

GENERATIONAL SOCIO-CULTURAL SHIFTS IN THE POST-MODERN AGE: FROM BOOMERS TO GEN X AND BEYOND

Fran Blomberg, Geoff Hart, Tae Kyoon Kim, George G. Robinson IV

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Generation X

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Web Sites for millennials and postmodern missions: www.postmission.com

Introduction

“Among democratic nations each generation is a new people.” ---Alexis de Tocqueville

If Alexis de Tocqueville was right then the trends toward globalization and democratization have tremendous implications. In the West democracy has yielded many distinct cultures to which we have affixed labels such as “Builder”, “Boomer”, “Buster”, “Gen X” and now “Millennials”. However, in the Post-WWII era democracy has spread to varying degrees to the ends of the earth. So for the first time, many societies in the Far East are seeing monumental shifts in cultural characteristics.

Globalization fueled by the “Information Age” has created the first culture that is sharply based upon peer influence over ethnicity. And with this seismic generational shift comes tremendous implications for the way Christian ministry will be done in the coming years.

This paper is the joint effort of four students enrolling in the Doctor of Missiology program at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon.

This paper is organized in the manner described below:

There are four distinct parts covering the characteristics and implications of the cultural shift taking place between the older and younger generations.

The paper begins with an “emic” study (from an insider’s perspective) of the generational shift by a member of Generation X who has served as both a missionary and pastor.

This is followed by a case study written by a local church pastor who is from the “Boomer” generation. The case study addresses the struggles and outlook in dealing with transitioning leadership to Gen Xers.

Following that is a section written by a seminary missions professor on the distinct characteristics of the rising Millennial generation.

The paper concludes with a comparative study of youngster from several East Asian cultures and how the generational shift is playing out there.

At the end of the paper you will find an extensive bibliography and resource list that will prove helpful for further study.

Definition of Terms:

Although every source will provide different dates, a synthesis tells us the following:

Builders: The generation born in the 20th-century before WWII

Boomer: The generation born between WWII and the early 60s.

Gen X: The generation born between the mid-60s and the early 80s.

Millennial: The generation born between the mid 80s and the turn of the millennium.

Paradox Found – An Emic Perspective of Generation X with Implications for Ministry Leadership Transition



George G. Robinson, IV

Director of International Equipping for Global Partners Ministries, Atlanta, GA, USA

A. Shaping Forces : The River of Time

Have you ever heard of an oxbow lake? An oxbow is a body of water that has been formed by the shaping forces of nature. If you have ever flown over a river it is easy to see from above how the flow of the water has shaped the land that contains it. There is no such thing as a straight river. As the water flows it slowly erodes the bank which shifts the current and before long the current is taking on a zig zag pattern cutting into the landscape. Over the course of time the curves become so pronounced that the force of the river actually cuts off a curve in an attempt to flow straight again. But the cycle begins all over again further down stream. The result is that what was once a curve in the river is now cut off and left behind in the form of a small lake. The river keeps flowing by but the lake becomes stagnant.

Time, like a river is constantly moving in a linear fashion. It has its origins in the Well-Spring of Life, our Creator, and like a river, time has a destination. Time is a shaping force over human culture because no living human can escape it. At times it seems to flow more slowly and peacefully and at other times it feels like we are moving through the rapids. Human culture is like the banks of a river in that it is ever in a state of flux. Those who shape the culture – family, peers, media, leaders etc. – collectively cut away at us in some places and deposit into us at others. All the while the river changes as each generation passes through this world, each leaving their indelible mark on this world. To be sure, there are other forces at play as well for God Himself is a cultural architect, patiently and meticulously shaping a masterpiece.

The point of this whole metaphor is that each generation leaves its imprint on the world and on those who come after them. Like a river, cultural change is cyclical in nature and yet linear and purposeful. There are generational transitions that take place but they cannot be clearly defined. The flow of human culture shifts and sometimes the forces are under the surface and unseen. And unfortunately, like an oxbow lake that is cut off from the flow, generations become stagnant and lose both their shaping influence as well as their direction. And the river cuts them off and leaves them behind.

So what have been the shaping forces for the post moderns of generation X and how can the Church make sure they are not left behind like an oxbow lake? That will be the focus of the next few sections of this paper.

B. Currents that Shaped Gen X

As an X'er poster child, I know full well the forces that shaped my life. When I was growing up in the 1970's my parents divorced, as did 40% of all Boomer parents, compared to only 4% of the Builders who preceded them. I cannot recall a single memory that I shared with both of my parents. I had two homes – one with mom on the weekdays and another with dad on the weekends. My life became a dichotomy that I was forced to deal with at the ripe age of seven! The dissolution of the nuclear family in the US cannot be underestimated in its shaping force of today's post moderns. God designed and ordained the family in Genesis 2 for *both*

relational and functional reasons. The stable covenant relationship of a father and mother provides the optimum environment in which to nurture a child. When conflict enters and that relationship is dissolved, there is always fallout. For GenXers, this force more than any other, has impacted our outlook on life.

Along with divorce, the fact that our parents dedicated their lives to a job becoming workaholics also shaped us. (Dunn, 1998) We lost our parents at an early age as they poured their lives into their careers. The result is that many of us got ourselves ready for our over-crowded schools in the morning and spent the afternoons getting into all sorts of mischief with our peers in the afternoons. We were latchkey kids that learned to be independent and self-sufficient early on. They were overworked and tired when they came home and had little to give to us kids. Feeling the occasional guilt trip that we gave them, our parents tried to compensate by buying us anything we wanted contributing to their debt and our materialism.

As we grew up we learned quickly however that our parent's employers did not return the favor of loyalty as the recession hit and companies down-sized. We had felt betrayed because our parents gave their all to their jobs. Our parents felt betrayed because their employers gave them the boot. We quietly observed their frustration and we learned not to trust.

