



Episode 24: Part 2: A millennial is anyone under 40 I don't like...

Featuring: Mingo Palacios & Wes Gay

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Transcript:

Mingo Palacios: Welcome to the PD podcast. My name is Mingo, and this is Part 2 of a conversation I had at Thrive Conference with Forbes Under 30 contributor Wes Gay. As always, thanks for tuning in and thanks for joining the conversation.

When you talk about the observations that you've made with the millennial generation – we're talking about a 20-year roster of people – what are you seeing trend-wise as it collides with the local church?

Right now I think it's strong-armed by largely the Boomer generation when it comes to those who hold the keys in an executive position. We're seeing a bit of a surge with sub-leadership roles within the

organization, but really very few in my mind are really circuiting their way to the highest levels of authority.

Wes Gay: Yeah. I think it was Barna that came out earlier this year and said the average age of the American pastor is 54.

Mingo Palacios: And that is up 10 years.

Wes Gay: Yeah. If you look at the 25-year range, that's like a 14-year gap in 25 years. That's crazy.

From a local church, particularly the staffing and the leadership level, for some reason we're not embracing generational diversity. If millennials can start and run billion dollar companies – remember, Zuckerberg is only 32. The cofounders of Snapchat are what, mid-twenties? That's a \$20 billion valuation right now. If they can start and run billion dollar companies and create six-figure brands off their YouTube accounts, I'm pretty sure they can serve the local church.

But what a lot of churches do – this drives me nuts – “hey, we've got millennials!” You find a 27-year-old guitar player who can sing. Then you put him on stage to lead worship next to the 29-year-old female who's your female singer, and it's like “oh, we've got millennials,” and then everybody else on stage is over 50.

Mingo Palacios: You mentioned Zuckerberg being in his twenties when he launched.

Wes Gay: He's 32 now, I think, yeah.

Mingo Palacios: Snapchat, Twitter, all of those entrepreneurs being in the millennial bracket, and then just the absence, the gross absence of them in the local church at the leadership level.

Wes Gay: We could talk for days about just the attendee level, but the problem is I don't think churches really value this generation at all. That's what it boils down to.

I talked to the guy who's a Senior VP at Chick-fil-A. He's been at Chick-fil-A for 35 years, written several books, brilliant leader. He told me on the phone one day, "When we hire consultants at Chick-fil-A, I always ask for the young people. I don't want the partners because they always have the same stuff. They say the same things, they have the same viewpoint as I do." His comment to me was "when you've been around the block a few times, you start to recognize the landmarks." We need fresh vision, we need fresh perspective.

Churches just don't value that. Senior pastors think "oh, you dumb kids" or whatever it is. I have a lot of friends who are this way – there's just no place for them to start a local church. They have to go be a church planter, which they never really wanted to be – that's the only way they can serve – or they wind up in the secular world, wanting to get back and serve in the local church and they just can't because there's no room.

Mingo Palacios: There's really no afforded opportunity. Or it's so specialized in such an unattractive way. It's like "be the guy that holds the sign as people come driving into the parking lot."

Wes Gay: Yeah. If you've got a 32-year-old millennial in your church who's a smart business guy, why not let him, if he can do it, be a bilocal

executive pastor? Your church may not be able to afford to hire a full-time person, but if he can work it out and do one day a week, something to get involved in leadership – bring some on as elders, bring them on as deacons – some kind of way to have a voice in leadership.

Mingo Palacios: That's wild talk, Wes. That's wild talk.

Wes Gay: But again, you've got millennials, who are the most educated generation in history – they are starting and running million and billion dollar businesses. They can lead big change at massive companies.

One of the biggest things to hit IBM last year – they have 400,000 employees. The biggest news from IBM last year came from a dress, of all things, that somebody wore to the Met Gala in 2016. It interacted with Watson, their supercomputer. As people tweeted about the dress, the dress changed colors.

Whose idea was it? A 28-year-old friend of mine at IBM.

Mingo Palacios: That's crazy.

