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Be Transformed?*

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Foreword

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Foreword: Mutual Transformations

In April 2015, the Institute for Leadership and Service at Valparaiso University brought together students, alumni, faculty and staff for a day-long conference on the distinctive character of millennials. Through a keynote address and undergraduate research presentations, participants explored millennial interactions with faith, philanthropy, society and the world. The conference proceedings, published in this inaugural issue of *Bridge/Work: An Undergraduate journal connecting Action, Ideas, and the Meaningful Life*, invite us to ask: What will change as a result of these interactions? Who will be transformed?

The spring conference was both inspired and framed by keynote speaker David King, who serves as Karen Lake Buttrey Director of the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving at the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy. Speaking to the multi-generational audience gathered that day, King described “seismic shifts in the ways that religious and philanthropic communities are engaging the world” in the twenty-first century. As millennials enter into this shifting landscape, he observed, we are tempted to try to recruit them to reinforce existing structures and practices. “Many engage the generational question eager to make millennials into something else,” he noted. “They are hoping they can attract millennials to come to their church, attract them to their business, or buy their product.” But that is not going to work. “In contrast,” concluded King, “Any dialogue should hold out the possibility of change on all sides. Openness to mutual transformation is an absolute necessity.”

Openness to mutual transformation is an absolute necessity. David King’s call echoed throughout the conference hall that morning and throughout the four student research presentations that followed his keynote address.

Cogan Blackmon ‘16 explored the potentially transformative impact of the Social Gospel movement on millennials’ faith and service today. Tracing Social Gospel theology from the early twentieth century to the present time, Blackmon noted that figures like Walter Rauschenbusch, Dorothy Day, Shane Claiborne and Eugene Cho “present a perspective that would encourage millennials to be more religiously, socially, and civically engaged.” He also questioned whether that perspective is taking hold. “If millennials are going to be the generation that ‘stops talking and starts doing,’” concluded Blackmon, “then the Social Gospel offers motivation to begin the movement.”

Nura Zaki ‘17, drew out the many ways in which the “paradox of choice” in faith and service is impacting members of the millennial generation, making them less likely to commit to one church or organization for the long term. Faith communities are tempted to cater to the culture’s menu mentality by creating more options as well, she suggested. Yet what is needed is something very different: faith communities must recognize the deep desire of young people to find authenticity, which may come from being chosen rather than choosing. Pointing to the biblical story of Esther, Zaki concluded that, like Esther, millennials hunger to find answers in their discomfort, rather than escape it. “For

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the millennial generation,” she concluded, “life is a quest to figure out and define our own values; to not be further informed or completely conformed, but truly *transformed*.”

Caleb Rollins ‘15 focused on trends in philanthropy, in a paper investigating the Buy-One-Give-One (BOGO) model to giving that is so popular with millennials. Rollins pressed members of his own generation to consider whether this model transforms givers into consumers without compassion. “Proponents of BOGO consumerism would argue that this blending of care for others with a consumer product highlights the benefit of BOGO consumerism,” he observed, “but this amalgamation might also lead to unintentional shifts in the culture of giving and humanitarian action.” Transformations in giving patterns are occurring as we speak (or buy), he observed. But are these transformations deepening—or weakening—our capacity to care?

Finally, Katelyn Marak ‘16, argued that it is millennials who most need to change. Drawing on thinkers from C.S. Lewis and Charles Taylor to Valparaiso University’s own Slavica Jakelic, Marak emphasized the importance of an extra-individual commitment that propels us to contribute to the greater good, despite the ever stronger pull of American individualism. This extra-individual commitment, she argued, is exemplified in the Christian conception of service. “Christians of the millennial generation,” she argued, “must learn to think less out of self-interest, while harnessing their individual talents in ways that serve for the betterment of others.”

Millennials. Faith. Philanthropy. Who will be transformed? The papers presented at our conference did not converge on a single answer to that question. Yet, intriguingly, all four students pointed toward resources *already present in traditions of faith and service* (Social Gospel theology, biblical story, humanitarian action, Christian service) as powerful means of transformation, both for young people and for the institutions they are now entering. In so doing, they connected actions, ideas, and the meaningful life in fresh and compelling ways—and confirmed, in David King’s words, that “as we look for answers, millennials may be our best teachers.”

We hope you enjoy this inaugural issue of *Bridge/Work*, and that the papers published within will inspire you to engage questions of mutual transformation in your own places and ways.

We close this brief foreword with a word of thanks to several philanthropic friends of Valparaiso University: the University Guild, which kindly co-sponsored the conference with the Institute for Leadership and Service, and Peter and Bonnie Raquet, who helped us start this journal out of their own distinctive faith and generosity.

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