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Ministry Among the Generations: Challenges and Opportunities
"Now, to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen." Ephesians 3:20–21

(Caution: This article includes lots of stereotypes and generalizations. It’s the nature of generational theory. While they may largely hold true for the population as a whole, individual communities could be illustrations of great exceptions. The generalizations are provided as a measure and should not be considered as law or always true.)

I remember in youth confirmation class when the pastor said that a generation was roughly 20 years long. The assumption was that every 20 years the generational stereotypes would change, and that the things the generation held in common would be significantly different. The differences in generations would be fairly obvious. At any given time, back then, there could be three to four generations alive in the nation/church/community. These days, right now, because of great gains in life expectancy, there are at least six and possibly seven distinct generations alive, and who they are has an impact on any institution or organization with which they are connected.

Broadly, these generations are identified as “The Lost Generation” (1883–1900—obviously not many of these folks are still living, but there are some); “The G.I. Generation” (1901–1924); “The Silent Generation” (1925–1942); “The Boomer Generation” (1943–1962); “The 13th Generation” (also known as Generation X, 1963–1982); “The Millennial Generation” (also known as “Generation Y” and which George Barna calls “Mosaics,” 1982–2002’ish); and a generation yet to be named born since 2002’ish. These seven generations fall into four generational types, each with needs and energies that don’t always work together. This is a challenge for any institution seeking to work and, in the church’s case, to minister to diverse populations.

Neil Howe and William Strauss have done landmark work in what they call generational history. It is their belief that there are four generational types. Each generational type appears in the population routinely and cyclically. One generation follows the other in the same order. Each generation has a task to accomplish at each of its life stages which Howe and Strauss call “turnings.” There are four turnings to a cycle. They have tracked their theories through the history of the United States and make a very strong argument for the validity of their research and conclusions.

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The four generational types are identified as "Hero," "Adaptive/Artist," "Idealist/Prophet," and "Reactive."

The "Hero" is also identified by the word "Civic." They are defined by words like conventional and powerful, with a profound trust in authority. These people are loyal to institutions, nations, causes and the like. They are the ones on the front lines of any battles. Howe and Strauss show how this generation's population was on the front lines during the Revolutionary War, World War II and now in Iraq. They are basically the nation's back-bone during any crisis. After World War II, the "G.I. Generation," which Tom Brokaw termed "The Greatest Generation," built the country into the superpower we became. They moved to the suburbs, built the nation's industry and commerce, and enjoyed the nation's prosperity. The G. I. Generation reflected its institutional loyalties even in the churches they built, often through great monuments of brick and stone and steel, and supporting denominational programs, including great overseas missions. Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John Kennedy and Ronald Reagan were all "heroes." These generations are marked by economic prosperity and public optimism. Another term you often find to define "heroes" is "social discipline" which they often tried to impose on their children.

After the "Hero," comes an "Adaptive" or "Artist" generation. In our current population, the generational name is "The Silent Generation." It can be said that this generational type is mostly about flexibility and consensus building. Words used to define this generation include subtle, cautious, unadventurous, indecisive, compromising, sensitive and empathetic. This generation is not about to rock the boat or take up a major social cause or initiative. In some respects, it can be said that they often serve the role of "the conscience of the nation" in the sense of amelioration. They are loyal to institutions, but again in the sense that they are not about to rock the boat. They like things "normal." It is said that they are model social technicians, advocates of fair play and political inclusion. There have been many "silent" political advisors but there has not been a "Silent" American President.

