Making Space for Millennials

A Blueprint for Your Culture, Ministry, Leadership and Facilities
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What is your favorite place to connect with God? To connect with others? How about the best place to spend time in personal reflection?

To some extent, every church facility is an effort to harmonize these and other competing demands. The buildings where communities of faith gather are expected to do triple duty (at least) as spaces for worship and prayer, friendship and mentoring, and spiritual self-discovery. But if you’re like many people, the place you feel closest to God is different from the place you enjoy spending time with friends—and both may be different from the place you go to be alone with your thoughts. To complicate matters, different people have differing ideas about the right “feel” for a place to connect with God . . . to say nothing of their divergent opinions about where best to interface with others or turn inward in meditation.

It’s trendy in some circles to decry the importance of space. Why spend any more resources than absolutely necessary on walls, windows and carpet? What’s really needed is a functional area that houses worship, teaching and fellowship. Anything more than utilitarian is irrelevant at best and wasteful at worst—maybe even sacrilegious.

But such an attitude ignores human experience. Are we not intent on developing spaces for our own comfort? When hosting others in our homes, do we not clean, straighten and rearrange, so as to give them the most inviting and comfortable experience possible? In our work lives we acknowledge the necessity of space that is both functional (to be productive) and comfortable (to be creative). If such efforts are good enough for us and for our social guests, are they not also good enough for God and our spiritual guests?

Any visit to Europe would be incomplete without a visit to a few of the spectacular cathedrals. For anyone born and raised on this side of the Atlantic, the scope of time those churches represent can be dizzying. “Let’s take a look at the new pipe organ,” the tour guide might say, before showing you...
an instrument installed 150 years ago. It’s “new” because the old organ was made 400 years ago. The structures themselves were often constructed over the course of several generations or even centuries. What made our spiritual forefathers invest so much time, talent, and treasure into these buildings? Why doesn’t such an investment in church facilities seem appropriate today? Has our culture lost its respect for the physical trappings of a sacred space, or do we just have different trappings (pipe organ out; $25,000 projector in)?

In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Victor Hugo waxes eloquent on the decline of cathedrals and of their impact on Christianity. Claude Frollo, the archdeacon of the cathedral, points to a book, then to Notre Dame and predicts, “This will replace that.” As new printing technologies made the written word more accessible, books would supplant churches as the primary means by which everyday people encountered God.

His prediction came true. Cathedrals were built not only to house teaching and worship, but to proclaim the gospel and convey doctrine, theology and Scripture. Now we use other technological means to do the same. In Hugo’s day, the primary means was the book. Today it’s the blog, the podcast, Twitter and Instagram.

With the advent of new ways to communicate the gospel, we can afford to expect much less of our buildings.

It is unlikely that any generation—let alone Millennials, who are so at home in the digital space—will seek to recreate the physical spaces of the past. But the question is worth asking: What are we losing along the way? As we develop religious spaces fit for the twenty-first century, how can we also maintain the timeless principles of sacred space that have been developed through centuries of architecture and design?

The old churches were built to connect people to God. The altar, the stained glass windows, the soaring ceiling that pointed to the heavens—every element was designed to create a link between human and divine.

Generally speaking, modern churches are *not* designed with this goal in mind. In fact, many modern churches are explicitly constructed not to look and feel too much like a religious place. A modern church is designed to host activities, and these activities point the people to God. But strip away those activities and you might as well be at a community college or a performing arts center or, heaven help us, an airport terminal.

Most of our modern churches have excellent areas set aside for corporate worship, group learning and community-building. But they leave something to be desired when it comes to personal reflection and prayer.

How do these changes impact Millennials? They may or may not be the next “greatest generation,” but they are certainly the next largest. With about 78 million of them in the US, they are an important demographic for any organization to understand, and churches are no exception.

To understand the principles of design that best resonate with Millennials,
Barna Group partnered with CKN to conduct a multi-phase research program. First, we recruited Millennials from a variety of religious backgrounds to tour through urban cathedrals, suburban megachurches, city parks and coffee shops. Along the way we asked them what they liked and didn’t like about each space, what they would use different spaces for, and how they might change them if given the opportunity.

Once we had observed Millennials in the field, we better understood the scope of issues confronting churches as they work to optimize their buildings for the next generation. We then developed an online survey and gave it to a nationally representative sample of 18- to 29-year-olds. The combination of in-depth interaction and observation, along with the precision of a large-sample survey, drew into stark relief the key characteristics today’s churches must develop if they want to create a sacred environment that meets the needs of Millennials. (For a detailed description of the research, see the Appendices.)

Of course, every person is unique and has her own particular preferences. But there are commonalities—both culturally and within generational cohorts—and knowing these can help leaders make informed decisions about the design of their facilities.

**Descriptions of Church**

When we asked Millennials to choose words to describe their vision of the ideal church, a two-thirds majority or greater picked the words on the left:

- **Community** (78%)
- **Sanctuary** (77%)
- **Classic** (67%)
- **Quiet** (65%)
- **Casual** (64%)
- **Privacy** (22%)
- **Auditorium** (23%)
- **Trendy** (33%)
- **Loud** (35%)
- **Dignified** (36%)

### Pastors, Youth Workers & Mentors

- Does your gathering space offer clear visual cues—and what additional visual elements could help Millennials answer the questions “Where am I?” and “What’s expected of me?”

- Where do people in your community go for respite—and what could your church do to offer space and atmosphere for peaceful reflection?

