



Center for Congregations
PODCAST

**Where have all the young people gone?
A conversation with Mike McHargue, aka Science Mike**

Ben Tapper ([00:03](#)):

Welcome to the Center for Congregations podcast. This is a conversation for people of faith who want to sustain and strengthen their communities. During this conversation, you'll learn from experts about topics that matter to you, discover great resources that you can use, and hear encouraging stories about the work of Indiana congregations.

Matt Burke ([00:21](#)):

The Center for Congregations is an Indiana nonprofit that exists because we believe in the work of congregations in the State of Indiana and around the country. Our mission is to strengthen congregations, helping them with their work. And we exist because of the generosity of the Lilly Endowment, because of their funding all of the work of the Center for Congregations is a free gift to Indiana congregations. My name is Matt Burke. I'm the education director for the Center for Congregations and also the Northeast director in the Fort Wayne office.

Ben Tapper ([00:48](#)):

And I'm Ben Tapper. I'm an associate for resource consulting at our central office in Indianapolis.

Matt Burke ([00:52](#)):

In this week's episode, we talked to Mike McHargue about young adult engagement, essentially the engagement of Millennials and Gen Z in congregations today. So Ben, what kinds of things have you encountered in your work with Indiana congregations around this topic?

Ben Tapper ([01:17](#)):

Such an important question. One of the reasons I love this topic, being a young adult myself, however you define that, I've seen a lot of congregations that wrestle with wondering how you keep young adults engaged, how you keep them attending and how you offer things that will entice them to bring their gifts to the community. And it seems to be something that has puzzled congregations for years and continues to do so, at least that's what I've seen down here in Central. You've seen some of the same things up in Northeast?

Matt Burke ([01:45](#)):

Yeah, I do. And I think one of the interesting things is the categorization. So, when we say Millennials, those of us who are a little bit older, we tend to immediately think about college age, but in reality, from a sociological perspective, the Millennial generation are between 20 and 40 years old at this point. So, they're in the workforce, they have families, some of them are executives in companies and in

nonprofits and really Gen Z are the ones who are between the ages of ... I can't remember what the beginning age is, but up to about 19 years old. And so, I think one of the things is just remembering, reminding ourselves that when we talk about these cohorts, these generational cohorts, that we use the right language and right labeling.

Ben Tapper (02:26):

Right. And I wonder if part of that disconnect has to do with the loss of Gen X in the congregations, right? So, there's not as much of a buffer as maybe there would be in terms of leadership. So, you still have a lot of Boomers in leadership, Gen X, I think to some degree stepped away from congregational life. And so, it's easy for the Boomers to look at the Millennials as just these young kids just figuring out life. When, to your point in reality, we've got debt just like full grown adults, we've got kids, we're running businesses and organizations, but I think generational dynamics come into play.

Matt Burke (02:59):

Yeah. And I think that's so important because I think one of the key questions about this is understanding and empathy. I think a lot of times that's missing because you hear typical tropes and stereotypes of generations. And the interesting thing is, I pulled a book off my shelf a few weeks ago that was written about Gen Xers, my generation, around the time that we were in our 20s and 30s and not all of the information was the same, but it was so funny how many of the characterizations of Gen Xers when they were young, are similar to what we talk about or what we hear about, about Millennials.

And so, it's just an understanding that some of this ... There are definitely new things out there with technology with social media, but some of these things are not old, it's just generational differences that we've been fighting since humanity has existed.

Ben Tapper (03:44):

Right, it's the same issues just through a different lens, right? Because of the ways that our culture has changed and adapted and the uniqueness of this day and age. And one of the reasons I really like the guest that we're having on today, Mike, is that he helps congregations take that step back and bring that empathy in and reframe this discussion, reframe the questions that they're asking about young adults and about their giftings. And I think it's helpful not only for those that might be Gen X or Boomers, but as a Millennial, I think that this conversation is helpful too because it helps me understand the dynamic of the discussions that are happening in congregational life, and then I can choose how to appropriately and empathetically engage, which is really important. So, we have talked quite a bit about what's coming up. I'm wondering if it makes sense to just jump into this interview and hear some of the great things that Mike has to say?

Matt Burke (04:36):

Yeah. So, our guest for today is Mike McHargue. He's an author, speaker and podcaster. He was part of The Liturgists podcast and also has a podcast called Ask Science Mike. He's written two books and a lot of his audience is made up specifically of the Millennial generation. And so, I think it basically qualifies him as somewhat of an expert on who they are and what they are. And I think you're going to hear some very encouraging things from Mike about what congregations have to offer and strengths that they have for engaging younger generations. So, here's science Mike.

