

Carlus Gupton

### **Intergenerational Unity: Resources and Insights**

Intergenerational conflict is nothing new. Many churches today, however, experience increased difficulty in preserving respectful relationships among the older and younger. The current struggle between generations is due in large part to the intersection of two major trends: longer life spans and rapid change. Four to five generations may coexist in congregations, and the pace of change during the last three generations' "coming of age" has widened the generational gap. Conflict over worship styles, sermon forms, Bible translations, views of the church building, the place of pastoral care, drama and video, are just a few of the unsettling issues surrounding generational unity.

There is help. I offer the following suggestions in a four-step format. The first step is to understand the magnitude of recent cultural shifts that contribute to the generational divide and how this affects *religious* youth, "youth" meaning those from early-teens to late-twenties. The second step is to look closely at how *non-religious* youth view the church. The first two steps are important because the preferences of the youth culture often define the most significant generational differences in congregations. The third step is to assess the level of generational differences in your congregation through activities such as focus groups. The fourth step is to follow an intentional path toward building peaceful intergenerational relationships.

#### Cultural Shifts and Religious Youth

First, to understand the changing landscape of *religious youth*, consult Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Baker Books, 2002). Webber draws a distinction between three different types of evangelicals. The first are Traditional Evangelicals of the post-WWII era, 1950s-1970s, often called "The Traditionals." They were the conservative, Bible-believing churches of the stable church-culture period that enjoyed widespread Christian influence and relative sameness between the three main institutions of society: family, school, and church. The leading cultural figure of "The Traditionals" is Billy Graham.

Webber's second typology is the Pragmatic Evangelicals who emerged in the 1960s but came of age in the 1970s-1990s. They were the seeker-targeted, church-growth-oriented churches, often called "The Attractionals" because they sought to "attract" the unchurched by offering appealing services. Following a principle of "accommodation without compromise" (Rick Warren), these churches popularized contemporary worship, ministering to felt-needs, and building huge facilities with gymnasiums, all with the intent of reaching disenfranchised baby boomers and older busters. The leading cultural figures of "The Attractionals" are Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church and Rick Warren of Saddleback Valley Community Church (*Purpose Driven Church*).

Webber's third typology is the "Younger Evangelicals," the "twenty-somethings" who come of age in the post-9/11 postmodern era, after 2000. Younger Evangelicals are often called "The Missionals," in distinction from the previous group of church-growth enthusiasts, "The Attractionals." "Missional" is an adaptation of the Latin term *Missio Dei*, which may be translated "Mission of God." It affirms the belief that God has a mission for the world and that he is always sovereignly at work toward that mission, sometimes in ways that are perceptive to us and often in ways that are not. God's desire for the world goes beyond simply evangelism but also incorporates concerns of social compassion and justice toward the creation of whole communities of people (indeed the whole creation) who experience the benefits of God's reign.

In this view, what the church does is part of the larger work of God but not the entirety of that work. And it accomplishes this work not by becoming a center that seeks to attract the world to it by delivering messages and providing religious goods and services through its programs but by becoming a mission outpost that sends people into the community. Instead of being *attractional* in trying to bring people *to* the church to experience its offerings, it stresses our being *incarnational*. *Incarnational* is the sense that just as Christ was God *incarnate*, or God *in the flesh* who left heaven to bless the creation (John 1:14, Phil 2:6-8), so the church must *incarnate*, or take up dwelling in and around the community, not for the sake of building up the church but for the sake of bringing the blessing of God to the people.

Viewing the previous evangelical groupings as highly modernistic, YE's are typical of the postmodern (often abbreviated "PoMo") tendency to reject all modernistic assumptions. For example, they vehemently reject the consumerist, capitalist, corporate principles and practices of the pragmatic evangelicals and challenge their preoccupation with success, numbers, and cultural dominance. In contrast, they prefer small, diverse churches that "indwell" their local communities with ministries of social compassion.

