MILLENNIALS and MISSION



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JIM and JUDY RAYMO

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Published by William Carey Library, an imprint of William Carey Publishing
10 W. Dry Creek Circle
Littleton, CO 80120 | www.missionbooks.org

Melissa Hicks, editor
Brad Koenig, copyeditor
Josie Leung, graphic designer
Rose Lee-Norman, indexer

William Carey Library is a ministry of Frontier Ventures
Pasadena, CA 91104 | www.frontierventures.org

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Raymo, Jim.

Millennials and ministry : a generation faces a global challenge / By Jim and Judy Raymo.

pages cm.
ISBN 978-0-87808-536-1 (print), ISBN: 978-0-87808-881-2 (ebook)
1. Church work with youth. 2. Church work with young adults. 3. Generation Y--Religious life. I. Raymo, Judy. II. Title.

23 22 21 20 19 Printed for Worldwide Distribution

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MILLENNIALS: A GENERATION UNLEASHED?



Over the years as I have worked alongside, trained, led, and learned from younger people in Europe, Australia, Canada, and the USA, I have been inspired, bewildered, amused, and frustrated (as I am certain they have been with me!) by their challenging contributions. Throughout this journey I have sought to understand and respond intelligently to generational differences. My aim in this book is to explain what I have learned in the process, particularly in the context of cross-cultural ministry.

The Millennial generation (born 1982 to 2002) in North America is being introduced daily to a growing and tumultuous level of pressures and threats. Every generation faces challenges, struggles, and danger. What perhaps makes this generation's situation unique from those of the past is its overly optimistic expectations and immediate exposure to global events.

How will this generation of Christians respond to both dangers that seem pervasive and the global biblical mandate to go to all nations with the teachings and life of Jesus? Will fear and overwhelming desire for safety rule its choices? Will protecting family, job security, advanced health care, and retirement funds be seen as necessary insurance for a future without pain? Will disturbing challenges be seen as opportunities for the church to demonstrate its core ethos and sacrificial roots, or as difficulties to be avoided?

> I'm a bit of a nutter, so bear with me, but after every question I want to give a passionate, emphatic, "No! No! We will prevail! We will go! We will serve, we will sacrifice, we will LOVE." This is our battle cry! Yes, I'm ready God!

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> Let's go. I'm ready to serve the poor and feed the hungry, comfort the outcast, go to the hard places." (all said in my head, of course, I'm comfortable, sitting in an American coffee shop) *Shasta Feltman, Millennial Blog*

Historically the church has stepped up and demonstrated what it proclaimed, that Christ lived out a sacrificial life and death and calls His people to do the same. Comments by Kristin Kobes Du Mez illustrate this:

> A series of devastating plagues played an instrumental role in the seemingly miraculous growth of the early church . . . Contemporary accounts describe widespread panic as family members abandoned their loved ones at the first sign of disease, sometimes tossing them into the roads even before they had died . . .
>
> Christians, however, soon gained a reputation for their boldness in the face of death . . . the bishop Dionysius, for example described how Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ and with them departed this life serenely happy: for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.
>
> I was struck by the contrast between the sacrificial behavior evidenced by early Christians and the reputation of many American Christians today. Looking back over recent American history, it is discouraging to note how fear, rather than selfless sacrifice, often seems to have motivated Christians to act.[1]

The response of the early church to the plagues differs sharply from the church's initial reaction to the contemporary crisis presented by the HIV pandemic. Rather than offering compassion and selfless

[1] Kristin Kobes Du Mez, "Plagues, Terrorism, Recessions and Christian Witness," http://www.gospelandculture.org (accessed November 23, 2010; site discontinued).

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help, the evangelical church tended to condemn the victims and treat them as outcasts. Panic and shunning of those within the church who suffered from HIV reflected the general public's confusion and fear.

One of the saddest commentaries on the church and this crisis is found in the book *Burden of a Secret* by Jimmy Allen, former president of the Southern Baptist denomination. His daughter-in-law contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion and passed the disease on to her two infant sons before the family realized she was ill. Allen's son was on the staff of a church in Colorado. Seeking counsel and consolation, he met with the senior pastor to inform him of the family's illness. He was asked to resign immediately. Additionally,

> We suspected that someone who attended the church and also worked in the hospital had spied the family's health records and had spread the word that the Allens had AIDS. In a matter of days, both Scot and Lydia were unemployed . . . Lydia was asked to remove Matt from the church daycare center. The family was asked not to return to the church.[2]

After their baby son died of AIDS, no Christian school would accept their kindergartener. Only a public school finally agreed to educate their older son, Matt.

> Lakewood Elementary School, a public school, exemplified far more of the Spirit of Christ than did many of the institutions that bear his name. It wasn't that the people of Lakewood did not have their fears and reservations about a child with AIDS. But where there was fear, they overcame it. Where there was ignorance or confusion, they sought to provide the truth. For instance, when Mrs. Marian Hammert, Matt's kindergarten teacher at Lakewood Elementary School, was told an AIDS child would be in her classroom, she knew so little about the subject that she had to have a special briefing . . . At the end of Matt's first year of school, however, Mrs. Hammert came to our

[2] Jimmy Allen, *Burden of a Secret: A Story of Truth and Mercy in the Face of AIDS* (Nashville: Moorings, 1995), 66.

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> family members and said, "I love Matt so much. If there is any problem next year, I am also qualified to teach first grade. I would be glad to shift grades to be his teacher."[3]

What a tragic role reversal from the church's earlier heroic sacrificial responses to crisis! We all feel fear when threatened. I found myself facing fear of AIDS when in the process of adopting one of our sons, we were told his birth mother was HIV-positive at the time of his birth. My first response was that we should withdraw. I told my wife, "I would never want to have an AIDS child in our family who might infect the rest of us. We would probably be simply housing him to usher him to his death." As I thought about this before the Lord, I recognized my fear was really more about what others would think of us and how they would treat us.

My wife's logical and compassionate response was twofold: the little boy had been tested throughout his first year and had not shown any evidence of the disease, but even if he should have the virus, whose responsibility is the care of these children if not Christians'? We ended up going ahead to adopt Daniel, who at the time of this writing is ten years old, healthy, and a lively addition to our family.

In the face of numerous global crises including the HIV pandemic and international terrorism, will the younger generation step up to care for its neighbors and to share the gospel in life and words? Will self-protection be their legacy, or will the Christians of this generation set self-interest aside and offer themselves to extend the kingdom of God?

After my first book[4] was summarized in an *EMQ* article,[5] I was engaged in a radio interview addressing call-in questions from listeners. A parent posed this question: "Are you really seriously suggesting that

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[3] Ibid., 115.

[4] Jim Raymo, *Marching to a Different Drummer: Rediscovering Missions in an Age of Affluence and Self-interest* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1996).

[5] Jim Raymo, "Reflections on Missionary Malaise," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (October 1997): 442–46.

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we release our children to places around the world that are dangerous and without all the benefits we've built in America?" Yes, I am serious. Is this question the normal response of the Christian population? With millions of people, here and abroad, still untouched by the gospel, and in the face of many "dangers, toils, and snares," will this generation hesitate because of fear and worry or obey the Great Commission and move forward confidently because Jesus said, "Go"?

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