- How well do your indoor and outdoor spaces facilitate cultural discernment, reverse mentoring, vocational discipleship, life-shaping relationships and experiences of God—and what could change to make space for Millennials in these areas?
4.1 SELECT THE WORD THAT DESCRIBES YOUR “IDEAL” CHURCH

- SANCTUARY: 77%
- COMMUNITY: 78%
- PERFORMANCE: 56%
- AUDITORIUM: 23%
- PRIVACY: 22%
- RITUAL: 44%
- CLASSIC: 67%
- CASUAL: 64%
- MODERN: 60%
- TRENDSY: 33%
- DIGNIFIED: 36%
- TRADITIONAL: 40%

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You may associate the words “sanctuary,” “classic” and “quiet” with more traditional church buildings—yet less than half of survey respondents preferred the word “traditional” over “modern.” (See Figure 4.1.) And herein lies a cognitive dissonance common to survey participants. Many of them seem to aspire to a more traditional church experience, in a beautiful building steeped in history and religious symbolism, but they are more at ease in a modern space that feels more familiar than mysterious.

Our field groups each visited a modern church facility (Willow Creek Community Church in Chicago and Buckhead Church in Atlanta) and a cathedral-style church (St. James Cathedral in Chicago and Church of the Redeemer in Atlanta), and we discovered a similar dissonance among the field participants as in the survey results. At Church of the Redeemer, for example, group members appreciated the Christian symbols grandly displayed in the sanctuary, as well as the magnificent stained glass windows, sweeping arches and soaring ceilings. They felt it was an appropriate space for serious activities such as prayer, coping with tragedy and communing with God, and sensed the spirituality of the place was deep-rooted. At the same time, however, they were concerned about how they would fit in—*If I visit for a service, do I need to wear dressy clothes?*—and a few participants, especially unchurched people, felt overwhelmed or even intimidated by the spiritual intensity of the space.

The same group visited Buckhead Church, and found inviting common areas to connect with others (armchair seating along the edges of an open lobby) and to spend time in personal reflection (smaller private rooms furnished with comfy couches). However, there was no obvious place conducive to connecting with God. One group member suggested that worshiping among a crowd of people in the auditorium might provide that connection, but void of those activities, there was nothing about the facility itself to make a person feel that connection with God. Overall, the “un-churchy” atmosphere of the space, which had more of a corporate vibe than a holy feeling, and the absence of Christian symbols failed to suggest transcendence.

Two metaphors may help to capture the complex relationship between young adults and worship spaces. First, cathedral-style churches seem to Millennials like fine china compared to the everyday dishware of Buckhead and Willow Creek. Fine china is considered higher quality and therefore desirable for special occasions—but it’s not appropriate for Tuesday night takeout. We can also see this instinct in nearly two-thirds of survey participants’ preference for the word “casual” (64%) over “dignified” (36%). Everyday dishes are casual, convenient and familiar, and that makes them preferable for ordinary use.

Second, we talked with the field groups about Starbucks versus the independent coffee shop, and many participants agreed that, while they might aspire to the ambiance, community and authenticity of the indie coffee house, they usually find themselves at Starbucks. What Starbucks lacks in the intangibles, it makes up for by being convenient and offering a predictable,
familiar experience. Millennials might aspire to the rich religious atmosphere and deep-rooted spirituality of Redeemer or St. James, but most would probably find themselves at Buckhead or Willow Creek on any given Sunday.

When we analyzed the results from the word pair section of the survey, we found a couple of interesting countertrends. Several word pairs elicited a reverse preference among one segment—that is, one population segment preferred the opposite word from a majority of Millennials.

4.2 Countertrend: Exiles’ Preferences

- **Traditional vs. Modern**
- **Flexible vs. Authentic**
- **Exciting vs. Relaxed**
- **Upbeat vs. Low-key**
For example, Exiles—church dropouts who still take their faith seriously but feel caught between church and culture—preferred “traditional” when everyone else preferred “modern,” and “authentic” over the majority’s preference for “flexible.” (See Figure 4.2.) They also preferred “low-key” while a majority in other groups preferred “upbeat.” This may reflect their preference for a low-pressure visitor experience.

In another section of the survey, we showed participants images of elements commonly found in North American church buildings, and asked them to choose the one most appealing to them personally. The first series showed four images of different kinds of worship spaces.

Just under half of participants (44%) selected Sanctuary 2 as most appealing with the remaining 56% split almost evenly among the other three images. Those who profess a faith other than Christianity (32%) were more likely than average (20%) to prefer Sanctuary 3; this image is devoid of Christian symbols.

Sanctuary 2 was the “Goldilocks” space for many respondents—not too big, not too small. Just right. It’s big enough to retain some anonymity as a visitor—the marginally churched (63%) and those who are not practicing Christians (50%) preferred it more strongly than the average—but small enough to feel part of a community. Parents with children under 18 (50%) also preferred Sanctuary 2 more than average.

This pattern squares with the feedback we got from the field groups: for many, size is a necessary evil rather than a selling point. Participants acknowledged that a successful church would grow and therefore need to increase the size of its services and facilities. But they also expressed a bit of tacit distrust for very large churches. One young man put it starkly: “It seems like a really big business.”

The one advantage of a large church is the option to blend in, especially for those who are less than comfortable visiting.

**Visual Clarity**

“It kinda feels like a bait-and-switch.”

This was one of the strongest negative statements we heard from field group participants. It was a comment from an unchurched participant who had toured one of the modern churches. She, along with the rest of her group, was enamored by the creativity of various rooms and common areas, the attention to detail and the quality of the materials. Overall, she said, it was an impressive location.