On the heels of the Artists comes a "Prophet" generation. What we have come to know as "Baby Boomers" are the quintessential Prophets. Prophets are known for their coming-of-age passion. They are values-driven, moralistic, and willing to fight for what they believe in. Just witness the causes Boomers took up in the 1960s. Boomers were on the front lines with a spiritual direction and passion for all the social causes of the age from sexism to racism, social justice and anti-war (not a cause they believed in). The energy Boomers brought to those causes grew into a serious passion for economic prosperity in the 1980s and 1990s. Now in the 2000s, Boomers are all about retirement and the opportunities to self-indulge in the last third of their lives. Boomers can be very "me" focused. They can be very self-centered and selfish, and they are often prone to ignore the realities and needs of other generations. If they find a cause, they can bring the same passion to it as they committed in their youth. The "cause" of global warming and environmental responsibility could be the next great cause of the Boomers … could be because at the same time, Boomers might have to give up some of the comforts of their accumulated prosperity. If they have to give up too much, they may rather decide to just let the ice caps melt.

After a Prophet generation comes a "Nomad" generation. Boomers often find it difficult to get along with "nomads." Nomads are pretty much a no-nonsense generation. They can be "picaresque," not a word heard often these days, but one that means and identifies this group as edgy and roguish, rascals who want to take charge. They are sometimes described as raty, tough, unwanted, diverse, adventurous and cynical. They can be irritating but, to their credit, they are a "just do it" generation. They have little patience for process. If there is a job to be done, do it. Don't sit around talking about it. Boomers coined the term "Generation X" as a less-than-kind moniker
for this group. Howe and Strauss called them "The 13th Generation," meaning they were the 13th generation in the U. S. since the Revolutionary War.

In the life of the church, there remain five primary generations. The "G. I. Generation," the hugely loyal group, has begun to die in large numbers. The church often finds itself pursuing their wealth. It is said that several trillion dollars will be passed from their hands into the hands mostly of Baby Boomer heirs. Institutions are looking at how they can secure some of those funds for their endowments. Baby Boomers are not expected to be the generous givers that their parents were. "The Silent Generation" continues loyal and true, generous in spirit and gifts. "Boomers" are self-indulgent, yet they speak with a prophetic passion as if they knew what they were talking about. Gen X has largely disassociated itself from the institutional church. It can be very spiritual but often in terms of independent churches or alternative spiritual expressions. The latest generation to begin making its mark in the church and society is the "Millennials," which generationally is another civic or hero generation. And in the last three or four years, the newest "artist" generation has begun to be born.

Put all these people in a church and you can have quite a challenging ministry. Involve them all and you will demonstrate St. Paul's words in Ephesians quoted earlier. Miss a generation along the way and you will likely lose that generation. Let's take a look.

Worship

It can be argued that the church has been embroiled in the so-called worship wars going all the way back to the 1960s. Frankly, the worship wars are a Boomer issue. A lot of Boomers have been fighting for "contemporary" worship since they were in high school back in the mid-1960s. The church needed to get real. Worship needed guitars and drums to be real and relevant to the young. Get rid of the hymnal and lock up the organ. Those on the front line of the contemporary movement continue to mostly
be Baby Boomers. Look at the praise bands in many churches. They are made up of graying 40 and 50-year-olds still playing guitars and drums with added amplification.

When one looks at the reaction of other generations, you are likely to see "Heroes" tolerant of the contemporary. This is probably due to the fact that in the early days of the "contemporary" movement, many "spiritual" songs, favorites of the "heroes," were included in the repertoires, such as "In the Garden," "How Great Thou Art" and "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord."

Gen X, if it's at church at all, would prefer worship that is both edgier and more mystical. This group can really get into darkness, incense, candles, icons—things that emphasize the mysteries of the faith. Gen Xers are also among the most tolerant of other spiritual expressions and less inclined to hard and fast worship rules. They are as likely to like Gregorian chant as Chris Tomlin or David Crowder. Their generational cynicism doesn't work well with anyone that says, "Thou must ..."

On the other hand, the Millennials seem to be moving back towards a more traditional sense of worship. Worship should look and sound like church, and for many that means hymnbooks and organs—like their great-grandparents’ church.

When it comes to worship, churches need to be sensitive that there isn't one way to worship these days. Boomers, especially, assume that the best way to reach everybody is by using worship styles that they like. They assume that by amplifying praise music, you will attract young adults, teenagers and children. And that generalization simply cannot be made.

