recognition influence the motivation and

actions of people. The second construct of social influence theory is identification, which refers to how people see others around them. Influence occurs because individuals naturally adopt the attitudes, values, and behaviors of those around them. The third construct is internalization, implying that if a person believes these attitudes, values, or behaviors are valid, they will adopt them as their own (Papagiannidis, 2022). Lastly, social influence theory links how individuals' behaviors contribute to the identity they communicate to others.

First, this study's findings illuminate Christian Millennials' desire to learn and grow with others. Christian Millennials want to connect with people who are like-minded and differently opinionated. Participants in this study claimed a dual need to fellowship with like-minded individuals and a desire to learn from and be surrounded by people who think, believe, and hold different opinions from them. Christian Millennials are trying to find the balance between these two types of relationships.

Christian Millennials deeply desire to learn from non-likeminded individuals through book clubs and social organizations. They want to expand their horizons and hear different opinions, values, and viewpoints. With the increase of digital media and social media, Christian Millennials can now learn from various people they would have never had an opportunity to connect to without the internet. It is no accident that Christian Millennials come across these people and perspectives because they actively seek opportunities to learn from people different from themselves.

Second, participants revealed that Christian Millennials base their membership decisions on the lifestyle they want to communicate publicly. When discussing nonreligious memberships, participants shared how they select memberships that project the image of the lifestyle they want

to communicate to society. If a membership enhances that image, Christian Millennials will likely consider joining.

Third, Christian Millennials seek the influence of the gospel message in churches. They are not looking for a highly-produced concert or performance. They need to see the pastors of a church living out the mission and vision communicated. Christian Millennials have opportunities to experience good music and productions at concerts, events, and venues outside of church. They desire the churches they join to focus on the gospel, community, and serving others. Before joining a church, Christian Millennials consider how the church's reputation matches the reputation they want to portray to their family and friends. If they believe the church will positively influence their lives, they will consider joining.

Understanding social influence theory can help organizational leaders better understand how Christian Millennials are influenced by those around them and how these influences affect their social and religious affiliations. By recognizing the importance of personal growth, the influence of the gospel, and the church's reputation, Christian leaders can better serve the needs of Christian Millennials and help them achieve their goals.

Theological Implications

The data from this study revealed that Christian Millennials have a distinct need to find belongingness, value, growth, and transcendence. All four of these concepts are biblical constructs. However, many Christian Millennials seek opportunities to experience these things outside the church. Therefore, the theological implications of this study are vast. First, Christians belong to God, the church, and each other. Second, humans have inherent worth because God created them in his image. Third, the Bible instructs Christians to pursue growth. Fourth, the

principle of transcendence is a biblically based need to be a part of something larger than oneself.

Theological Implications of Belongingness

Genesis 1–2 lays out a framework for humanity. God made humans in his image, both male and female. God designed humans to have an innate need for relationships, first with himself and secondly with one another. Genesis 2 depicts a picturesque image of human life before sin, where man and woman lived in harmony with God. God met all their needs, and the first humans found a profound sense of belongingness in their relationship with God (*New International Bible*, 1978/2011).

However, sin quickly disrupted these relationships, leaving humans feeling isolated, alone, and ashamed. The good news of the gospel message is that God sent Jesus Christ to die for the humans' sins and restore their relationship with him (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, 2 Corinthians 5:18–20). A relationship with Christ means Christians are never truly alone; however, until God fully restores the world, Christian Millennials are caught between knowing about the belongingness in their relationship with Christ and the reality of living in a broken world full of disappointment and fragmented relationships.

Psalm 68:6 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011) says, "God sets the lonely in families." First, God assigned people to social groups, like the priest to the Levites and Joseph to David's lineage (Linneman, 2019). Then, God affirmed that humans belong to his family. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, Matthew 19:14). There is security in the fact that God says his children will belong to him forever (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, John 8:35).

Linneman (2019) explained the good news of belonging is that "in Christ, we can find true belonging, for true belonging is being simultaneously fully known and fully loved" (p. 5). The church is not just a building or an organization. It is a global community of believers united by their belief and faith in Jesus Christ. Christian Millennials should find a sense of belonging in the church; however, their demographic struggles to find their place in the Protestant church. The theological implication of people's needs to belong should propel Christian Millennials to invest in their relationship with God and other believers. However, because the church community is not meeting their needs, Christian Millennials seek belonging outside the church, searching in social clubs and fitness memberships to find friends who will love and care for them. Christian leaders must address why Christian Millennials are not finding belonging in the church and immediately begin cultivating a welcoming community of belongingness.