Later, however, after visiting the downtown cathedral, with its elaborate iconography and traditional layout, she was less impressed with the modern church. She realized how little indication she’d seen that the modern church is
4.3 Select the sanctuary image that is most appealing to you

- Male: 20%
- Female: 16%
- Married: 15%
- Unmarried: 19%
- Single, never married: 16%
- Children: 14%
- No children: 21%
- HS or less: 22%
- Some college: 14%
- College Grad: 17%
- <$40k: 20%
- $40k - $60k: 18%
- $60k+: 16%
- Churched: 22%
- Marginally churched: 15%
- Unchurched: 17%
- Other faith: 24%
- No faith: 20%
- White: 15%
- Black: 18%
- Hispanic: 20%
- Nonwhite: 21%
- Northeast: 18%
- South: 15%
- Midwest: 17%
- West: 22%

Barna/CKN, October 2013, N=843 U.S. adults ages 18 to 29 years old. The segmentation percentages above are among Millennials who participated in the study.
a religious institution. The more she thought about it, the more frustrated she became. She felt the cathedral presented itself honestly, while the modern church was trying to pass itself off as something else.

We heard similar perspectives from multiple participants in both cities. Once they viewed the rich religious décor of the cathedrals, they wished there were more of it in the modern facilities.

On the whole, Millennials have a strong preference for unambiguous visual clarity. Practically speaking, field group participants expressed appreciation for clear signage and directions for how and where to find information. More philosophically, Millennials want to be able to answer the questions “Where am I?” and “What’s expected of me?” by looking for cues in their surroundings. Cathedrals and traditional churches have such cues in spades, yet modern churches are often designed expressly to be ambiguous.

This is a wise strategy if a church’s goal is to reach people for whom “church” is loaded with negative connotations. For example, the seeker-friendly movement set about to attract people who had a negative personal history with traditional churches and wanted something different—so modern churches aimed for different. But this younger generation of seekers doesn’t have the same history with traditional churches. Some have grown up with such buildings, but the childhood frame of reference for many others is the modern, un-churchy church facility. Still others have no frame of reference at all. When the field group entered the lobby area of Buckhead Church, a large modern church campus north of downtown Atlanta, one participant asked, “If I came here on Sunday morning, would I have to pay?” That level of unfamiliarity with churches is not rare among Millennials.

They want a church to be open and honest about what it is and about what it is trying to accomplish. Most expect a Christian church to look . . . like a Christian church. When it doesn’t, some feel off-balance and perplexed.

Wanting clarity in their church experience is most prevalent among Millennials who are peripherally connected to Christianity or with a community of faith. When we asked survey participants, “How important is it to you that a church building looks like a church?” answers fell somewhat evenly across the spectrum from “very” to “not at all.” Six in 10 young adults fell somewhere in the middle, and the overall trend was toward less importance. Skewing higher, however, were the six in 10 notional Christians (59%)—that is, those who self-identify as Christian but are not born again—who said it is somewhat or very important to them that a church looks like a church. This is 12 percentage points higher than the average (47%). A similar proportion of the marginally churched (58%) reported it is somewhat or very important. (Those who are marginally churched have attended a service, other than a funeral or wedding, within the past six months but not within the past month.)
4.4 Millennials & Visual Clarity

How important is it to you that a church building look like a church?

6 IN 10 FALL IN THE MIDDLE—SAYING IT IS ONLY SOMEWHAT OR SOMewhat NOT IMPORTANT

How important is it to you that a church building look like a church?

- Catholic: 73%
-Churched: 60%
-Notional Christian: 59%
-Practicing Christian: 59%
-Hispanic: 57%
-Protestant: 53%

47% of all Millennials (% very or somewhat important)

- Black: 51%
-Other Faith: 43%
-White: 43%
-Unchurched: 38%
-Evangelical: 28%
-No Faith: 20%

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In addition to sacred architecture, religious iconography—crosses, stained glass and altars, for example—also play an important role. They connect people to the traditions and history of Christianity. Congregants are connected to the church through the ages, rather than only being connected to each other in the here and now. (This is the longer view of the “communion of saints” referenced in the Apostles’ Creed.) Despite much conventional wisdom, young people often place great value on the old way of doing things: witness the resurgence in cloth diapers, gardening and even knitting! Rather than relegating religious symbols to the storage closet, modern churches might rather find innovative ways to incorporate them into their décor.

The second series of images in the survey showed four different altar areas with varying levels of ornamentation and iconography.

**Q&A WITH KEVIN MILLER**

*Kevin Miller is Associate Rector of Church of the Resurrection in Wheaton, Illinois (www.churchrez.org). He is a featured preacher on PreachingToday.com and a contributor to LeadershipJournal.net.*

**What are three to five tips or best practices you could offer to churches who are considering a refresh on their spaces?**

- Put Millennials on the fundraising team.
- Put Millennials on the design team.
- Visit community restaurants and stores frequented by Millennials.
- Think “organic” in materials and color palette.
- Add tons of space for strollers and for toddler play.

**How can churches meet this draw among Millennials toward traditional spaces with their equal desire for comfort?**

The winning combination is “cathedral” for your worship space and “coffee shop” for your gathering space. But it’s important that your worship theology and practice is right for a cathedral-like space. Does it draw on traditional sources? Does it incorporate any music written before this century?
4.5 SELECT THE ALTAR IMAGE THAT IS MOST APPEALING TO YOU

Barna/CKN, October 2013, N=843 U.S. adults ages 18 to 29 years old. The segmentation percentages above are among Millennials who participated in the study.
Altars 2 (33%) and 3 (37%) were the overall favorites. Both are unambiguously Christian and are more traditional in appearance than 4. Analysis of faith and demographic segments reveals a few interesting trends. Nearly half of non-mainline Protestants (48%) preferred Altar 2, with an even stronger preference among evangelicals (55%). By contrast, Catholics (63%) and notional Christians (48%) were more likely than average to prefer Altar 3. About half of those professing a faith other than Christianity (51%) found Altar 1 most appealing—it lacks overt Christian iconography—and three in 10 of those with no faith (29%) also chose Altar 1. Both these proportions were much higher than the average (19%).