As a side note, it is this development that has spawned terms such as "missional church," "emergent church," "emerging conversation," etc. At the risk of gross over-simplification, those who are part of this conversation speak of themselves as "missional" vs. "attractional" (see above) and wish to create a fresher and more vibrant faith expression, one that is newly "emerging" in the postmodern era, thus the emerging, missional church. The leading cultural figures for the Younger Evangelicals are Brian McLaren, who until 2006 led the Cedar Ridge Community Church of Washington, D. C. (<http://www.brianmclaren.net> and <http://www.crcc.org>) and Dan Kimball of Vintage Faith Church in Santa Cruz, California. (<http://www.vintagefaith.com> and <http://www.vintagechurch.org>).

Webber is obviously a missional proponent. In fact, just before his death in 2007, he was a principal author of "The Call to an Ancient Evangelical Faith" (or AEF Call). It is a succinct statement of what many younger evangelicals long for. To view the AEF Call, go to the following website and scroll to the bottom for links:  
<http://www.growcenter.org/AEFConferenceInformation.htm>.

Webber's bias notwithstanding, his book is still arguably the best resource for understanding *religious* youth. He describes twenty-four specific characteristics of Younger Evangelicals and presents over a dozen detailed charts comparing them with the previous generations on issues

like communication, theology, history, apologetics, ecclesiology, church ministry, role of pastors, youth ministry, education, worship, spiritual formation, art, evangelism, and activism. In the process, Webber provides some of the best introductory descriptions of terms like postmodern, emergent, missional, etc.

### Cultural Shifts and Non-Religious Youth

To understand *non-religious* youth culture, consult the extensive research conducted by the Fermi Project and supplemented by a number of other quantitative and qualitative studies by the Barna Research Group. The results are published in a recent book by David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons entitled *UnChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity...And Why It Matters* (Baker Books, 2007). The news is not good. The authors discuss the six most common points of skepticism and objections raised by outsiders ages 16-29. These young adults believe Christians are:

1. **Hypocritical**--Outsiders consider us hypocritical, saying one thing and doing another, and they are skeptical of our morally superior attitudes. They say Christians pretend to be something unreal, conveying a polished image that is not accurate. Christians think the church is only a place for virtuous and morally pure people.
2. **Too focused on getting converts**--Outsiders wonder if we genuinely care about them. They feel like targets rather than people. They question our motives when we try to help them "get saved," despite the fact that many of them have already "tried" Jesus and have experienced church before.
3. **Antihomosexual**--Outsiders say that Christians are bigoted and show disdain for gays and lesbians. They say Christians are fixated on curing homosexuals and on leveraging political solutions against them.
4. **Sheltered**--Christians are thought of as old-fashioned, boring, and out of touch with reality. Outsiders say we do not respond to reality in appropriately complex ways, preferring simplistic solutions and answers. We are not willing to deal with the grit and grime of people's lives.
5. **Too political**--Another common perception of Christians is that we are overly motivated by a political agenda, that we promote and represent politically conservative interests and issues. Conservative Christians are often thought of as right-wingers.
6. **Judgmental**--Outsiders think of Christians as quick to judge others. They say we are not honest about our attitudes and perspectives about other people. They doubt we really love people as we say we do.

An extensive summary of their research appears on the website <http://www.unchristian.com>, and video interviews with the authors may be found on the book's YouTube site <http://www.youtube.com/unchristianbook>.

A similar book by Dan Kimball, *They Like Jesus but Not the Church: Insights from Emerging Generations* (Zondervan, 2007), presents unchurched youth in the same light but without the research base of *UnChristian*. Kimball's numerous anecdotes and intuitive identification with postmodern youth, however, make him a worthy alongside Kinnaman and Lyons.

### Assessing Level of Generational Issues in Your Congregation

Most older church leaders who read these texts will be both encouraged and discouraged by what they find. After all, serious issues of theology and morality are at stake, and more importantly, the eternal welfare of our youth and the older members who work and worship with them. Often, a form of denial sets in, where leaders may question the extent to which their congregational climates reflect the cultural ethos. I offer a few perspectives.

1. The Christian Churches / Churches of Christ tend to be a generation or more delayed in reflecting cultural currents, so the youth (ages 16-29) in many of our congregations may not fully demonstrate the characteristics of Webber's Younger Evangelicals.

But do not assume this too quickly. In my association with young postmoderns in the Bible college, state university, and seminary environments, I have encountered only a handful who do not reflect the characteristics of their generation on a very recognizable level. I believe most of our youth are more postmodern than we would like to admit.