Wes Gay: She figured out the money, she got it all approved, and it became *the* topic. It was a globally trending thing.

Mingo Palacios: Loaded with I'm guessing LEDs?

Wes Gay: It was loaded with some kind of LEDs, it was connected to their supercomputer deal, and that was the biggest thing at IBM, led by a millennial.

So we've got to value the generation. We've got to realize they're not the 21-year-olds in college anymore. They're 32, they're 35, they're 28. They've been active for a while.

Mingo Palacios: That's a great point that you made earlier. They're no longer this beanie-wearing, latte-sipping – well, maybe they are, but they're not just wondering what to do with life. They're already down the road and making good out of it.

Wes Gay: They could run for president, some of the older ones. They're approaching their 40s in a couple years. They're going to hit their midlife crisis before long.

Mingo Palacios: I just hit 35. I start rounding up, bro.

Wes Gay: I know. It's close. [laughs]

Mingo Palacios: Man, that's so good. I can't even fathom – it's disappointing to me when I think of – I connect with lots of churches, lots of senior level leaders, to go “you should try to afford some space at your executive level for a part-time, bilocal millennial.” They'd be like “you're crazy!”

Wes Gay: Just loko at Paul. Paul in the New Testament. That guy traveled everywhere, but what did he do? He invested in Timothy as a teenager. When Timothy was probably in his early 30s, he was an elder at Ephesus, the third largest city in the Roman Empire, with the apostle John.

Now, in the U.S., Chicago is the third largest metro area. Could you imagine if Rick Warren appointed, somehow, if he had the authority to do this, if he appointed a 32- or 34-year-old to be an elder of the capital city church of Chicago? That would be crazy. Nobody would think it was a good idea.

Paul did. With John the apostle, they served together in that church.

Mingo Palacios: That's a great observation.

Wes Gay: A lot of people who are maybe older may be thinking "he's just a whiny millennial."

Mingo Palacios: And maybe we are. [laughs]

Wes Gay: Maybe we are, but if millennials are valued in the workplace, if they're valued in their jobs to make million-dollar decisions – forget the one who are the owners, forget the ones who are founders. They're just managing departments now.

I can talk about the 35-year-old guy who is the VP of Human Resources for Scripps Networks Interactive, the company that owns Food Network, HGTV, Travel Channel, all those brands. He's 35. He's in charge of millions and millions of dollars. No problem.

But my guess is at a local church, he's probably not allowed to do more than either go on youth trips as a chaperone or serve in children's ministry. Is he being vetted right now? I don't know. He's not on staff.

Why do we undervalue the largest generation in history? If we don't handle this now, we're in the midst of – my prediction is in the next three to five years, we're seeing this massive generational handoff. The baton is in motion, and if we don't execute now we're going to drop that baton and the church is going to struggle.

Mingo Palacios: That's big. I'm going to say something and I want you to bounce back on it, because I tell a lot of people this. I say if you're waiting for this magical baton to show up in your hands, you might actually miss your prime.

I've been telling kids, I would rather go off, figure out a few materials, and just start making our own. I just want to start handing them out. Because if you believe that you've got it, you're going to execute. You're going to run the lap like you're on it, right? I tell people stop waiting for the baton and start realizing that you're already on the track. I'll hand you one and you just run as hard as you can.

Wes Gay: It's interesting. We're waiting for this authority piece to be delegated to us.

Mingo Palacios: That's exactly what it is.

Wes Gay: The reality is, a study two years ago said that 80% of millennials believe they have leadership abilities. Well, think back – when did the leadership development industry explode? The '80s. There was no leadership development industry before John Maxwell. He was kind of the guy. But in the '80s. There was nobody doing it before him at the level that it is now.

So you think for the last 20 to 25 years, John Maxwell and everybody who's ripping him off, saying "leadership is influence" – we've grown up hearing that. We now know we have the access to influence people like never before through our social media channels.

Mingo Palacios: And it's happening. It's not even that it's possible; it's just normalcy.

