

Newman Strategic Planning Study – Questionnaire Results (Part 4)

The following is the last installment in a series of reports on the Newman Questionnaire conducted last November. Here we present the areas of growth and challenges in the community that our study has revealed, and in particular what defines and drives the millennial generation. The key findings in this installment are as follows:

SUMMARY

- Comments about the liturgy were also quite complementary employing terms such as: “well done”, “wonderful”, “beautiful”, “deeply moving”, “joyful”, “peaceful”, “inspiring”.
- That’s not to say that everyone felt their experience at Newman Centre could not be improved upon. The majority of comments related to improving the liturgical experience e.g. change layout of the benches, include kneelers, etc., and to try to make Newman a more welcoming community than it is. A small minority felt Newman was too conservative and were in disagreement with its new directions. This criticism arose mostly from those over 30 and former members.
- The shift in overall Mass attendance by the millennial generation presents a challenge to make a space for their cultural expression while at the same time providing mentoring relationships with the other generations in the Newman Community.

Opinions on the Liturgy

The vast proportion of comments on the liturgy were commendatory. Only about one in five respondents contributed one or more negative comments. Of the 20 categories that were coded for this question, the top three account for almost 60% of all comments.

- Most frequent with 43% were comments like well done, wonderful, beautiful, deeply moving, joyful, peaceful, inspiring.
- Next with 9% were comments related to good preaching, relevant homilies and occasional references to Fr. Chris.
- The third category with 8% related to the music and the 7 PM Mass.

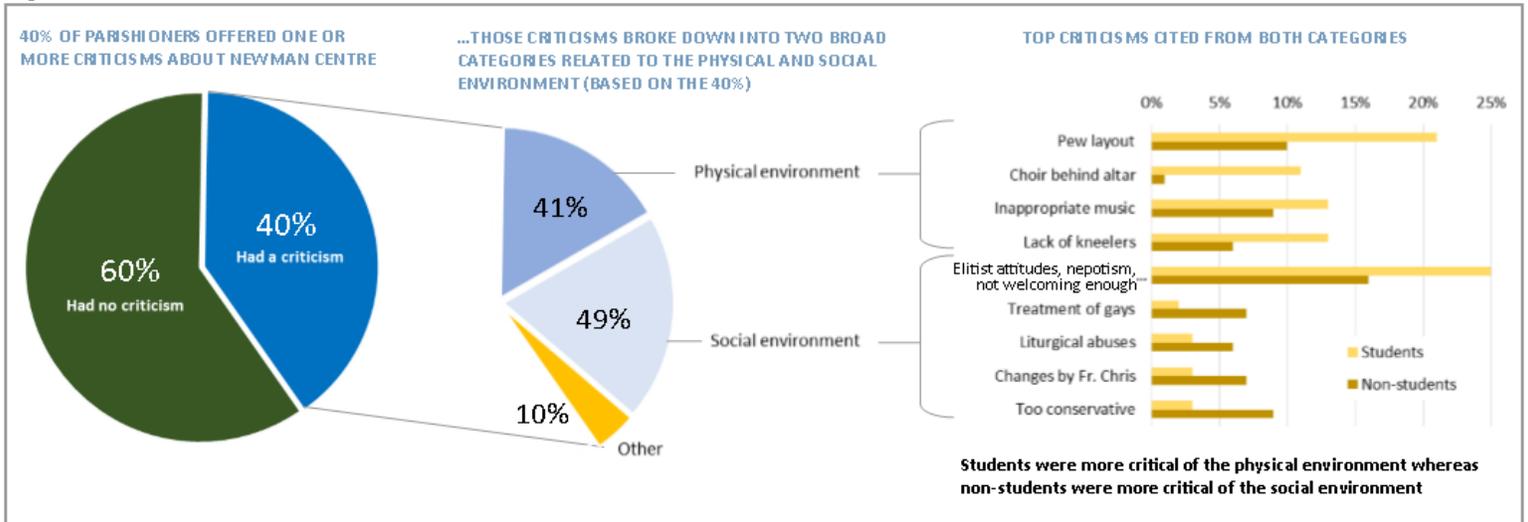
Negative comments were mainly directed at the layout of the benches with 5%, the absence of kneelers with 3%, a general lack of reverence and too much noise during Mass with 4%, and complaints that the music at the 7 PM Mass was too noisy and inappropriate with 3%.

