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WHO AND HOW ARE **THE NEXT GENERATION?**

“BUT AS FOR ME AND MY
HOUSEHOLD, WE WILL SERVE
THE LORD.” (JOS. 24:15B)



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next
generation
series

3



WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES?

NEXT GENERATION SERIES 3

WHO AND HOW ARE THE NEXT GENERATION?

(Is the church losing the next generation?)

Chicago UBF Isaac Y. Choi

I. WHAT ARE THE MAIN CAUSES?

We were looking for a single “smoking gun.” Instead, we found many. Our investigation would uncover one big reason but young adults disconnect from the church or walk away from their faith—maybe two or three. We would find, for instance, that going away to college is a faith killer—but it turns out that’s just not the case for most young people.

Instead of one or two “biggies,” we discovered a wide range of perspectives, frustrations, and disillusionments that compel the next generations to disconnect. No single reason pushes a majority of young adults to drop out. Each person has his or her own set of unique and mundane reasons—that is, both deeply personal and rather pedestrian. Yet the everydayness of these reasons does not make them important or uninteresting.

In shifting through our research findings and individual stories, we were able to identify six themes that capture the overall phenomenon of disconnection between the next generation and the church.

Here are the broad reasons they offer for dropping out. They find the church to be:

***Overprotective**

Here are some of the criticisms that young Christians and former Christians label at the church:

- Christians demonize everything outside of the church. The next generation feels as though many Christians characterize every non-Christian thing as bad. For example, they perceive that the underlying message about non-Christians---adherents to other religions, atheists, and agnostics---is that these people are categorically evil.

- Christians are afraid of pop culture, especially its movies and music. Many young Christians complain that they have been conditioned to fear “the world.” The problem is that, as they explore “the world,” they come to believe (rightly or wrongly) that the world is not nearly as hopeless or awful as they’ve been told.
- Christians maintain a false separation of sacred and secular. This generation does not see a divide between the sacred and secular, at least not in the same way their parents do.
- Christians do not want to deal with the complexity or reality of the world. To young Christians, the church can feel rigid and unreal. Christians’ black-and –white views seem not to reflect the world as it really is.

The next generation is living through a period of compressed social cultural, technological change. This environment invites them to live out their faith in new and sometimes startling ways. They want to follow Jesus in a way that connects with the world that they inhabit, to partner with God outside the wall of church, and pursue Christianity without separating themselves from the world.

This desire of young people brings two opposite temptations: cultural withdrawal and cultural accommodation. A healthy desire to influence culture can turn too easily into an unhealthy preoccupation with acceptance by main stream culture. When this happens, we consume what the world has to offer and end up with lives no difference from anyone else’s. Some Christians in every generation have succumbed to this temptation including the next generation.

One of the most significant consequences of being overprotected is that millions of young people look for excitement outside traditional boundaries. This may be pornography or sexual experimentation, drugs and other addictive substances, extreme thrill seeking, total immersion in video game universes, under-and overachievement, hyper-exercise and eating disorder, and so on.

-----The impulses toward creativity and cultural engagement are some of the defining characteristics of the Mosaic generation that are most obvious. They want to reimagine, recreate, rethink, and they want to be entrepreneurs, innovators, starters. To Mosaics, creative expression is of inestimable value. The church is seen as a creativity killer where risk taking and being involved in culture are anathema.

How can the church peel back the tamper-resistant safety seal, making space for imaginative risk taking and creative self-expression, traits that are so valued within the next generation?

***Shallow**

To many young people who grew up in Christian churches, Christianity seems boring, irrelevant, sidelined from the real issues people face. It seems shallow.

- The shallowness equation has two sides. On the one, we find young adults who have only a superficial understanding of the faith and of the Bible. The Christianity they believe is an inch deep. On the other, we find faith communities that convey a lot of information about God rather than disciplining young believers to have wholly and deeply in the reality of God.

Thus, the Christianity some churches pass on is a mile wide. Put the two together and you get a generation of young believers whose faith is an inch deep and a mile wide—too shallow to survive and too broad to make a difference.

