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Back to the Future

How we reach the Boomers

The purpose of this edition of Issues in Christian Education is to explore the spiritual journeys of the Boomers, people born between the years 1946 and 1964, and their relation to the church. In this issue we are focusing on identifying characteristics of the Boomers, looking at their spiritual quest, considering their impact on the church, and suggesting effective ways in which congregations can minister to this generation.

Kallestad and Wright, in one of the three major articles, point out that Boomers were raised by parents who hoped their children would be the brightest and best. They were a generation of high expectations. However, many of those hopes and dreams have not materialized. Indeed, the Boomers are searching for something more, and during such times of introspection people often are open to the Gospel. Kallestad and Wright believe there is much that congregations today can do in sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with Boomers. "So even though Boomers rebelled against the church by leaving it in droves in the 1960's and 1970's, there are signs that God is bringing about a hunger in their lives for the church. Boomers can be reached. We just have to know how to reach them. For what worked in previous generations will not work with the Baby Boom generation."

Many observers have noted that as a result of the Boomers' involvement in the church, it will never be the same. Both the characteristics and numbers of this generation present unique challenges and opportunities for congregations today. Approximately one-third of the United States population is today made up of Boomers. This generation in many ways is an untapped resource for the spread of the Gospel.

The choice before us involves two possibilities: we can demand that the Boomers become like us before we accept them, or we can discover what is unique about them and creatively design new methods to reach them with the Good News. It is my prayer that this Issue in Christian Education is of assistance in that decision-making process.

Ovville C. Walz, President
Particularly noteworthy is the fact that this congregation grew up and found its roots in a cultural setting markedly similar to that of suburban America in the 1950's. Antioch, the third largest city in the Roman Empire, was a cosmopolitan center of government and commerce. Noted for its luxurious life style, the city had a reputation for being tolerant of various beliefs. Eclectically and culturally diverse, Antioch was also notorious for its moral laxity.

It was in this fertile ground that persecuted missionaries first planted the Gospel seed. The results were astounding. Great numbers of Gentiles embraced the faith.

When the news reached Jerusalem, the response was something short of unbridled rejoicing. Barnabas, a spiritually mature disciple known for his ability to work well with people, was sent to investigate.

Barnabas recognized the need of the Lord at work in Antioch. He established an effective team ministry (Acts 11:25-26) in a growing and dynamic congregation. The church at Antioch was characterized by powerful teaching and preaching, vibrant worship, and shared leadership. From its earliest days this congregation would display a deep concern for the welfare of other Christians and the plight of the lost.

It is fascinating to consider the great Biblical model with the characteristics of many contemporary Christian congregations which are thriving as they take our missions among the Baby Boomers. These churches are recognized for the very things evidenced in Antioch: strong preaching, vibrant worship, biblical teaching, applied daily life, transformational leadership, high expectations, and a number of opportunities for meaningful service.

Many ministry leaders are demanding upon their leaders, but is it really necessary? It is a question that God's Word and is relevant to the Church's culture of the day. Sensitive to changing times, it places paramount importance upon teaching people to follow a changed Christ.

Ministry to Baby Boomers

As Lutheran congregations strive to minister effectively with the Baby Boom generation, they will need to face changes and challenges in two areas dear to their Germanic roots: process and structure. While the numbers have changed for the "Never trust anyone over 30" generation, now in their 40's, the concept remains the same. Valuable information, contents, and ideas, once transmitted from one generation to the other by means of proclamation and teaching, are gained not by listening to the "wisdom of the fathers" but from examining one's own experience. The Baby Boom generation tends to function as though their life experiences are completely unique. Therefore, since no previous generation has ever experienced life in this way, the learnings of previous generations are basically irrelevant to current life.

This viewpoint is destined for conflict with traditional practices in the Lutheran Church, which places high value on traditions, structures, and doctrinal elements handed down from previous generations. On the one hand is a church body with strong heritage of doctrine and practice and on the other is a generation of people who structure their lives on the basis of personal and ongoing current experience and perceived need.

The results of these conflicting viewpoints can easily become real problems within a congregation. Congregations may find groups of people experiencing and expressing frustrations with "staid and stuffy" programs, structures, worship services, or even doctrinal positions. Congregations may find themselves fragmented by a group of people who refuse to "play by the rules" or participate in activities and programs in the accustomed way. Congregations may become rigid and insensitive to Boomer members by insisting on traditional practices, systems and programs, while Boomer members, in turn, may seem rebellious, impatient, and insensitive to the needs and feelings of other members.

The challenge to the church is this: how do we foster, encourage, and facilitate the creative discovery and exercise of this generation of church members and at the same time maintain the integrity of a valued past? How do we enable members and structure congregations so that members of all generations grow and receive ministry within the visible face of the Body of Christ, the church? The church must find ways to apply the creative action of the Baby Boomer generation to real issues and needs which are not always the same as those faced by previous generations of Lutherans. At the same time, we must consistently affirm those aspects of our heritage, both doctrinal and structural, which provide solid foundations for growth and action with the Lutheran congregation and seek to find new ways to teach and apply that heritage to this time.
in musical tastes, an absence of involvement by some generations, and crises related to fragmented families of all shapes and sizes.

Differing generational values may produce frenetic attempts to develop meaningful programs. Older generations, blessed with many talents and resources, often struggle to involve younger generations in picking up legacies, such as service. Gerontophobic lamentations can be heard about the greying of congregations with concomitant fears of dwindling financial support.

Recognizing that the church is the body of believers with differing generational personalities may enable congregations to deal with a variety of perceptual blocks, such as "That's not the way we've ever done it before." "I've served my time, let the younger ones do it." "Why don't more younger people participate?" and "Why don't they let go and let us do it?" Understanding generational personalities can help to lift up each cohort's mission as well as develop strategies that will enable the church to carry out its collective mission.