Many of our parents had habits that failed to provide a positive example. Theirs is the generation that everyone smoked and drank. Theirs is the generation that gave us Playboy. And when we wanted to try those vices we were told to "do as we say, not as we do." That hypocrisy left us brazen and jaded toward the modern style leadership in which we were told to do things or not to do them "because I said so."

We were shaped by other forces besides our parents. From Nixon to Clinton to Baker and Swaggart, we watched our heroes fall one by one leaving the debris of our confidence in their wake. And the media tapped in on this black hole of leadership by giving us our peers through Hollywood and MTV. With little supervision we came to depend upon one another instead of adults. GenX became a peer-driven culture as the understanding gap increased with the moderns before us. And today those same moderns do not understand why we have problems relating to them. For twenty years or more we have gotten by without much interaction. We did not spend time with Boomers at home in our families, and now we have a hard time relating to them in the workplace and in church. The river has carved its course and many have been left behind.

C. Thought Patterns: A Culture of Paradoxes

There are many places along rivers where the water seems to be flowing in a circular pattern. These spots that are found among the rapids are caused by some object being just under the surface. The pressure of the river flowing against that object momentarily sends the water into a spin causing what is known as a "swirling eddie." If you look at this phenomenon, it seems as if the same water is cycling round and round, but that is not the case. Some wise sage said, "You never stand in the same river twice." The water is always flowing whether it appears to be doing so or not. The water in a river does not stand still. These "swirling eddies" create little visual paradoxes that disorient the untrained eye.

A paradox is a seemingly contradictory statement. Postmodern thinking GenXers are a living paradox – we are the "swirling eddies" of our time. We do not have a problem balancing seemingly contradictory characteristics. It may appear that our logic and reasoning capacity are on hold, but underneath the surface you will find a reason for our thought patterns. Our lives are defined by the paradoxes that we have become comfortable with. These same paradoxes make most Moderns shake their heads in disbelief.

Following are some of the reasons I call Gen X "a culture of paradoxes."

1. *We are cynical and non-committal yet optimistic and dedicated when we believe in*

something.

Explanation: Many Moderns think that GenXers are unable to commit to anything. We saw our parents commit to one another and then divorce. We saw our parents commit to their careers and then get laid off. We inherited their cynicism and hold back on committing until we can trust that we will not be betrayed. If you are having trouble getting a GenXer to commit to something it is likely that he has a trust issue with you or that he feels he has nothing at stake in the project. Once you establish trust with us however, we are dedicated and will do our best to see it through.

2. Truth is relative yet we are willing to die for what we believe in.

Explanation: Epistemologically speaking, most Postmoderns are not comfortable with the concept of “objective reality”. (Ford, 1995) This, however does not mean that we do not believe in absolute truth. It means that we bear out truth through our experiences and in the context of community. Moderns emphasized propositional truths. Postmoderns emphasize asking the right questions and dialogue. When we come to the conclusion that something is true, we will fight to the death for it.

3. Tolerance is the highest virtue yet we are dogmatic about our beliefs.

Explanation: If a Post-modern were to choose a favorite Bible verse it would likely be “Judge not, lest you be judged.” We cringe at the thought of someone passing judgment on us and so we are quick to defend others whose ways of life and thinking might be under attack. The result is that we have become tolerant, sometimes to a fault. However, if you engage a GenXer on a subject that they are passionate about, we will argue dogmatically as if our opinion is gospel.

4. We are self-reliant yet relationship and community oriented. (Ford, 1995)

Explanation: Having grown up as latch-key kids we had to learn how to take care of ourselves in many ways. I was cooking and cleaning early in life and rode my bicycle across town for my first job at the age of 13. I had to be self-reliant. Growing up like that however left me knowing my weaknesses and craving relationships. Because I did not have community at home, I found it outside through my peer-group. Relationships have become crucial to us because ours were so shallow in our homes growing up.

5. We are pragmatic yet educated, valuing both formal and informal continuing education.

Explanation: Education for Moderns involved rote learning of things that may or may not have mattered to them. Postmoderns want to know why they should study something and how it is going to benefit them in their life experiences. They value formal and informal education just as much as Moderns, however their learning styles have changed. Seminary enrollment has risen 3% annually between 2000 and 2005, which reflects the Christian GenXers desire for education. As this influx of GenX students enter seminaries across our nation, professors are beginning to offer more pragmatic courses that will appeal to the students. See www.westernseminary.edu for examples of these more pragmatic course offerings which include themes such as: “Learning to Love God and Others”, “Practicing Prayer and Other Key Spiritual Disciplines”, and “Equipping Women to Identify and Embrace their Call”.

6. We are non-materialistic yet consumerist.

Explanation: According to Futurist Len Sweet, “Post-moderns recycle more than ever and they consume and throw away more than ever.” We buy clothes at the Salvation Army and the Gap. This generation tried to

get it all as quickly as possible – big house, nice car, etc. – and is now in serious consumer debt. Gen X is reported to spend \$125 billion annually on consumer goods. (OnPoint, n.d.)

7. We are anti-establishment and anti-institution and yet purpose-driven. (Dylhoff, 2003)

Explanation: This means that denominationalism is on the decline among GenXers because we distrust any institution which we have no influence over. The majority of church plants springing up across America today are being started by GenXers who have an ideal church in mind and are willing to work to build it. We are purposeful and hard-working for that which we have influence over.

8. We are attracted to what is bigger yet we want what is smaller.

Explanation: I am a member of a mega-church, but I value the intimacy of my small group. Across the nation these cell-based mega-churches are popping up and are being filled with Gen Xers. We love the excitement and the quality that a big worship service provides. However, our craving for relationships will not allow us to be satisfied there. We desire intimate relationships that can only be established in a small group setting.

9. We are technology-driven yet we desire simplicity (OnPoint, n.d.)

Explanation: The first time I ever used e-mail was in college back in the early 90's. I thought it was ridiculous that my political science professor wanted us to communicate with him from a computer lab on campus. Today my laptop and cell phone go with me just about everywhere and I am always looking for the latest upgrades. These technological breakthroughs were supposed to make our lives simpler, and yet the opposite effect has occurred. (Codrington, 1999) What drives us has put what we desire beyond our grasp.

