

WHAT ABOUT YOUNG ADULTS?

by David G. Berube

I suspect that since the beginning of the Christian faith there have been young adults in churches. Certainly there have always been young adults in United States congregations since the first meetinghouses were erected on this continent. So why should we worry about the specifics of this group of people? As several long-term church members in several places have put it, “What makes them so special? When we were their age we were here and nobody did anything special for us. Besides, it isn’t all that surprising if they aren’t here at the moment. A lot of people go away from church for awhile after high school then come back after college. They’ll do the same.”

That statement may have turned out to be true a good portion of the time in previous generations. It probably even held up for the last generation of young adults, the Baby Boomers. Up until that generation, a large portion of young adults grew up in church, most in homes with traditional nuclear families, and all in a US culture that stressed a sort of individuality within uniformity. This triple reinforcement guided people to the reality that even if you go away from church for a while, when the seeds planted in you as a child sprout you’ll return. As we moved from the Boomers to the current generation of young adults, however, something profound happened that has forever changed that reality.

Defining a Generation

The current generation of young adults is called “Baby Busters,” “Generation X,” “Twentysomethings,” or “Post-moderns” with fair regularity. One of the struggles we immediately encounter is the high degree to which they defy a single name’s ability to capture who they are. All those names and many others touch on parts and pieces of who the members of this generation are. Unlike earlier generations, though, a single profile is hard to develop, and the only rule is the exception. In this document you’ll see Gen (eration) X for the sake of consistency, but please remember the rule of the exception. Also remember the resistance (maybe even resentment) of this generation to being labeled or “captured” at all. If you are not a Gen Xer you’ll feel at points like all you are hearing is generalizations, hedging, and disclaimers. That hazy edge, however, is core to understanding this group of people. As theologian Harvey Cox once wrote, “God may be eternal. But Generation X is a moving target.”

Statistically speaking, the US population of Generation X includes approximately 50 million people born between roughly 1965 and 1985. In contrast to the Baby Boomers, this generation, largely, did not grow up in church, comes from family situations that left their friends as their greatest primary influence, and lives in a US culture that stresses individuality to the exclusion of uniformity. They don’t have the “seeds” of church experience that will fuel a need to come back to church after a college-years sabbatical. As far as the current generation of young adults is concerned, all assumptions that past reality predicts the future can be assumed false.

This is the most significantly different generation the world has known since the Middle Ages, and their worldview is significantly different from any in the last 500 years. They grew up surrounded by new forms of media and new advances in technology. They grew up in a world where the sky is no longer the limit for prosperity at work or at home or in the realm of certain reality. They grew up when “Christendom” was past its heyday and the relevant power of the church had waned. They are the ones whose conscious life experience has been exclusively in the post-modern age, and they are the only generation for whom this is true. For Generation X, a high degree of individualism is tolerated and encouraged, and their ever-changing, fluid, virtual reality prohibits generational sameness. And that’s why we need to frame church in significantly different ways to reach out to them.

Exploring some themes

While creating a profile of the “typical” member of Generation X may be impossible, there are certain central themes that factor into who these young adults are as spiritual and religious beings. They are: Suspicion of Institutions, Especially Organized Religion; The Superiority of Personal Experience; The Spiritual Nature of Suffering; and The Centrality of Ambiguity to Faith.

Institutional suspicion

Think about the Apostle Paul’s middle-of-the-night vision in Acts 16 of a man from Macedonia calling, “Come over here and help us.” That image has to one degree or another motivated church evangelism and mission for about 20 centuries. But what if the Macedonian in the vision wasn’t interested? What if he said something like this instead:

“Look, Paul, I know you mean well, but we’re just fine already. We don’t care what you do on your side of the water, and anyone who wants to follow you can, but we’ll pass. We may incorporate some of what you say, but it’ll be on our terms and by our own interpretation. And you may not like how it looks, but our spiritual journey belongs to us, not you. Besides, you haven’t exactly got such a great track record. People keep beating you up and running you out of town. Maybe you’re too zealous and convinced you have the only truth. Besides, some of your followers are gossips, power mongers, and intolerant of others. No offense, but no thanks.”