Wes Gay: It's the most natural thing. I can't say how many times I've done something or bought something simply because a friend of mine said they enjoyed it. I wasn't actively looking for it; I just saw the recommendation. I tried a restaurant, I went to a coffee shop, I bought this thing.

We're influenced by people. We're leading people through our influence all the time online. This generation knows how to do that instinctively.

What the church has got to figure out is how can we channel that influence together? How do we bring it in and collaborate together for the sake of the Kingdom and bring that in the right direction?

It's going to require a little creativity. I said this this morning in my session. When we talk about the millennials thing, what it really boils down to is a lot of times it requires that we change things that are long overdue. A lot of times. Things that we should've changed 20 years ago, but it's uncomfortable and it's hard.

Mingo Palacios: Even if it's working all right, it still requires us to change it.

Wes Gay: And it's not simply because of millennials. It's simply because culture changes. Things shift. People change. My granddad is 85. He likes

Facetime. An 85-year-old man loves Facetime. He has an iPad. My dad's in his 50s; he loves his Apple Watch. He's very connected in all that stuff. So it's not a generational thing anymore; we're just in a different world.

We keep the same Biblical principles. We don't change our principles, but if we're not adjusting how we engage with people based on how things are shifting around us –

Mingo Palacios: That's the time to change. It's funny because it's written right here in *The Purpose Driven Church*. That's really what Rick wrote about the church. 25 years ago he wrote, the principles can't change. Those are God-given.

Wes Gay: We don't get to define the principles. They have already been defined for us. Our objectives are defined for us. What God's called us to do is defined for us.

What does change is how that plays out in our specific context. That's the thing. People think the method is what they read online. They say "this church reaches millennials." Yeah, but that church is in downtown LA.

Mingo Palacios: It has to be contextual.

Wes Gay: My guess is how one Saddleback location reaches people is different than how another reaches people.

Mingo Palacios: A hundred percent.

Wes Gay: It has to be, because the context is different. We forget context.

Mingo Palacios: You know what it is? It's kind of lazy, because what we want to say is copy/paste – the worst idea ever. I'm not going to nail the Boomer – but that's the easiest thing you can do. You just select what you like, copy it, and then you drag it to the place you want it to be and you paste it.

But context is something I think that we're innately keen on. We understand "this does not fit," and we avoid it like the plague. I think that we're in a season where a lot of executives, no matter what age they are, have run the easy game, which is copy/paste, copy/paste, copy/paste. "We'll just paste this all over the place."

Wes Gay: "I saw this online, I heard this at a conference," yeah.

Mingo Palacios: Yep. "I'm going to buy the bundle and I want to just insert it into my thing, bolt it on." I think that the millennial generation is like "ooh, that doesn't work here, and I don't even like the fact that you're trying to make that work here."

Wes Gay: It goes back to authenticity. For your staff, if you change every time you get back from a vacation or a conference – I've been in those staff meetings where you always dreaded the senior pastor or leader coming back because it's like "I had a week off, I went to this conference. We're changing everything again."

That level of inconsistency and inauthenticity is going to run people away every time. At the end of the day, authenticity is not a style, it's not a program, it's not a method; authenticity is about your confidence and your identity in Christ, period.

Millennials are the most targeted generation in history – since childhood with Disney movies. We’ve been hit with every Disney animated classic.

Mingo Palacios: Those stupid puffy Disney boxes. [laughs]

Wes Gay: And they’re bringing them back with the real *Beauty and the Beast* thing and all this kind of stuff.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah, they’re attacking your kids now, bro.

Wes Gay: They’re attacking us because they knew we grew up with them. We’ve been targeted, we’ve been talked about, we’ve been studied and researched ad nauseum, so we can spot a phony about 10 miles away.

Mingo Palacios: This is so good.

Wes Gay: I know a guy I worked for – he’s in his mid-50s, he’s been in ministry 30-plus years, he’s got his Doctor of Ministry – he doesn’t try to be cool at all. He is fully confident in who he is and he’s fine with it. He doesn’t care.