10. We are experience-driven yet inexperienced.

Explanation: We watched our parents flounder about struggling to live out the truths that they claimed to hold. Cultural Christianity resulted in the “Sunday Christian” whose experiences did not always confirm their confession. For this reason, many GenXers left the faith of their fathers but are rediscovering biblical faith that is not only worth talking about, but worth living out. We often overestimate our abilities though. We have accomplished so much early on in life that we sometimes fail to honor the experience that our modern forebears hold. In comparison with them, we are inexperienced. As much as we may hate it, we need the experience-based wisdom of our predecessors.

11. We are participatory yet voyeuristic.

Explanation: The rise of everything from Reality television to extreme sports illustrates the fact that we are a generation that is not content with sitting and watching – we want to participate in the action. Some may argue that reality television proves the opposite, but ask a Gen Xer if he has applied for one of those shows and you will be surprised that it is the potential that keeps them plugged in. We love to watch because we dream about what it would be like if we were involved.

D. Ministry Implications: The River is Changing

There has been no shortage of writing on the subjects of Post-modern thinking and Generation X over the last decade. There are books written by Moderns complaining about what they have perceived as an ungrateful and undependable progeny. There are countless blogs and webzines out there written by Xers complaining

about how Boomers do not understand the changing times and how they should quietly fade away. Like it or not, both generations were placed on this planet at this time by our Beneficent Creator to have a relationship with Him and with one another. And like it or not, the river is changing and both generations are going to be affected.

As churches and missions agencies throughout the world attempt to chart a strategic course down this river, they need to be preparing for the inevitable transition of leadership from one generation to the next. The best way to do that is to take a realistic look at some of the challenges and opportunities that lay just down stream.

Challenges with the Coming Gen X Leaders: Troubled Waters?

1. *We are individuals.*

Implications: As has already been mentioned, we Gen Xers have been taking care of ourselves since we were children. If we seem stand-offish to the Boomers it is likely because we have never had much interaction with them. As we were developing we had too much freedom and not enough input from our parents. So now that we are beginning to share leadership responsibilities with Moderns, we just do not know how to relate. We never had to in the past. If we are to navigate these troubled waters successfully, both generations are going to have to give.

We Gen Xers are going to have to learn how to subject our own individual aspirations for the good of the whole Kingdom. This is what Jesus taught when He said, “Take up your cross.”

Boomers are going to have to give us some room and realize that to micro-manage us is to stifle our creativity and will eventually crush our spirits. Jesus demonstrated this kind of trust with His disciples as He prepared for the most crucial leadership transition in history. He lived out what He wanted the disciples to be and then He patiently guided them through both successes and failures without making them clones. Each of the disciples retained his individuality, which they learned to express in a way that benefited the collective.

2. *We are slow to commit.*

Implications: I will never forget the overwhelming feeling from my childhood of being released by my mother into the cereal aisle at the grocery store. My mom would finish all of her shopping for the week in the time it took me to choose one box of cereal! The problem was that I had what seemed like at least a thousand different types of cereal to choose from. And there were countless variables that had to be considered in making such a crucial choice that I would have to live with – and eat – for the next week. Not only was their different ingredients and tastes, but the manufacturers battled for my attention with the cartoon characters on their boxes and the “prizes” that they promised if I only chose their product. I would change my mind at least a half-dozen times before actually putting a box in the cart. And even after choosing, I often felt buyers remorse, wondering if I had made the right choice.

Is there any wonder with the sheer magnitude of options on everything from cereal to music styles that I have a difficult time committing to a single choice? Like all Gen Xers, I like to keep my options open because I am always looking for a better option. This challenge has followed us right into our careers and ministries. Most mega-churches are filled with Gen Xers that drained from other smaller churches that did not have as many options to offer. I am in my mid-30's and I have changed careers three times since college: high school teacher, pastor, missionary. But I realize that there are some things worth committing to. Boomers are the

ones who gave us all these choices – and we thank you by the way. But we Gen Xers must identify those things which really matter – like our marriages and children, our covenant relationship with God and His Church, and the global plan of redemption. These are things that we must commit our lives to without reserve. And Boomers, we need your help.

3. *We question authority.*

Implications: We are tired of seeing authority figures saying one thing and doing another. We will listen to authority figures until we suspect abuse or dominance, at which point we have a tendency to rebel and stop listening altogether. Boomers need to realize that our distrust of authority figures has some degree of legitimacy as most of us watched our fathers walk out, our political figures sell out, and our religious leaders drop out. Trust is a two-way street upon which the two generations need to arrange a serious meeting.

I have seen countless young Gen X leaders take ministry positions and then for one reason or another, they stopped trusting their pastor or leader. In most cases it was a combination of domineering authority by the Boomer and disrespect by the Xer. Too many young potential leaders are leaving in frustration because of these misunderstandings. Respect must be earned on both sides of the generational line.

4. *We are impatient.*

Implications: Gen Xers come from a microwave, drive-thru, and fast access internet culture. We have cell phones and think we can accomplish more in less time than our predecessors. We look for immediate results and become frustrated when we do not see them. Gen Xers could learn a great deal from the Boomers before us about perseverance in and longevity of ministry. We will have to learn what it means to “be still and know that He is God” and stop trying to force the hand of the Boomers in leadership over us. Rather than bailing on commitments at the first sign of trouble, we must be patient and persevere trusting that Almighty God will guide us with His sovereign hand.

5. *We are cynical.*

Implications: Gen Xers have seen a lot of failure, unreliability and brokenness so we reserve our trust until it is earned through relationships. Boomers need to take the time to establish meaningful relationships with us and our cynicism will likely melt away. Most of the Gen X ministry leaders that I know simply desire someone more experienced to invest in their lives. We do not want someone to tell us what to do. We want someone to walk with us and do ministry together.