For example, a recent article highlighted a Silicon Valley church that offers Bible studies for engineers who, facing many pressures, ask, "What is it all for?" (Omaha World Herald, 1993). For them, the search for personal meaning in work, family, and society is a life constant. In their experience, societal images of never-ending progress, success, and then "sudden oblivion" do not mesh with their personal images of a "goodness-of-life fit" and unfolding stories of family, work, and community. Death is showing up on their mid-life calendars, generating more questions. Thus, spiritual quests among engineers is a contemporary hallmark. Such spiritual quests provide the church with a window of opportunity to bring the one Gospel that can speak the business of every generation's search.

**Generational Profiles**

In *Generations: The History of America's Future*, Strauss and Howe (1991) identify four types of cohort groups or generations of 20-25 years which occur and recur cyclically. Each type of generation has a distinct personality shaped by previous market events that allow for projecting the unique characteristics of a generation.

Since 1620, 13 generations have lived in the United States. A small cohort of centenarians born after the Civil War, called Missionaries, is still living today. One major characteristic of that generation was an idealism evident in the lives of such representatives as President Franklin D. Roosevelt and W. E. B. DuBois. This generation was followed by today's nonagenarians, called the Lost Generations, represented by the early years of Presidents Eisenhower and Truman, who weathered both the stock market crash and the Great Depression (Strauss & Howe, 1991).

In reviewing characteristics of the four generations that followed, the G.I.s, the Silent, the Boomers, and the Thirteeners, the purpose is to identify generalizations that may help us understand the Boomer profile. Such generalizations do not apply to all members of a particular generation. For example, Christian Boomers, a minority, reflect a value system that is different than the values of many of their contemporaries.

**The G.I. Generation (1901-1924)**

The G.I.s are called a generation of trend-setters born during the Great Depression and heroic World War II struggles. Survivors emerged as confident leaders with expectations of greater life entitlements, such as Medicare and Social Security. The G.I.s, who once numbered 65 million and now number 25 million, benefitted from a raft of firsts from the federal government, such as the White House Conference on Aging (1999), the U.S. Children's Bureau, federal child labor laws, federal age-discrimination laws, and better life entitlements. Members of this generation won nine White House elections, 99 Nobel prizes, and became the most affluent group of the 20th century (Strauss & Howe, 1991). They founded the first Sun City retirement community and the largest advocate group, AARP. Their children became the Silent and Boomer generations, while their grandchildren are known as the Thirteeners, whose age span today is 12-30 years. During their later years, the G.I.s rank as the "happiest" cohort when compared with younger generations. The social mission of this generation was that of winning a war and rebuilding a nation (Strauss & Howe, 1991).

The parents of the G.I.s, the Missionaries, encouraged their
children to support and work with the church. Now numbering 48,000 or 36 percent of the membership of The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod, the largest and outer-directedness of the G.I.s have inspired the development of multiple mission congregations in strategic cities and country locations. Through their generous support, a global emergence of missions occurred. Lay men and women spearheaded such auxiliary organizations as the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League and the Lutheran Laymen’s League that resulted in a world-wide Gospel outreach which created powerful legacies for future generations.

The Silent Generation (1925-1942)

Caught between two giant generations, this smaller cohort, 49 million, of whom 40 million are still living, confirmed as much as possible after growing up with scolding and overprotective parents who, after experiencing the Depression and a world war, were determined to shelter their children. Inculcated parental values of the Silents included a sense of permanence, simplicity, and discipline which resulted in generational conformity. Most Silents were too old for the conflict in Vietnam, while many became involved in the war in Korea. A few joined the Peace Corps under President Kennedy. While they became the younger marrying generation in our history, often producing large families, their divorce rate also skyrocketed. Their crime, suicide, illegitimate birth, and teen employment rates are the lowest of any living generation. Today, they often are called the “Ladies” because of their lifetime opportunities of monetary gain. Though the Silents probably will not see a cohort being elected as President of the United States, their value systems shaped a collective personality that sought to live out a social mission, evident in the large numbers that serve in the helping professions, and in their efforts to reach out to people of all cultures (Stauss & Howe, 1993).

One legacy left by G.I. parents to young single Silents was the Football League. Later, many Silents became part of the two most important auxiliaries in our church, the LLL and LWML, giving generously of their time, talents, and treasure to carry the Gospel in new ways to new places. Many became church planters and helped to build new mission congregations. Numerous older Silents, who now number 365,000, or 13.9 percent of the membership of the LCMS, remain active leaders of the church.

The Boomers (1946-1964)

Today, the odds that an adult American is a Boomer are fifty-fifty. This trend-setting generation drives the nation’s economy and dictates the nation’s mood (Russell, 1993). Wherever Boomers are situated in their aging process has and will continue to impact generations in multiple ways, especially the Silent and Baby Boomer generations. During the current and coming decades, this generation will be preoccupied with their inner journeys of mid-life transitions, comparing early dreams with mid-life realities, while experiencing the sudden death of death. Their present mood is one that expresses an angst and search for meaning while facing the realities of children’s college educations, gender roles, particularly significant institutions such as “the family,” of employment, AIDS, accidents, and millennial fears (Russell, 1993), all of which heighten their spiritual quest. The “Holy Grail” of their maturation quest for meaning is found in relationships with family and grandchild the work world, and later life leisure and service pursuits, all of which can provide only a partial sense of satisfaction.

The Rise of Individualism

Childhood-raising practices produced the master trend of individualism. Early Boomers experienced intensive nurturing from tolerant and permissive young G.I. parents, while later-wave Boomers were parented by the Silents during the fifties and sixties to think for themselves and to be competitive rather than team-players. Boomer parents who followed taught their Buster children to be even more self-sufficient. Russell (1993) asserts that such practices contributed significantly to an individualism which fosters withdrawal from social institutions such as the family, church, school, and community. Individualism also is linked to a concomitant rise in the number of suicides, illegitimate births, violent crime, and substance abuse due to unlimited freedom, self-indulgence, and feelings of entitlement.

