

## Generation Theory and Ministry to Today's Youth

Raised in a world of MTV, AIDS, computers, broken families, and virtual reality, "Generation X," by whatever name it is given in the media—Post-Boomers, Twenty-Somethings, busters, or Post-Moderns—is posing new challenges to the Church and its ministry. With many recent studies surrounding Boomers, Generation Xers and, now, Post-Millennials, one thing has become clear: the challenge the Church is facing is not only how to reach "lost generations," but what effect, if any, generational outreach might have on how churches understand the very context in which they minister. The young men and women who make up Generation X are as diverse in outlook and style as any generation before them. Consequently, any sweeping, easy generalizations and pop labels carelessly ascribed to this group are often deceptive. Nevertheless, there is one thing that members of Generation X, and now the Post-Millennial generation, have in common. They represent the first generations in North America to be raised in a predominantly post-Christian culture. What was realized about France in the 1930s perhaps needs to be realized about North America today: we are a "mission country," and the boundaries that we cross in ministering to youth today are as significant as any we cross when we minister in the Third World.

In these few pages, I would like to discuss, first, the relevance of generational theory as a source for developing approaches to ministry to and with today's younger generations. Then I will reflect on some of the challenges that these generations pose for the Church's continuing task of evangelization. Admittedly, mine is basically a Protestant perspective; I offer it as one of the "signs of the times," however, that ministers in the Catholic tradition might want to consider as they reflect on ways to reach today's youth.

### GENERATION THEORY

Generation theory is not new. Strauss and Howe (1991), in their pivotal work on generations in the United States, review the history of the field and trace its roots back into the nineteenth century. They also cite the work of twentieth-century philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, who called the very notion of the generation "the most important concep-

tion in history" (Ortega y Gasset, 1961: 14–15). Although perhaps an exaggeration, Ortega y Gasset's conviction does point to the fundamental nature of this sociological concept. A generation today is usually defined as a group which is born within a limited span of consecutive years, the length of which approximates the span of a phase of life, and the boundaries of which are fixed by the commonality of age, beliefs, and behavior and perceived membership in a common group. A generation, therefore, is defined in relation to a span of years, shared common experiences, and a shared sense of identity.

There is no agreement in generation theory on the specific number of generations, their definitive characteristics, or what provides any group with its cultural glue. Furthermore, generational categories are often susceptible to significant changes due to political or cultural bias, demographic numbers of historical cues. Given these caveats, we can say that some general tendencies do run through the literature on generations, tendencies which many congregations and parishes have found useful in defining their own context for ministry. One detailed picture of generations is given by Diane Crispell in *American Demographics* magazine. Crispell's survey offers seven possible generations in North America today: the "G.I. Generation," those born before 1930; the "Depression Generation," born between 1930 and 1939; "War Babies," born in or after 1940 until 1945; "Baby Boomers," born from 1946 until 1964; "Baby Busters," from 1965 to 1976; "Baby Boomlet," born between 1977 and 1995; and the "Echo Bust," which is the generation of babies born since 1996. Church sources, in contrast, often restrict their demographics to four broad groups: the "Builders" (1925–1944), the "Boomers" (1945–1964), "Generation X" (1965–1984), and the "Post-Millennials" (1985 to the present).

Two issues are important as various approaches to generations are debated. First, generational theory is an important way to enable church leaders to understand their congregations, in particular the two generations ("Boomers" and "Generation X") which seem, at least to many, "lost" and "unchurched." Second, generation theory points to the fact that generations today are not merely "life stages" that we all go through. Youth today, for example, are not simply going through the same kind of adolescence that their parents and grandparents experienced. Recent generations have become, according to these theories, radically and fundamentally different from preceding generations in language, culture, and personal identity. Inter-generational ministry must be understood as cross-cultural ministry, and ministers need to learn a new language, new rules, and new cultural norms. To ignore the impact of generational particularity, therefore, and simply to view people in various life stages—as most congregations are wont to do—will prove to be an impediment to ministry.

## THE CHALLENGE TO MINISTRY

What impact ought generational theory have on the Church's ministry to youth today? I believe that what history did for bible studies in the first part of the twentieth century, this field of sociology can do for our efforts of evangelization. Evangelical Protestant groups in particular have intensely explored how worship and outreach can be generationally sensitive. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and Leighton Ford Ministries co-sponsored a Baby Buster consultation in the early 1990s in which several leaders ministering to Xers were invited to discuss how to reach Generation X with the gospel. The tenor of the conference's discussion pointed to five main characteristics that Xers are looking for in faith groups: authenticity, community, an abandonment of dogmatism, a focus on the arts, and diversity. What marked this conference in particular, however, was its methodology. The radical methodological shift of the conference, now copied across the country in many churches and ministries, was first to define what a generational group "spiritually needed." Then, secondly, it reflected on how specifically to express the gospel message in a way that would address these needs.

Many other Protestant groups have followed suit and copied this methodology, either hiring experts in generational outreach or visiting "megachurches" which have thrived on generationally specific ministries—e.g., Willow Creek Community Church outside Chicago and Saddleback Community Church in Newport Beach, California (for Boomers), and Forest Hill Church in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Ginghamburg Church in Tipp City, Ohio (for Xers—although Willow Creek does have a ministry to Generation X as well).

Such "needs-oriented approaches," however, are not without their critics. Some are quick to point out that these approaches reduce the Church's mission to marketing strategies. It becomes, to these critics' minds, reduced to a vendor of religious goods and services, and the individual parish becomes one more store in the religious shopping mall. In addition, many of these seemingly successful congregations will admit that they have not always been successful in communicating the gospel to new generations. They still grapple with how to engage in a contextually relevant ministry to Baby Boomers or Generation X without remaining faithful to their church's traditions. As the title of a recently published essay puts it, the challenge is "Reaching Out without Dumbing Down" (Dawn, 1999).

As part of a mission leadership seminar at my own seminary, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, students visit and compare two Chicago-area megachurches—Willow Creek Community Church in White, affluent Barrington, and Trinity United Church of Christ on the South Side of Chicago. Their typical reactions to these two influen-

tial congregations is telling. When Trinity's pastor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, states that his church "is unabashedly Black and unapologetically Christian," our (mostly White) students applaud his vision as contextually relevant. This, they say, is incarnational ministry within a Black context. In contrast, they often react harshly—"this is marketing!"—when Willow Creek attempts to be contextual and uses generationally sensitive worship. But does Willow Creek engage in marketing, or inculturation? Are the students perhaps missing pastor Bill Hybel's conviction that particular generations have particular cultures, and that these cultures are as different for mainstream Christians as the cultures of Latin America, Asia and Africa, or that of African-, Asian-, and Latino-Americans?

In particular, Generation X's unique view of life poses significant challenges for the Church, and will require some wrestling with basic questions of contextual relevance and faithfulness to the "tradition." Which of our beliefs are culturally bound? Can we learn from the post-modern mind with regard to issues such as community and personal transparency? How can we be faithful to our liturgical traditions? Both Tom Beaudoin and Willard Jabusch in *America* magazine have recently proposed ways of reaching youth today (Beaudoin, 1999; Jabusch, 1997). Is one right and the other wrong? Or are both approaches based on overgeneralizations (Johnson, et al., 1999).

What I am proposing is that the scientific theories of paradigm shifts and sociological theories of social discontinuity can serve as wake-up calls for ministers today to engage in ministry that is contextually sensitive. In particular, generational theory can be a source that can assist churches to conceptualize and cope with the dramatic changes they are experiencing all around them—not the least of which are in the real differences among generations.

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