6. *We are hedonistic.*

Implications: Many Gen Xers believe that life is all about personal pleasure. We were given everything on demand by our workaholic parents who attempted to buy our love. We need to learn that life is not all about us. Gen Xers need a Christo-centric worldview and a lesson in putting others before ourselves. We would do well to embrace what Pastor John Piper of Desiring God Ministries refers to as “Christian Hedonism” – “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.”(Piper, 2006) It is that type of biblical hedonism that will allow Gen Xers to joyfully give up everything for the sake of the gospel.

Opportunities with the Coming Gen X Leaders: Rapids Can Be Fun!

1. *We are creative problem solvers.*

Due to the fact that Gen Xers have been independent from an early age, we know how to fend for ourselves and how to overcome many of life's challenges. With a global AIDS pandemic, genocide, the war on terror, and thousands of "unreached peoples" with little or no access to the Gospel, churches and missions agencies need the creativity that we bring to the table to help solve the world's problems. God is our "Creator." Our creativity is part of His indelible imprint upon us to make a difference in this world.

2. *We are go-getters.*

Gen Xers want our work and contributions to be judged based upon the outcome, not the process. We do not want to keep hours or to do things the way they have always been done. We want the opportunity to accomplish tasks in new and more efficient ways.

3. *We are resourceful.*

Gen Xers will most often find ways to make things better but will go outside the lines to get that done. The micro-management leadership styles of the Boomer generation will squelch this resourcefulness. Leadership styles need to be adjusted to be based upon trusting relationships which empower us to get the job done.

4. *We are global.*

Gen Xers are more cross-culturally literate than previous generations because we have experienced a peer influx of diversity. Many have a multi-cultural social network. Gen Xers around the world share elements of a common culture (globalization) through clothing, music, movies etc. Because we have been exposed to diversity, we are more willing to integrate it into everyday life. This has far-reaching implications in the field of missions. There will always be cross-cultural communication issues, but they are being minimized by the growing trend toward globalization.

5. *We are flexible.*

One of the weaknesses of the Boomers is their reticence to change leaving many churches and organizations stagnant and declining. Gen Xers respond well to change as long as it is forward progress. We are used to trends and thus are less sentimental and nostalgic than our ancestors. This means change can be managed at a faster rate.

6. *We are community-oriented.*

Gen Xers have been without close-knit family for too long so we are looking for it wherever we can find it. Often we find community in peer groups which become surrogate families. We do not like to be lonely. We want to share experiences with others. This bodes well for the future of the church. Churches will become more relational and less program-driven in the coming years as Gen Xers transition into leadership.

7. *We are passionate.*

Every time I am around young people I always ask them what they are passionate about. Try it and you will see their eyes light up as they dream. Those young people want to live their dreams with passion. Gen Xers have seen our parents operate out of a sense of duty and we are disillusioned by that impersonal external force. We want to live out of passion and when we find something worth our energy we will go headlong into it.

E. A Summary of the Implications of the Current Generational Leadership Shift from an Emic Perspective

As Gen Xers transition into ministry leadership in the coming days there are several notable trends to help Boomers prepare.

Gen Xers will always strive for balance between our professional and personal life. Please understand that we are not functionalists. We are relational. We have a different work ethic from Boomers in that we see work as a means to an end. The end we have in mind is authentic relationships in our families and communities.

We thrive on change, which could mean multiple careers and moves in a lifetime. As long as Xers see that the ministry they are in is willing to change with the times, they will feel less compelled to “escape” to something else.

We need to be heard and included in decision-making. Authoritarian leadership styles will only suffocate Gen Xers. As Boomers include us in shaping our common ministries, we will feel valued and remain committed. We do better with a non-hierarchical approach to responsibilities. We are hesitant to respect positions, but we do people when we have a relationship with them.

I truly hope that these insights will provide readers with a source of understanding the Gen X mindset and possible future opportunities for dialogue. May we be as one just as Christ and the Father are One – that the world might know the truth of the gospel that we share.



The Boomer-Gen X Leadership Transition

Geoff Hartt

Missions Pastor, The Table: A Christian Community, Portland, OR, USA

One of the greatest challenges facing the church in the next decade will be the transition of leadership from the Boomer generation to the Gen Xers. I write this as a pastor from the Boomer generation who is involved with young church made up of Gen Xers. This challenge will put our values to the test, reveal our priorities and stretch our faith in the sovereignty of God. And this is not a phenomenon that is yet to come; it has arrived and is happening in our churches right now.

A clear source of tension between the two generations is the difference in values. Often this difference is measured not just in degrees but in completely opposite values. Many of the characteristics of Gen X identified earlier in this paper, when applied to leadership will test the values that have guided us for years, sometimes decades. For example, consider the use of technology. Boomer leadership for the most part was content to communicate with a telephone call, face to face in a regularly scheduled meeting, or by leaving a written message in a mailbox in the church office.

These forms of communication were more personal and took longer. Gen X leaders on the other hand see e-mail, voice mail and text messaging as the standard. These forms of communication are quicker, and allow them to multi-task and create an ongoing flow of communications. The Gen X leaders value technology and are comfortable with technology whereas the boomers are often threatened by new technology and prefer a slower, more personal pace of interaction.

I have observed this tension in communications between Boomers and Gen Xers in leadership. For example, a substantial amount of communication can take place between a few leaders using technology, such as e-mail. Another leader, outside the e-mail circuit (a Boomer resisting technology) might feel as if they have been intentionally excluded from the conversation, creating tension in the relationship. The Gen Xers value the rapid sharing of information, the Boomers value moving slower and using the traditional channels of communication, such as a meeting with everyone present. The different values regarding communication methods can lead to a breakdown in trust and relationship between the two generations.

When existing boomer leadership is threatened by the appearance of a new generation of leaders, ready and willing to step into their own season of leadership, our true priorities will be also be revealed.