Things that detract from the Newman Centre experience

The enthusiasm of parishioners for the institution, however, does not mean that everything was as perfect as could be. When asked if there was anything that detracted from their experience at the Newman Centre, about 40% of parishioners had something to say (see **Figure 1** on Page 2)

Those attending the 11 AM Sunday Mass were twice as likely to have critical comments as those attending the 7 PM Mass. Also those holding negative opinions on the liturgy were twice as likely to proffer negative comments as those holding positive opinions. Demographically those least critical were less than 30 years of age and had lower educational attainment. Finally, former members tended to be far more critical than current members.

Figure 1



As with the question on the liturgy, the primary target of criticism related to the physical and organizational environment at Mass. The main themes here had to do with the layout of the benches, lengthy announcements and uninspiring homilies, music that was not relevant to the faith, the absence of kneelers, and too much socializing that detracted from the religious experience.

The other key area of criticism related to the social environment at the Centre. The latter involved comments that Newman Centre was not welcoming enough, although clearly from earlier questions, for many a welcoming community was its great virtue. Others complained that it was too conservative, while others said it was too modernist. One had the impression these were crosscurrents emerging from a liberal versus conservative divide.

It was interesting to see the differences between students and non-students as it relates to these two broad areas of criticism. The most frequent criticisms of the physical and organizational environment came from students, while the most frequent criticisms of the social environment on the other hand, generally came from non-students. On some social environment criticisms this reversal did not hold (see chart above).

The context for criticisms

While the above seems like a long laundry list of criticisms, it's important to understand its context. The percentages quoted above mostly relate to the 40% that found something to criticize -- 60% did not. That means that the 25% of students who found Newman Centre not welcoming enough translates to 10% of the total sample of students. The 16% of non-students with the same criticism translates to 6% of the total sample of non-students. Together, that represents about 8% of the sample. Secondly, this was a multiple response question meaning that a person could end up in multiple categories of criticism.

The third and perhaps the most compelling point of context is that many of these criticisms raised by a small minority are massively outweighed by positive comments from other questions in the survey. For example, on the issue of Newman Centre being a welcoming community, 61% cite this as the reason for coming to Newman Centre in the first place. Furthermore, where respondents describe in their own words how Newman Centre is unique, 43% cite its welcoming, caring, intimate quality.

While these numbers dwarf the 8% who find that Newman Centre isn't welcoming enough, they do suggest it's a challenge for Newman to do better. Given the large influx of new students every year and the necessity to integrate the established community with new members that is no simple task. To

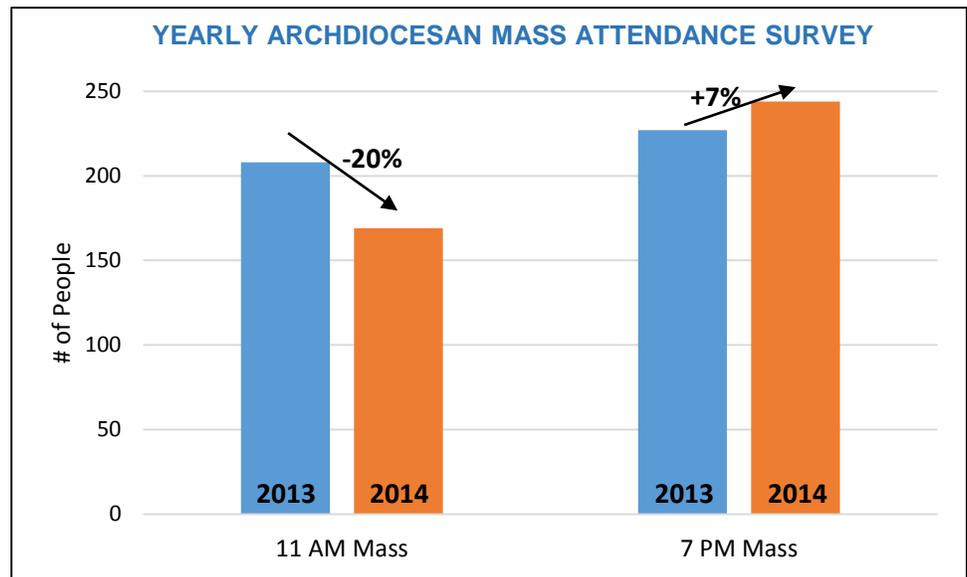
open oneself constructively to all these criticisms, it is important to establish the context from within which they arise, and especially their statistical basis.

An important question upon which these criticisms may shed some light is why the 11 AM Sunday Mass attendance has fallen about 20% from 2013 to 2014 according to the archdiocese attendance survey. Was it due to some of the criticisms noted? Or were other, more significant factors at play?