2. On the other hand, most of our congregations are not very intentional in creating deep-level understanding among their members and have simply come to expect that most young adults will lose their faith once they leave the nest (a sad resignation). If we were more intentional, might we discover something similar to Webber or even Kinnaman and Lyons among our youth? Is it there, but we simply have not been thoughtful enough to uncover it?
3. Prefaced by the caveats above, it is important to acknowledge that not all youth have bought into the postmodern ethos. A resource that is not yet available by Kevin DeYoung and Ted Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be* (Moody Publishers, April 2008), should shed light on this. I will review this book in the next issue of *Church Link*. Here's the prepublication editorial review on this volume:

“You can be young, passionate about Jesus Christ, surrounded by diversity, engaged in a postmodern world, reared in evangelicalism and not be an emergent Christian. In fact, I want to argue that it would be better if you weren't.”

The Emergent Church is a strong voice in today's Christian community. And they're talking about good things: caring for the poor, peace for all men, loving Jesus. They're doing church a new way, not content to fit the mold. Again, all good. But there's more to the movement than that. Much more.

Kevin and Ted are two guys who, demographically, should be all over this movement. But they're not. And *Why We're Not Emergent* gives you the solid reasons why. From both a theological and an on-the-street perspective, Kevin and Ted

diagnose the emerging church. They pull apart interviews, articles, books, and blogs, helping you see for yourself what it's all about.

What this may point to is a group of younger believers who are less enamored with the PoMo, Missional, Emergent mindset. How large or small that group is in one's congregational landscape, versus those who are definitely immersed into the postmodernity, must be locally determined.

How might we discover the extent of the generational divide in our own contexts? Some congregations do not need a wake-up call, as the circumstances have forced them into intergenerational concerns on a very serious scale. Others must create the awareness. Either way, this demands planned, purposeful communication, perhaps through focus groups of younger and older members within your congregation. The next section suggests helpful guides for these discussions.

### Intentional Paths Toward Inter-Generational Unity

How may leaders of established churches build practices that help the generations experience Christian unity on a congregational level? Toward that end, I recommend five resources. Each of them not only presents ways of bringing the generations closer but also suggests several *generation-specific* measures for addressing the unique needs of the older and younger generations.

The first is Gary L. McIntosh, *One Church, Four Generations: Understanding and Reaching All Ages in Your Church* (Baker Books, 2002). If church leaders read only one book on intergenerational unity, this should be it. McIntosh surveys four different generations from older to younger (builders, boomers, busters, bridgers) and reviews their formative experiences, characteristics, and religious preferences. His section on "Riding the Waves of Change," though brief, does an excellent job of suggesting *what* to do. The volume by Gil Rendle below is a good supplement on more specifically *how* to do it.

Next is Gilbert R. Rendle, *The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge* (Alban Institute, 2002). Alongside McIntosh above, Rendle provides one of the most helpful guides to equip generations for intentional conversations with each other and to help leaders facilitate appreciative and productive intergenerational relationships on a congregational scale.

Perhaps Rendle's greatest contribution is his four-part approach for multigenerational understanding:

1. Move to the balcony--take time to reflect
2. Work descriptively--describe the situation neutrally instead of blaming
3. Seek common space--identify values shared by the generations
4. Install civility--be willing to put the other side first.

The essential point of both resources is **do not avoid the issues**. Provide settings where generations hear each other, respectfully, on tough issues. This should occur on at least four levels.

1. Pulpit teaching to help groups see the value of each other, holding up each generation and never criticizing a generation publicly;
2. Sunday School classes and small groups as forums that allow questions and answers and provide a safe place to process frustrations;
3. Outside speakers and consultants who may be able to say things too difficult for someone inside to express and are viewed as objective experts;
4. Common ground experiences that bring the generations together and helps them to understand and love each other, challenging the church's tendency to segregate generations almost exclusively into age-graded activities.