Silent parents recognized television as one of the new communication frontiers and wanted their Boomer children to develop mastery skills for the new high-tech work world. A competitiveness which was developed by “doing one’s own thing” also fostered entrepreneurship. “Free Agents,” a term coined by Russell, are entrepreneurs who play by their rules, seem, for example, in sports and entertainment who hold out for their millions while rationalizing that “No one is going to look out for me, except me, myself and I.” While the individualism of our social and economic development continues to unfold, Russell (1993) cautions that it is pointless to blame parents or Boomers for the rise of individualism.

Boomer Music

Older Boomers rocked the music world and shaped many elements of our culture as we know it today. "For me, music was a way to open my mind; words that expressed my confusion, passion, longing, and hope. It was the poetry of my emotions, and the Beatles were my poets laureate," wrote John Parkhill (1993), a 40-year-plus Boomer trend analyst. During the 1960s, the top 40 radio stations in cities played the same records at the same time, which meant that kids from all over the country heard the "breaking with the past" music of the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, and others who initially spoke of light and hope.

Then the message of the Stones, Doors, Jimmy Hendrix, and others changed to a support of a generational-cultural rebellion that would change the world by diminishing war and pain, but most of all, to rebel against the status quo, that is, societal authority figures and older generation forms which saw virtue in postponed gratification. AM radio stations, while recognizing the changing messages, were reluctant to participate in the cultural shift. FM stations, however, picked this window of music opportunity and targeted market audiences with different programming of rock and roll. Soon, a new mix of orchestras and rock multiplied millions of adolescents during their passages to adulthood as they embraced Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band and its message of drugs, sex, and technology (Parkhill, 1993).

Millions of Boomers, however, did not succumb to the Beatles, rock music, or to significant changes in lifestyle. Current market niches include many Boomers who prefer classical music and new adult contemporary (nac) jazz (The Boomer Report, May 15, 1992). However, rock music has accelerated the country. This confronts the contemporary church with a significant challenge when consideration is given to the church’s musical heritage, the absence of young single Boomers and Busters in the pews, and sweeping musical changes which permeate society.

Sexual Revolution

With changing sexual standards evident in the 1960s, the availability of birth control pills, and older Boomer rebellion against the strictness of their parents, the sexual double standard of men was set aside as the pre-marital sexual activity of Boomers increased two times the rate of premarital sexual involvement of Silent women. Strauss and Howe (1993) point out that the adultery rate for women increased from one to two to three-fourths of the rate of adultery among men. An interesting reaction is that Boomers today do not want their children to experiment with sex, with three out of five Boomers parents indicating that they plan to be even more strict than their parents (The Boomer Report, April 15, 1992).

Boomer Families and the Work World

Three out of four Boomers work outside the home, with many returning to work before their infants have reached one year of age. Today, the division of labor is one of the great problems faced by couples. Women are doing more of the work in the home and caring for children than their spouses, with the result that two out of three divorced Boomer women initiated a divorce because of problems related to this issue. Unemployability among males leads to a high divorce rate among older Boomers, with gesturines suggesting that 41 percent will end their marriages. A lower divorce rate (38 percent) is projected for the generation that follows the Boomers, the Busters, possibly because young men are more supportive of women’s entry in the work-world. By the year 2000, 80 percent of our children will live in a dual-earner or single-parent family (The Boomer Report, July 15, 1993). Only six in ten of Boomer marriages will include a lifetime marriage with two children, a boy and a girl (Russell, 1993).

Public Events Witnessed by the Boomers

One Boomer male out of six served in the war, with others avoiding the war by dodging the draft (two out of three), becoming married (one out of two), finding physical (one out of two), or deliberately abusing their bodies. The older Boomers generally were the draft-dodgers, with the younger cohort that entered the military serving at a median age of 19, the lowest age in our history. Boomers were split 50-50 on involvement in the war (Strauss and Howe, 1993). Older Boomers also witnessed the death of Martin Luther King and President Kennedy. Despite their embrace of the Beatles, more than 45 percent of the Boomers did not feel that the death of John Lennon was important (Parkhill, 1993).

Social Mission and Boomer Values

Russell (1993), in her review of the value shifts among the generations, notes that the G.I. and Silent generations grew up with the Ten Commandments as a value base. Attitudinal shifts away from these values are seen in changes in Sunday work-rules, a significant rise in materialism, and taking the Lord’s name in vain. Harmless bodily and stealing are condemned by most Boomers. Boomers often speak out against issues which affect smaller groups of people, such as pregnant women who smoke or drink...
alcoholic beverages, but which do not infringe on their own freedom. Despite being the most sexually-experienced among contemporary generations, they are moral regulators of their children's sexual mores, largely because of AIDS and other STDS. Since violent crime is a threat to family life, 76 percent join members of other generations in expressing a belief in the death penalty.

The heart and core of Boomer values is self-interest, with personal choice being the hub of such controversies as abortion. With more than one million women having abortions each year, a majority of the population supporting Roe vs. Wade, and a growing political majority of "Free Agents," the legality of abortion will probably remain an option (Russell, 1993), while being fiercely contested by many Christians. Boomers will try to regulate the moral codes of other generations as long as they are not adversely affected, often expressing desires for action, but not being willing to make sacrifices. For example, many believe that they are environmentalists, but few sacrifice for the environment; few carpool; most do not pay more for environmentally safer products or recycle unless forced to do so (Russell, 1993).

SPIRITUAL QUEST

As Boomers search for spiritual meaning, they often experience a values clash between age 40-plus Boomers and more traditional 30-year-olds and Evangelicals. Adding to this mix is the view that spiritual concerns are a matter of personal choice.

There are differing views regarding the prediction that 80 percent of the Boomers will leave mainline churches for Evangelical groups and New Age movements by the end of this century. One view suggests that older Boomers often align with meditation and reincarnation types while younger people lean toward "born-again" type conversions (Straus & Howe, 1992). Gallup surveys find that age is an important indicator, with people under 26 leaning toward a more secular viewpoint while those older than 50 years appear to be more conservative (The Boomer Report, May 15, 1992).