Different picture, isn’t it? In a nutshell, that’s where Christianity stands with Generation X right now. They watched during the 1980s (their formative years) as holy rolling televangelists and local priests and pastors fell like crack addicted junkies into their personal moral failures. They grew up in households with parents who said things like, “When I was a kid my mother dragged me to church and I hated it. So, I’m not going to force you to go. When you’re old enough you can decide for yourself what your faith will be.” They heard how the church (at best) is full of irrelevant, boring old hypocrites who don’t realize the calendar has turned a few times since what they’re doing mattered.

The institutional church is important, even critical for many people. Given the history of Generation X, the same is not true for them. “Pure” faith can, and is most often, experienced outside the bounds of humanly created rules, restrictions, and rituals. Faith, after all, is about that which is beyond human control. Once human beings institutionalize it, faith becomes less supernatural and more earth-bound. Beaudoin says Xers believe churches have watered down and domesticated the radical messages of Jesus. Ministries are often safe and passive. People of faith are sometimes bored to the point of not caring, or frustrated to the point of leaving.

Personal Experience

Generation X is not the first group of people to use personal experience as the standard for judging truth and falsehood. When his fellow apostles told Thomas they had seen the Risen Lord, he told them he needed to see and touch the wounds of Jesus to believe them. The mystics of church history, American revivals and crusades, and the Pentecostal movement all rely on experience to drive the engine of spiritual encounter. Generation X has just heightened the value of personal experience to the point that it is a generational hallmark. According to Virtual Faith, “Xers generally find the religious in personal experience, particularly in an emerging form of sensual spirituality. In this turn to experience, there is a constant yearning, both implicit and explicit, for the almost mystical encounter of the human and divine.”

Generation X is looking for religious experience that is personal, and significantly marks the individual. This is more significant than any external witness’s testimony could possibly be. Beaudoin points out that visible signs of the Invisible God are very important. Anything that reminds a person of the religious truths she holds to be true — candles, a cross, even a kiss — can be a “sacramental.” (A sacramental is

a physical reminder of the holy. The popularity of sacramentals for Gen Xers may lie in their predominantly unofficial, and sometimes controversial, status. As symbols outside the mainstream of religious institutions, sacramentals highlight the individual's separateness from institutional religion.

Interestingly, Beaudoin sees body piercing and tattoos as ultimate sacramental reality. These symbols communicate something of the essence of the person — they are spiritual expressions in that sense, only more intimate than simply wearing a cross or fish a fish lapel pin. In these experiences, a person bonds the sacramental to her or himself in deeply physical, intimate ways that "...leave a permanent mark of intense physical experience, whether pleasurable or painful." He says these marking experiences, in part, are substitutes for the inability of religious institutions to provide experiences that deeply mark people. They are a form of ultimate personal experience, taking a person outside what is comfortable, forcing them to face pain, and choose a permanent expression of the experience.

Suffering's spiritual nature

According to Beaudoin, Generation X feels a strong connection with the prophet Isaiah's Suffering Servant — "He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." (Isaiah 53:3, NIV). Gen X is a suffering generation and self-conscious about it, which is what makes suffering a generational trait for them.

Beaudoin offers a list of specific societal failures during the lifetime of Generation X that contribute to their identification with suffering: AIDS, easy divorce, broken and reconfigured homes, abuse, poor schools, recessions, youth poverty and lower real dollar wages, teen suicide, outrageous educational expenses, disappointing government and religious institutions, national debt, high taxes, environmental devastation, drugs, parents who need parenting, violence, unstable economic security, premature loss of childhood. Of course, many of these issues have existed across time and generations, but think how much more we've heard of them in the past 15 to 20 years. Any and all of these situations have been headline news on television, in news magazines, local papers, sermons, and general public discourse. The difference from previous generations, according to Beaudoin, is that the act of suffering itself is definitive of Gen X. They own the suffering to the point that they literally wear it. Generation X's fashions — mix and match, grungy, or strange looking to other generations — are visual symbols of the suffering they feel.