One example of this is in the boomer generation focusing their efforts on maintaining the facilities they have built over the years. Money was raised, sweat was poured and many beautiful churches have been built, not just in the last few decades but in the last fifty years. To them the church was often defined by a building. But, Gen X leaders did not build the building. They did not sacrifice to provide the money to build the building. Actually, they would rather experience *being* church more than *going* to church. The building is not a priority, and they can not be expected to make great sacrifices to preserve it.

I have observed this in the Gen Xers general lack of concern to be involved in the maintaining of a building, and even talking comfortably about selling buildings and putting the money to use for ministry. Even to engage in a serious discussion about building issues is difficult.

On the other hand, to engage Gen X leaders in a discussion about how to express more creativity in a worship service, or what does it mean to be “missional” in their context, might lead to a lengthy conversation. The two generations clearly have differing priorities concerning the focus of their efforts and the challenge for both groups is to compare their own priorities against God’s priorities. The next generation might actually be more

scriptural in investing in ministry rather than buildings.

Transitioning leadership to the next generation will not only test our values and reveal our priorities, but it will also stretch our faith in God. We will be challenged to turn over our churches to a generation of leaders who are very different than us. They will do things very differently than we did. They will interpret the world around them in a different way than us. The reflex might be to hold on and to protect what has been built up over the last 50 years but we will not be able to hold on indefinitely. Leadership will change hands. Then, Boomer leadership will be forced to recognize something that has always been true – the church belongs to God, not us.

As often as I struggle with differing values and priorities I have to remind myself these Gen X leaders are just as Spirit filled as I am, and consequently they will be guided into their season of leadership by the Holy Spirit just as we were, and every generation before us was. This transition in leadership coming over the next few decades will be a wonderful opportunity for Boomers to stretch their faith in God and grow closer to him as they release the church into the hands of Gen Xer leaders.



The Millennial Generation: Paradox Reformed?

Fran Blomberg

Adjunct Professor of Intercultural Ministries, Denver Seminary, Littleton, CO, USA

A. Introducing the Millennial Generation

If “Paradox Found” characterizes Gen X, “Paradox Reformed” may prove the shibboleth for Millennials. The Millennial generation, born in the 1980s and 1990s, are so called because they are the first generation to come of age and enter college in the new millennium. With approximately 38 million between the ages of 16 and 26 in 2006, or 28% of the US population, their sheer numbers will surpass Gen X. Since preschool, they have been raised and educated with the advantage of Internet technology. Likewise, they represent the first generation taught by primarily postmodern educators from kindergarten through high school. In that, they truly represent the first American generation to move postmodernism from theoretical constructs to everyday life. As Gen X moves into their 40s and assumes greater leadership responsibilities in business, education and the church, we must ask if they themselves are prepared to serve and equip the Millennial generation emerging behind them. (Wood, 2001)

Building off Neil Howe and William Strauss’s generational theory, we may predict that Millennials will differentiate themselves from the previous youth generation, Gen X, by reversing abuses of unmitigated freedom and personal rights, and building the types of community and support systems for which Gen X themselves long. As have most other generations of Americans, they will likely show some form of “rebellion” against those who raised them; or as Howe and Strauss put it, they will “correct the behavioral excess [it] perceives in the current midlife generation.” (Howe and Strauss, 2000a: 62)

Look to the Millennial generation for an increased emphasis on community betterment and activism rather than personal rights and expectations of comfort found in the Boomer generation. As well, if they follow the pattern of generations of past Americans, they will restore ideals they perceive to have been demonstrated by their grandparents, the generation that lived through the Great Depression and World War II. It is anticipated that the Millennials will show a heightened civic responsibility and selfless capacity for teamwork in

reforming, rather than abandoning, important societal institutions such as the family and the church.

B. Characteristics of the Millennial Generation

A Wanted Generation

Millennials are the, precious, planned for and protected children of the youngest Boomers and oldest of Gen X. While Gen X went to great lengths to avoid having children or limit their number, in the 1990s visits to the abortion clinic were replaced by visits to the fertility clinic. These sought-after children have been supervised and watched over like no previous recent generation as their parents, raised as “latchkey kids,” vowed to be more involved than their own parents had been. Indeed, statistics on truancy, substance abuse, crime, suicide and unwed pregnancies all show signs of decline from 2000 to 2005, although (perhaps because of the tendency to overprotect), statistics are up regarding the use of painkillers, antidepressants and behavior modifying drugs such as Ritalin in the under 18 population. (“Generation Y,” 2005)

A Trusting and Confident Generation

With all that attention, it is not unexpected that teens themselves report getting along better with their parents than studies of earlier decades (USA Weekend, 1997). “The old youth angst, cynicism, and alienation are all giving way to a new confidence about the future and new trust in parents and authorities.” (Howe and Strauss, 2000b)

Their confidence is in part a product of America’s booming economy. Across the board, in all but the poorest American families, the Millennial generation has more discretionary income at their young ages than any previous generation.

A Collaborative Generation

Millennials have been raised with team projects, peer review and peer discipline in school, team sports and clubs, and group day care and after school programs. Not surprisingly, their collaborative ability is admirable. “Peer pressure,” once the bane of parents and educators because it was nearly synonymous with undesirable behavior, is the prime motivation for this generation’s apparent return to higher standards of behavior and ethics. Ethnic and religious diversity is a given. They have not known a time in which females have not been considered equal partners. Upon hearing the story of a conflict in a local church regarding the role of women, a young seminary student who had come to faith in college and has associated with “emerging churches,” said incredulously, “You mean that really happens? I thought that was just something we studied in class, like, you know, historically.” He had never experienced a form of Christianity that deviated from the gender relationships he was accustomed to in school and at work.

A Motivated Generation

Indeed, volunteerism among teens is at an all-time high. (USA Weekend, 2005) “If I can be personally involved, and see the difference it makes, I’m ‘there,’” seems to be their rallying cry. Some see in Millennials more willingness to live purposefully for great causes rather than for fun, money or excitement. (Luce, in Mayo, et, al., 2001) The proliferation of numbers participating in short-term missions trips as well as the exploding number of study/service/vacation opportunities attests to the Millennials’ willingness to be involved.

