

Generations and Generosity

A Travel Free Learning Article

By

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I have been researching generational issues and how they impact church life and evangelism for many years. Recently, as I have been working in the field of fundraising and financial development, that interest has focused on giving. My workshop, "Generations and Generosity," was developed from that focus. This article summarizes some of the material that is regularly presented in the workshop.

First, it's important to note some assumptions about generosity.

- 1. Generosity is a learned or conditioned response.** If you've ever been around a two-year-old, you know that generosity is not usually an innate characteristic in humans. It needs to be modeled, explained, and taught. If your congregation is not doing anything to help people understand generosity and abundance, you should begin exploring this soon.
- 2. Generosity is religiously motivated.** Research shows again and again that people who give to religious causes and are members of a faith community give to all causes more generously than people who don't. Every major faith tradition has teachings on giving. It is evidently making a difference.
- 3. Generosity is shaped by childhood experiences.** One exercise that is widely used in teaching generosity is the Philanthropic Autobiography. This is a series of questions designed to put people in touch with their early experiences of giving and receiving. Again and again, I see that as people become aware of the impact giving has had on their own lives, and remember a time when they gave something very meaningful, their thoughts about giving begin to expand. This has relevance to the whole generations issue as they different generations were impacted by different shared childhood experiences, which we will note later.
- 4. Generosity is influenced by our adult life experiences.** It's not too late to impact generosity! Providing opportunities for your congregants to experience helping others, to get engaged in hands-on mission, to see how their gifts can transform the lives of others and the church community itself are invaluable in building generosity.

Now, here are some assumptions about generations:

- 1. Each Generation has distinct attitudes, behaviors, expectations, habits and motivational buttons.** Some researchers call these the shared "attitude shaping experiences" of each generation. With the pace of change that has impacted our society over the past 75 years, you can imagine the variety of attitudes or worldviews that different generations hold.
- 2. Each generation spans roughly 20-25 years.** Persons born close to the "cusp" of each generation will likely be impacted by both sets of values and experiences.
- 3. Each generation reacts to the generation before them.** Part of what shapes a generation's worldview is the desire to be different from the generation just prior to it.
- 4. Each generation looks at their own generation as the standard of comparison.** This is very important to understand. There is no one single way that people operate in the world. People of each generation see their own attitudes and approaches as normal, and all others as out of

sync. Since most of our congregational systems were built according to the needs of one generation, we are asking four other generations to adapt to that worldview in order to participate. No wonder it doesn't always work!

Therefore, each generation's formative influences have a bearing on their capacity and inclination for generosity.

Now let's look at how this plays out, generation by generation.

The Silents, born 1901- 1928:

- Created systems that benefitted Builders (GI Bill, etc.)
- Loyalty and belonging are primary motivators
- Women of this generation are the highest givers
- 57.7% attend religious services weekly
- 57.1% give to religious causes
- Want to pass on their **legacies** to the next generation

The Builders, born 1929-1945:

- Children of war and depression ...followed by prosperity
- Entering elder-hood with unprecedented affluence
- Most congregational systems created by and for Builders
- 80% give money to charity and 30% volunteer
- Want to communicate philanthropic motives to descendents
- Often reticent to talk publically about their charitable interests
- 46.3% attend religious services weekly
- 72% give to religious causes

The Baby Boomers, born 1946-1964:

- Idealistic and socially-conscious investors
- *Want* to be philanthropic, but are tight on time
- Are often caring for aging parents and are getting their kids educated... and they are burning out
- They like options in giving, but need all the preliminary work done for them. In a campaign, provide giving options, but two or three, not 20
- They remain supportive of a cause only if they believe they are really making an impact
- 32.5% attend religious services weekly
- 46.7% give to religious causes

The Busters/Generation X, born 1965-1983:

- Most diverse generation in the U.S.
- Extremely pragmatic, skeptical, conscientious, self-sufficient, "me" oriented, focused on work/life balance
- Expanded definition of family
- They connect to "causes"; you must communicate the results of their gifts
- Give them control in decisions
- Gen X women give more than Gen X men
- 30.8% attend religious services weekly
- 45.1% give to religious causes

The Millennials, born 1984-2002:

- Raised on technology and multi-tasking. They expect 24/7 access to everything. Including you.
- Collaborative; the most tolerant generation regarding lifestyle differences

- They expect to be involved in big decisions as they have always been taken seriously by others
- 'Fun' and 'impact' are important messages to communicate
- Enthusiastic volunteers on short-term projects
- 27.9% attend religious services weekly
- 41.5% give to religious causes

The fact that each generation was shaped by different influences means that **we need to adapt our giving messages to reach all of them**. This requires that you diversify your communication strategies. In addition to your print newsletter, do you send out email blasts of important information and updates? That's great Many Builders and Boomers will read them. However, you'll miss everyone younger than a Boomer.

Few Gen Xers and almost no Millennials respond to email. (If I want my 21-year-old son to read an email I've sent, I have to text him and tell him to look at it.) For Gen Xers and Millennials, you need a Facebook page that carries the same updates, and a Twitter account wouldn't hurt either.

Don't know how to do any of that? Guess what? All the teenagers in your congregation do, and many of them need community service hours! Recruit some Millennials to help you update your communication strategies.

Another consequence of all of this is that **congregations must also diversify the ways in which people can give**. The first step is the capacity to pledge or make a gift on your church website (which requires accepting credit card gifts.) The next step is to expand your thinking regarding when people give. For example, some Gen Xers working in corporate America give once a year when they get their year-end bonus.

Many Gen Xers and Millennials don't carry checks or cash. They swipe a debit card for everything. Congregations need to accept the fact that they are going to have to create a variety of systems through which people can give. You will have to sort that out for yourselves, based on your congregation's age range and culture.

It may seem like a lot of trouble to try and diversify these systems in your congregation's life. But if you don't, you will miss out on teaching generosity to all but the two most senior of the generations. You will miss out on the gifts that succeeding generations can bring to the table in church life and stewardship. And (my personal opinion here) you will be shirking your duty as a spiritual leader to do all that you can to strengthen the faith of your people. The Bible requires that faithful people give. It doesn't require that we all give by the same method or timeline.

I'd love to talk with you more about this. Please email me with your comments and questions, or join the Travel Free Learning Dialogue on January 12, 2011, at 2 p.m. EST. I look forward to hearing from you! Call 605.715.4900 then access code 954492#.

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Important Things to Know

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