- Most young people lack a deep understanding of their faith. This type of shallow faith that most Christian young people embrace does not require the nurture of a faith community to thrive. Certainly it is not a holistic way of life that demands we die to ourselves for the sake of Christ.
- Young adults' ability to grow in faith withers when they persist in narcissism, entitlement, and out of proportion self-confidence. The vast majority of church-going teenagers said, they understand the teachings of the Bible "very well." But when we ask specific

questions about basic content of those teachings, most teens in the study performed quite poorly. In other words, their self-confidence was totally and out of proportion with their actual knowledge.

- Churches have ceded the realm of knowledge to academics and institutions of higher education. Essentially we make little effort to keep disciples connect the dots between their vocation—whether in medicine, journalism, music, sales, computer-programing, or any other---and their faith. We in the church focus on matters of belief and commitment, which may be divorced from any impact these make on the whole of life. Christians must connect our commitment to God with real-world knowledge and experience.

-----So, young people need a much clearer, definitive, objective, and directional approach to finding their calling in Christ body.

Among Mosaics, the most common perception of churches is that they are boring. Easy platitudes, proof texting, and formulaic slogans have anesthetized many young adults, leaving them with no idea of the gravity and power of following Christ. For young Christians can coherently connect their faith with their gifts, abilities, and passions. In other words, the Christianity they received does not give them a sense of calling.

How can the church nurture a deep, holistic faith in Christ that encompasses every area of life?

***Anti-science**

Millions of young Christians perceive Christianity to be in opposition to modern science.

- Today's teen and twentysomethings have been even more profoundly influenced by these developments than previous generations. From their earliest days, science and technology have had a hand in nearly every area of their lives.
- Science has come to dominate and define our collective culture. Digital and mechanical technology, medical research and treatment, survey and conservation of the environment, study of the human

brain and mind, genetics, physics, and discoveries about our universes---these areas of scientific inquiry, and so many more, shape our reality. Tools and methods developed by science significantly impact our daily lives.

- We see the rift between science and faith undermining the church's efforts to make disciples among the next generation. The first is the challenge facing all believers to live biblically in a culture immersed in science.

The second area is the challenge of nurturing and supporting young science-minded Christians.

-----Many young Christians have come to the conclusion that faith and science are incompatible. Yet they see the mostly helpful role science plays in the world they inhabit—in medicine, personal technology, travel, care of natural world, and other areas. What's more, science seems accessible in a way that the church does not; science appears to welcome questions and skepticism, while matters of faith seem impenetrable.

How can the Christian community help the next generation interact with science positively and prophetically?

***Repressive, Religious rules**

Sexuality is the one of the greatest expression of God's creativity and of his intention for human flourishing. It is also confounding and confusing to teenagers and young adults on their spiritual journey.

Marriage and childbearing, if they happen, are coming later in life for most young adults—but sex is in the picture earlier than ever. Among many of those with a Christian background, the perception is that church is out of step with the times. Many though not all, view the church as repressive—controlling, joyless, and stern when it comes to sex, sexuality, and sexual expectations.

On the other hand, many are also dissatisfied with the wider culture's pressure on them to adopt lax sexual attitude and behaviors. They feel torn between the false purity of traditionalism and the empty permissiveness of their peers. The story of a generation and sex is complicated and layered

too, filled with judgment, rules, old and new media, hypocritical religious leaders, values turned on their heads, a world saturated with sexual images, and double lives trapped between soul and pelvis.

Christian teens and young adults are caught between two narratives about sexuality. The first we will call traditionalism, and second individualism:

- Here, we must distinguish between traditionalism and tradition. Christian traditions, such as chastity and fidelity, are significant features of spiritual and sexual wholeness emerging from an understanding of God's revelation in the Bible.
- Traditionalism, on the other hand, is an ideology that seeks to replace a thriving, grace-filled relationship with Christ, with human-made rules and regulations. Unfortunately, traditionalist narratives about sexuality have mingled legalism with Christian tradition. As such, what many churches have taught about sex is steeped in traditionalism, not biblical tradition.