Discussion of Results

The yearly Archdiocese Mass attendance survey found that in 2014, the attendance at the 11 AM Sunday Mass had decreased about 20%. During the same period, however, attendance for the 7 PM Mass increased by 7% (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



A reason for leaving?

One hypothesis for the drop in attendance at 11 AM is a dissatisfaction among some parishioners with the changes at the Newman Centre, causing them to leave the parish.

The distribution of this discontent among current students, non-students and former members of the parish is shown in the chart below (Figure 3).

Figure 3

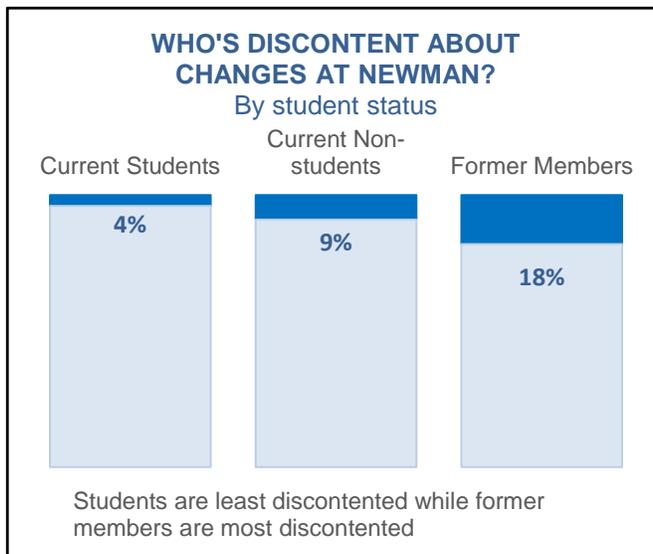
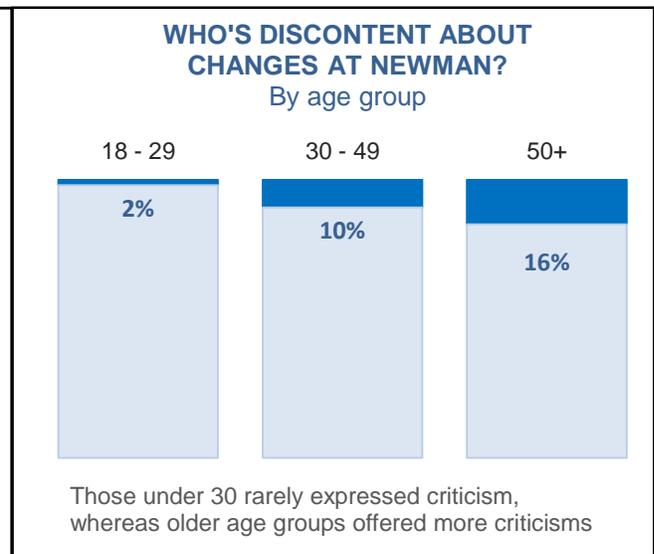


Figure 4



However, while one in five former members may have left because they were unhappy with the changes at the parish, four out of five left for other reasons. In addition, Figure 3 shows that about one in 10 of non-students who voiced similar complaints, continue to remain as parishioners of Newman Centre.

While their disagreements may have impacted on how often they attend the 11 AM Mass, they did not cause them to leave the congregation. It may well be that the key trigger in the decision-making process to stay or to go was the impact of the Courage controversy; however, the purpose of the survey was not to explicitly target specific criticisms. The open ended nature of the questions left such decisions with respondents. Some respondents did specifically note in their verbatim comments that the reason they left the parish was disagreement with actions taken related to Courage. The number who did so, however, was small.

Perhaps the most interesting result for those who took issue with changes at the parish was that almost all of them were over 30. The table below shows that for those under 30, the whole flap had almost no impact on the group as it relates to either voicing criticism of the changes or possibly leaving.

This generational difference alluded to earlier as pitting the millennials on one side and older generations on the other in their demographics, attitudes and behavior at Newman Centre, is central to the understanding of the dynamics measured in the archdiocese attendance data.

The shift by the <30

Rather than looking at the archdiocese numbers as an indication of deteriorating Mass attendance, the data suggest we are seeing a generational shift in the makeup of the community of Newman Centre. The archdiocese numbers show that although the 11 AM attendance decreased by about 20%, the overall decrease between 2013 and 2014 was only 5%. Losses at 11 AM were to a fair degree compensated by increases at the 7 PM Mass. Attendance at the latter is in large part students and those below 30. As members of older generations disappear from Newman Centre attendance rolls (for all sorts of reasons most of which have nothing to do with disapproval of changes at the parish), they are replaced in large part by a younger generation that demographers have come to define as millennials.