"Grunge" is the signature clothing most of us recognize. It is almost anti-fashion — flannel shirt (preferably old and a little worn), faded (better yet, tattered) jeans, recycled combat boots. Lack of make-up and unwashed hair complete the look. Purchased from Good Will rather than the Gap, Beaudoin says this outfit expresses the poverty of meaning and direction Gen X feels. These secondhand clothes share Xers sense of being a secondhand generation — hand-me-down fashion symbolizing the weight of the hand-me-down problems listed above. Left to themselves (remember, these are latchkey kids) Gen X chooses to wear the incongruities, confusion, and aimlessness of the reality it has inherited. By taking on the burden of the culture's suffering and actually wearing it, Gen X owns suffering rather than being owned by it. Suffering, Beaudoin comments, "...need not be a series of debts we owe, but can ironically be a set of clothes we own."

Ambiguity at center stage

Generation X, according to Beaudoin, thrives in the gray areas of life. In fact, as he shows, Gen Xers highlight the ambiguity:

"Xers practice a type of religiosity that experiments with heresies as new forms of faith. Trusting in betrayal as much as in a benevolent God, we erode stringent dichotomies between the orthodox and the

heterodox. We search for faith in the midst of profound theological, social, personal, and sexual ambiguities.” In the Gen X spiritual quest, there is a mixing of the holy and unholy, spiritual and sensual, sacred and blasphemous, all for the purpose of aiding young adults’ search for God.

Gen Xers are not the first to raise the issue of ambiguity. Beaudoin points to such historical theologians as John Henry Newman, Rudolf Otto, Paul Tillich, and Thomas Merton, who all lifted up the same theme. In different ways, each of them raises the point that blasphemy, doubt, and the unholy can all be doors into the sanctuary of the holy. For one to express doubt, a faith reality to be doubted must exist. For one to embrace blasphemy, one must acknowledge orthodoxy. For one to seek what is unholy, one must believe there is something that is holy.

Why such a focus on ambiguity? Where did it come from? I mentioned earlier the parental wisdom of not exposing children to faith and letting them choose later. That’s one source. The relative ambiguity of a world where good and bad get equal coverage and are sometimes portrayed as equally powerful is another. So is the young adult impression that the Christians they know really don’t act any different from anybody else. But the virtual reality of cyberspace highlights ambiguity more than any other contemporary reality. Virtual Reality is defined and redefined with lightning speed, simultaneously redefining everything and everyone existing on it. Time and space are relative in cyberspace. They aren’t “real” in the sense that our five senses can verify. Our modems are literal time machines, transcending geography and culture, allowing us to travel around the world in seconds. Time is no longer a line, but a series of blocks that are replayed and recombined to tell a story in many different ways.

People, as well as time, are segmented for the cyber-generation. Multiple cyberpersonalities are not only possible but prevalent. You really can recreate yourself and live multiple personalities side by side. Who I am is fluid in cyberspace, allowing me to explore areas where I may feel ambivalent or ill-defined in “real life.” This new reality even affects the Bible.

Hypertext, the mouse-driven, clickable version of information, is more fluid than printed text. A “text” in cyberspace doesn’t have covers, pages, or single authors, so it is potentially as big as the World Wide Web. By following highlighted words, you can travel far and wide in a seamless flow of words and images. Even if your starting point is the Bible, you can move very quickly outward, even to places that previous generations considered incompatible with Scripture. In cyberspace, even a search of the Bible wanders.

Implications for churches

These Gen X themes point to some realities we in the Christian Church need to take into account as we reach out to young adults:

1. “Front door” evangelism won’t work. This generation is not going to come to church through the front door. They may not even come through the back or side doors (remember the words that echo for them are, “My mother dragged me, and I hated it). We’re going to have to go to them in the midst of their culture and take our cues from them as to when it’s okay to share our message. Trust building is our first job, and I think it’s going to be a long task.

2. Even a hint of hypocrisy is fatal. Integrity is key. If we don’t believe our faith enough to follow through on its implications (not to mention knowing it well enough to know what the possible implications are), we better be careful about what we proclaim.