For traditionalists, shame is the watchword when it comes to sexuality. There is something dirty all sexual pleasure—even within marriage. Sex is so shameful that it would be best for everyone if sexual activity were confined to procreation, its most basic utilitarian function.

- The traditionalist focus on making babies, while affirming the Christian tradition of family and the biblical mandate to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28), has a dark side, especially for women.
- If sex should be limited to fulfilling one's obligations—to obey the church, to marry and stay married as a social responsibility, to bear and rear children—there is little room for self-giving love, which requires the freedom of personal choice.
- Individualist sexuality----When the Boomers came of age in the 1960s, they were sick and tired of traditionalism's “repressive” notions about sex. Boomers attempted to replace the traditionalist's narrative with something new—the individual's personal journey toward sexual fulfillment.

- The new narrative, which has come to define our broader Western culture, is that of the individualist: sex is about me. In the individualist narrative, sexuality is about personal satisfaction. Pornography is the most blatant case in point.

The rules of individualist sexual encounters are self-defined. The highest goals of sex are not just pleasure but freedom and self-expression. At best, young adults “rules” for sex are loose, self-driven, and self-oriented guide lines.

- The unsustainable tension between the traditionalist and individualist views has led to profound cognitive and behavioral dissonance in the next generation of believers.

The changing narrative of sexuality, like other areas, has been shaped in the next generation by the three “**A**”s:

- Young people have grown up with unprecedented **access** to sexual content via internet, TV, movies, music, and video games, which have brought sexuality into their lives earlier and more easily than was true for previous generations.
- Their **alienation** from formative relationships (especially from absent fathers) has created a host of emotional issues, many of which are manifested in their sexual decision making.
- And their suspicion of **authority**, inherited from their Boomer predecessors, invites them to dismiss “old- fashioned traditions without wondering first whether they might be healthy and life-giving.

When the Christian community is hesitant to dialogue about sex we lose the opportunity to apprentice the next generation in transparent, trusting, Christ-centered, relationships. Otherwise, they have the world at their fingertips!

So we need to initiate respectful, nuanced, and livable sexual ethic beyond “sex is dirty; save it for the one you love.”

-----Particularly sexual mores—feel stifling to the individualist mindset of young adults. Consequently they perceive the church as repressive.

Sexuality creates deep challenges for the faith development of young people.

How can the church contextualize its approach to sexuality and culture within a broader vision of restored relationships?

***Exclusive**

The church is exclusive. Many of the next generation believe that Christians have an insider-outsider mentality that is always ready to bar the door to those who don't meet their standards.

Tolerance has been the cultural North Star for most of their upbringing. Inclusiveness, diversity, and political correctness are ideals that have shaped this generation.

Young people's affinity for tolerance poses a significant challenge for the church, in four related ways:

- **Agreement versus Disagreement**

Founder of "Off the Map", Jim Henderson, has described eighteen to twenty-nine year olds as "the great agreement" generation, because young people prefer finding areas of common ground rather than emphasizing differences that may lead to conflict. They look for ways to come together, rather than for issues on which to divide.

"No compromise!" has been the slogan of the Western church, but it does not make sense to the next generation, for whom negotiation and cooperation are facts of life. As the church moves together into an unknown future, we may find Mosaics' compulsion toward unity a gift.

- **Peer Responsibility versus Individuality**

Young adults also look to their peers to be their moral and spiritual compass. They tend to base their views of morality on what seems fair-minded, loyal, and acceptable to their friends. This peer-centeredness poses many challenges for other generations.

In the Western church we tend to emphasize the individual over the group. We focus on personal responsibility to a fixed standard, rather

than on collective negotiation with a world absent of absolute truth. This is the exact opposite of how young adults relate to their world. Yes, it is important that we in the church continue to tell the truth about personal morality, but I believe the next generation can remind us of our collective responsibility to each other and to the world.