Other observers maintain that Boomers left mainline churches because of confusion over the church's own belief systems. For example, Presbyterians advocated a liberal approach toward ecumenism and cosmopolitanism, which weakened the religious foundation of members. While Boomers search for both meaning and spirituality, they also reflect a lack of foundational belief. For example, when 100 Boomers, ages 33-42, were interviewed, nearly one-half did not attend any church. Many, however, affirmed belief in both Christian teachings and the tenets of relativism and universalism. The researchers concluded that churches themselves are to be blamed for losing Boomers who believe that no one church or religion has "the truth" and that one's spiritual development should be primarily a personal concern (Omaha World Herald, 1993). Another study found that a majority of Roman Catholics in the United States today do not consider church teachings to be binding. A generational difference is seen in the 65 percent of the Boomer sample who see the Pope as a moral and spiritual leader, while 86 percent of members older than 65 years view the Pope in this way (The Boomer Report, November 15, 1993).

Other research data show that Boomers will be the most important group for the church's ministry during the 1990's (Murrin, 1995). Young Boomers who are in the acquisition stage of finding jobs, selecting mates, raising children, and seeking community ties provide a significant opportunity for outreach ministries that focus on spiritual nurturing and belonging needs.

A major barrier can be congregational perspectives which do not recognize Boomer personality characteristics, but rather reflect the values of older generations emphasizing denominational loyalty, church models designed in earlier generations, and worship forms that do not connect with younger generations. Because Boomers were born with their feet, it is imperative that congregations today recognize that members of their generation reflect a reluctance to belong, see denominational loyalty as being unimportant, are experience oriented, desire that clergy make sermon points concise, judge the church's morality by the participation of women, value singles ministry, are comfortable with high levels of dysfunctionality while desiring help, applaud innovation, and have a strong sense of destiny in shaping the church's mission (Murrin, 1990). This suggests that we have a short time-frame to minister to and with millions of Boomers interested in returning to the church for spiritual nurture and a Christian education for their young children.

THE BOOMERS ARE AGING

Aging imagery threatens Boomers who fear multiple losses, such as financial independence and separation from a spouse through divorce or death. Many also are obsessed with preserving their physical body images. Madison Avenue recognizes their aging fears and will make billions of dollars by soothing and pampering Boomer later-life imagery, revolutionizing the cultural way in which we view aging. Middle-age will extend into the early twenties, and this will be accompanied by extending Social Security eligibility to ages 67-70 plus. Other important factors will be the self-filling concept of one's aging imagery and one's lifestyle. An estimate is that individuals will become centenarians, most of whom will be women, while eight million women and three million men will become nonagenarians.

With many Boomers living long lives, one must ask if the church today is planting seeds that will inspire ministry visions of new frontiers of service, so that people begin to plan not only finances and leisure pursuits, but also ways of making a difference through the gift of time. A recent study indicated that not only are many leaders of the church unaware of the coming tidal wave of Silents and Boomers, but that most church professionals and congregations are ill-equipped to respond to generational needs with the exception of fellowship activities such as bingo and trips (Modern Matrimony, January, 1994). In addition, church professionals often reflect a gerontophobia due to a lack of aging education which results in a kind, benign neglect. While G.I.'s are willing to tolerate a degree of patronizing attitudes and behavior, both Silents and Boomers have much higher expectations of the church's ministry.

CHRISTIAN MISSION

In the LCMS, approximately 793,000 Boomer confirmed members (27.5 percent of the membership) have transformed the church by launching or swelling Lutheran schools and other schools by enrolling their children. Preschools have become major outreach ministries, and Boomers helped to launch Lutheran Youth Fellowship. Whether or not a similar loyalty remains in future years that is comparable to loyalty shown to the Walther League remains to be seen. Many mature Boomers are re-creating as church professionals with a work-world maturity that comes with only age and experience, which also facilitates their ability to understand and respond to generational attitudes and behaviors. They are a tremendous resource for the church.

Multiple new ministry opportunities abound in both the I.WML and LLL. New approaches to ministry need to be developed in order to respond to significant outreach needs.
such as a delineation of ministries among various generations so that value collisions rather than collisions become the norm. Today is an opportune time to respond to the spiritual questing of Boomers who are looking for custom programming centered around individual and family needs coupled with time considerations that fit schedules and a keen desire to make a difference in living out one's faith.

A Look Ahead

While ministry to the Boomers is a most significant ministry, congregations and church leaders want to focus as well on the next generation known as The Thirteneers, ages 15-31. Numbering 80 million (differences in the number of Boomers and Thirteneers among demographers relate to the span of years identified for each generation), the Thirteneers are known by this label as the thirteenth generation since the founding of this country (Strauss & Howe, 1994). Thirteneers have been characterized as the throw-away children, unskilled, unschooled and unwanted. They are the most incarcerated generation in history and have been subjected to relentless pornographic sexualization, violence, and disruptive societal behaviors. It is not surprising that many of this generation express a cynicism about life in general that is directed to Boomers. This translates into social fragmentation and chaotic individualism.

The good news is that if this generation ages as prior generations with the same personality type, we may anticipate a generation that will undergo a dramatic mid-life change linked to a strong sense of conservatism, belief in strong family and community life, and a commitment to a social mission later in life that focuses on cleaning up the messes (Howe & Strauss, 1994).

Among the 457,000 confirmed members of this generation who belong to the LCMS, the future of their involvement is too early to predict, except that many of our children have left the Synod for other church bodies or are still absent while not being linked to any church. At the same time, one can note many young people in our schools and colleges as well as in some congregations. Needed is a significant investment in their nurture and support in finding meaningful roles in church and society.

Generations are always aging and shifting, moving up on the life-cycle notch every 20-25 years, and presenting new opportunities. Congregations who attract Boomers will need to understand their generational mindset, which desires active participation in worship services, top-notch choices in this information age of educational programming, excellent nurseries, quality bulletins and newsletters, follow-up visits, and a personal sharing of their weekly "in vocation." Can you imagine the generational testimony of called Christians who dialogue about transcending challenges and learn from each other? The timeless Gospel and the same commission are given to all generations; what is different is a set of unique opportunities and strategies needed for each generation.

