

Generation X: Ministry Lessons from the Television Kids

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Generation X is now parenting the kids in your church. If you've noticed changes in the loyalty of parents to your program in the past ten years, that's because Gen X has arrived and they'll only be loyal if you prove that you've earned their loyalty. Their memory spans from Nixon to the collapse of financial systems in 2008 along with all the governmental and corporate corruption that has been exposed in between, not to mention disastrous church scandals from the Evangelical and Pentecostal branches to the Catholic sex abuse crisis. Institutions are not to be trusted and anything bigger than a family fits the institutional bill. John Mabry said it best in his book, *Faithful Generations*, "Because of their early betrayals, Xers have a nearly universal allergy towards idealism, and a finely tuned cynicism toward stated agendas (there's always a hidden one). Generation X was born with a built-in Bullshit Detector, and it is turned up to eleven." This may be their most defining characteristic.

Characteristics of Generation X

- Born between 1965 and 1977 (Some sociologists place them between 1962 and 1980)
- As young as 34 and as old as 52 (have kids ranging from newborn to young adult)
- From families with two working parents or divorced parents leading them to accomplish much on their own (developed a strong entrepreneurial spirit)
- Tend to be helicopter parents perhaps correcting the absence of their own parents
- Very tolerant and open to diversity
- Very tech savvy (also contributes to their ability to stay in touch with their children)
- Prefer creative and diverse information delivery systems over the lecture method of previous generations
- Prefer family time to meeting time
- Expect to have to fight to be heard, having grown up in the shadow of the Boomers and nurtured by distant parents
- First generation to benefit from relatively easy world travel and a truly global perspective
- More educated than any generation before them
- Thrive on regular feedback
- Love to take down "sacred cows"

Generational characteristics are reflected in and reinforced by popular culture. Television programming is a helpful way to put your finger on the pulse of any particular generation. What did they watch in their formative years and how did the themes of their television shows differ from the themes of shows that were popular for other generations? Answering that question will provide a window into what makes any generation tick since the dawn of television.

Three television shows about high school that emerged both in the Boomer and X years provide insight into some key transitions into the culture of Generation X:

- Room 222 (1969-1974)
- Welcome Back, Kotter (1975-1979)
- Saved by the Bell (1989-1993)

Tolerance for Diversity

Racial, cultural and sexual integration are present in all three shows, but it feels new, clumsy and a little forced in *Room 222*. A key purpose of the show was to help America move forward with cultural diversity, and Xers were being born into this context. By the time *Saved by the Bell* hit the little screen, diversity awareness was a cultural given. The tolerance for differences that is a defining mark of Generation X was a growing mainstay of television shows that developed from the 1960s forward.

Ministry Implications of Tolerance

Generation X has not been as supportive of churches as previous generations. The dogmatic tendencies of religion are distasteful to Xers. They prefer an open disposition to diverse groups of people and schools of thought. While older generations valued loyalty to the group, Xers believe there is nothing wrong with identifying with a number of apparently opposed groups. In fact, they think it is a virtue to cross lines that were formally impenetrable walls. Interracial, intercultural and interreligious friendships and marriages exploded with this generation.

Effective ministry with Generation X will bear a softer doctrinal tone. Definitions of sin that are illustrated by a list of behaviors are not helpful. Sin in the mind of Xers is epitomized by barriers to relationships. Whereas parents from previous generations would willingly disown a child who violated a sacred law for the sake of strong identity, Generation X parents will stand by their children who stray from long-held sacred traditions and point to the laws of love, mercy and inclusion as the supreme guides. Generation X expects institutions to bend to human realities.

Rules that define who is “in” and who is “out” need to be reconsidered. Behavior is not considered a reason for rejection in a Christian community according to Generation X. If someone wants to be a member, the institution has an obligation to find a way to accept that someone. Institutions should change for the sake of people, not the other way around. Generation X is interested in learning what is in the person’s heart beneath the person’s behavior. Doing ministry with attention to intention is a key way to reach out to Generation X. Enforcing membership rules is a sure way to push them out.

Suspicion of Authority

Authority figures and institutions still had a chance for redemption as the early Xers were being born. *Room 222* is sympathetic with a wise teacher, Mr. Dixon, who is the clear star of the show and the character who is in control of what happens not only in his classroom but also perhaps in the entire school, not to mention the personal lives of his students. Even the principal, Mr. Kaufman, is respected even if a bit detached in terms of his influence on the outcome of events in the school.

When *Welcome Back, Kotter* debuts, things have changed. The principal is clearly the enemy, and the institution offers almost nothing positive for the students. The teacher, Gabe Kotter, is accepted and esteemed by the students he panders to because he is, in fact, one of them. He was a founding member of the Sweathogs, the group of under-performing students who are in a remedial class until they inevitably drop out of school altogether, at least according to the school's administration. Kotter comes back to his alma mater and brings hope to these failing students in defiance of, not in cooperation with, the school administration in contrast to what we saw in *Room 222*.