Theological Implications of Value

There are two significant theological implications of Christian Millennials' need for value. First, Christian Millennials, like all people, have inherent value and worth because God created them in his image. God's image is worthy of love and respect. God values all humans regardless of ethnicity, race, or social class, giving them dignity. He values them to such a great extent that he sent his son to die for their sins to restore their relationship. Second Corinthians 5:14 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011) says, "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died."

Second, Christian Millennials' need for others to value them reminds them of humanity's brokenness, revealing profound insecurity. This need is rooted in people's desire for others to love, affirm, and accept them. However, when Christian Millennials root their need for value in the praise of humans, it sets them up for disappointment as humanity will inevitably disappoint

them. However, God teaches humans that they are worthy of love and respect because he loves them unconditionally.

God assigns humans value. A deeper relationship with God will invoke a more profound sense of security and self-worth. Psalm 139:13–14 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011) says, "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well."

Theological Implications of Growth

The Bible teaches Christians that growth is vital to life. God designed humans to grow up in wisdom, stature, and love. Proverbs 1:5 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011) says, "Let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance." Samuel was a prime example of someone who "continued to grow in stature and favor with the Lord and people" (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, 1 Samuel 2:26). In the New Testament, Hebrews 6 instructs Christians to move beyond the basic teachings of Christ and grow in maturity. In 1 Peter 2:2–3 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011), Peter described Christians as newborn babies, needing metaphorical milk to grow.

Numerous biblical passages discuss growth, teaching Christians that God is a God of growth. Jesus modeled growth for humans, and the Holy Spirit empowers believers to grow (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011, John 16:8; Luke 2:52; Matthew 5:48). Christian Millennials' need for growth is a biblical, God-given need. As Christian Millennials enter their late 20s to early 40s, they are adults with spiritual, emotional, and mental growth needs. Because of this, they are looking to pastors, mentors, and disciple-makers in the church for wisdom.

In a secular world full of cultural immorality, Christian leaders have a unique opportunity, a God-given command to disciple Millennials. In Matthew 28 (*New International*

Bible, 1978/2011), Jesus commissioned Christians to make disciples. Today, Christian leaders must live out this command, serving as mentors who guide, teach, and empower Christian Millennials to grow in their relationships with Christ. This type of mentorship can offer Christian Millennials wisdom, support, accountability, and the growth they intensely crave.

Theological Implications of Transcendence

People often use "transcendence" to describe the concept of connecting with something larger than oneself, most often on a spiritual level. Transcendence moves past one's physical needs and introduces humans to their need for spirituality. The theological implications of transcendence mean God is a spiritual being, greater than the laws of physics, time, and space. Because of God's holiness and sovereignty, he demands worship. When people worship God, they identify him as Lord and express gratitude for his sovereignty and grace.

Christian Millennials understand their need to personally connect with God on a spiritual level. Their souls crave to worship Jesus Christ, the Lord and Savior of their lives. However, they often do not know how to approach God best. Spirituality for Christian Millennials expands beyond Sunday mornings in a 1-hour church service. Christian Millennials can access podcasts and worship music on their personal media devices, enabling them to worship anywhere. Their generation is trying to figure out where and how to best connect with God every day of the week.

Another way Christian Millennials express their worship of God is by obeying his commands to love and serve others. Organizations, including churches that provide opportunities to serve others, attract Christian Millennials. The participants in this study revealed a profound desire to serve their neighbors and the less fortunate in their communities. John 13:34 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011) says, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." James 1:27 (*New International Bible,* 1978/2011)

says, "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world."

Christian Millennials are fulfilling their need for transcendence by worshiping God through obediently serving others. Therefore, church leaders need to orient their church's focus on mission, teaching their congregations to experience God through serving his people and providing opportunities for them to serve others regularly. By doing this, church leaders provide Christian Millennials with the opportunities they crave to connect with God through serving others.