References


Having parented two Boomers and currently passing along a congregation comprised of 40 percent Boomers and 22 percent of their children (the Baby Boomer generation), I am keenly aware of the diversity of Boomers. I shall, nevertheless, ask the question, "For what are Boomers looking in congregations?" My perspectives will suffer from the limitations of all generalizations and be informed by my personal experience and the research I have done on this complex and talented generation.

HERE'S LOOKING AT YOU

Baby Boomers are looking for integrity in the church. Their generation has been influenced by Vietnam, the Iran-Contra affair, Watergate, and the resignation of a President for whom many voted. The Savings and Loan scandal, Jim and Tammy Fulkes, Jimmy Swaggert, the misuse of funds donated to The United Way, and clergy in the highest ranks accused of moral infidelity have contributed to most Boomers being skeptical about institutions—all institutions—including the church.

As unchurched Boomers approach congregations to test the waters of baptism, it is natural that they raise the question, "Does this congregation want me for my sake or for its sake?" It will not take Boomers long to form an opinion about the genuineness of the clergy, the ministry, the people of a congregation they attend.

Boomers have asked for a copy of our newsletter, our by-laws, and our budget on their first visit.

Most Boomers returning to congregations want help. As succinctly stated in Church Membership Initiative, an extensive research project funded by one of our Lutheran insurance companies, "Churched people say to unchurched people, 'Return and be saved.' However, unchurched people do not ask, 'What must I do to be saved?' They ask, 'How can I make my life work?'" (Church Membership Initiative, Narrative Summary of Findings, 1993, page 5)

Baby Boomers want help with their marriages, with parenting, with singleness, with loneliness, with addictions, with building community. Some harbor guilt. Others are angry because they are the victims of parental abuse or sexual harassment. For the next ten years, Boomers will be coping with mid-life crisis issues. Many are wrestling with vocational questions and the disillusionment that life is not as fulfilling as they imagined it should be. Many are not achieving the rewards of the good life they envisioned when they were growing up in families where they were pampered in home and college. Some are wrestling with the issue of what constitutes success.

Boomers are looking for congregations in which they can give of themselves in meaningful ways. While often portrayed as self-centered and unwilling to make commitments, it is closer to the truth to say that they are consumers of religion. Like all consumers, they sacrifice for that which they deem worthwhile. Boomers become very committed and generous people when they are able to give of themselves and their financial resources within the context of their personal value system and when they are receiving while giving. They may not respond to an appeal for funds for a church building, you church building, but they will sacrifice for the edifice once they have caught the vision of the ministry the building will enable.

Boomers are a people seeking quality, quality, quality. They desire mediocrity. As a group, there is the most highly educated generation in America. They have been raised with electronic media where no dollars were spared in producing quality programming. Their refusal to purchase inferior American goods and their selection of superior foreign products have created a revolution from which American manufacturers will not soon recover. While some say that the only way to appeal to a younger, hip rock, I have discovered they also appreciate the pipe organ and classical music when each is presented excellently. They also seek excellence from Sunday School, Bible classes, seminars, program of ministry, and in congregational facilities.

Boomers prefer options. Accustomed to making choices, their busy life-styles force them into prioritizing the activities in which they will engage. In 70 percent of Boomer families, both husband and wife work. While Boomers tend to have children later in life, and tend to have small families, they are devoted to their children, and child-rearing impinges on the time remaining after work. The busyness of Boomers may contribute to the increasing incidence of childhood. The high divorce rate means that many single people are raising children and working. Scheduling activities for the benefit of children and managing visitation schedules in blended families can be extremely demanding.

Among the double-income-no-kids (dink) Boomers, travel and recreation determine time available for church-related activities. Singles are even more mobile. More than any generation before them, Boomers place high priority on recreational and physical fitness activities. Worship services offered at various times including mid-week, appeal to Boomers. Retreats and short-term activities around which they can adjust their schedules to participate appeal to many. Boomers want to be totally involved in activities which are meaningful to them, and rather than attend an event half-time, they will more than likely not attend at all if they cannot participate in the entire experience.

The element of choice also applies to forms of ministry in which Boomers will participate. In general, projects relating to the poor, the disadvantaged, the disabled, the environment, their community, physical fitness, social issues where networking can occur, and self-help groups appeal to Boomers. Recently, before I was able to examine the volume myself, I had to purchase a third copy of The Twelve-Step Bible, because Boomers asked for my book upon seeing it.

Boomers value diversity in culture and equality in male/female relationships. When they come to church, they want to see people of diverse ethnic origins treated with dignity, and they expect both men and women to be allowed to serve in congregations just as they work together in the marketplace. A careful study of 1,900 Boomers by Wade Clark Roof summarized in his book, A Generation of Seekers, disclosed that 70 percent of those surveyed thought women should be allowed to be ordained. The women's movement in the Roman Catholic church is well-documented. Boomers are impatient with sexist and exclusive language and prefer that ministry be shared between professional church workers and the laity.

THE BOOMER-FRIENDLY CONGREGATION

Lyle Schaller observed, "Your congregation can get older and smaller or younger and larger." Changes to accommodate Boomers range from those that are simple to implement to those quite difficult to put into practice in established congregations which have not deliberately appealed to Boomers in the past. The changes mentioned are not intended to be exhaustive but are suggestive of the types of actions which may appeal to Boomers. Meaningful change will not occur, however, unless congregations make compassion for Boomers a core value.

Boomers will expect to be gratified by their first visit to a congregation. How you meet Boomers, greet, seat, provide child care, invite them to return or become a part of a small group are all important. Many Boomers prefer the back pew and anonymity on their first visit. They do not want to be displayed as "visitors." Deliberate, yet casual greeting by members—especially by other Boomers—is most effective.

The quality of the worship experience is crucial. Congregations
which have been occurring among women with two left legs for fifteen years is a serious disadvantage. Boomers do not appreciate hymns and liturgy with exclusive, sexist, or gloomy and doom language. To Boomers, music is not simply entertainment. It is a means of experiencing reality. Orders of worship should be clear for the uninstructed to follow. The service needs to move at a reasonably fast pace with a variety of means used to express the message of the day. This latter statement does not preclude time allowed for purposeful meditation if that fits the flow of the worship experience. However, the worship service must be planned, and the plan must be carried out in a participatory fashion. Boomers do not make good prolonged spectators.