The 90-year-old ladies, the three-year-olds, the 17-year-old guy who’s doing pushups and drinking protein shakes during worship, the high school football punk – they all love this guy, because he is who he is. He cares about people. And at the end of the day, that’s what draws people.

Mingo Palacios: I love that. Wes, thank you so much for just unpacking your guts and your convictions in the RV today. If you were to give a final word of

encouragement – because we’ve done a lot of assessing, we’ve done a lot of picking. Hopefully people aren’t weeping on the other line because they’re self-identifying.

What would you give as a word of encouragement? We’ve got two segments, like I told you. We’re wrapping ourselves around executive leaders by way of recommendation from emerging leaders. What’s your final word?

Wes Gay: For executive leaders to stop talking at millennials and start talking through them. Just get to know people. Find out who they are, what makes them tick, and then really help point them to Jesus in those things. As your staff, as your volunteers, as your congregation. Just make it about people. I wish it was more complicated than that, but it’s really not.

Mingo Palacios: That’s really good. I think that we were at Catalyst a few weeks back and we said if we could stop talking about the next generation and just start talking with them, we’d actually find some solutions.

Wes Gay: Leverage their strengths and you’d be amazed at what happens when you let them use what they have, where they are, for the Kingdom.

Mingo Palacios: That’s super good. Any word for our young hustlers, our young bilocational up-and-coming kiddos?

Wes Gay: This is more of a word – I’m just going to be a little mean for a second.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah, go for it. Brace yourself. Wes is getting mean.

Wes Gay: Yeah, watch out.

Mingo Palacios: Wes is getting mean.

Wes Gay: One thing millennials don't do well is we don't honor the past generations' sacrifice. I've been in churches that are over 100 years old, and you have young people go "we're going to do all this different."

It's like we forget – yes, music styles should probably change, and yes, this and that should shift, but we've got to take time to intentionally honor and respect the people who, for 50+ years, have sacrificed for this church to happen.

I know churches literally that still have people who were digging with shovels for the first building. If we're not honoring and respecting those people and their sacrifice, and willing to learn and help guide them along the way...

I'd say that the second thing is, if you're in a church, if you're full-time on staff and you're encountering resistance from older people, particularly the retired age who tend to gripe anyway, here's what I'd suggest – and I got this from a guy I'm working for: find out where the old men go for coffee in the mornings. It's probably a diner somewhere.

Mingo Palacios: It's probably at like 5:05 a.m.

Wes Gay: It's probably at 5 a.m. They're probably getting coffee, which is probably just basically hot brown water. It's not even really coffee.

What are they going to do? They're going to meet like old men do and they're going to swap news. They're basically going to gossip like old women do, but around their version of a coffee shop.

Show up. Literally. There's a guy I work with, he knew where the old men hung out on which days of the week, and he would just show up unannounced. He'd sit at the table with them, have a cup of coffee, eat some bacon and eggs. No agenda. They just got to know him, and over time they trusted him. And the more they trusted him, the more they trusted his leadership. He earned their permission to lead through change.

Mingo Palacios: That's good. Earning permission is huge. I don't like to even think about that.

Wes Gay: It takes time.

Mingo Palacios: Yeah. That's a really great word. That's not as harsh as I thought it was going to come out.

Wes Gay: I can be mean. Nah, I don't want to be that mean. [laughs]

Mingo Palacios: No, I don't want you to be mean. We want to keep these ears. Wes, if people want to follow along with your thoughts and along with your writings, how do we do that?

Wes Gay: The best way to do it is on Twitter. It's @wesgay. And my website, just wesgay.com.

Mingo Palacios: That's perfect. Wes, I love, love, love your perspective. I appreciate you dropping all of that wisdom on us. I hope that this propels some

young leaders forward. Some existing leaders, I hope it challenges them.

And we'll catch up. I don't know where we'll meet up again, but that was so, so good. The first time we met and all this chemistry at work because Jesus is in the middle of it.

Do me a favor; share this conversation if you enjoyed it. Love you guys. We'll talk to you soon.

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