Exactly ten years after *Kotter* went off the air, *Saved by the Bell* began its four-year run to the delight of tweener Xers. This show transformed Saturday morning programming from cartoons to live-actor sitcoms. In *Saved by the Bell*, student, Zack Morris – a charming schemer – clearly runs the school with the support of a diverse group of friends. Mr. Belding, the school principal, is incompetent at worst and gullible at best. You get the feeling at times that he believes Zack knows more about life than he does. But, to be true to Xer principals, appreciation for diversity and for the intentions of the heart, Zack and Mr. Belding develop a mutual respect for each other as the show progresses, something not seen between Kotter's Sweathogs and their school administrators.

Ministry Implications when the Audience is Suspicious

Building trust is a key to success with Generation X. They will not be loyal to you because of the office you hold. You will have to earn their trust and respect. Healthy doses of organizational transparency and interpersonal honesty will take you far in the Gen X world. Your level of ministry competence is also very important. Gen X will not initially trust that you know what you are doing, but when you display your competence regularly, you will gain their respect.

Church ministers need to be both smart and compassionate... as sly as a fox and gentle as a dove, as long as your fox-like characteristics are full of integrity. Studies of Generation X parents reveal that they really want leaders in their communities to know what they are talking about. They want physicians who can give clear and proven advice on how to keep their kids physically healthy. They want teachers who use proven methods in the classroom and who are willing to open the classroom door to parent participation, which Xers know is a key to educational success. They want their church staffs to be able to give sound advice on how to nurture their children into a healthy and helpful relationship with God.

The Absence of Parents

Television before the birth of Generation X featured many shows about families, families in which there were two wise and loving parents. *Father Knows Best* and *Leave it to Beaver* are classic examples. As television developed in the 60's, 70's and 80's, parenting roles changed and in many shows parents became almost non-existent, reflecting the real-life experiences of many Xers. Generation X grew up in households where both parents worked long hours, if there were two parents in the house at all.

Parents are practically invisible in *Room 222*, *Welcome Back*, *Kotter* and *Saved by the Bell*. As the shows progress, the advice of peers replace the advice of parents. Father no longer knows best; my friend does. Kids raising kids was the lot of Generation X.

The real-life end result seems to be a near obsession with parenting. Xers are doting parents. Their children experience no lack of parental contact. Time diary studies of all kinds of parents today (married, single, divorced, etc.) reveal that parents today spend far more time with their children than parents of the 1960's and it's quality time!

Generation X felt the painful results of absent parent oversight. In many ways, Generation X raised itself and stumbled along the way. Easy access to risky behaviors increased their use of drugs, alcohol, their involvement in crime and early sexual experimentation. Lack of parental involvement also affected school performance. Crimes against children also increased as parent oversight decreased. While I am not aware of a study that proves the correlation, it is notable that crimes against children plateaued and then decreased as Generation X became parents.

The absence of parents left a bad taste in the mouths of Xers, and they don't mind striking back at the generations that abandoned them. They'll happily explode the myths that older generations hold dear. When Baby Boomers in the church extol the virtues of unconditional love, Xers point to the divorce rate and ask, "How's that unconditional love thing working out for you?" Xers embrace realism with a bite.

The absence of parents for Xers wasn't all bad. They learned how to survive. They developed a self-starter work ethic. They honed strong domestic skills and became very entrepreneurial.

Ministry Implications for Helicopter Parents

Whereas previous generations were impressed when kids "did it by themselves," Xer parents want to show their kids how to navigate the world. They'll have meaningful conversations with their kids. They'll devote huge amounts of time to the organizations that work with their kids. They'll read to their kids. This high level of involvement can be a great blessing to a church. Finding parents who will volunteer for your programs with children is easier today than it was thirty years ago.

Church ministers who want to be successful with Generations X parents will loudly and regularly proclaim that the ministry door is always open to parents. Keep parents informed about the progress of their children and teens in your programs. Tell them when the kids succeed and when they struggle. Give them tips about how they can reinforce at home what you are doing at church. Never leave them out of the loop or guessing about what is happening in your programs.

Develop a variety of intergenerational and family programs. Don't limit your programs to faith formation. Create family service experiences. Family prayer and discussion groups are a great way to build family faith. Keep families together when they are offering ministry hours at the church. As much as possible, don't make family members come to the church for programming at different times. Family togetherness is a strong and positive value of this generations that feels they were unjustly starved of it when they were children.

Involvement, diversity, acceptance, suspicion, technology, independence, integrity and authenticity have all been used to capture the spirit of Generation X. They challenge our institutional approaches like no generation before them. Our success with them will be dependent upon our adaptability, our integrity and our competence. If they successfully push the church to grow in these three areas, they will have done all of us a great service.

Sources and Resources

Wikipedia entries about the television shows discussed in this essay:

- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Welcome_Back,_Kotter
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saved_by_the_Bell
- http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Room_222

This essay focuses on work characteristics of Generation X:

<http://legalcareers.about.com/od/practicetips/a/GenerationX.htm>

This essay offers a concise summary of several generations:

<http://www.brucemayhewconsulting.com/index.cfm?PAGEPATH=&ID=20209>

This report is based upon the *American Religious Identification Survey in 2008*:

Kosmin, Barry A. & Juhem Navarro-Rivera, "The Transformation of Generation X: Shifts in Religious and Political Self-Identification, 1990-2008" Trinity College, Hartford, CT.