To be relevant to Boomers, preaching should include references to personal experience, life-related applications demonstrate how the scriptures are relevant on Thursday morning at 10:45 a.m., and a touch of humor. Subjects such as sin and death are not typically presented in a serious fashion which proclaims Christ's power over both.

Most unchurched Boomers indicate they would go to church if invited. They often attend baptisms, weddings, funerals, and festival services. Such occasions make excellent opportunities to teach the lives of Boomers.

Many Boomers are singles, and there are more single women than single men existing congregations. A minority to singles must be sufficiently diverse to relate to the life cycle of singles, including whether they were previously married, or have responsibility for children. Helping single parents cope with child raising shows genuine concern and could be as simple as offering parents a morning or evening outing Pre-school education, day care, latch-key programs and courses on the art of raising children.

When a congregation can visualize itself as a surrogate father, mother, or grandparent to children in single-parent families, Boomers will respond. Many single Boomers women as a group are more flexible with issues relating to meaningful companionship. Egalitarianism in board and committee membership and in those allowed to lead in public worship is important to Boomers. Many structurally their marriages in egalitarian terms, taking turns with child care, equal and separate social and recreational activities, and financial management. Independent bank accounts and financial responsibility for a specific area of their life together is most common among divorced and remarried Boomers. Congregations may have greater success recruiting Boomers to serve on boards and committees if both husband and wife are offered opportunities to serve in the same group.

Congregations attempting to reach Boomers need many doors of opportunity for them to participate in ministry. Small groups are important because Boomers want to know and be known. Many are searching for a sense of community. They tend to prefer large congregations with small group ministries. In addition to fellowship groups, self-help groups, twelve-step recovery groups, and recreational groups appeal to Boomers. Community service groups and those that help new parents and parents of teen-agers are popular. Boomers are active, action-oriented people, so they take not to appreciate committees which gather to ponder issues and do nothing about them. A strong emphasis upon spiritual gifts will help Boomers find the types of ministry in which they will feel fulfilled. Boomers resist being assigned or coerced into groups. They want to choose the activities in which they will participate.

Congregations need to be open to receiving the gifts Boomers have to offer. Many are not by nature leaders. Since, however, they are committed to learning and self-advancement, they tend to participate in leadership courses. They enjoy growing and becoming more competent people through educational experiences. They are risk takers who appreciate being given the tools which enable them to perform ministry successfully. While they need to know that failure is allowed and that failure can often be a valuable learning experience, they resent being set up for failure by inadequate training or inadequate respect for their acceptance. Congregational staff should support Boomers to preclude failure while treating them as adults.

An item previously mentioned bears repeating: Boomers appreciate choices and diversity of times to participate in congregational activities. Sunday morning services may not be the ideal time—especially for the single parent balancing career and family responsibilities. Neither may it be ideal for the woman-Boomer who must be wife, mother, employee, and church member for a task or responsibility. If women Boomers are employed, this generality has wide application.

Recently, I complimented one of my Boomer secretaries on a new hair cut. "It makes me look younger, doesn't it?" she asked. I assured her it did, but that she looked young even with her hair longer. Then she told me that she and her father recently took her children to a fair where her father insisted on having someone guess her age. He guessed her to be 45 years old or 50. Obviously, it is the big "40" crisis time in her life.

Helping Boomers through mid-life issues is an important function of congregations can play. One Boomer woman wrote she was concerned about the Mac's mortgage, menopause, and mortality. Another commented that she had no interest in "stitch and bitch" groups. While craft groups make important contributions to congregations, this woman obviously wanted to find a group which would relate to her life-stage needs. Both men and women will welcome help with issues relating to mid-life passage. This is not an exclusively feminine concern.

The Boomer Felt Round the World

When church statisticians broadcast the bad news that most church bodies have declined in membership during the post war period, the difficulty of understanding interest in Baby Boomers who represent one-third of the population of our nation. In addition, the Baby-Boomer they have produced promises to rival them in size. In between are the Baby Busters, one of the most difficult generations of all for the church to reach and the generation which should receive much of our attention before they are lost to God and the church. If we wish to concentrate on the Baby Boomers, there is considerable urgency related to this task, since the Baby Boom bulge has already moved halfway through the population pyramid of our nation.

Many Boomers, raised in conservative, godly families, are returning to the values of their youth, but in new ways. Their yearning for spiritual experience supports the New Age movement, meditation groups, and interest in reincarnation. Even though many Boomers were only children when President Kennedy was assassinated, they resonate to his famous words, "Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country!" Though the dream of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., has yet to be realized, many spoke as a responsive note within the spirit of Boomers. If, during their lifetime, our violent world has eliminated the leaders just mentioned and Senator Robert F. Kennedy as well, Boomers are not without history and much of their music packs powerful messages of love, hope, despair, self-sacrifice. They want their lives to make a difference in the world. They care about the legacy they are leaving to others. Many who would not claim to be religious would insist that they are on a spiritual quest.

Where have all the Boomers gone? Those returning to the church are going to congregations which are meeting their needs and which appreciate their gifts. They tend to choose large congregations offering a variety of activities, worship times, small groups, and quality worship experiences including strong preaching and adult education courses. Small groups can attract them if they strive for excellence in the ministries they offer.

While writing I thought of the words of Paul the apostle to the Corinthians.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer. So then if any man is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation... So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal to us through us (2 Corinthians 5:16-20).

Standing at the baptismal font baptizing a young Boomer recently, my eyes filled with tears as I considered the journey through which this person became a believer. A person who is important to me heads our Tuesday night basketball program. He invited to worship an unchurched friend who played basketball. That young man became active in our congregation, and invited the person I was baptizing to church. After a discussion in their office about a problem they had. That is the way it works: one Boomer inviting another Boomer inviting another Boomer.