Looking at ethnic, age and other demographics, we find that Hispanic

**Q&A WITH DEREK DEGROOT**

Derek DeGroot, AIA, is an architect for Aspen Group, a design-build firm in the Midwest that works exclusively with churches. He is passionate about creating physical spaces that connect people, and he speaks and writes regularly on this topic. You can find some of his work at AspenGroup.com.

**Why do you think it’s important for churches to consider their space and architecture? How do these elements impact worship and community?**

As the missional renaissance kicked up dirt over the last decade, a school of thought formed around the idea that spaces aren’t important. Instead, minimalists contended we should maximize resources into our missions and ministry, saving whatever we could in facility costs. Recently, however, more churches are realizing that the best approach is a balance of stewardship and space that enhances ministry.

A building can help connect people who have never met. A building can impact our emotional experience. It can propel us to action or give us much-needed rest. A building is like fertilizer: Ministry can flourish in a building that enhances it. Churches that consider their spaces important are able to use them to improve ministry, connect people and enhance the worship experience. In a world that’s increasingly modular, our buildings and spaces offer an incredible, physical opportunity to show people what our vision is.

**Why do you think many Millennials gravitate toward more traditional worship spaces?**

The cathedral is powerfully symbolic, connecting our world to the one above. But it’s also a common symbol of church in the secular world, frequently featured on TV shows, movies and in literature. Perhaps this standard Hollywood depiction makes the traditional church a standout symbol of Christianity, where the modern day church works so hard to blend into its culture. With this in mind, it’s easy to say we need more cathedrals because so many unchurched people are fond of them, but that’s not practical given modern church programming and budgets. Instead, churches can focus on designing for clarity. Good design can make it crystal clear who they are, what they believe and what they are there to do.
participants strongly preferred Altar 3 (54%), while twice as many blacks (21%) as the national average (11%) found Altar 4 appealing. There seem to be significant regional differences, as well: Midwesterners were more likely to prefer Altar 2 (40%) and Southerners more likely to choose 3 (46%). Married people (30%) and adults ages 25 to 29 (25%) were more likely than average to find Altar 1 appealing.

These patterns illustrate most Millennials’ overall preference for a straightforward, overtly Christian style of imagery—as long as it doesn’t look too institutional or corporate. Not only do such settings physically direct one’s attention to the divine, they also provide the rich context of church history as a backdrop for worship.

What do you see as the biggest barrier or problem for churches when it comes to their space?

Budgets are and may always be the biggest hurdle to overcome in creating great space. Most churches are pressed for funds, and their limited dollars are given in great faith by many generous people.

So how do you create great spaces on a shoestring budget? First, concentrate on one or two areas and make them special. Instead of spreading funds equally throughout the facility, make your spaces utilitarian in general but go the extra mile in a few areas. Keep your structures simple, and instead invest more of your building budget on finishes, furniture and technology that display great thought and care. Limit expensive materials to a few choice facades or a special landscape feature. Better yet, there are thousands of buildings begging to be reused and repurposed. Creative designers can do unthinkable transformations of car dealerships, retail spaces or warehouses that dot our landscape. Instead of spending dollars on site work, parking and structures, spend your money on outfitting these existing spaces in new ways. Oftentimes you’ll get twice the value at half the cost! Talk about good stewardship.
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Respite

“I could come here during lunch to pray.”

The statement was a surprise. First, the young woman did not even attend a church, and was not someone we would expect to undertake an impromptu prayer session during the middle of her workday.

Second, she said it in a tiny traditional chapel just a few feet from a busy downtown Chicago street. Opaque windows, hard wooden benches, burning candles and a low-vaulted ceiling completed the grotto’s décor. It was hardly the place we might expect an unchurched 24-year-old woman to feel at peace.

What did this little chapel, with its overtly religious décor, hard floors and harder seats provide that the luxurious modern facility in the suburbs did not?

As we discussed above, many of our churches today are not defined by form but by function—by the activities that go on inside. And while that’s not altogether a bad thing, some Millennials feel something has been lost along the way.

Our churches are places of action, not places of rest; spaces to do rather than spaces to be. The activities, of course, are designed to connect people with God and each other—and some Millennials hope for that, too—but many just want an opportunity to explore spiritual life on their own terms, free to decide for themselves when to stay on the edges of a church experience and when to fully enter in.

When we walked into the cathedrals, participants sat down. Churched or unchurched, Christian or non-, they intuitively understood they were in a place where it was fine to sit . . . and do nothing. Is it a wonder we see an uptick in Millennials seeking out liturgical forms of worship? Or that Millennials who know about Lent are more likely than their parents to practice it? (And often what they give up is technology—to find that slower pace, if only for a few weeks.)

The desire for space to reflect came up again and again among participants, and many connected their desire for peace directly to their expectations or hopes for church. Our culture is highly fragmented and frenetic, and there are few places to take a breather and gain much-needed perspective. When half of Millennials check their phone first thing in the morning and last thing at night; when many become physically anxious if they don’t have their phone on them at any given time; when #FOMO is both a cry for help and a badge of honor; when young moms scour Pinterest for fun ideas and end up feeling inadequate because their kid’s lunch doesn’t feature homegrown cabbage wraps shaped like algebraic equations (so little Johnny can develop math skills and go to Harvard Business School and take his company public) . . . it’s no wonder our churches offer what people think they want: more to do, more to see.

Yet that’s exactly the opposite of what many young adults crave when it comes to sacred space.

Your church. Is it a place of energy and activity?
What are three to five tips or best practices you could offer to churches who are considering a refresh on their spaces?