**Church Membership and Institutional Loyalty**

Now there are two generations active in congregations that are oriented towards institutions: the Great Generation and the Millennials, people in their 70s and 80s and people in their teens. The heroes always were joiners. They joined churches, civic groups, men’s clubs, LLL, LWML and card clubs at church. So did the Silents but with less enthusiasm.

Boomers are not joiners. To join something means that you subscribe to its agenda. Boomers largely want to march to their own drummers. So, historically speaking, in The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, youth ministry moved from the heyday of the Walther League, something people had been joining since 1893, to abandoning any notion of a youth organization. Even when the Synod adopted a new youth organization in 1977 called Lutheran Youth Fellowship, Boomer leadership never had much energy to join or invite others to join. Boomers still don’t join many things unless there is a specific benefit for them.

Into this mix, add Gen Xers. Among them, there seems to be a natural suspicion of institutions and organizations, particularly if somebody is trying to recruit them. Again, it’s their cynicism that makes them hesitate. But, should they find something that they truly value, they’ll jump in totally. If they do make their way through the front door of an average Lutheran church—and that can be a huge "if"—they need to feel welcomed. You can’t automatically assume that they want to be there, or that they will come back. The welcome needs to be genuine. If that’s the case, and they see that the church is doing something of value, they may make a connection.

**Doctrine**

Doctrine is a major concern for Lutherans to be sure. We’ve always treasured our confessions as a true exposition of God’s Word. We believe God’s Word is true and inerrant. It doesn’t make mistakes, and it’s real and relevant for every generation. The G. I. Generation has no problem with this at all. They love their church, and they love what their church believes. Millennials promise to be very much the same. Theirs is a world without much truth, so when their church proclaims the truth, they are likely to sign on because their church stands for something. Boomers are likely to test the truth but also to be defenders. At this point in their
lives, Boomers don’t want a lot of spiritual arguments (unless it’s about worship). (And, by the way, because of their inclination to institutional loyalty, confirmation classes with Millennials and the new artists should be a breeze for the next 20 years, which is good news for pastors who never liked Boomer or Xer confirmation classes.)

But, then there are the Xers. These folks live in a world without absolute truth, and they don’t really mind it. If they are Christian, they are likely to say they value what Christianity teaches. They are likely, in large numbers, to say they believe in God. But they may be very reluctant to subscribe to any definition of who God is or what He actually expects. In a world without absolute truth, every person is entitled to one’s own spiritual expression. So, I might be a Christian, but in my Xer world my friends are entitled to be Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim or to create their own spiritual system. In the 21st century, everyone can be spiritual without being religious. Religion implies a system of beliefs and creeds. That’s not necessary in the young adult world.

It should also be noted that the Millennial world is also one without absolute truth. And Millennial young adults may be very loyal to their own church, but they won’t turn that loyalty into an absolute for their friends who might be dabbling in all kinds of spiritual things.

It is not a surprise that there is a so-called ”emerging church” movement among Christians that is attracting large numbers of young adults in their 20s and 30s. These churches, like Mars Hill in Granville, Michigan; Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California; Solomon’s Porch in Minneapolis, Minnesota; and Gateway Community Church in Austin, Texas; attract thousands of young adults, many on a spiritual journey. Rob Bell and his wife and a small group of friends started the Mars Hill Church in Granville. They didn’t know what to expect, but 1,000 people showed up on the first Sunday. There are now nearly 10,000 people, mostly young adults, in church on a typical weekend.

One of the key elements in this movement is that doubt is welcome. You don’t have to buy the creed to be a part of the church. You can have questions, concerns and doubts galore. But the church will still love you. Bell tells the story of a service they held in which people were invited to share their doubts. They wrote them down and put them in a box, and he pulled out a question and responded. He told them what he believed, but I’m not sure he would ever suggest that they had to believe what he said. This kind of system can be very uncomfortable for Lutherans where sound doctrine is a primary touchstone for the community. Some might even be so brash as to suggest that real Lutherans don’t have doubts. Still, these ”emerging” churches are attracting thousands of young adults, and for a church body that sees fewer and fewer young adults in its ranks, the good Lutheran must ask, “What does this mean?”