So, with us today is Mike McHargue. He's an author, speaker, and podcaster, he's been around for some education events around Indiana for the Center for Congregations. Thanks for being here with us, Mike.

Mike McHargue (05:16):

Oh gosh, my pleasure. Thanks for having me on.

Matt Burke (05:18):

Absolutely. Thrilled to have you here. So, I think one of the things we want to talk to you about, a lot of congregations have been seeing the data and sociological statistics, things like that, about the decline of younger members in congregations and the statistics and the language and the messaging is pretty grim, but I think there really are some bright spots, and I've heard you talk about that some. So, your public work, a lot of your audience are people in the younger generation, you work a lot with them and have some understanding of who they are. So for congregations, what do you see as some of the challenges with traditional congregations, traditional forms of congregating, of how they connect with younger generations?

Mike McHargue (05:58):

Oh gosh, the challenges are many. I think I would start with what I would call the internal institutional focus of a traditional congregation. And I want to be specific here that I mostly mean majority white congregations have this structure and this focus and also statistically hold the bear of the brunt where most of the de-religification of America is happening among white Millennials and white Gen Z, and that these numbers aren't so dire in communities of color. And I think that these things are connected and that is that outlook I talk about, where no matter what the stated purpose of a given church or congregation is, what the actual daily activities and weekly rhythm is centered around is the building of a building and facilities and events in that building and on that campus, and most of the efforts by the congregation go into benefiting that congregation.

And then, you have this big focus on right doctrine, right belief, understanding the right set of conditions, and relatively little engagement in the good of the community that surrounds that congregation. Most congregations get pretty excited if they operate like a barely filled food pantry on their campus for any people of need who happen to come directly to that church and ask for help. And in my behind the scenes experience in the church world, often those are just ways to make encounters with people in need less awkward for church staff, and that is not what young people are about. They are not concerned with a set of theological understandings and relating to God or to the divine. They are not concerned with building buildings or protecting institutions. In fact, this generation has quite ... These generations, I suppose more accurately, has a pretty strong anti-institutional bent.

So, there's a fundamental philosophical orientation here that is different, where people will say they want young people in their church, they'll make that expression, but what they really want is for young people to come and continue to do church life or congregational living the way that it is done now, and that is not a possibility. So, the reason things feel hopeless, in my opinion, is that disconnect between what prior generations want a congregation to be and what current and future generations are willing to participate in. That is not to say that it is actually hopeless or that young people aren't interested in living or spiritual life because my work tells me in fact, that they are.

Matt Burke (09:00):

So, it sounds like there's a fundamental disconnect as to the purpose of spiritual pursuits. And so, how do you see that fundamental difference between the older generations and the younger generation? So, you've talked about facilities and programs and ... But is there one central point that summarizes the difference between the two sides?

Mike McHargue (09:21):

Where action is placed and where the focus is. Millennials and Gen Z will tolerate institutions that can act as conduits to meaningful social connection and meaningful action in the world. So, if your institution is a convenient scaffold, then it's useful, if its focus is on those ends. And just what we've seen in American church life, churches do amazing work in communities already, don't hear me wrong. But as a percentage of their total effort, it is generally less than half of the church's time and energy is externally focused versus internally focused, and this is the gap. This is the point of difference, especially among Gen Z, but also with Millennials.

Matt Burke (10:11):

So what advice would you have then for traditional congregations? How can they pivot or how can they change at least somewhat to embrace this new view and to stay relevant?

Mike McHargue (10:24):

I think most congregations, if they look at the origins of their faith stories, they are around community and they are around communal transformation. You can frame a movement towards a more youth-centered approach as a return to the fundamentals of what your faith tradition is actually about in its holy texts. This is really consistent in congregational origins, is these notions that the reason we're together is to be God's people and God's people are there for each other and God's people represent God in the world, and they do that by living lives of love and generosity.

What we know from the data is that young people are anxious, they are depressed, they are lonely. Now, they don't have the same kind of civic support that prior generations have had, largely because of their institutional involvement and the lack thereof in younger generations. And so, I think if we position our churches as places to genuinely be loved and supported and connect with others and grow as we pursue meaningful acts of service in community, it changes things, but it can't be a mission statement. It can't be a 10 year vision plan. It can't be what I typically see churches try to do is like, yes, we are excited to start a journey of thinking about how we could do this eventually. The change won't happen until you are already doing it.

