Generation to generation

The church's unique composition offers opportunities—if we want them

by Greg Davidson Laszakovits

"Why aren't the young people stepping up?"
"Why aren't the old people stepping down?"
"Those Boomers/Millennials/Gen Xers just don't get it!"

In the past two years of pastoring and consulting congregations I've heard these comments and many more like them. Not coincidentally, they are the very same comments I hear from nonprofits and businesses while consulting to create and manage healthy workplace cultures.

Much has been made in recent years about a new reality in the modern workplace: four generations working side by side. Thanks to advances in medicine and extended longevity, people are now able to work longer and stronger. Coupled with a steady demand for workers, it is not uncommon to see a 50-year gap between workplace colleagues, and the challenges that go along with that gap in age and perspective. When frustrated, each can view the other as entitled, lazy, power-hungry, and clueless.

Congregations are not immune to these same dynamics—perhaps to an even great extent due to at least one more generational cohort added on the younger and older ends! Yet despite the multi-generational challenges congregations face, one cannot help but wonder if the church has something to share with other organizations. After all, from its early origins Christianity was designed as a body that welcomed and cared for all, regardless of age or status.

First, a disclaimer about generational analysis: It is not intended to box in entire swaths of people as particular personality types based solely on their birth years. It is helpful to remind ourselves that this type of study is sociology, not psychology; we are looking at broad trends across tens of millions of people.

With that in mind, we can also note there are trends that apply to a high number of people in a specific generation [see sidebar]. This is attributed to their shared experiences, especially in formative childhood and young adult years. Wars, economics, (un)employment, and culture all play a part. For example, we know that a member of the Silent Generation who grew up listening to the radio, now in their 80s or 90s, understands and relates to entertainment differently than a person in Generation Z, who does not know a time before the internet and handheld devices existed.

What is "normal"?

It's no secret that generational cohorts often act as rivals with one another, even in the church. Sadly, these differences in perspective often go beyond rivalries to outright conflict. When we slow down and examine the radically different worlds in which each generation was raised, it is easy to understand why: People of different generations view the world in different ways. Our experiences shape how we understand the world and what we view as "normal."

For example, Generation Z (born 1997-2012) does not remember a time before hand-held devices, and business apps on those devices. They wonder why on earth an old fogey like me would ever physically walk into a bank when virtually all banking can now be done virtually. It is normal, comfortable, and convenient for them to do their banking from their device. On the other hand, I still remember the satisfaction and safety of seeing my deposit registered on a little piece of paper that I could tuck into my checkbook. That was normal for me. (Full disclosure: I think they're right, and I'm slowly making the change)

How we go about our personal banking is one thing. But what about when we need to make decisions together as the world changes around us? In our congregational communities, how do we come together about how to worship (is it okay for a "member" to participate solely online?), use the church building (can the day care use the sanctuary for an art class?), or organize ourselves (in person under a complex organizational structure using Robert's Rules of Order, or a Zoom gathering with minutes on Slack, the budget on a Google Sheet, side conversations happening via text, and simple decision-making?).

It's easy to see how intergenerational conflict might arise when questions like these come up. Each of these not-so-hypotheticals questions how we view the world, solve problems, and envision the future. What do we do when versions of "normal" include two, three, or even four different perspectives?

One congregation I worked with couldn't figure out why "no young people want to serve on the church leadership team." Some comments trended even more negatively as loyalty, commitment to service, and work ethic were scrutinized. Then we started examining what was "normal." For the Silent and Baby Boomer generations, church leadership positions were considered prestigious positions that served the church and had taught them valuable life and leadership skills in their young adult and middle years. That was their "normal." The younger generations felt their disapproval and felt guilty, angry, and some disillusionment with the congregation. So we got curious.

A basic study showed us that the number of vacant positions was numerically overwhelming for younger generational cohorts because the governance structure was built when the congregation was much larger. We also discovered that the calling process presumed people already knew the importance and value of serving the congregation but did not communicate that to potential leaders.

The last, and most important, information gathered was insight into the lives of several young families. In sum, rising college costs left many of the families with educational debt to the extent that two jobs were necessary to support their family and service their debt. This also meant that some of them would have to hire childcare to attend evening, in-person meetings. Not only would serving on these committees cost these families time away from their families—from whom they had already been away all day—but it would also cost them money. In sum, it was a very big ask.

As this information came forward, the entire conversation changed. Generations began to understand one another's "normal," as well as their hopes, dreams, and challenges. Finding solutions to these challenges was not easy, but we were able to find success through an improved calling process, greater flexibility in meeting, and improved focus (read: shorter) at meetings.

How did we create the environment where these problems could be solved? Here are three habits every organization can adopt to overcome generational differences and maximize each generation's strengths.

> " Generations began to understand one another's "normal," as well as their hopes, dreams, and challenges. "

#1. Get curious not furious.

I encourage every organization I work with to practice this habit early and often, especially when it comes to conflict and decision-making. Asking questions of curiosity, even if just internally, probes assumptions about what is "normal." Admittedly, this can be thornier when it comes to something as dear as congregational practices and traditions. Nevertheless, it is the embodiment of humility: "I may not have all of the answers." "The way we've been doing it may have been effective for decades, but is it now?"

Curiosity asks non-leading questions, seeks input, gathers information, and listens deeply. When we develop and practice this skill personally, it will rub off on others. We will begin to create the setting where others can climb out of their positional trenches and begin solving problems together.