• Add video projection and upgrade the AVL to enhance the teaching and worship experience
• Create large lobbies and expand narrow halls
• Convert church parlors, fellowship halls and gymnasiums into relationally inviting rooms that foster community, like Wi-Fi cafes, conversation pits and conference rooms
• Transform children’s spaces into cutting-edge environments that are open, colorful and secure

What shifts have you seen in your field over the last few decades? Is there something churches can and should learn from those shifts?

• The technological revolution has extended church impact beyond the walls of a building and its geographic location
• The multisite revolution liberated churches from unsustainable mega-campuses
• The economic recession liberated churches from expensive building campaigns
• The decline in church attendance is forcing churches to build community-centric, multi-purpose and environmentally friendly facilities
• The church planting resurgence is retro-fitting existing commercial facilities and building smaller church facilities with multiple venues.
• The church merger trend is redeeming and recycling existing church buildings for renewed use

What do you see as the biggest barrier or problem for churches when it comes to their space and/or architecture? What are some ways to overcome this hurdle?

The historic value of church attendance that once permeated American culture is receding. There has been a major cultural shift away from church attendance and the value of church buildings. Church buildings that were once seen as an asset to a local community are increasingly being viewed more as a liability. In the eyes of non-churchgoers, church buildings take money off the tax rolls, cause traffic problems and create noise issues. As a result there is an increasing community resistance to churches buying land and building facilities, especially large facilities. To win the hearts of the secular community, church buildings will have to be multi-purpose facilities that not only serve the church family but also the broader local community. New church buildings going up today need to be smaller, multipurpose, multi-venue, community-centric and environmentally friendly “green” buildings. And though church facilities will tend to be more utilitarian than the cathedrals of the past, they also must be aesthetically inviting.
Do you offer all sorts of choices for those who want a vibrant faith experience? That’s all well and good. But when do people stop their labors—even their spiritual labors? Where do they go to experience Jesus’s invitation, “Come unto me, all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest”?

NATURE
Our field participants couldn’t get enough of nature. At each location, the groups as a whole gravitated toward windows and other areas with plenty of natural light. They expressed appreciation for pleasant landscaping, not just as decorative but also functional, setting the stage for community and communion. As we’ve described, St. James Cathedral boasts a tiny courtyard, lush with plants and a small labyrinth, just steps from a bustling downtown street. Chicago participants were delighted by the peaceful nature oasis; several—like the unchurched young woman mentioned earlier—said that if they worked or lived nearby, they would enjoy visiting on a regular basis to pray, meditate or spend a few moments in quiet reflection.

While nothing tops the real thing, even fake nature was enjoyed by our focus-groups-on-wheels. The children’s area at Buckhead Church features a variety of oversized plastic plants and insects on walls and ceilings, and these fun, natural touches were well-reviewed by the group. Likewise, at Willow Creek, a large, decorative “chandelier” made of wooden leaves hanging in a breezeway garnered favorable comments.

Our findings reveal two core questions churches should ask about their facilities. First, how do we bring the outside in? It might be as simple as a large window over a well-landscaped vista or as elaborate as a walled-in courtyard with a water sculpture and mediation benches. Maybe a stone accent wall instead of wallpaper, or bamboo flooring instead of carpet. How can the inside of our church reflect the shapes, textures and colors of its natural surroundings?

Second, how do we bring the inside out? Field participants showed a strong, consistent preference for personal reflection and prayer in an outdoor setting. Some indicated they would rather meet friends outside, as well. Many churches think of their facility as everything inside the walls, but it is worth considering how we might make better use of our external spaces. Instead of using landscaping simply as a frame for the building, could we use it as a legitimate ministry space—a sacred place in its own right?

The third series of images in our national survey showed four images of nature brought into the church space. Most respondents preferred images with greater realism and more immersion into the outdoors.
Nature 4, the garden path, was the favorite by far, with 62% choosing it as most appealing, a majority in nearly every population segment preferred it. Catholics (74%), those with no faith (69%), notional Christians (69%) and the unchurched (67%) were even more likely than average to choose 4. While just 9% of all adults chose Nature 1—the more child-oriented paper cutout of a tree—one-quarter of evangelicals (24%) and about one in six born-again Christians (17%) found it most appealing.
Millennials’ enthusiasm for the outdoors was also obvious in the majority preference for nature scenes in the image series we explored in chapter 1, “Culture.” Nearly two-thirds (64%) chose the tree-shaded bench as illustrative of the statement “feels like home,” and more than half (52%) preferred the window-facing desk as the best illustration of “a place I would like to work.” (See chapter 1 for these images and more thorough analysis.)

The final series of pictures showed four different images of church windows. We were particularly interested in this topic because we had identified two contradictory findings from our field groups: they loved big, open windows (nature), but they also loved stained glass (visual clarity). What would happen when we pitted the two against each other?

Windows 1 and 4 tied as most appealing, with both garnering 35% of participants’ votes. This is a drastic split; 1 is the most modern, least “churchy” of the images, while 4 is the most ornate and traditional. These survey results are consistent with our field group findings: Millennials like both! So why not embrace both types of windows? We saw a space with both in Church of the Redeemer in downtown Atlanta. It has a small prayer chapel with an ornate stained glass image of Jesus at the front, flanked by two large, open windows. The overall effect is very pleasant, and was noticed with appreciation by our field participants.