- **Fairness versus Rightness**

Another hallmark of the next generation is their emphasis on fairness over rightness. Teens and twentysomethings tend to determine rightness and wrongness of their choice by what seems fair, reasonable, and accessible.

Digital piracy isn't right, but music sharing seems fair. Many young people are redefining their ethical decisions by what seems fair rather than by an outside standard of right and wrong.

- **Participation versus Exclusion**

With all this emphasis on peer acceptance and agreement, it should come as no surprise that the majority of young people hate to be out of the loop. They dread being excluded. They want to participate. A core motivation for their participatory mindset is the fundamental belief that everyone has the right to belong. No one should be excluded for any reason.

In the church we tend to make belief a prerequisite to belonging—you're not "one of us" until you have signed off on our statement of faith.

Yet young people start with basic assumption that everyone belongs and they have a hard time understanding spiritual communities that feel like insider-only club.

Being excluded is tough to swallow for any generation, but it is especially tough for today's all-access, low-authority young people who would rather do just about anything than choose to end a relationship.

If we look at overall picture, eighteen to twenty-nine years old are more likely than the previous generation of Americans to believe in religious pluralism, which holds that there are many different paths to God. More specifically, they are likely to believe that most or all religions teach essentially the same spiritual truths.

-----Although there are limits to what this generation will accept and whom they will embrace, they have been shaped by a culture that esteems open-mindedness, tolerance, and acceptance. Thus Christianity's claims to exclusivity are a hard sell. They want to find areas of common ground, even if that means glossing over real differences.

How can the Christian community link the singular of Christ with the radical ways in which he pursued and included outsiders?

***Doubtless**

“Doubt is the ants in the pants of faith” said by Frederick Buechner. It may seem redundant to say that doubt causes people to struggle with faith, but it is important to remember that doubt is not always faith's opposite.

- Often doubt acts as a powerful motivator toward a more complete and genuine spiritual life, and we confirm that not everyone who doubts walks away from faith. Still, doubt is a significant reason young adult disengage from church.
Many Christians believe that people who experience doubts is a fear more nuanced and slippery experience that involves personality, lack of fulfillment, notions about certainty, relational alienation, and even mental health.
- Our research reveals that many young people feel the church is too small a container in which to carry their doubts.
As we noted earlier, communication, fueled by technology, is moving from passive to interactive. Yet the structure of young adult development in most churches and parishes is classroom-style instruction. It is passive, one-sided communication—or at least that's the perception most young people have of their religious education.

They find little appetite within their faith communities for dialogue and interaction.

There is an isolating element to unexpressed doubt as well. We believe that unexpressed doubt is one of the most powerful destroyer of faith.

- There are too many instances, however, when faith communities create a toxic environment where doubts are allowed to fester. Or they never create space for questions to be raised, where pressing life issues can be openly discussed.

In these places, young adults don't feel accepted, safe or secure. Perhaps their church does not invite transparency but is instead a place where the "expert" makes those who express doubt feel stupid or out of sync with true belief. Some perceive they will be judged for being honest, while others want to believe more deeply and articulating about feels traitorous.

- We cannot solve doubt like a puzzle but we can create communities that hold doubt and faith in proper balance. God is not afraid of human doubts (Doubting Thomas).
We need communities where it is safe for people to talk about their deepest, darkest concerns, where expressing uncertainty is not seen as abnormal or apostate.

Faith communities have not done a good job creating environments and experiences where students can process their doubts. Our posture toward students and young adults should be Socratic, more process-oriented, more willing to live with their questions and seek answer together. We need guides who know how to strike a better balance between talking and listening.

-----Young Christians (and former Christians too) say the church is not a place that allows them to express doubts. They do not feel safe admitting that faith doesn't always make sense. In addition, many feel that the church's response to doubt is trivial and fact focused, as if people can be talked out of doubting.

How can the Christian community help this generation face their doubts squarely and integrate their questions into a robust life of faith?