But do not expect those causes to align themselves with the issues that motivated their parents or grandparents. With their commitment to diversity and pluralism, this “Whatever” generation is unlikely to

take up causes of personal liberation or enfranchisement even as they seek privileges for diverse populations. Millennials will discern the difference between poor leadership and irredeemable institutions, and will often choose reform over revolution. (Sanchez, 2003) Sporting T-shirts with the saying “The greatest sin of our time is not the few who have destroyed, but the vast majority who have sat idly by. Dr. Martin Luther King” public-school fifth graders in Aurora, Colorado raised over \$50,000 for the release of Sudanese slaves in 1999. (Starr, 1999) World Vision’s “30 Hour Famine,” popular with youth leaders and students alike, now offers an online community forum for participants to share their stories and encourage one another in this fundraising and educational process. (World Vision, 2006)

Global issues of justice and ecology will excite them, while winning their enthusiasm for parochial or even national causes will become increasingly difficult. Geoff Hartt’s question above is a good one—will Gen X and their followers, the Millennials, be interested in maintaining the buildings and structures so prized by their elders?

Relational but Deficient

As does Gen X, Millennials long for deep relationships; however, their parents have been ill-equipped to pass on what they never learned in family relationships, as they themselves were latchkey kids and children of divorce. They contentedly substitute friends for “family,” innocently unaware that many aspects of this “family” cannot equip them for marriage and parenting. Their friendships exhibit another paradox unknown in previous generations—Millennials can genuinely and quickly reach a depth of conversation and understanding even with seemingly impersonal, non-face-to-face communication online. For Millennials, an acceptable alternative to a group of friends gathered around the dining room table is the ability to “converse” simultaneously via technology such as Skype, IM, and text messaging with any number of friends anywhere in the world.

Technology—a Given

In many ways, the Internet has made this generation and its culture. Unlike Boomers and Gen X who have used new technologies for social individuation and personal empowerment, Millennials see these tools as forces for social homogenization and community empowerment. (Howe and Strauss, 2000b) With the World Wide Web (which, amazingly, has only been available since 1991), the Millennials’ world has indeed shrunk to a global village. Information is “cheap,” and what they are taught can be easily checked and verified online, often with communication with someone closer to the source than a classroom educator could ever hope to be. From personal experience, I can vouch that instructors will need to be current in the classroom when students have the opportunity to be online and provide updates, examples and even corrections to what is being taught! Relationship and first-hand experience verifies truth for this generation.

Spiritual but Not Religious?

The phrase “spiritual but not religious” threatens to become the mantra of the 21st century. Many parents of Millennials have thought themselves magnanimous in not “forcing” religion on their children and allowing them to “choose for themselves” as adults. Outside the home, Millennials have grown up with exposure to and acceptance of varying faith traditions in a supposedly “value neutral” public educational system. “They are the first generation of Americans to be raised without the culturally established assumption that they would start their religious explorations with Christianity and continue to seek a faith system only if Christianity was found wanting.” (Martinson, 2002)

Anecdotes abound while serious studies of this generation’s religious views are only now becoming available. Gallup youth surveys, as well as a number of Christian youth specialists actually predict this generation will

return to or remain in church in numbers far exceeding Gen X. Again, Millennials are able to differentiate between poor leadership and irreparable institutions, have less cynicism than many of their elders, and enjoy collaboration in efforts that will genuinely make a difference in the world.

Churches that attract Millennials will be churches that engage hard questions, offer tactile experiences in worship, opportunities for involvement and leadership, and multiple venues for community. In contrast to Boomer and Gen X desires for comfort and self-actualization, Millennials, with their global perspective, are predicted to embrace suffering and service as critical components in their spiritual development. For this generation, bigger is not better; a small community of friends with similar convictions as well as opportunities for individual attention through mentoring relationships will be crucial. Unlike those dubbed “seekers” in previous decades, Millennials will not in the least expect church to provide them entertainment; their purpose in gathering in community with other believers will be for shared spiritual experience and connection with God.

If they have learned one thing from the constant change of their technology, it is skepticism of any claims to be “new and improved.” In fact, many indications such as resurgent interest in Celtic Christianity and spiritual disciplines demonstrate that this generation seriously desires to rediscover the roots of traditional, orthodox Christianity. They will celebrate tradition in forms, rituals and sacrament in ways considered quite nontraditional to their elders.

C. Postmodernity Enters Ministry

Having earlier stated that the Millennial generation is the first to bring postmodernism out of the theoretical and into their daily lived experience, it is worth investigating how aspects of postmodernity seen in Millennials will affect ministry and mission to them, with them and by them.

A Functional Postmodernity

“Paradox” is an apt expression to summarize these findings. At the heart of Millennials’ lived experience of postmodernity is a seeming ability to navigate life with a vacuum of truth, contradictory worldviews, a plethora of unanswered questions and the inability to dialogue regarding these questions due to the incommensurability of postmodernism with other systems of knowledge. And yet it is claimed that Millennials have less angst and cynicism than their elders?! The answer may lie in the functional and pragmatic way in which Millennials have embraced postmodernity in modern America. (Hiebert, 1999) As much as seemingly contradictory worldviews can coexist simultaneously, why not a functional postmodernity?

Core to postmodern thinking is the belief that absolute truth claims cannot be made. At best, “truth” is individually derived from experience and personal knowledge; since my experience will never exactly match your’s, our “truths” will never equate and cannot be foisted on each other. Self-perception is an autonomous and existential construct—“I am. I think...” Identity issues among Millennials will be huge both theoretically and practically. Internet allows the anonymous assumption of any persona desired at the moment, and Millennials are coming of age “in a time where the major indicators of what it means to be men, women, heterosexual, homosexual, elder, adult, married, or single are ambiguous, confused, and contended.” (Martinson, 2002) A community that scripturally and sensitively guides Millennials into discovery of freedom and identity in Christ will be embraced by anchorless young adults.