Service

Gen Xers like to serve. They like to be involved. They love to make a difference, and it doesn’t make a difference whether that difference is around the world or around the block. Nike coined the password for this generation: “Just Do It.” If Grandma Schmidt’s house needs painting, then paint it. “Just do it.”

Boomers like to think they are serving but really what they like is the process. If Grandma’s house needs painting, let’s talk about it. First, does painting Grandma’s house fit within our purpose/mission statement and does it help meet our goals and objectives? Then, brushes, rollers, sponges or sprayers? Ladders? Colors? Time to meet? What’s for lunch? We can use up a lot of time “planning” and never get the house painted.

G. I. Generation members have always been workers, especially when connected to church, and when as young people, which Millennials are now, they thought that they could make a difference.

One caution about the whole concept of service, though, is what is communicated when a service opportunity is presented. It is not unusual to hear people say that the
reason we serve is because it feels so good, which seems to be true across generational lines. We might paint Grandma’s house, and she’s very grateful, but the real reason we did it was because it makes us feel so good about ourselves.

Another caution, particularly when working with youth, is to take care not to make service a requirement. A service component has been added to many school and college curricula. In order to graduate, a student must fulfill a service requirement. This is no way to teach altruism. It turns service into slavery.

**Passion**

The question is “Does the church really believe what it says it believes and would it do anything to share that truth?” Young adults and youth look at their churches and often feel there is no energy or enthusiasm for the Gospel or for much of anything else. Why go to church if church doesn’t really care and is not passionate? An aging Silent won’t have much enthusiasm for somebody that wants the church to break out of its lethargy, although they and their G. I. friends may long for the excitement they knew in their own youth when the church was packed with people. The energy of the young may find no room for it in a church where most are tired, retired or just plain bored (and in some cases happy to be that way).

The emerging church referenced earlier is passionate, first about God and then about people. And their love for people is for all people, believers and non-believers. They love each other and respect each other even if they have differences. Relationships are key. George Barna notes the growing house church movement as evidence of a relational focus. The growth of small groups in traditional congregations also gives evidence of this relational focus. When looking at the generations, relationships were and are also key for the G. I. Generation and for the Millennials. That’s why they joined groups and organizations. Relationships are probably less important to the self-absorbed Boomer (and I say that even though I am one) if he or she is honest.

**So What?**

We’ve made a lot of generalizations and shared a lot of stereotypes. We admit that there are exceptions to everything said here. But what is the bottom line? What have we learned?

I heard recently of a small town church whose mission statement included words to the effect that everybody felt important because “everybody knew their name.” Sound familiar?

First, of course, the church is a community that knows God’s name. It knows who God is and what He does and how He has accomplished our salvation. It shares the
love of Christ with everyone that is a part of the community and seeks to extend that community beyond the church walls out into the neighborhood.

It would be so easy if everybody in your church were the same—the same age, same generational type, same interests, same perspectives, same worship style. You’d never have to argue. And it would be so boring, really.

The church is such a God-blessed place because God puts all kinds of people into the mix. Churches should include everybody from the very young to the very old. And how wonderful it is if “everybody knew your name.” Nobody ever has all the answers, and so, everybody is there as a resource to everybody else. Need some wise advice? Talk to an older adult. Need the house painted or gutters cleaned? Talk to a teenager or young adult. In the church, no one tries to dominate or run things. Everyone is welcomed. All are connected regardless of their faults or foibles. Leadership is shared. Energy is shared. Love is shared, and the church is filled with all kinds of people who confess, “To Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.”

Sources and Resources


“Strauss and Howe” from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.