In the example above, it was easy for each generation to feel justified in their anger and assumptions. It was not a matter of right or wrong; it was a gap in understanding solved through non-judgmental inquiry.

#2. Take the long view.

In Genesis–and much of the Hebrew Bible–there is a clear emphasis on the value of future generations. Time and again, the covenants and punishments alike between God and God's people are couched in terms that are strikingly forward-looking and framed in a generational context. To have peace and security (*shalom*) now is good. To experience shalom *for generations* is a tremendous blessing.

What would happen if we viewed church decisions, rivalries, and differences of preference from the generational long view, rather that the short view of what my generation prefers or feels comfortable with?

#3. Leverage the strengths of each generation.

It should go without saying, but no one generation is better

THE GENERATIONS

A brief look at today's most populous generations, and the events, technologies, and economic factors that shaped them:

Silent Generation

(Born 1928-1945. Current population 22 million, according to US Census data provided by Statista.com.) Shaped by the Great Depression and World War II, this generation is loyal to and gives a high level of trust and respect to institutions. They are willing to sacrifice for these institutions, including the church. They were grateful for employment and could often find a job for life. They grew up on radio and newspapers as their sources of entertainment and information. The car was cutting-edge technology for the masses. Through most of their lives the church was at the center of community, and family life and denominational affiliations were important and valued. Sixty-six percent belong to a church, according to Gallup studies.

Baby Boomers

(Born 1946-1964. Current population 71 million.) Boomers believed they could change the world. Then they did just that as the largest generation ever in US history. Highly motivated by work, upward mobility, and status, they enjoyed unprecedented economic growth. They saw the Civil Rights and Women's movements make great strides and remember the moon landing, the golden era of television, and the advent of rock and roll. Boomers are accustomed to holding power. To wit, a Boomer held the US presidency for nearly 30 years straight (Biden is an almost-Boomer, but very young Silent Generation). Boomers are the richest and most influential generation. Many church buildings today were literally built on the promise of this numerically huge generation, and they fulfilled that promise—though many peeled away as church attendance and denominational affiliation became less important. Fifty-eight percent belong to a church.

> "Communities of faith are among the few organizations that have practice existing as a multi-generational organism."

than another, even though each generation seems to think that generation above them has too much power and the one below them doesn't know how good they have it! ("Back in my day…") In fact, studies show time and again that no generation has a stronger work ethic than any other.

Multi-generational organizations are a gift for all. Yes, younger generations can help older generations with technology and finding modern solutions to problems, and older generations can pass their accrued wisdom on down. But I believe we can go at least one layer deeper if we understand one another's "normal." If we know Baby Boomers are motivated by work and Millennials by making a difference, how can we communicate our volunteer needs to speak to both? If the Silent Generation is loyal and understands the value of institution and also is wondering where they fit in now, and Generations X and Z tilt towards institutions cynically, how do we connect them in ways that will edify each?

In conclusion

Communities of faith are among the few organizations that have practice existing as a multi-generational organism. Where else does a body exalt a toddler's exuberance and a 100-year old's wisdom, along with every other gift in between? Our faith carries rituals that nurture the young, feed us in our middle years, and care for the needs of the aged.

In spite of our stumbles, the church universal—and congregations in particular—have gifts, rituals, and perspectives woven into our communities that prepare us to live into the challenges of multi-generational interaction. The church's unique composition offers opportunities. Do we want to take them?

Greg Davidson Laszakovits is a leadership coach and organizational development consultant, and sometime Church of the Brethren pastor. He lives in Elizabethtown, Pa., and can be reached at gdl@gdlinsight.com.

Generation X

(Born 1965-1980. Current population 65 million.) This age cohort lived through the proliferation of divorce culture and being latch-key kids, runaway inflation in the 70s, the end of the Cold War, and increasingly targeted marketing. Often branded as "slackers," they adopted a more laissez-faire attitude towards work, especially as employers became less devoted to employees. If the Boomers "live to work," Gen Xers "work to live" and sought greater life balance and flexibility, though they are currently in the prime of their careers. Gen X welcomed in the personal computer and World Wide Web, and it became a place to find the grunge rock and hip-hop they so adore. Fifty percent are church members, and the downward trend of loyalty to institutions, including church and denomination, continued.

Millennials

(Born 1981-1996. Current population 72 million.) Perhaps the most derided generation in recent years, Millennials are now the largest generation. Most of them remember 9/11 and the wars that followed, and they were students as school shootings became part of the norm in American life. Despite these horrors, it is an optimistic generation that was raised to think they could do anything, often by "helicopter" and "snowplow" parents. Career-wise, work is a transactional means to an end, often done as multiple "gigs," and student debt has altered many of their futures irrevocably—delaying marriage, family, home-buying, etc. At the same time, they want what they do to mean something. Thirty-six percent belong to a church.

Generation Z

(Born 1997-2012. Current population 67 million.) Still coming into their own, Gen Z appears to be on course to continue the trend of a more pessimistic generation following an optimistic one, as Gen X did after Baby Boomers. Who can blame them: They've not known a time when terrorism was not a threat, they grew up on live-shooter drills at school, saw *two* economic downturns, and have now endured COVID-19. They are trending towards a generation that will prize safety and predictability. It is still too early to measure church membership numbers, but estimates show numbers close to the rates of Millennials.