Messy Mentoring

The postmoderns’ journey to faith will be messy and at times frustrating to mentors. Without the anchor of

truth, one cannot distinguish good and evil nor evaluate standards of morality and behavior with conviction. Mentors will do well to encourage collaboration, accountability and hard discussion among Millennials regarding their lifestyles. A neoconservative movement is being seen among this generation, which is well educated as to the consequences of casual sex and determined not to emulate its parents' forays into addictive attitudes (such as workaholicism) or behaviors. Existentially aware of the vacuity of "value neutrality," Millennials thirst for relationships in which they can find commonality, support and help in stabilizing their fragmented world views. The journey will indeed be a long one, with inevitable setbacks and heart-breaking detours. Spirit-given patience and grace is essential.

The Evidence of Faith

Conversion, for Millennials, will likely not be an easily definable moment in time; far more questions than hands will be raised by this generation. It is of utmost importance that North American church leaders reconceptualize their determination of what constitutes conversion. We can make use of Kraft's model to see conversion as a dynamic, transformational process of evaluation and allegiance, as we understand this generation's presupposition that truth is most tentative in the realm of proposition and most verifiable in the realm of personal experience. (Kraft, 2005:271-73) The truly converted millennial will be marked by a self-perceived changed lifestyle and devotion to the sovereign Lord, and will be content to allow cognitive understanding a lifetime to develop. As Millennials arrive in church with a culture that thrives on diversity and lives with constant change, church leaders cannot expect adherence to a static set of doctrines and practices. Statements of faith will be replaced by narratives of faithful living that demonstrate adherence to truth.

Involvement in Ministry

Once committed to Christian community, Millennials will demonstrate tolerance in ways irritating to many of their elders. They will be patient with those struggling in their faith and accepting of those whose lifestyles challenge the evangelical Christian stereotype. They will expect to be full partners in decision-making and ministry regardless of age, gender or level of formal Christian education. In other words, they will demonstrate unconditional love and grace toward others and an enthusiastic desire to use the spiritual gifts they have been given to "grace" their community. (Those perturbed that Millennials seem too tolerant of differences can at least rejoice that their tolerance of diversity is unlikely to resurrect the worship wars of previous decades.)

Convinced by their genuinely devoted and admiring parents that they could indeed conquer the world, the church must be prepared for Millennials to attempt just that. Parochial issues will neither interest to them nor divert their attention from more encompassing concerns of justice, worship and service. If Millennials can be reoriented from their postmodern acceptance of religious pluralism in ways that allow them in turn to sensitively persuade others, a new generation of North American missionaries may be released to join the increasing number of their peers from majority world countries in collaborative efforts to share Christ with the least reached peoples of the world.

Millennials will seek to serve in community, and multicultural mission teams in and of themselves can witness to the reconciling power of the gospel in ways that no individuals' words could. First, relational deficits must be addressed, a task best accomplished through lengthy experience in well functioning relationships with peers, married couples and families. The autonomy and independence of the postmodern mindset must be recognized and transformed in a context that puts preeminence on a healthy submission to the Lord as well as appropriate submission and service in human relationships. Trusted mentors and spiritual directors will be essential in the preparation of tomorrow's missionaries.

A Challenge to Current Church Leadership

Two critical challenges face the church as we enter the 21st century. We may never see large numbers of the Millennial generation in Christian congregations if their predisposition to postmodern relativity cannot be adequately engaged. Or, the institutional church may repel those willing to investigate Christianity's truth claims unless they are met with grace, patience and appreciation. On the other hand, the arrival of postmodern Millennials into areas of influence and leadership in the North American church will open opportunities for the church to see itself anew and may well hasten its "conversion" from the institution of Christendom to the community of faith desperately needed in today's world. If the predictions of Millennials return to integrity and involvement are accurate, "church" will undergo radical shifts in forms in the next generation while at the same time experiencing a radical recapturing of its essence.

The Fields Are White for the Harvest

the human heart can go to the lengths of God.

dark and cold we may be, but this

is no winter now. The frozen misery

of centuries breaks, cracks, begins to move;

the thunder is the thunder of the flocks,

the thaw, the flood, the upstart spring.

Thank God our time is now when wrong

comes up to faces everywhere,

never to leave us till we take

the longest stride of soul man ever took.

The fields are now soul size.

the enterprise

is exploration into God.

Diogenes Allen



Trans-cultural Perspective: the Asian X

Tae K. Kim

Assistant pastor of Inchoen Presbyterian Church of Korea (IPCK)

Editor's note: Because the term "Boomer" does not apply to the Asian context, this portion of the article will compare the "older generation" with the "younger." "Gen X" generally applies in the Asian context

because along with globalization, the younger generation (those in their mid-30's and younger) shares many characteristics with their Western counterparts.

In general, most Asians of the old generation tend to respect traditions passed on from their ancestors. The older they are, the more nostalgic and traditional they will be. This characteristic is due to the fact they come from a cultural tradition of long history yet due to the horrific rapid cultural shift within a short span of time resulting in the formation of a hybrid generation. In this part, I will illuminate how members of the older Asian generation share trans-culturally common characteristics followed by cross-generational comparison.

A. The Common Characteristics of the Older Generation of Asians:

They respect traditions.

They value men over women.

Authoritarian headship of the father; nurtured by the mother.

Conservatism keeps traditions rigid and insulates the older generation from new ideas slowing down the rate of change.

They are a collectivistic; not individualistic.

They have a more complicated kinship system than that of their Western counterparts.

They have a syncretistic religious system with a mixture of shamanism, animism, Taoism and Buddhism.

They are either incapable or slow in adapting to new technology such as the use of computer and internet.

They are very structured, relatively more rigid and resist change.

. They prefer time-honored tradition, take pride in cultural heritage and mono-cultural.

I conclude that the older generation Asians are more oriented by the past than the future. That is why they are so conservative in contrast to the new Asian X. Most Asian cultures have long history and strong heritage, even though each of them has distinctiveness with unique indigenous characteristics.