Four other volumes are excellent supplements to McIntosh and Rendle. To supplement McIntosh and gain more information on the generations, consider two volumes. One is by Jackson W. Carroll and Wade Clark Roof, *Bridging Divided Worlds: Generational Cultures in Congregations* (Jossey-Bass, 2002). Based on extensive research of how three different generations (dwellers, seekers, and hybrid souls) punctuate church life, Carroll and Roof present a sensitive and refreshing vision of how churches can responsibly engage the generational divide either through generationally blended or generation-specific churches. They are not as heavy on methodology as McIntosh and Rendle but are quite helpful on describing the generational divide and encouraging church leaders regarding possibilities.

Another helpful volume is by Carl G. Eeman, *Generations of Faith: A Congregational Atlas* (Alban Institute, 2002). This is a brief, well-written summary and application of the extensive research by William Strauss and Neil Howe (who write the foreword) on generation theory, four generation cycles, and how generations experience birth, emergence, contribution, and graying. Eeman gives perspective on how current cultural conditions have accentuated the generational clashes that have existed in all periods of history. This is a very usable distillation of the extensive field of generation theory as it relates to congregational life.

To supplement Gil Rendle on how to facilitate congregation-wide discussions on difficult issues, a helpful volume is Joseph Phelps, *More Light, Less Heat: How Dialogue Can Transform Christian Conflicts into Growth* (Jossey-Bass, 1999). Though not written on the generational issue itself, Phelps presents helpful strategies.

Another excellent volume for the older generations is Gordon MacDonald, *Who Stole My Church? What to Do When the Church You Love Tries to Enter the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Thomas Nelson, 2007). MacDonald pastorally and sensitively addresses older members of established churches who struggle as their church makes adjustments to reach younger populations. Designed for group or class study, the appendix contains discussion questions for each chapter. This book is long overdue.

## Conclusion

To summarize, we are experiencing sweeping generational and cultural shifts that often result in congregational conflicts. Read Robert Webber's *Younger Evangelicals* to understand the new breed of *religious* youth and to grasp how they compare/contrast to the previous generations. Next, look at David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons' *UnChristian*, or at least the web summaries of their research, to grasp the significant disconnect of *non-religious* youth. Expect revelations that are both unsettling and encouraging, but balance those with reflections such as those in the upcoming volume by DeYoung and Kluck, *Why We're Not Emergent*. With this perspective, enter the task of equipping your congregation for intergenerational unity by digesting Gary McIntosh's *One Church, Four Generations*, perhaps supplemented by Carroll/Roof and Eeman, to get a good idea of *what* to do. Then read Gil Rendle's *The Multigenerational Congregation* (perhaps supplemented by Joseph Phelps) for excellent suggestions on *how*. Then consider MacDonald's *Who Stole My Church* as a helpful study for the older members.

If you need additional help, I offer workshops and consulting on this issue and others. Go to <http://www.lifeandleadership.com/consulting> for more information.

## Recommended Books

- Carroll, J. W., & Roof, W. C. (2002). *Bridging divided worlds: Generational cultures in congregations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- DeYoung, K., & Kluck, T. (2008). *Why we're not emergent: By two guys who should be*. Chicago: Moody Publishers.
- Eeman, C. G. (2002). *Generations of faith: A congregational atlas*. Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute.
- Kimball, D. (2007). *They like Jesus but not the church: Insights from emerging generations*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Kinnamon, D., & Lyons, G. (2007). *UnChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity... And why it matters*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- MacDonald, G. (2007). *Who stole my church? What to do when the church you love tries to enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- McIntosh, G. L. (2002). *One church, four generations: Understanding and reaching all ages in your church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.
- Phelps, J. (1999). *More light, less heat: How dialogue can transform Christian conflicts into growth*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rendle, G. R. (2002). *[The multigenerational congregation: Meeting the leadership challenge.](#)* Bethesda, MD: Alban Institute.

Webber, R. E. (2002). *[The younger evangelicals: Facing the challenges of the new world.](#)* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

#### Recommended Websites

Brian D. McLaren: <http://www.brianmclaren.net/>

Call to an Ancient Evangelical Faith:

Cedar Ridge Community Church: <http://www.crc.org/>

Dan Kimball: <http://www.vintagefaith.com/>

*UnChristian* website: <http://www.unchristian.com/>

*UnChristian* YouTube site: <http://www.youtube.com/unchristianbook>

Vintage Faith Church: <http://www.vintagechurch.org/>