Our survey has clearly revealed these generational cleavages. In addition to millennials preferring the 7 PM Mass over the 11 AM service, the survey also found that music plays a big part in the celebration of the 7 PM Mass. They seem to have boundless enthusiasm, showing great willingness to volunteer and engage in some of the programs at Newman. They also tend to be fairly supportive of how Newman Centre is run, far less critical than older generations of parishioners. For them Newman Centre is like a home, a place of safety where they can mingle with spiritually like-minded peers. For that reason the handy location of Newman Centre on the U of T campus makes it a very desirable feature for students.

Profiling the millennial generation

Apart from being below 30, the Barna group (see reference below) identified three words in their study of millennials that went a long way towards explaining how they differed from earlier generations: **access, alienation, and authority**. As the authors of the report noted, through the Internet and social networks, millennials are more connected to the body of information about the world than any generation before them. It is one reason they are perhaps the most highly educated generation in memory. One consequence of this access is that millennials have become aware more than any other generation at such an early stage of their life of the massive corruption of our most venerated political, economic and social institutions and their leaders.

Millennials have lived through the most devastating economic meltdown in modern history. This has alienated them from those institutions whose job it was to keep us safe from such events. It is little wonder millennials are skeptical of the call of institutional authority. As such, the Barna study concludes institutions like the church needs to undertake a special effort **“to make space for their cultural expressions”**.

A study from the Pew Research (see reference on pg. 6) that compared millennials to previous generations when they were of a similar age, found millennials were far less likely to affiliate with an established religious group— about one in four were unaffiliated. For boomers the corresponding figure was half that. The Pew study also found that millennials attach much more importance to things like being a good parent (52%) or having a successful marriage (30%) than having a successful career (15%). It is the one generation in which the work ethic takes a backseat to leisure activities such as technology use, social media, and music to uniquely define themselves.

The future for millennials

The economic prospects for millennials do not look promising. In spite of the fact that one in three millennials are unemployed, Pew Research found most were optimistic about their economic outlook. Many felt that the government would help solve the economic problems. This seems a bit unrealistic given that reliable research (see reference on pg. 6) has shown that being unemployed for an extended period after graduation tends to have a long-term negative impact on earnings and career success.

A successful mentoring program...would strengthen the bonds between generations

Perhaps this is one area where mentoring advice from more experienced Newman Centre parishioners could help their millennial colleagues develop insights for a more rewarding economic foundation. After all, the spiritual world and the material world do not exist as islands unto themselves (*reference here Cardinal Newman's philosophy in which spiritual, intellectual and human growth combine to foster a holistic development of each person*). The survey showed an overall participation rate for the mentorship program of 10% and only 5% for students. A successful mentoring program of this nature would certainly strengthen the bonds between generations and provide real substance to the meaning of welcoming community.

Concluding thoughts

None of these findings identifying millennial differences, or parishioner experiences that may have detracted from their time at Newman Centre, however, should diminish the central message of the survey. Shared passionately by both millennials and older generations is the extraordinary sense of community that Newman Centre offers its attendees. Community is what brings people to Newman Centre. It is what sustains their presence. It is the fond remembrance of those who have left the community. Inextricably related to that is the presence of young people and students. They add a sense of vitality and enthusiasm that make life at Newman Centre absolutely unique.

It is the common ground of a welcoming, diverse, energized community inspiring spiritual growth and intellectual development that makes the bridges connecting the different generations of Newman Centre parishioners. Hopefully the survey will instruct us where bridges need be buttressed, where bridges need be built, and where bridges stand strong where they are.

Links to Millennial Research:

MILLENNIALS A Portrait of Generation Next: Confident. Connected. Open to Change.

<http://pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf>

Millennial Generation Less Religiously Active than Older Americans

<http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/millennial-generation-less-religiously-active-than-older-americans/>

Religion Among the Millennials

<http://www.pewforum.org/2010/02/17/religion-among-the-millennials/>

Making Space for Millennials

<https://www.barna.org/spaceformillennials>

Lisa B. Kahn. "The Long-Term Labor Market Consequences of Graduating from College in a Bad Economy," Yale School of Management, Aug. 13, 2009 (forthcoming in Labour Economics).