Empirical Implications

LaSalle University (2022) explained that, empirical research is "based on observed and measured phenomena and derives knowledge from actual experience rather than from theory or belief" (p. 1). Rather than presenting additional quantitative statistics about Christian Millennials' engagement rates with church membership, this study sought to elevate the life experiences of practicing Christian Millennials to discover the "why" behind their commitment and hesitations toward memberships. This qualitative approach gives leaders a deeper understanding of Christian Millennials' behavioral patterns.

While the researcher cannot change the positive or negative experiences Christian Millennials have had engaging with trinitarian Protestant churches in the United States, she successfully elevated their personal stories to develop a deeper understanding of their generation's beliefs, motivations, and actions. The empirical information revealed through this study identifies the critical factors concerning various membership types.

The findings from this study should inspire Christian leaders to develop strategic engagement plans highlighting the core beliefs and values of Christian Millennials. If Christian

Millennials do not feel heard, valued, or seen, they will continue leaving the church and searching for belongingness in nonreligious settings. Therefore, church leaders must use this empirical data to expand their understanding of Christian Millennials and the motivating forces that drive their engagement rates.

Christian leaders must create opportunities for Christian Millennials to share their stories and experiences with church membership. Leaders can accomplish this opportunity through small group discussions, focus groups, or one-on-one conversations. In these conversations, Christian leaders must listen carefully to these Millennials' feedback, maintaining an openness to hearing about their positive and negative experiences. Then, Christian leaders must develop a strategic engagement plan in response to the needs of Christian Millennials, ensuring their church provides a welcoming and authentic environment for Millennials to find belongingness, value, growth, and transcendence. By taking these steps, Christian leaders can develop a deeper understanding of Christian Millennials and build long-term relationships that will keep them engaged in church membership.

Practical Implications

In addition to theoretical, theological, and empirical implications, this study provides several practical implications. By examining the results of this study, Christian leaders gain insights into how practicing Christian Millennials evaluate religious and nonreligious memberships. One of the leading themes from this study's data was Christian Millennials' need to feel a sense of belongingness.

Christian Millennials evaluate how they see themselves belonging to a community before joining it. If Christian Millennials do not experience belonging in Christian contexts, they will search elsewhere to find belongingness. Suppose a church has a generational gap, and Christian

Millennials do not see other people their same age or life stage present in the church's community. In that case, they will bypass that church and continue looking elsewhere for acceptance and membership. As the study's participants expressed their desire to see generational diversity in their churches, they noted that they would quickly leave the church without committing if there was no programming or community for their age range or life stage. Christian leaders must create opportunities and foster multigenerational relationships, making Millennials feel like they belong to the larger Christian community.

Since Christian Millennials need others to value them, it is essential to remember them when they are present or absent. Christian leaders can intentionally focus on identifying Millennials in their organizations and personalize their interactions with those members to increase a sense of belongingness. Small and simple things go a long way. For example, sending a quick text message letting a Millennial know someone noticed they were absent at a fitness class or church small group may be more impactful than leaders realize. By implanting personalized touches, Christian leaders can build stronger relational bonds with Christian Millennials, thus increasing their retention rates.

Christian leaders will benefit from noting that Christian Millennials can differentiate between baseless words and authentic expressions. Participants agreed that there is a difference between saying someone belongs and that person experiencing and feeling belongingness. The words and actions of the Christian community must align, and a church's values must create a communal and welcoming culture. If the words of leaders do not align with the actions of current members, Christian Millennials will be disinterested in committing to the church.

Another practical implication is Christian leaders' ability to learn from the experiences of this study's participants. Based on the participants' responses, there are many perceived benefits

to becoming a church member, including accountability, personal growth, and spiritual guidance. However, many church leaders have disappointed Christian Millennials, leaving deep scars and a heightened sense of hesitation about committing to church membership. Every day, Christian Millennials weigh the risk of getting hurt again against the benefits of church membership.

Church leaders may benefit from acknowledging the reality that sinful humans run churches and take responsibility for their leaders' shortcomings. Christian leaders, in religious and nonreligious settings, can also develop policies, protocols, training, and evaluation patterns to increase staff accountability, thus increasing the safety of their organization's participants. As Millennials become the parents of future generations, implementing new policies and protocols now will prevent future generations from experiencing the same high rates of church hurt as Millennials, impacting the future of church membership among Generation Z, Generation Alpha, and those to follow.