If Jesus were dying for the sins of the world today, he would be a Boomer. I have no idea why God so foolishly ordained that we human beings are the ambassadors through whom God will offer grace, salvation, and righteousness to the world. But God did that. Think of it. Baby Boomers are the largest group in the world today with the potential of becoming ambassadors for Christ. We have a Baby Boomer as President of the United States of America who says unashamedly that his Christian faith informs his decisions.

It is indeed a "new day." Does the church have the heart to regard people from a point of view which includes the old stereotypes and finds Christ in Boomers? Better yet, can congregations celebrate newness, craft new winekins, receive the blessings from the Lord, and save resources for the poor, resourceful people alive? It will not take long to find the answer to that question. In truth, we do not have long to determine the answer to that question. It is Jesus who asks, "Where have all the Boomers gone?" Changing congregational ministry to meet the inestimable spiritual thirst of the Boomer generation is probably what God had in mind for the church of today to be doing all along.
Station Wagons, Mini-Vans, Fast Food Restaurants. Shinkies. Halahoops. Silly Putty. Suburbs. Health Clubs. Health Foods. The resurgence of Disney. They all have one thing in common: they all trace their roots to the most unique generation of people ever born in the history of our country—the Baby Boom Generation.

Born between 1946 and 1964, the Baby Boom generation is the largest, most educated generation ever. Numbering 75 million strong, this generation of people has shaped our culture, fashions, and style of living, and they will continue to do so for years to come.

As they move into mid-life, they also represent one of the most reachable generations for Christ. However, when it comes to Boomers, the church can no longer do business as usual. For what reached previous generations will not reach Baby Boomers.

Ministry Shapers
Several factors, fueled by the Baby Boom generation, have changed the way the church can do ministry today. Three of the most important are:

Television
Boomers were the first generation raised on television. It forced them to grow up quickly, seeing the adult world vividly in a way no previous generation had. Through television they witnessed the Viet Nam war, the Civil Rights riots, the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK. Those visual images forced them as children to deal with issues and concerns usually reserved for adults.

Television also created a visually-oriented society. While previous generations were audio-oriented due to the influence of radio, Boomers enjoyed a world of sound and pictures. Information was received and processed at an increasingly rapid rate, with commercials lasting for 30-15 seconds. Attention spans have changed. Slow moving services with long, drawn out dead spots no longer hold the attention of Boomers. Being a television generation they insist on high quality, fast-paced, energetic services.

Music
During the 1960's and 1970's many young people rebelled against anything and everything traditional. Refusing to trust anyone over 30, they rejected the values of the past. They replaced Christianity with Eastern religions and the New Age movement. They exchanged democracy with socialist ideas. They opted to live together outside of marriage rather than marry. They reshaped childbearing with the advent of the pill and other new forms of birth control. They traded in suits and ties for long hair and ragged bell bottom jeans. They turned their backs on classical music and replaced it with a brand new sound: Rock and Roll.

Rock and roll rallied Boomers in the 1960's and 1970's. It fueled their rebellion. It not only reflected their values, it shaped them. Rock offered young Boomers a common voice. It spoke their language and gave voice to their concerns. Contemporary music was and is the unifying force behind this unique generation.

Non-traditional lifestyles continue to impact culture and ministry. So does this non-traditional music. Rock and Roll, in some form or another, is here to stay. Contemporary music, pop, rock and roll, country western, and rap continues to be the heart music of today's generations. They will rock and roll to their graves. They will not mature into classical music!

Boomers are not listening to organ music on their way to...
and from work. Nor are most of them listening to classical music. In fact, only two percent of all music sold in our country is classical. And yet the overwhelming majority of mainline churches uses only classical music in their worship services, which means the overwhelming majority of mainline churches is targeting two percent of the population.

As Boomers shop for a church, they look for congregations that value them by valuing their music. In designing worship services attractive to today's consumers, no other factor has greater impact than the choice of music.

Affluence

Another important factor in molding and shaping the Boomer generation was affluence. Raised by parents who vowed never to let their children face the pain of a depression, Baby Boomers enjoyed the benefits of prosperity. And that affluence shaped their view of life. Where people under economic pressure think about jobs and money, people raised in abundance generally turn their attention to the search for a meaningful philosophy of life.

They tried to find that meaningful philosophy of life in the protests of the 1960’s. In the 1970’s, the “Me-Deacade,” they turned inward trying to find meaning within themselves. Coming up empty once again, they looked for meaning in the success and consumption of the 1980’s. In the 1990’s the search continues. And though the word is still out, many suggest that the 1990’s could be a decade of spiritual revival as Boomers move into mid-life and begin to re-evaluate their lives.

That search for meaning has made them highly pragmatic. More than a quest for truth, Boomers are looking for relevance. Does the Gospel work? Can it make a difference in my life? Can it help me be a better parent, boss, employee, person? Can it help me be a better manager of my finances? Can it fill the emptiness and give my life purpose?

Theological pronouncements and religious dogmas will not capture and hold this generation. Boomers want a practical, relevant presentation of the Gospel, a proclamation that can make a difference in their everyday lives.

Three Reasons Boomers Stay Away from the Church

Several surveys have identified what turns off Boomers to the church.
- First, the Baby Boom generation perceives the church to be boring. The worship services are too slow. The music lacks sparkle. The sermons are dull. There are too many dead spots.
- Second, they perceive the church to be unfriendly.
- They accuse Christians of caring only for those already in the doors. Outsiders tend to remain outsiders.
- Third, they perceive the church to be irrelevant. It does not meet their needs. The church is stuck in a 16th century mindset that does not relate to life. It is not practical. Boomers want a faith that is functional, a faith that works practically in daily life.

Four Reasons Boomers Will Consider Returning to Church

Even though they have some criticisms of the church, the Baby Boom generation is open to exploring faith if the church is willing to open to them. They are not turned off to God or even Jesus Christ. They are turned off to the church. And yet, there are some compelling reasons for believing that Boomers will return to the church if the church is willing to respond with programs and worship experiences that speak to Boomers and their felt needs.

