

Growth Points

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Generational Update 2010

Generational change is one of the major issues challenging churches in the last half century. Ever since the Baby Boomers took the world by storm in the 1950s and 1960s, church ministry has not been the same.

Today there are five generations in many churches. The Builder Generation are the people who were born before 1945. They are called the builders because they built churches, businesses, and much of the infrastructure of the United States. Today there are approximately 43 million

builders in the USA, or about 14% of the population.

The Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964. A result of the baby boom that followed World War II, this generation is the largest generation to be born in the USA during an eighteen year span. Today there are around 78 million boomers, or 25% of the US population.

The Gen X Generation is the thirteenth generation to be born in the USA since the founding fathers. Sometimes referred to as the Baby Busters, they are a much smaller generation than the Boomers. Technically, Gen Xers were born between 1965 and 1976. However, some demographers see this generation as ending in 1983. Using the eleven years between 1965 and 1976, there are today about 52 million Xers in the USA, or 17% of the entire population.

The Millennials, or Gen Y Generation, were born between 1977 and the end of the last century, sometime around 1996 and 2000. Today there are roughly 80 million Millennials in the USA, or 26% of the US population. This generation is slightly larger than the Baby Boom generation.

The fifth generation is most often labeled Generation Z, an obvious play on Gen X and Gen Y. However, the name is likely to change as the generation grows up and develops a distinct generational personality. Born between, say, 1998 and the present, they comprise 18% of the US population or about 56 million people. Since they are twelve years old and younger, it is difficult to predict what this generation will look like when it comes of age. Generational personalities are formed when a generation is in its teens or early twenties, so we will have to wait and see what transpires in the coming years as this newest generation comes of age.

The worship wars that dominated much of the last decade seem to have subsided, but new challenges await churches with multiple generations.

“Generational change is one of the major challenges for church leaders in the twenty-first century.”

—Gary L. McIntosh

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Boomers are not likely to give up control.

Technology is part of the Gen Yers' DNA.

The Builder generation is quickly stepping away from church leadership. With the youngest member of this oldest generation set to turn 66 years old in January 2011, the great majority are heading for retirement.

This leaves the Baby Boomers firmly established in the drivers seat of church leadership. Most senior pastors, lay leaders, and denominational heads are currently between the ages of 46 and 64 years old. This has led to the lessening of the worship wars, since boomers pioneered the newer styles of worship.

While many boomers appear to be delaying retirement due to the weak economy, some have taken early retirement and are volunteering in numerous ways. For example, *Christianity Today* reported in 2007 that Wycliffe Associates enjoyed a 40 percent increase in boomer volunteer missionaries, which prompted Wycliffe to build a volunteer mobilization center in Orlando, FL in 2005. What boomers desire is to do something significant. However, they want a measure of control and freedom in whatever ministry they participate.

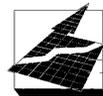
Gen Xers are now between the ages of 34 to 45 years old, and are pressing up on the boomers. They represent the younger pastors and denominational leaders who are entrepreneurial, tech-savvy, and distrustful of hype. The stress created between them and the boomers is related to mission and ministry practice. For example, boomers embrace the evangelistic seeker-oriented church service, but the Gen Xers are more comfortable with the missional engagement of social action ministry. Boomers appreciate the high production values of well-rehearsed worship services, but Gen Xers like the authentic atmosphere displayed in less rehearsed worship. There is likely to be a great deal of conflict in coming years as Gen Xers desire to take over various ministries but boomers refuse to give up control. The transition of leadership between these generations is likely to be challenging.

Today, Gen Yers are between 13 and 33 years old. They are the first generation to grow up in a digital world, and take to technology as though it was part of their DNA. Gen Yers appreciate speed, change, and like working in collaborative teams. As such, they challenge boomers by focusing on innovation, social networking, and technology. Members of this young generation find it difficult to trust boomer leaders unless they are open and transparent. Boomers, of course, practice ministry with a more command and control approach. While Gen Yers want to be given freedom to invent, customize, and control their own ministries, even at their young age. They want a church that offers a holistic approach to discipleship that includes social engagement with community needs, as well as evangelistic fervor.

How many generations do you currently have in your church? What are the percentages of each generation?

What challenges are you currently facing that are generationally related? What coming challenges do you see looming in the future?

How are you collaborating with each generation in the design of church ministry?



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