Next, many Christian Millennials do not understand the difference between regular church attendance and formal church membership. Christian Millennials wish churches would teach about the biblical importance of membership and talk about it more than in the announcements section of a worship service. If there were a greater understanding of the biblical value of membership, Christian Millennials would be more inclined to commit to membership versus continuing to be regular attendees without formal association. Therefore, church leaders must regularly teach their congregation about church membership's biblical importance. They must also evaluate their membership onboarding processes, ensuring it is smooth and accessible.

Christian Millennials desire personal, professional, and spiritual growth. Christian leaders will secure committed members if they invest in their Millennial relationships. According to this study's data, a committed Christian Millennial is loyal and will endure internal disagreements

and even leadership shortcomings as long as their relationships with friends remain intact. The commitment of Christian Millennials to their communities leads to commitment to religious and nonreligious memberships.

Research Limitations

Research limitations represent "weaknesses within the study that may influence outcomes and conclusions of the research" (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019, p. 261). Presenting these limitations is an ethical element of scientific study and contributes to the validity of the findings. The limitations of this study included the participants' ability to accurately recount their membership engagement and describe the factors contributing to their ongoing commitment to nonreligious and church memberships.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) reiterated that it is essential to note that the researcher has limitations in addition to the participants. For this study, the extent of the researcher's knowledge, bias, and ignorance contributed to the researcher's limitations. Because this study was voluntary, there was potential for self-selection bias, meaning only the people who desired to share their experiences enrolled in the study. According to scholars, another limitation in qualitative studies may be social desirability bias, where participants share what they believe to be favorable answers to the researcher's questions rather than authentic responses (Kenrick & Neuberg, 2002; Krumpal, 2013; Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019).

For this study, additional uncontrollable factors included the participants' gender, ethnicity, and geographical location in the United States. There is additional space for future researchers to continue studying the topic of membership engagement among Christian Millennials by delimiting the sample population to gender-specific participants, between ethnic cultures or churches, and within specific regions of the United States.

Further Research

Considering the study's findings, limitations, and delimitations, the researcher recommends the following directives for future research. First, the researcher recommends conducting a comparative study where future researchers analyze participants' responses by gender. The researcher also recommends studying the nature of engagement with religious and nonreligious memberships among Christian Millennials of multi-ethnic churches in the United States.

This study focused on examining the nature of engagement of practicing Christian Millennials; however, it may be beneficial to the field to zoom the lens out slightly and study the more expansive demographic of churched Christian Millennials. Therefore, the researcher recommends conducting additional research on the nature of engagement among churched Christian Millennials associating with the Christian faith but attending church less often than practicing Christians.

Next, the researcher recommends splitting the Millennial population into three life stages in addition to the birth year. For example, because of their birth years, the Millennial population consists of a 15-year age range comprised of individuals in three major life stages: single, married, and married with children. These Millennial participants share a standard age range according to their birth year. However, the researcher wonders if their lifestyle choices and decision-making processes differ according to their life stages. Therefore, the researcher recommends future studies of Christian Millennials' engagement with memberships delimitated by life stage.

For future study, the researcher recommends exploring the implications of Christian Millennials' ability to find a sense of belonging through nonreligious memberships outside of the

church in addition to or instead of within the church. The researcher also recommends subsequent studies to evaluate the religious upbringings of Christian Millennials and how their religious upbringings contribute to how they approach church membership.

The researcher also recommends finding additional avenues for the Christian Millennial population to express their views and beliefs regarding religious and nonreligious memberships. This researcher believes, from the sheer volume of interest in this study, that the target population is eager to discover a forum where researchers can hear their voices and listen to their opinions and experiences. Lastly, the researcher recommends comparing these opinions and experiences to those of older and younger generations.

Summary

Christian Millennials are desperate to find belongingness in communal contexts. The Christian Millennial demographic is willing to search inside and outside the church, pay for memberships, and engage in various activities to seek a sense of belonging. Other significant themes include value, growth, and transcendence. Motivation theory, generational theory, and social influence theory provide a framework for understanding the theoretical implications of this study. The data from this study illuminated how modern-day Christian Millennials need to feel a sense of belonging, contribute value to their communities, and grow personally, professionally, and spiritually. These factors drive Christian Millennials to engage with religious and nonreligious memberships.

