

Growth Points

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Communicating to Generations

Ministry in today's church is quite complex. One factor that adds to the complexity is the existence of four different generational groups.

The Builder Generations is comprised of persons born between 1923 and 1945. Together this group is often referred to as the Silent Generation. Members of this generation grew up reading books and listening to radio.

The Baby Boom Generation is made up of those born between 1946 and 1964. This generation is popularly known as "The Me Generation," and members grew up watching television.

Friends Still Important In American Life

According to a report in *American Demographics*, the typical American has known his or her best friend for fourteen years, and more than half of us still make time to call our best friend once a week.

For the most part, people hang out with those who are demographically similar to themselves. Seventy-three percent of American's best friends are within five years of their own age. In addition best friends tend to be at similar life stages.

Source: *American Demographics*

Generation X was formed from those born between 1965 and 1983. Most were influenced by Sesame Street, MTV, and the early stages of computer technology.

Generation Y are those people born from 1984 to 2002. They cut their teeth on the Internet, high speed computers, I pods, and other types of up-to-date technology.

Communicating to all four of these generations in one worship service presents quite a challenge to leaders. Each generation has a particular learning style that characterizes about three-fourths of the total generation.

Builders evidence a visual learning style whereby they learn best by reading and seeing information. Their learning style was created in large part from the emphasis on reading print material such as books, newspapers, and magazines. This generation's love of the hymnal is reflective of a learning style that likes to read.

Boomers learn best by seeing and hearing information. Their learning style appears to be auditory, with a mixture of visual thrown in. Growing up watching and listening to programs on the television created this learning approach.

Generation X displays more of a hands on or tactual approach to learning. Their involvement with technology created a desire to learn through experimentation.

Generation Y are active learners. Their action-oriented, multitasking approach to life creates a kinesthetic style of learning. They need to be highly involved in the learning process. Verbal lectures are not helpful with this generation.

The existence of these different learning styles points out the fact that church leaders must use several approaches to communication when all four generations are present in one church.

Most effective communication with all four generations involves a creative use of spoken word, action-oriented illustration, and visual presentation.

Effective communication with these generations will likely involve use of art, music, poetry, media, the Internet, drama and lots and lots of stories.

How are you communicating with the generations in your church? What might you do differently?

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Share Compelling Stories

Stories, stories, and more stories

Our changing cultural has spawned two different styles of thinking: Analytic and Global.

Analytic thinkers focus on a “one-step-at-a-time” approach to thinking and learning. For these persons the best approach to communication is to build a logical list that proceeds from point A to point B to point C with each succeeding point adding to the former until a logical conclusion is evident.

Global thinkers focus on several different aspects of an issue that at first may appear unrelated. However, as each aspect of the issue is reviewed, they gradually point to a general conclusion which cannot be ignored. The best approach to communicating with global thinkers is story-telling.

Analytic thinkers learn in a linear format, while global thinkers learn in a circular format. Both approaches to thinking and learning are seen in scripture. The apostle Paul often used linear thinking to build a case or “line of thought.” Romans is a good example of linear thinking as Paul presents a case for righteousness by faith in a point by point manner. In contrast the parables of Christ found in the Gospels are an example of global (circular) thinking. For example, in Luke 15 Jesus tells three stories—the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son—and leaves it up to his audience to figure out what is meant. As each story is told, the listener is drawn ever closer to the center, or central, idea of the circle of stories.

Clearly both forms of teaching and learning are biblical. However, it appears that the older generations (Builders and Boomers) are more likely to be analytic thinkers, while the younger generations (Gen Xers and Gen Yers) tend to be global thinkers. Of course, I’m speaking in large generalities as each person within each generation is an individual. Yet, the general characteristics of each generation should not be ignored.

Communicating to Generation X and Y means we must teach through compelling stories. What’s out today is simple formulas, solutions, and being the “Bible Answer Man.” Gen X and Y both have experienced a complex world where simple solutions do not seem to have power. The Roman Road and The Four Spiritual Laws may still be useful tools, but they feel too simplistic to the global minds of Gen Xers and Yers.

What’s in is conversation and sharing of stories. The key to communicating to Gen Xers and Yers seems to be as follows: A person with a story to tell talks to another person who has a story to tell, and in the process of communication integrates the story of Jesus.

The dispensing of easy answers is not what Gen Xers and Yers seem to be searching for today. They want to see the more complex side of the issues, particularly how truth is internalized in the life of the communicator. A pastor may correctly point out that husbands should love their wives, but the younger generations want to see if the pastor actually loves his wife.

In practice this means pastors and others who speak and teach to the younger generations must integrate their own life stories into their teaching and preaching. It also means involving people from the congregation in forums where they can share their stories too. It means sharing the stories of men and women in the Bible with today’s younger generations. Most importantly it means telling the “Greatest Story Ever Told” in fresh compelling ways.

Story-telling and preaching/teaching from the Old Testament are likely to be growing avenues of communication in the coming decades. How often do you preach or teach from the Old Testament? How creative are you in telling stories? When was the last time you allowed someone from the congregation to share their story with the congregation? How can you begin to use stories more effectively in the weeks ahead?



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For information about training workshops, seminars, and church consultations call 951-506-3086.

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