Middle-class young adults were more likely (45%) than average to prefer Window 1, as were Midwesterners (41%). This was also the case, by a wide margin, with those adhering to non-Christian faiths (61%). On the other side, Catholics (55%), residents of the West (44%) and Hispanics (44%) were all more likely than average to find Window 4 most appealing. (There is likely significant crossover among these three segments.)

| Male   | 34% | Female | 36% | Married | 47% | Unmarried | 32% | Single, never married | 28% | Children | 37% | No children | 33% | HS or less | 36% | Some college | 36% | College Grad | 31% | <$40k | 36% | $40k - $60k | 45% | $60k+ | 30% | Churched | 40% | Marginally churched | 31% | Unchurched | 33% | Other faith | 61% | No faith | 38% | White | 36% | Black | 41% | Hispanic | 29% | Nonwhite | 34% | Northeast | 30% | South | 29% | Midwest | 41% | West | 35% |
|--------|-----|--------|-----|---------|-----|-----------|-----|----------------------|-----|----------|-----|----------------------|-----|-------------|-----|---------------|-----|----------------|-----|-------------|-----|-------------|-----|----------|-----|----------------|-----|----------------|-----|-------------|-----|---------------|-----|-----------|-----|--------|-----|--------|-----|------|-----|-------|-----|--------|
|        |     |        |     |         |     |           |     |                      |     |          |     |                       |     |             |     |               |     |               |     |             |     |             |     |         |     |             |     |             |     |            |     |              |     |            |     |             |     |        |     |       |     |
| Male   | 9%  | Female | 9%  | Married | 8%  | Unmarried | 9%  | Single, never married | 8%  | Children | 7%  | No children | 11% | HS or less | 6%  | Some college | 10% | College grad | 12% | <$40k | 7%  | $40k - $60k | 6%  | $60k+ | 11% | Churched | 6%  | Marginally churched | 4%  | Unchurched | 11% | Other faith | 6%  | No faith | 9%  | White | 11% | Black | 2%  | Hispanic | 4%  | Nonwhite | 5%  | Northeast | 10% | South | 13% | Midwest | 9%  | West | 3%  |
| Male   | 21% | Female | 22% | Married | 18% | Unmarried | 23% | Single, never married | 25% | Children | 22% | No children | 21% | HS or less | 22% | Some college | 21% | College grad | 23% | <$40k | 21% | $40k - $60k | 17% | $60k+ | 24% | Churched | 23% | Marginally churched | 28% | Unchurched | 21% | Other faith | 12% | No faith | 13% | White | 20% | Black | 27% | Hispanic | 22% | Nonwhite | 24% | Northeast | 22% | South | 21% | Midwest | 25% | West | 18% |

4.7 Select the window image that is most appealing to you.

Barna/CKN, October 2013, N=843 U.S. adults ages 18 to 29 years old. The segmentation percentages above are among Millennials who participated in the study.
BUILDING FOR THE WHOLE BODY

Again and again, we have circled back to five reasons Millennials stay connected to a faith community: cultural discernment, mentoring, vocational discipleship and life-shaping relationships with God and other people. Rarely do these happen by accident, at least not for long. Faith-centered organizations must make deliberate choices about their structures—their culture, ministry, leadership and buildings—to facilitate these essentials.

The satirical “news” website *The Onion* published a story a few years ago under the headline, “Area Teen Accidentally Enters Teen Center.” It reads:

> In a moment of confusion, area teenager Eric Dooley briefly walked into a local teen outreach center Tuesday, a place that neither he nor any of his teenaged friends would ever knowingly enter. “Oh, geez. I’m sorry,” the 15-year-old said as he quickly assessed the four battered foosball tables, outdated PlayStation console, overly friendly counselor, and garish orange and purple paint scheme—all intended to appeal to him—before exiting the facility in less than six seconds.¹

All too often our churches make the same mistakes as that fictional youth center. We try so hard to make our spaces “edgy” and “real” that they become caricatures and clichés. They end up repelling the very people we are trying to engage.

It’s tempting to oversimplify the relationship between Millennials and sacred space. For instance, it might be easy to believe such a place needs to look ultra modern or chic to appeal to teens and young adults. But the truth, like so much about this generation, is more complicated—refreshingly so. Most Millennials don’t look for a church facility that caters to the whims of pop culture. They want a community that calls them to deeper meaning.

Does that sound like your community of faith? If you’re in the business of following Jesus, of course it does! So let your facilities reflect your church’s calling to connect with God and each other.

There are myriad ways to design sacred and communal spaces that call people of all ages to deeper relationships with God, self and others. No two churches will (or should) incorporate them all in the same way. There is no cookie-cutter, mass-production solution for welcoming Millennials to your space, but there are questions your community can keep in mind as you build to include the whole church body:

- How do our facilities present visual cues? Can people easily answer the questions “Where am I?” and “What’s expected of me?”

- How do our facilities offer respite from the outside world? Can people find a place of peace that is accessible and comfortable?
• How do our facilities connect to Christian history and traditions? What symbols or design elements evoke a sense of the sacred and tell the story of God’s actions in the world?

• How do our facilities integrate elements of nature? How can we bring the outside in and take the inside out?

Designing or redesigning our structures in such a way that Millennials are welcomed into our community is not a matter of trendiness or of keeping up with cultural fads. (In fact, many of the choices we make with younger people in mind may require us to swim against the wider cultural stream.) Rather, putting the needs of the next generation ahead of our own preferences is an act of service.

After he had washed his disciples’ feet, Jesus asked them, “Do you understand what I was doing? You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and you are right, because that’s what I am. And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. . . . Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them” (John 13:12-15,17, NLT).

Cultural discernment, intergenerational friendships, reverse mentoring, vocational discipleship, and an experience of and connection with Jesus are five reasons Millennials go to and stay in church. How well do your facilities, inside and out, allow you to facilitate these important outcomes?

Why do you think it’s important for churches to consider their space and architecture? How do these elements impact worship and community?