While this researcher cannot predict all the ways this study will influence the future, she can reasonably speculate that the findings of this study will directly impact the future of Protestant churches in the United States. The researcher recommends that Christian leaders utilize the insights of this study to develop strategic initiatives geared toward engaging and

retaining Millennials in their local churches. The researcher recommends that church leaders

consider teaching more frequently about the biblical importance of membership and evaluate the

generational diversity of their congregations, ensuring there is a place for Millennials to fit in.

The researcher recommends that Christian leaders elevate their relationship equity with Christian

Millennials, frequently reminding them, in words and action, of their inherent value and worth.

As Peter said in Focus Group 1, there is a "difference between being told you belong here to

actually belonging." Christian leaders need to heed caution not to be the type of leader who tells

people they belong with vain and empty words. As revealed by many stories shared by the

Christian Millennial participants of this study, words without action can do significant damage

and contribute to the sting of preexisting church wounds or scars. For Christian Millennials, prior

church wounds influence their current-day decision-making when it comes to making decisions

about church membership. Christian leaders must not fail their members like those who failed to

reach out to Jacob after his father passed away. The pain of loneliness led Jacob to walk away

from the church and God for many years. It took Jacob several years to return to church, just like

it took Chloe's parents almost a decade to trust the church again after being wounded by their

previous church's leadership failures.

Every Millennial represents a soul in God's kingdom, and Christian leaders are

responsible for stewarding and shepherding Millennial souls well. By enhancing their ministries

and evaluating their engagement opportunities through the lens of belongingness, value, growth

opportunities, and transcendence, Christian leaders can change the trajectory of Millennials'

engagement with church membership, influencing not only the Millennial generation itself but

their children's generations and generations to come.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Permission to Reprint Data in Table 1

CCC Marketplace

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Order Date	07-Nov-2023	**Type of Use**	Republish in a thesis/dissertation
Order License ID	1414478-1		
System ID	475197407	**Publisher**	Gallup Press
		Portion	Chart/graph/table/figure

LICENSED CONTENT

Publication Title	Gallup	**Country**	United States of America
Author/Editor	Gallup, Inc.	**Rightsholder**	Gallup, Inc.
Date	01/01/1999	**Publication Type**	Website
Language	English	**URL**	Gallup.com

REQUEST DETAILS

Portion Type	Chart/graph/table/figure	**Distribution**	Worldwide
Number of Charts / Graphs / Tables / Figures Requested	1	**Translation**	Original language of publication
		Copies for the Disabled?	No
Format (select all that apply)	Electronic	**Minor Editing Privileges?**	No
Who Will Republish the Content?	Academic institution	**Incidental Promotional Use?**	No
Duration of Use	Life of current edition	**Currency**	USD
Lifetime Unit Quantity	Up to 999		
Rights Requested	Main product		

NEW WORK DETAILS

Title	Engaging an Unengaged Demographic	**Institution Name**	Liberty University
		Expected Presentation Date	2023-12-01
Instructor Name	Stephanie F. Prince		

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

Order Reference Number	N/A

The Requesting Person / Organization to Appear on the License   Stephanie F. Prince

REQUESTED CONTENT DETAILS

Title, Description or Numeric Reference of the Portion(s)	Changes in Church Membership by Generation, Over Time	**Title of the Article / Chapter the Portion Is From**	U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time
Editor of Portion(s)	N/A	**Author of Portion(s)**	Gallup, Inc.
Volume / Edition	N/A	**Issue, if Republishing an Article From a Serial**	N/A
Page or Page Range of Portion	N/A	**Publication Date of Portion**	2021-03-29

SPECIAL RIGHTSHOLDER TERMS AND CONDITIONS

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Appendix B

Permission to Reprint Figure 2

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Author/Editor	Gallup, Inc.	**Rightsholder**	Gallup, Inc.
Date	01/01/1999	**Publication Type**	Website
Language	English	**URL**	Gallup.com

REQUEST DETAILS

Portion Type	Chart/graph/table/figure	**Distribution**	Worldwide
Number of Charts / Graphs / Tables / Figures Requested	1	**Translation**	Original language of publication
		Copies for the Disabled?	No
Format (select all that apply)	Electronic	**Minor Editing Privileges?**	No
Who Will Republish the Content?	Academic institution	**Incidental Promotional Use?**	No
Duration of Use	Life of current edition	**Currency**	USD
Lifetime Unit Quantity	Up to 999		
Rights Requested	Main product		