One thing that I try to encourage congregations to do as they ask me about this, is you have some young people in your congregation or in close proximity to it, get three or five of them together, have the pastor, have some church leadership go to lunch. And the point of this lunch is not to teach, but to learn, is not to guide, but to receive and ask them, "Be honest, we have a concern, is our church going to exist in 20 years? We don't know. We look at the grading every year and it concerns us. What would it take to get you really excited about being a part of what we're doing? How could we remake our congregation in a way that would make it a place that you feel like is significant and meaningful and have your peers feel the same?"

And then, when they tell you those things, start a dialogue where you partner with those young people in being the ones who lead and build that. The way to involve young people is not to put them in a training center where they start as ushers and graduate to Sunday school teachers and eventually become deacons. That model is gone. Involve them immediately and directly in the work of spiritual growth, of community building and community service, and they'll show up and they'll revitalize a congregation.

Matt Burke (13:26):

Yeah, that's really interesting. We just finished up an 18 month project that we did with around 30 congregations in Indiana called The Engaging Young Adults project. And one of the things we asked them to do on the very front end of that project was to just go listen. And it sounds very much like what you just described of sitting down, just asking about the needs and how do they see the world, from young adults, both in their congregation and outside of their congregation. And one of the interesting things was the difficulty some congregations had just with that first step, because they weren't sure how to engage with folks who weren't already part of their religious sphere. And so, how do we talk to people that we don't know and just listen to them? And I think that's a real gap in congregations in general sometimes is, we've been around for so long, we've been an organization or an institution for so long that we forget what it's like to not be a part of that and have difficulty bridging outside of it, to learn and to connect with people outside.

But some of the congregations that were most successful in that project ... In fact, one just up in the Fort Wayne region, I went to a couple of their meetings and it was wonderful because I was sitting around the table with the pastor and his wife, and then probably 10 to 12 young adults who they brought in very quickly in the planning stages. And those young adults really saw the vision and took ownership of it and then are still heavily involved in that 18 months later. And so, just the bare fact of listening, trying to understand needs, but also inviting them into, like you said, not ushering necessarily or just be in the worship band, but bringing them alongside for true planning and true future direction, really jump-started their culture, and it was a really, really cool thing to see.

And so, sounds like some of the strengths that you see in congregations are the tradition, the outward focus that the point of congregations is to be here for the sake of the community. Are there other strengths in the traditions of congregations or just strengths of congregations in general, that you see as a real positive asset for the next generations?

Mike McHargue (15:35):

Oh my gosh, so many, so many. People are highly mobile today. It's hard to find community. Congregations are pre-built communities. There's already an existing web of a social fabric that people can join into that's happy to have them. They're multi-generational. They are full of listening ears. One of the things I love about the fact that churches band together and hire clergy and keep them on staff is there someone who basically is able to provide free triage mental health services. There's a listening ear. There's someone who cares. There's someone who, if you get sick and you go into the hospital, will come visit you. There's these very tangible, real quality of life improvements that come from being involved in a congregation. I read in a book by Tanya Luhrmann called *When God Talks Back: Understanding Evangelical America's Relationship with God*, that people who join a church and feel a part of it, they experience a shift in personal happiness that is similar as moving from the bottom quartile to the top quartile of income. That's a huge, huge shift.

And research has actually shown this out that with our anxiety and depression epidemic in the United States, basically church attendance and going to sporting events are the only two things that have consistently shown to have long-term health outcomes for people experiencing depression and anxiety, is those two things. So, half of the winning strategies that cost ... Well, cost nothing, right? Sporting events typically cost money. The church is sitting on top of a goldmine to a major societal mental health epidemic. So, I'm very pro church. I love the church. I think its potential to aid and transform society is wildly untapped. And if we can, as people of faith and as members of congregations, if we can lower some of these access barriers around our weird institutional taboos and norms, and instead focus more

on our fundamental strength, which is community formation, I think there's no limit to what the church could be in America.

Ben Tapper (17:54):

Well yeah, one thing that I want to add as a skeptical Millennial myself, a lot of the congregations that I see trying to step away from bold theological statements in the hope of being more welcoming, they often can go a little too far and just feel watered down and not actually having substance. And so, I'm wondering if you can talk about either examples you've seen or strategies you've seen employed for congregations to find that sweet spot where there's still some substance, but they're also not holding so hard to ideology that is excluding people.

Mike McHargue (18:28):

Yeah. I want to be clear, I'm not actually talking about changing theologies at all. That's not what I mean. What I mean is our theology applied as programs and institutional accoutrements. So, we have this sacred text we study and we have these lessons we give, and then what we actually try to get people to do is join a small group study, fund a building program. You see what I mean? There's this big gap between those two things. I think it is essential that to be relevant and to matter to young people, churches are actually really clear about what they believe. That this should never be ambiguous, this should never be hard to figure out. You should never try to bring people in under false pretenses. That hurts people, right? Don't don't believe one thing and put up a public front that hides your beliefs because you're afraid your beliefs aren't socially palatable.