- One of the reasons Boomers are open to returning to the church is that they have yet to find ameaningful philosophy of life. That search for a meaningful philosophy of life has driven Boomers all their lives, and it will continue to do so until they find an answer.
- A second reason for Boomers’ openness to the church is their need to belong. Though highly individualistic, they crave intimacy. They want to be known and loved for who they are. Along with 75 million others, they were huddled through hospitals as infants, grade schools as elementary lads, high schools, colleges, and the job market, and now they have a strong need to be cared for as individuals.
- A third concern motivating Boomers to try church again is parenting. Boomers feel inadequate as parents and want all the help they can get. Churches today do well to invest time in parents and children.
- Finally, as Boomers move into mid-life they begin to question their present position in life and where they might be headed. Imagine 75 million people going through mid-life crisis at the same time!

Boomers were raised to be the best and the brightest. They were the generation of expectations. But most of those high hopes and dreams have gone bust. They are searching for something more. In such times of introspection people are often open to the Gospel.

So even though Boomers rebelled against the church by leaving in droves in the 1960’s and 1970’s, there are signs that God is bringing about a hunger in their lives for the church. Boomers can be reached. We just have to know how to reach them. For what worked in previous generations will not work with the Baby Boom generation.

Keys for Developing an Effective Boomer-Driven Ministry

In trying to reach Boomers we need to remember that they are asking the question, “What’s in it for me?” What does the Gospel say to them, their needs, and their lives, and how does it apply? Keys for reaching Boomers include the following:

Build Bridges

Boomers are a highly relational generation. They enjoy high-touch in the midst of their high-tech lifestyles. Creating an atmosphere of warmth and care will go a long way in winning them. Bridges can be built in the following ways:

- Make the campus visitor-friendly. Most churches assume those who come have been there before. The lack of signs proves this. If we want to attract and hold visitors, we need to go out of our way to ensure that they can find their way around the church. Signs directing people to restrooms, the nursery, Sunday School rooms, the Worship Center, and so on, let visitors know they are expected and welcomed.
- Recruit friendly ushers, greeters, hosts, and hostesses. A warm, friendly greeting or handshake as Boomers come to church helps fill the need for intimacy and belonging many of them crave. Several years ago a young man came up to one of us in the back of the sanctuary. He was visibly shaken and seemed to be in some kind of emotional distress. He asked if our church did weddings for non-members. After a few minutes of discussion he said, “Please forgive my shaking. I’ve never been in a church before.”

We are not sure what he thought was going to happen to him in church, but whatever it was, he perceived it would be something awful. Many guests come to church the same way. They are anxious and unsure of themselves or what may happen to them. A warm, friendly greeting can help put them at ease.
- Provide a high-quality nursery. Boomers want the best for their children. A clean, safe nursery, staffed by responsible adults, puts Boomers at ease and allows them to focus on their children.

Focus on their Needs

Churches need to creatively design new programs that will speak in practical terms to the everyday needs Boomers face: daycare, financial management (Boomers are the first generation in the history of our country to actually make less than their parents did), divorce recovery, marriage, single-parenting, stress management, and so on. Right now,
Boomers want to know what difference the Gospel makes in their lives. What does the Gospel say about marriage, abuse, parenting, incest, anxiety, divorce and a host of other issues? Boomers want to know if the Gospel works.

**Excel in Excellence**

Boomers are accustomed to quality. They place a high premium on excellence and expect such excellence in church. With Boomers, we only get one chance to win them over, so our worship and programming need to be the best that is possible. Using quality musicians, teachers, ushers and greeters, results in quality programming and a more effective Stormer-driven ministry.

**Offer a Vision**

In spite of their self-reliance Boomers want to make a difference in the world. Even now we are seeing some of the old passion of the 1960s re-emerging in the 1990s. The church needs to offer Baby Boomers practical ways through which they can make a difference in the world. (For more information on excellence and vision, see "Taking the Lead" by Walt Kallestad, being released by Augsburg Fortress this spring.)

For mainline churches and denominations, the Baby Boom generation has been a largely untrapped resource. As Boomers age, as they continue to search for a meaningful philosophy of life, we can either demand that they become like us before we accept them, or we can discover their uniquenesses and design new ways to reach them with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

**For Further Reading**


This book is an essential resource for both church professionals and lay leaders involved in a congregation's Christian education program. It formulates major goals for Christian education and presents helpful guidelines for achieving those goals, while allowing a congregation to maintain the integrity of its own identity.

Roehlkepartain's work grows out of the massive study of five mainline Protestant denominations conducted by the Search Institute, Effective Christian Education: A National Study of Protestant Congregations. This study utilized certain basic assumptions. One, faith is a way of living; it is not just assent to doctrines. Faith transforms life. Two, the primary goal of a congregation is to nurture such faith in order to empower its members for ministry. Thus, Christian education cannot be limited to learning stories and information. Three, faith maturity can be measured in levels ranging from trust and believing to advocating and working for social change.

The study revealed that the level of faith maturity was distressingly low; only 32 percent of adults from the surveyed denominations had a mature faith. The study also asserts that a congregation's formal Christian education program is the most important single influence on faith maturity. Other factors—the sense of family in a congregation, a thinking climate, quality of worship, service to others, and a warm climate—encourage faith maturity, but to a far lesser extent than does Christian education.

What factors, then, contribute to a life-transforming Christian education program? The author describes these key factors, especially as they pertain to adolescents and adults. Congregations must set a direction for Christian education, working to achieve goals which flow from a mission statement. Small study groups which offer a sense of personal warmth and community are important at all age levels. Effective teachers are those who have high levels of faith maturity and who understand educational theory and practice. Among adults responsibility for learning shifts from the teacher to the learner. Effective educational programs utilize life experiences of their members to gain spiritual insight. They encourage independent thinking and questioning. Congregations must provide regular service opportunities. Finally, families must nurture the faith.

The vision proposed by Roehlkepartain is exciting and solidly biblical. Our faith should revolutionize how we think and live. When the Church, which is the body of Christ, models His life and carries out His ministry, it can transform society. This book is a rich tool for working toward this challenging goal.

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