NEW WORK DETAILS

Title	Engaging an Unengaged Demographic	**Institution Name**	Liberty University
		Expected Presentation Date	2023-12-01
Instructor Name	Alvin Dockett		

ADDITIONAL DETAILS

Order Reference Number	N/A

The Requesting Person / Organization to Appear on the License	Stephanie F. Prince

REQUESTED CONTENT DETAILS

Title, Description or Numeric Reference of the Portion(s)	Church Membership Among U.S. Adults Now Below 50%	**Title of the Article / Chapter the Portion Is From**	U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time
Editor of Portion(s)	N/A	**Author of Portion(s)**	Gallup, Inc.
Volume / Edition	N/A	**Issue, if Republishing an Article From a Serial**	N/A
Page or Page Range of Portion	N/A		
		Publication Date of Portion	2021-03-29

SPECIAL RIGHTSHOLDER TERMS AND CONDITIONS

The chart must remain the same as it is in the source content. No changes to the labels, scales, data points, etc. are allowed. Use of the chart must include a proper citation listing Gallup as the source and include a link or URL to the source content on Gallup's website.

Appendix C

IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

July 28, 2023

Stephanie Prince
Alvin Dockett

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-116 Engaging an Unengaged Demographic: A Phenomenological Study of Christian Millennials' Engagement with Religious and Nonreligious Memberships

Dear Stephanie Prince, Alvin Dockett,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix D

Focus Group Discussion Question Prompts

The researcher will ask the following questions to the participants in each focus group:

1. What types of memberships do you currently belong to, and how long have you belonged to each membership?

2. What factors do you consider when deciding whether to join nonreligious memberships such as fitness, health, entertainment, or social clubs?

3. What factors do you consider when deciding whether to join church membership?

4. From your perspective, what are the benefits of church membership?

5. From your perspective, what are the hesitations about becoming a church member?

6. If you are a member of a nonreligious organization, what factors contribute to your commitment to nonreligious memberships?

7. If you are a church member, what factors contribute to your commitment to church membership?

Appendix E

Recruitment Materials

Social Media: Facebook

ATTENTION MILLENNIALS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Christian Leadership at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to explore the nature of Christian Millennials' engagement with church and non-religious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. To participate, you must be born between 1981 and 1996, self-identify as Christian, and attend a Protestant church in the United States at least once per month (Protestant church must be a trinitarian church). Participants will be asked to participate in one virtual focus group which should take about 75 minutes to complete. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please click the hyperlink below. An information sheet is provided on the first page of the pre-screening survey. Participants who complete the focus group study will receive a $25 Amazon e-gift card via email as compensation for their time.

To take the pre-screening survey please click here [https://forms.office.com/r/fqtBwmKAiM]

Social Media: Instagram

ATTENTION MILLENNIALS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Christian Leadership at Liberty University. The purpose of my research is to explore the nature of Christian Millennials' engagement with church and non-religious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments. To participate, you must be born between 1981 and 1996, self-identify as Christian, and attend a Protestant church in the United States at least once per month (Protestant church must be a trinitarian church). Participants will be asked to participate in one virtual focus group which should take about 75 minutes to complete. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please click the link in my bio or direct message me and I will send you a link to the pre-screening survey. An information sheet will be provided on the first page of the pre-screening survey. Participants who complete the focus group study will receive a $25 Amazon e-gift card via email as compensation for their time.

Email

Dear [Potential Participant],

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Ph.D. in Christian Leadership. The purpose of my research is to explore the nature of Christian Millennials' engagement with church and non-religious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be born between 1981 and 1996, self-identify as Christian, and attend a Protestant church in the United States at least once per month (Protestant church must be a trinitarian church). Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in one virtual focus group which should take approximately 75 minutes to complete. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential. Participants will be assigned pseudonyms to use in the focus group.

To participate, please click here to complete the pre-screening survey. If you meet my participant criteria, I will contact you to schedule you for a focus group.

An information sheet is provided on the first page of the pre-screening survey. This document contains additional information about my research. After you have read the document, please complete, and submit the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read it and would like to take part in the study.