Be clear about what you believe, articulate your theology thoroughly. People won't respect you otherwise. Or you can have what is happening in many evangelical churches right now, some evangelical churches know that their teachings on gender and sexuality are counter to the culture. And so, they basically put really ambiguous things about everyone is welcome on their website and then they grow a church, and then there's some scandal because a church member can't get baptized or married, and then people get really upset. And guess what? The Millennials and Gen Z leave at that point. So, if you've brought these people in under false pretenses, there's going to be a painful reckoning. And if you're clear, you will attract the people that will stay over time.

So, if your church is not affirming, be clear you're not affirming. There are Gen Z and Millennials who are not affirming, who will come to your church. And if you are affirming ... I'm using this example simply because it's so clear. If you are affirming, be clear you're affirming, and then people who have that stance will come and join you. Avoid pretending, avoid watering down statements, because that's going to set your church up, your congregation up for failure. So, I am not talking about changing your church's theology at all. I am talking about decoupling all the institutional craft from your church's fundamental beliefs, don't be attached to programs, don't be attached to certainly building funds, be attached to community involvement, be attached to the strengths of what congregations have to offer.

Ben Tapper (21:09):

That just vibes with what I have heard and experienced with other friends of mine that are in their 30s, either actively engaged in faith communities or looking for faith communities. In my mind, I like to say it, it's about being attached to people, right? You should figure out how to attach your beliefs or ideologies to direct impact on the lives of the people in your congregation, in your community. Those are the types of things that I think are going to draw Millennials and Gen Z folks into your congregation.

Mike McHargue (21:41):

Yeah, absolutely.

Ben Tapper (21:45):

That was Science Mike McHargue. His website is asksciencemike.com and you can follow him on Instagram and Twitter @mikemchargue. We'll be right back with resources.

Matt Burke (22:02):

Part of the center's work with Indiana congregations is what we call resource consulting. Resource consulting means helping you find and use resources that are relevant to a challenge or an opportunity that you're facing. So, we're going to bring to you a couple of resources that we've discovered around young adult engagement. So, Ben, what do you got?

Ben Tapper (22:18):

Yeah. I found this book called From Jay-Z to Jesus. Now, I've got to be honest, I was a little skeptical of this at first, just because it seems to be the it thing right now to bring Jay-Z into Christian culture. But looking through the reviews and reading through a little bit of the description, I think it offers some valuable insight. This book was written by two black clergy, Benjamin Stephens the third and Ralph C. Watkins, and it is about helping, especially aging African-American congregations, understand the dynamics of engaging and bringing in young adults to their congregations.

Not just creating new offerings or new choir groups for them to join, but really seeking out their input and wrestling with what it means to transform in such a way that they are incorporating the gifts of young adults into the services and into the fabric of the congregation itself. From what I understand, it has some segments that might be uncomfortable, especially for older members of the congregation, but it seems like those that have read it have found it extremely valuable and enlightening, and it could be a great tool, especially if you're a leader of an African-American congregation.

Matt Burke (23:27):

What specifically about this resource spoke to you?

Ben Tapper (23:29):

I think it's really difficult in our world to find resources for people of color. And so, the fact that it was written by two clergy that were black men. I can't quite tell their ages, but one looks like he's probably a Millennial and the other maybe Gen X. And so, they're two younger black men, two clergy, and it's specifically for the black congregation, older black congregations, that really stood out to me. There's a lot of work around how mainline Christian congregations can include and engaged young adults. And that typically means there's a lot of work for white congregations, but it doesn't seem to be as prevalent. There don't seem to be as many resources for black and Latinx congregations, and so I really appreciated that. And I appreciated that it was written by people embedded in the culture, doing the work daily. So, they're voices that I think can be trusted as opposed to those looking from the outside in, trying to offer prescriptive advice.

Matt Burke (24:26):

Yeah. It's always great to find books that are written by practitioners, people who are in the trenches and doing the work, and so that sounds like a really good find.

Ben Tapper (24:33):

Yeah. Yeah. How about you, what'd you get?

