Why millennials are leaving the church

By Rachel Held Evans, Special to CNN

(CNN) – At 32, I barely qualify as a millennial.
I wrote my first essay with a pen and paper, but by the time I graduated from college, I owned a cell phone and used Google as a verb.
I still remember the home phone numbers of my old high school friends, but don’t ask me to recite my husband’s without checking my contacts first.
I own mix tapes that include selections from Nirvana and Pearl Jam, but I’ve never planned a trip without Travelocity.
Despite having one foot in Generation X, I tend to identify most strongly with the attitudes and the ethos of the millennial generation, and because of this, I’m often asked to speak to my fellow evangelical leaders about why millennials are leaving the church.
Armed with the latest surveys, along with personal testimonies from friends and readers, I explain how young adults perceive evangelical Christianity to be too political, too exclusive, old-fashioned, unconcerned with social justice and hostile to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.
I point to research that shows young evangelicals often feel they have to choose between their intellectual integrity and their faith, between science and Christianity, between compassion and holiness.
I talk about how the evangelical obsession with sex can make Christian living seem like little more than sticking to a list of rules, and how millennials long for faith communities in which they are safe asking tough questions and wrestling with doubt.
Invariably, after I’ve finished my presentation and opened the floor to questions, a pastor raises his hand and says, “So what you’re saying is we need hipper worship bands. …”
And I proceed to bang my head against the podium.
Time and again, the assumption among Christian leaders, and evangelical leaders in particular, is that the key to drawing twenty-somethings back to church is simply to make a few style updates – edgier music, more casual services, a coffee shop in the fellowship hall, a pastor who wears skinny jeans, an updated Web site that includes online giving.
But here’s the thing: Having been advertised to our whole lives, we millennials have highly sensitive BS meters, and we’re not easily impressed with consumerism or performances.
In fact, I would argue that church-as-performance is just one more thing driving us away from the church, and evangelicalism in particular.
Many of us, myself included, are finding ourselves increasingly drawn to high church traditions – Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, the Episcopal Church, etc. – precisely because the ancient forms of liturgy seem so unpretentious, so unconcerned with being “cool,” and we find that refreshingly authentic.
What millennials really want from the church is not a change in style but a change in substance.
We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against.
We want to ask questions that don’t have predetermined answers.
We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation.
We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities.
We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers.
You can’t hand us a latte and then go about business as usual and expect us to stick around. We’re not leaving the church because we don’t find the cool factor there; we’re leaving the church because we don’t find Jesus there.

Like every generation before ours and every generation after, deep down, we long for Jesus.

Now these trends are obviously true not only for millennials but also for many folks from other generations. Whenever I write about this topic, I hear from forty-somethings and grandmothers, Generation Xers and retirees, who send me messages in all caps that read “ME TOO!” So I don’t want to portray the divide as wider than it is.

But I would encourage church leaders eager to win millennials back to sit down and really talk with them about what they’re looking for and what they would like to contribute to a faith community.

Their answers might surprise you.

Rachel Held Evans is the author of "Evolving in Monkey Town" and "A Year of Biblical Womanhood." She blogs at rachelheldevans.com. The views expressed in this column belong to Rachel Held Evans.