If you choose to participate, participants who complete the focus group will receive a $25 Amazon e-gift card via email as compensation for their time.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Prince
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix F

Pre-Screening Survey

1. Full Name _____

2. Phone Number _____

3. Email Address _____

4. Date of Birth _(MM/DD/YYYY)___

5. Do you self-identify as a Christian?

   o   Yes

   o   No

6. Do you attend a Protestant church in the United States at least once per month (Protestant

   church must be a trinitarian church)?

   o   Yes

   o   No

7. Are you a member of a(n) _____ organization? [Check all that apply]

   o   Civil

   o   Church

   o   Country Club

   o   Entertainment

   o   Fitness

   o   Gym

   o   Health

   o   Professional

   o   Religious

- Social

- None of the above

- Other _____

Appendix G

Information Sheet

Title of the Project: Engaging an Unengaged Demographic: A Phenomenological Study of Christian Millennials' Engagement with Religious and Non-Religious Memberships
Principal Investigator: Stephanie F. Prince, Doctoral Candidate, Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be born between 1981–1996, self-identify as a Christian, and attend a Protestant church in the United States at least once per month (Protestant church must be a trinitarian church). Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to explore the nature of Christian Millennials' engagement with church and non-religious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:
1. Participate in one virtual focus group which will take approximately 75 minutes to complete (audio and video recorded).

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include providing church leaders who are struggling to attract, engage, and retain Millennial church members with a better understanding of how Christian Millennials engage in religious and non-religious memberships and the factors that shape those commitments.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Transcripts will be stored on Microsoft OneDrive, a secure password-protected and file-encrypted cloud service. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. At the conclusion of the focus group each participant will receive $25 Amazon gift card via email. Any participant who chooses to withdraw from the study before completing the focus group will not receive any compensation.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Stephanie F. Prince. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ████████████ or ████████████████. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Alvin Dockett, at ████████████████.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects

research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations.

The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers

are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of

Liberty University.

Appendix H

Email to Participants

Dear [Participant Name],

Thank you for offering to participate in my Christian Millennials Focus Group!

You are scheduled to participate in a focus group on **Friday, August 4 at 9:00am (CST).** Your assigned pseudonym for the group will be ███████.

Please use the following link to join the focus group. Instead of signing into a Microsoft account, simply click, "continue as guest," and enter ███████ as your screen name.

CLICK HERE to join the meeting. If prompted, enter the following info:

Meeting ID: ███████████
Passcode: ████████

I am looking forward to hearing your insights!

Thank you,

Stephanie Prince
Doctoral Candidate
███████████████

Dear [Participant Name],

Thank you for offering to participate in my Christian Millennials Focus Group!

You are scheduled to participate in a focus group on **Thursday, August 10 at 6:00pm (CST).** Your assigned pseudonym for the group will be ███████.

Please use the following link to join the focus group. Instead of signing into a Microsoft account, simply click, "continue as guest," and enter ███████ as your screen name.

CLICK HERE to join the meeting. If prompted, enter the following info:

Meeting ID: ███████████
Passcode: ████████

I am looking forward to hearing your insights!
Thank you,

Stephanie Prince
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix I

Focus Group Outline

Introduction – 3 minutes
- Welcome.
- Thank you for participating.
- Review of the information sheet.
    - The expected risks are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.
    - Participation in this study is voluntary.
    - Participant responses will be kept confidential. Please do not discuss other people's responses outside of this group.
    - As a reminder, you reviewed the information sheet as part of the pre-screening survey.

Focus Group Discussion Prompts – 70 minutes
The researcher will set a timer allowing for 10 minutes per question.

1. What types of memberships do you currently belong to, and how long have you belonged to each membership?

2. What factors do you consider when deciding whether to join nonreligious memberships such as fitness, health, entertainment, or social clubs?

3. What factors do you consider when deciding whether to join church membership?

4. From your perspective, what are the benefits of church membership?

5. From your perspective, what are the hesitations about becoming a church member?

6. If you are a member of a nonreligious organization, what factors contribute to your commitment to nonreligious memberships?

7. If you are a church member, what factors contribute to your commitment to church membership?

Conclusion – 2 minutes
- Thank you for participating.
- You will receive a $25 Amazon e-gift card as gratitude for your time commitment. The gift card will be emailed to you within one business day.

Appendix J

Email to Non-Selected Participants

Good morning,

Thank you for offering to participate in my Christian Millennials focus group study by filling out the pre-screening survey.

Currently, this study is full.

Thank you,

Stephanie Prince
Doctoral Candidate
███████ ████