Matt Burke (24:35):

So, one of the best books I have encountered around Millennial engagement is by Dr. David John Seel, and it's called *The New Copernicans* and essentially he's a sociologist by training and he has a thesis that what we're living in right now is a Copernican revolution in terms of culture. And one of the reasons why generations don't understand each other is because they're talking past each other. They don't even have the same basic framework and understanding of what reality is. And so, even though it's from more of an academic setting, it's a very easy to digest book. Every chapter has questions at the end for reflection. This would be a fantastic book for a leadership team or a small group to read through, and I think at the end of the day, he's trying to generate an understanding of why these generational differences exist, and through empathy and compassion we can learn to navigate that deep chasm and then find commonality and common ways of being together.

Ben Tapper (25:29):

Was there one thing in particular that really grabbed your attention about that offering?

Matt Burke (25:34):

I think it was just the basic idea that we're living through a historical shift in our understanding of the nature of reality, the nature of truth and Dr. Seel doesn't advocate for us giving ground on ideas of truth or belief, but rather just an understanding that not everybody views it in the same way. And so, learning compassion through that, I think that was one of the most profound aspects of that offering.

Ben Tapper (25:58):

Yeah. I feel that. It sounds like an important truth and an important offering for congregational leaders to hold.

Matt Burke (26:03):

Yeah. And if you check out the Templeton Foundation actually worked with Dr. Seel and did a video series, funny enough in conjunction with Mike McHargue, about *The New Copernicans* and they did some interviews and some conversation around some of the themes in the book. So, that also would be another great resource to tack onto the book itself.

Ben Tapper (26:20):

Yeah. And did you have another resource?

Matt Burke (26:22):

Yeah. Another good resource, it's a little bit dated at this point, but I think it still holds up, Faith Communities Today or FACT did a report back in 2015 about Millennial engagement. And Faith Communities Today is a very broad-based, multi-faith organization that tries to gather data from congregations all around the country and sometimes even around the world. And they compiled a report about young adults and engagement in congregations. And so, there's a lot of really good information in that report. It's a little more on the academic side. So, if you have somebody in your congregation, who's better at digesting that information and helping it to be usable, that'd be very helpful, but it's relatively basic and it doesn't necessarily provide specific conclusions or steps, but I think it'll help congregations understand the landscape and just some of the trends that this organization, Faith Communities Today, some of the trends that they're seeing.

Ben Tapper (27:12):

So, and correct me if I'm wrong, but it sounds like that resource might help congregations situate their local discussions and issues within a broader, maybe more national context of what's happening?

Matt Burke (27:24):

Yeah, that's exactly right. It might show that some of the struggles that they're having, it'll normalize some of those struggles and some of the things that they're seeing, but also it might show where the congregation is maybe a little out of step or out of sync with some of the trends and might help them calibrate and readjust a little bit to bring themselves more in line with things that might be working to engage more with Millennials and with Gen Z.

Ben Tapper (27:46):

Wonderful. Those both sound like great resources.

Matt Burke (27:49):

Yeah. You can find all of those resources on The CRG, T-H-E-C-R-G.org. That's a website created by the Center for Congregations, and it's essentially a repository of over 1,500 different resources on all aspects of congregational life. So, those resources will be available on that website, along with many, many others around young adult ministry and all kinds of other topics.

Ben Tapper (28:10):

Yeah. And if you want more personal touch, we are always available for resource consulting, so you can reach out to the center directly and we can work with you one-on-one, if you want to find something a little bit more tailored. So, just keep that in mind as well.

Matt Burke (28:21):

Yeah. Absolutely. In our practice of resource consulting, we're not the experts, we're not the ones who are going to step in and tell you what you should do. We're not going to tell you how to do it, but rather we're going to listen well, we're going to help ask clarifying questions that may actually clarify what you need. And then, we'll go to work as kind of personal research assistance. So we'll go through the resources that we know about, we'll look for new resources and provide you with a curated list specific to your congregation. It's not a one-size-fits-all approach.

So, along with resource consulting, Indiana congregations are eligible for resource grants and resource grants are dollar for dollar matching grants of up to \$15,000 to help you pay for access to outside expertise, whether that's a consultant, whether that's a new curriculum, web development, there's a whole host of things those grants cover. So, the easiest way to find out whether a project that you have as eligible or not is to reach out to your local Center for Congregations office. You can find our website at centerforcongregations.org and email or call one of our consultants, and we'd be happy to help.

Ben Tapper (29:17):

You can also reach out to us on Facebook and Instagram if you're so inclined, you can find us at Center for Congregations on Facebook and Instagram as well. I also want to mention that there are five offices throughout the State of Indiana, and so there's always going to be an office not too far from where your congregation is located. We have an office in crown point in Fort Wayne, in Indianapolis, in Seymour, and in Evansville, that way we can cover the entire state from a local perspective as well.

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