God created us as physical beings who occupy real space and time and are deeply affected by our environment. Not only that, the Genesis mandate to fill the earth gives us the honor of being co-creators with God in our story. Part of redeeming the human story requires stewarding our physical setting for the common good, and the built environment (including church buildings!) is a fundamental component. In the book of Jeremiah, God tells the Israelites in exile to build houses and plant gardens even in the midst of not being truly “at home.” Likewise, we are called to put down roots in a particular place and physically invest in a community. To answer this call in our modern context, I believe a church needs to consider its space and architecture, particularly with regard to how they interact with the geographic context and community around them. The physical design of their building, by either exuding a fortress mentality or an invitation to participation and wonder, influences the type of interaction a church has with the surrounding community. For example, a church property can be designed for people or for cars—consider the sea of parking lots that surround most modern church buildings. Instead, churches could situate their building frontage close to sidewalks and streets with clearly accessible pedestrian paths to the front door. This allows people more interaction with the building and clear visibility of where to enter, and integrates the church building into the larger community.

Historically, churches were situated in the center of town, and their ornate architecture signified a transcendent or “otherness” function. While a church building was not a place of everydayness, its physical embeddedness within the larger built environment made it a visible and integrated part of the community. Modern churches that choose to build on large lots at the edge of town are demonstrably isolating themselves from the community and are often less accessible to community members because of the distance they have to travel. This type of “commuter” church building does not invite its members to invest in one geographic place together (ideally around the church building). Consistent communal interaction among attendees throughout the week is weakened. I believe these realities hinder a church community from putting down roots in a particular place, and work against our call to steward the built environment for the common good.

Why do you think many Millennials gravitate toward more traditional worship spaces? How can churches respond to this even as they try to offer comfortable spaces, which Millennials also appreciate?
The built environment orients us in a particular place. This is why Millennials gravitate toward more traditional worship spaces. They are hungry for rootedness and community. Having grown up in an era of ubiquitous McDonalds, Wal-Marts and housing tracts, placelessness dominates much of their human experience. Modern development patterns, driven by chain stores and highway systems, have made one place indistinguishable from another. In contrast, places imbued with particularity root us in memory, connecting us to the places we inhabit and to one another. Corporate memory is fundamental to community formation. In traditional worship spaces, Millennials are connected to the shared story with generations who have gone before them. As beings created for community, we thrive most when we are rooted together in a larger narrative. Despite all the virtual connections Millennials have through social media, I believe they are eager for tangible, physical community. A traditional church building that echoes a history of community resonates with that desire.

The Barna study reveals the contradiction many Millennials feel: a desire for comfortable anonymity yet an affinity for traditional communal religious spaces. The common approach of many modern churches is to err on the side of comfort and anonymity, stripping away religious elements and designing spaces for activities—but we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater. The Barna study notes, “Millenials want to be able to answer the question ‘Where am I?’” Answering that question requires being oriented by and rooted in a communal history. Our church buildings should reflect that history in creative ways.
What needs did you see among churches and church leaders that inspired you to start the Cornerstone Knowledge Network? What’s the mission?
The Cornerstone Knowledge Network (CKN) was founded by Aspen Group and Cogun, two church design and construction firms that build churches in competing markets and yet share a heart for ministry. Both Aspen and Cogun believe that we can do more for the church by learning and sharing knowledge, rather than hiding and hoarding information for our individual business gain.

Our shared vision—to create meaningful knowledge to help the church—gave birth to CKN, a mutually created initiative that has led to a variety of research and learning events since 2004. The research we do through CKN provides insight into how facility design, as well as culture, leadership and ministry, and affect and shape the church.

Why do this kind of research?
We partnered with Barna Group on the “Making Space for Millennials” research project for several reasons. First, Barna is one of the leading experts on Millennials. We wanted to partner with an organization that was deeply immersed in understanding the cultural trends that set this generation apart from its forebears and how the unique attributes of today’s young adults are affecting the church.

Second, we know that church leaders are struggling with how to recapture the hearts, minds and souls of Millennials. As David Kinnaman’s extensive research and writing on Millennials shows, churches have largely lost this generation of young adults, and the fallout of this mass exodus will have far-reaching, long-term consequences if churches don’t wake up and pay attention to what’s happening in the culture.

Third, at CKN we invest in research to discover what factors, such as facilities or ministry design, impact a church’s success. So for instance,
because Millennials are a large, influential demographic, we wanted to learn what factors in churches help young people connect with God and which ones push them further away. Not only did we come away with a deeper understanding of the cultural trends related to Millennials, but we also have a better handle on the ministry challenges young adults pose for churches, as well as the leadership traits that are required to shepherd this generation.

Additionally, all of this data and discovery is especially relevant on a practical level for our architects and designers. As we guide and assist churches to create ministry space that will have a meaningful spiritual impact, we can draw from the research’s findings to help shape churches’ decisions on what types of facilities to build.

It’s the alignment of these four factors—culture, leadership, ministry, and facilities—that helps position a church for radical ministry impact. This is the driving force behind why we invest in research. It’s not about having the right answers—it’s about making sure we’re having the right conversations with churches before they build.

As we walk with a church and discover its unique heartbeat for God’s people—its core values and DNA—we can use research like “Making Space for Millennials” to help ensure that churches build the right ministry space for lasting impact.

What are the main findings from the study that are changing how you approach your mission?

The “Making Space for Millennials” study helped deepen our understanding on at least four key points: visual clarity, respite, nature and modularity. As the chapters in this monograph reveal, there is much we can learn about young adults and their desire to connect with God and others in meaningful ways.

Beyond giving us clues about how to attract and retain more Millennials in the church, this research fans the flames of our passion to inspire and equip churches to, in turn, inspire and equip the next generation to lead the church in ways we—and they—can’t even imagine today. In order to do this, we need to first help Millennials find their way back to God, and second, make room for them once they return.

We’re privileged to join you on the journey of discovering how to better reach God’s people.