3. New wine needs new wineskins. It is safe to assume that old methodologies for reaching people won’t work. Techniques and approaches that even feel false or “canned” will fail. I’m convinced we’ve got to start with the command of Jesus — simple love — and pay attention to what develops from that (like Jesus with the Samaritan woman in John 4).

4. If we're willing to dialog about the Church's failures we can point to the triumphs of faith. If we get defensive with Gen Xers about the failures of Christianity, they will walk away. They need to know it's safe to raise the negatives, if we're ever going to have a chance to raise the positives.

5. We have to broaden our definition of "church." We need to give more than lip service to the organic understanding of the Body of Christ. In the new and continuing church, generational groups will organize, worship, and experience faith in radically different, maybe even separate, ways. We must be spiritually mature enough to see a widely diverse body as "our church."

6. I believe we must provide more and greater opportunities for Gen X (and all) believers to practice their faith. Hands-on experiences, interpreted as we participate, will go a long way to tie together the what of experience with the why of faith.

7. We have a tremendous outreach opportunity on the Internet. We need to put our best effort into being a viable, attractive presence in cyberspace. A "virtual community of faith" needs to become a part of who we are as the Body of Christ. It may be the only way some in this generation ever connect with Christ.

8. We need to be able to interpret symbols — both ours and those of Gen X — in ways that point to the experience of faith. I admit I'm uncomfortable with some of the symbolism of this generation. But, if we can withhold judgment while we seek to understand, we will get an opportunity to tie those symbols to the Christian context.

9. As we encounter this generation and seek to reach them, we can rediscover the experiential roots of our own faith. Jesus said things like, "Go into all the world," and, "be my disciples." Generation X's emphasis on personal experience reminds us that Christianity is intended to be a lifestyle rather than a label.

10. If we can touch Gen Xers as ambassadors for the suffering Jesus, we can show them the Way of the saving Christ. As our Christian statements of faith point out, Jesus was well acquainted with suffering — especially undeserved suffering. He demonstrated how to live through the suffering and beyond it, bringing hope, love, contentment and joy in spite of the suffering. His living through the pain transformed it.

11. We will need to be careful about pronouncements of "truth." We are set free by the truth of Christ, but some young adults don't yet know that as truth. If we initially walk lightly in our sharing of Jesus as "the Way," it will give them space to explore until they're ready to see him as Truth.

12. We must avoid seeing doubt and searching as confusion, disbelief, or lack of faith. Just because Gen Xers are looking for God in lots of places doesn't mean they are godless. Questioning the Gospel isn't necessarily arguing, or mocking, or dismissing it. We have to see uncertain times as part of the journey of faith, rather than indications that someone isn't faithful, and seek ways to help fellow pilgrims along.

13. We also must be honest about the places where our own faith is ambiguous or incomplete. We must communicate sincerely, openly, and honestly that it is all right to come to God and the Community of Faith with some ambiguity. We don't need to overdo this, to the point it looks as if it isn't possible to have a sure faith, but we've got to be clear that we don't have all the answers.

Closing thoughts

Ministry with Generation X is not as simple as a 10 step how-to process. It requires a willingness to go into their culture, see what the Lord is doing there, and find out how we can help. It requires those with a missionary heart who are willing to raise up leaders within Gen X culture who can fully and honestly

share Christ among their peers. To that end, there is one very specific thing any church can do to assure an honest, effective outreach among young adults — train and empower any young adults currently part of your congregation, and do the same for your teenagers.

This training and empowering consist of seeing to it that our young adults and youth are immersed in both Christianity and their own generational culture. We need to help and encourage them to look for the spiritual yearnings of their peers and link those yearnings to Jesus. We need them to love the people of their generation so much that they develop a God-guided passion to touch others with the Gospel, true to Christ and relevant to their peers.

I suspect that quality ministry with young adults is more about being than doing. I believe that an open, honest, supportive relationship is the best ministry we can have with young adults as they make their journey of faith. We can be a genuine, living example of Christ's love for them. This ministry is about relationships between Christian and not-yet-Christian, between members of different generations, between traditional and cutting edge. Mostly, it remains about the most significant relationship — the one between Jesus Christ and those he came to save.