B. Distinctive Characteristics of the Older Generation in Various Asian Societies:^[1]

1. China

They respect traditions influenced by Buddhism and Confucianism.

In a household, women have more power than men. Children depend more on their mothers than fathers. The duty of a father only focuses on material provision.

The older generation is optimistic regarding the future, whereas the Chinese Asian Xers are cynical regarding the future.

The old generation is functionalistic and results-oriented. The new generation emphasizes authenticity and relationships over functionalism.

The older generation views their identity through their profession in comparison with personhood marking the identity of new generation.

2. *Taiwan*

The main duty of father among the older generation is making money.

To hear is to obey. The older generation expects the Asian Xers to maintain their traditions and hold fast to cultural heritage.

Parents' opinions are always right and true because the older generation is the steward of time-honored tradition.

The older generation is functional and work-oriented, while the Taiwanese Xers are more hedonistic.

The older generation married much younger, while the newer generation delays marriage and has broader social ties.

The older generation preferred big family with many children; the Taiwanese Xers either prefer not to have children or delay child birth so that they can

have new experiences.

3. *Thailand*

Society of the older generation is Male dominated society with chauvinism; the Thai Xers value gender equality.

The older generation of Thais is conservative; new generation is innovative and assertive.

The older generation is not technologically oriented and resistant of globalization. The younger generation embraces technology and welcomes globalization for they are forces of liberation.

4. *Japan*

The older generation submits to hierarchy and collectivism. They value loyalty to and sacrifice for the group. Japanese Xers are establishing their own hierarchies based upon new values and trendiness.

The older generation is functionalistic valuing success and achievement at all costs. The Japanese Xers have retained some of this mentality but it is milder in form leaving room for an extensive network of relationships.

The older generation is rationalistic whereas the younger generation is more relational.

5. *Korea*

The cultural orientation of the older generation is shaped by traditions and folk ways.

Patriarchal in the older generation; whereas the Xers are more egalitarian.

Members of the older generation generally lived within the context of the extended family; whereas Xers are individualistic and independent preferring nuclear family only.

The older generation was influenced by absolutism and dogmatism - similar to fundamentalist Christianity; less so with Xers

The older generation prefers tradition music, life style; whereas Korean Xers are much more eclectic.

The older generation of Koreans is more altruistic and collectivistic in mindset; less so for the Xers.

7. Members of the old generation maintain moral principles and values of traditions

in Confucianism (e.g. filial piety, family-orientation, hierarchical socially),

Taoism (e.g. belief in the five elements, yin-yang, etc.), Shamanism (e.g. folk

medicine); less so for the Xers.

C. A Comparative Look at the Shaping Forces of the Older and Younger Generations in Asia

For Chinese, there is yet distinctive generational differences among those of the older generation (i.e. those of the cultural revolution era would be different from those of one-child policy). For Japan, the Xers have a more affluent life style than their counter part elsewhere in Asia.

However, cross-culturally there are similarity in their socio-cultural profile in terms of life styles, fashions, and mindsets. Due to forces of westernization and globalization they share common characteristics with the Gen X of the West.

D. The Common Characteristics of Asian-Xers

Strongly influenced by the West due to forces of Westernization and globalization.

Value system: gender-equality, individualism over collectivism, independence of self from group, progressivism and believe in change, insist on constant and instantaneous information and personal feeling.

Mindset: pragmatic orientation based on benefits to self, usefulness, and convenience innovative.

Life style: embrace technology, trend and fashion are practiced and paramount, assertive.

E. Conclusions Regarding the Asian X-ers and Generational Shifts

The previously mentioned phenomena have much in common with the Western Generation X. For the Asian-Xers, there is a uniform new culture emerging even though they all have a different traditional background. Furthermore, Asian-Xers like their Western counterparts have been strongly affected by trends toward globalization as a result of the worldwide web. Computers are very important in the rising generation as their entire lives have become re-oriented around the information age. Technological gadgetry (e.g. computers, cell phones, satellite TV, etc.) have taken over the lives of Asian-Xers, so they share a common

information-based culture with one another, as well as with Western Gen Xers.

The implications of this trend include the possibility of a unified global techno-culture where both information and new trends are shared. As far as ministry is concerned, the new Asian-Xers are likely to react like their Western counterparts with a shift toward relation over function, trend over tradition, feeling over rationalism, unsex over gender distinction, equalitarian over hierarchy. This means that the principle of homogeneity with regards to birthplace may become less relevant in the coming age and churches may be formed less along ethnic line but more along generational commonality reflecting the unity in diversity as found in Revelation 5 where peoples from every tongue, tribe and nation are worshipping the Lamb of God together.

The Challenge: Becoming Trans-Generational Missionaries

As collaborators of this study, we three generations attempt to navigate the river of time without losing our sanity or our religion, we will do well to understand that “a change in eras is a moment in history when profound change occurs and we move from one order to another – (it requires) a change of ethos (and) in values.”^[2] Boomers, Xers and Millenials can all see that change is in the air. It is the agreement of these authors that the successful navigation of this river will require taking a missiological perspective.

Christian leaders and pastors alike must be concerned not only with interpreting the text of Scripture, but also interpreting the cultural landscape. More and more we are seeing the need to send missionaries to the ends of the earth and to live as missionaries in our current context. As we embrace this missionary calling, may we also embrace one another. And may the God of all generations give us understanding so that we might faithfully communicate his unchanging Gospel in our ever-changing times.

"I will show love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments." Exodus 20:6

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[1] The following characteristics are based upon interviews with Asian Xers studying abroad in the U.S. This shows an emic perspective from the viewpoint of the new generation that will transition into leadership representing these Asian societies in the near future.

[2] Shenk, Wilbert. "The Changing Role of the Missionary: From 'Civilization to Contextualization'" in C. Norman Kraus, ed. *Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth*. Scottsdale, Penn: Herald, 1980. p. 34.