Ed Bahler, CEO of Aspen Group

On behalf of the Cornerstone Knowledge Network
FIELD GROUPS (QUALITATIVE)
The focus groups were conducted on August 26 and 27, 2013, in Atlanta, Georgia, and Chicago, Illinois. In each city, 10 adults ages 18 to 29 were recruited by a local research recruiting firm. They were told that the groups were about religion and architecture, but that no background in either was required. Participants were screened from a variety of religious backgrounds, including practicing Christians, non-practicing Christians and non-Christians, and came from a range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, including black, white, Hispanic and Arab. Each group had at least three male participants.

On August 26, the Atlanta group toured Buckhead Church, Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Centennial Park and a local Starbucks. On August 27, the Chicago group toured Willow Creek Community Church (Barrington), St. James Episcopal Cathedral, Millennium Park and Intelligentsia Coffee. At each location the participants were asked how they perceived each space, and how they would use it. They were also asked general questions about religious facilities and their perceptions of Christian churches. Each group lasted approximately six hours. All participants were compensated for their time.

NATIONAL STUDIES (QUANTITATIVE)
Throughout this Barna Report are statistics and research findings that are not directly footnoted, because these data and data-based statements are derived from original research designed and conducted by Barna Group. The primary basis of this report is the Barna/CKN Millennials and Architecture poll, which included 843 online surveys conducted among adult residents of the United States ages 18 to 29, from October 10 through October 15, 2013. The margin of error for a sample of this size is plus or minus 5.2 percentage points, at the 95% confidence level.

In addition to the CKN national survey, data from the Barna FRAMES
project was also used in the creation of this report. The FRAMES project included four separate nationwide studies conducted between May and August 2013. These public opinion studies were conducted using a mix of telephone (including cell phones) and online interviewing among 4,495 U.S. adults. The maximum sampling error for any of the four studies is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

The surveys administered online for these studies used a research panel called KnowledgePanel® based on probability sampling that covers both the online and offline populations in the U.S. The panel members are randomly recruited by telephone and by self-administered mail and web surveys. Households are provided with access to the Internet and hardware if needed. Unlike other Internet surveys that cover only individuals with Internet access who volunteer for research, this process uses a dual sampling frame that includes both listed and unlisted phone numbers, telephone and non-phone households and cell-phone-only households. The panel is not limited to current Web users or computer owners. All potential panelists are randomly selected to join the KnowledgePanel; unselected volunteers are not able to join.

Email reminders were sent out to non-responders on day three of the fielding period. In every survey there are a variety of ways in which the accuracy of the data may be affected. The response rate is one such potential cause of error in measurement; the lower the response, the less representative the respondents surveyed may be of the population from which they were drawn, thereby reducing the accuracy of the results. Other sources of error include question-design bias, question-order bias, sampling error and respondent deception. Many of these types of errors cannot be accurately estimated. However, having a high cooperation rate does enhance the reliability of the information procured.

Minimal statistical weighting was used to calibrate the sample to known population percentages in relation to demographic variables.

Making Space for Millennials also includes survey results from original Barna Group research conducted for Brad Lomenick’s book The Catalyst Leader (Thomas Nelson, 2013). Used by permission.
In its 30-year history, Barna Group has conducted more than one million interviews over the course of hundreds of studies, and has become a go-to source for insights about faith and culture, leadership and vocation, and generations. Currently led by David Kinnaman, Barna Group’s vision is to provide people with credible knowledge and clear thinking, enabling them to navigate a complex and changing culture. The company was started by George and Nancy Barna in 1984.

Barna Group has worked with thousands of businesses, nonprofit organizations and churches across the country, including many Protestant denominations and Catholic parishes. Some of its clients include the American Bible Society, CARE, Compassion International, Dreamworks, Easter Seals, Habitat for Humanity, NBC-Universal, Paramount Pictures, The Salvation Army, Walden Media, the ONE Campaign, SONY, Thrivent, USAID and World Vision.

The firm’s studies are frequently cited in sermons and talks, and its public opinion research is often quoted in major media outlets such as CNN, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal, Fox News, Chicago Tribune, Huffington Post, the New York Times, Dallas Morning News and the Los Angeles Times.

Learn more about Barna Group at www.barna.org.
The Cornerstone Knowledge Network (CKN) is a select group of innovative companies that collaborates to develop exclusive insights into the alignment of:

- Culture
- Leadership
- Ministry
- Facilities

CKN’s mission is to discover and disseminate meaningful knowledge that radically improves how church facilities impact ministry.

The two founding companies, Aspen Group and Cogun, offer valuable information as well as proven consulting services to ministry teams. They are committed to helping these teams develop an empowering missional ministry that has a transforming impact on their community.

CKN looks forward to welcoming you to an Alignment Conference. This acclaimed church building seminar is a clearinghouse of the latest information you need to assure your construction project is on a firm foundation.

Wait,
There’s More …

Purchase the full
Making Space for Millennials report now at barna.org/spaceformillennials for just $34.99

If you’re like the leaders of countless faith communities and Christian organizations, you are wrestling with how to make space for Millennials—not just appealing space in your buildings and gathering places, but also room in your institutional culture, ministry models and leadership approach.

This highly practical Barna Report, produced by Barna Group and Cornerstone Knowledge Network, is an essential, nuts-and-bolts tool for designing with Millennials in mind. Get to know Millennials as a generation and discover what impact their shared values, allegiances and assumptions will have on your church or organization as you make space for their ideas and influence in four critical arenas:

- Culture
- Ministry
- Leadership
- Facilities

Find out Millennials’ perspectives on worship and community spaces, and hear from practitioners about how the next generation of Christian adults is shaping their approach to form and function.

Making Space for Millennials is the visually compelling, information-rich result of a landmark study of the next generation and sacred space, presented alongside penetrating Barna insights into what the findings mean for your faith community.