

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 51 - JANUARY 1997



BY BARBARA WENDLAND 505 CHEROKEE DRIVE TEMPLE, TX 76504 817-773-2625 bcwendland@aol.com

Today's generation gaps

In recent years we've heard a lot about the generation gap. However, a lot of what is said about this subject isn't new. Children and teenagers have been seeing things differently from their parents and grandparents for a long time. Writings from very early centuries include adults' complaints about how wild and irresponsible the youth have become.



The gap between adults and their parents isn't new, either. It may be more noticeable now than in earlier years, because more people live to older ages now than in earlier years, but otherwise it's a familiar problem.



A different kind of gap

In recent years, however, many observers of contemporary society have begun talking about another kind of generation gap. The most influential differences between generations, these observers say, come from differences in the life experiences of generations.



An especially influential description of this kind of generational differences was published in 1991 in a book named *Generations*, by William Strauss and Neil Howe (William Morrow and Co., NY). When Strauss and Howe look at U.S. history, they see a recurring pattern. It consists of distinctive types of personalities and moods that develop in response to powerful historical events.



Secular crises and spiritual awakenings

According to Strauss and Howe, these influential events are of two kinds. Each of them radically changes the social environment. Some are secular

Connected by a place in time

Gary L. McIntosh, a church consultant and former pastor, describes a generation as "a group of people who are connected by their place in time with common boundaries and a common character." In his book *Three Generations: Riding the Waves of Change in Your Church* (Fleming H. Revell, 1995), McIntosh says most of today's Americans fit into three broad groups.

Builders—loyal, industrious, frugal, private

McIntosh calls those in their late forties and older the Builders. They're in the majority in traditional churches. They're a "get-it-done" generation whose members tend to be loyal, faithful, and committed. As a group they are hard workers and cautious, frugal savers. They tend to be patriotic and to respect their elders and people in positions of authority. In McIntosh's view, they tend to see things as black and white rather than gray, and they do things because they believe doing them is right. They tend to value self-discipline and sacrifice. Many Builders had parents who told them, "We don't air our dirty laundry in public," so they resist sharing deep hurts or needs that would help them really know and be known by the people around them. The Builders are strongly motivated by duty, McIntosh reminds us, and unlike many younger people they see church participation and financial support as part of their duty.



The church of tomorrow

McIntosh considers the Boomers (born in the Baby Boom) to be those whose ages now range from the early thirties to the late forties, who make up about a third of the U.S. population today. They are the most educated generation in U.S. history, McIntosh points out, and they're very different from the Builders.

The Busters (born in the Baby Bust) are today's teenagers and young adults, and they're quite different from both the Builders and the Boomers. We're dependent on them to be the church of tomorrow.



Differences in these three groups' views of the church are already having a big effect on our churches. Our willingness to pay attention to these differences when we design our worship and ministries will have a big influence on our churches' continuing effectiveness.

crises, such as wars. They make the society focus on changing the outer world of institutions and public behavior. Other crises are spiritual awakenings, in which the society's main focus is on changing the inner world of values and private behavior.



A generation that comes of age during one of these crucial times becomes dominant in the society, Strauss and Howe find, and stays dominant throughout its members' lifetime. However, the generation whose youth occurs during the crisis becomes and remains a recessive generation. It has relatively little influence on the society at large.

Four kinds of generations

Strauss and Howe see four kinds of generations recurring regularly throughout U.S. history. Because of individual differences in personality and experience, not every member of a generation has all of its characteristics, but in Strauss and Howe's view that doesn't keep general descriptions of the generations from being useful.



▪ Civic

A civic generation is a dominant generation that focuses mainly on the outer world. Its typical members grow up as protected youths after a spiritual awakening. They come of age overcoming a secular crisis, and they become a heroic group of achievers. At midlife they have power and build institutions. They become busy elders who are attacked by the next spiritual awakening.

▪ Adaptive

An adaptive generation is recessive. Its typical members grow up as overprotected, suffocated youths during a secular crisis. As they mature they become conformists who aren't inclined to take risks. At midlife they're what Strauss and Howe call "arbitrator-leaders" during a spiritual awakening. As sensitive elders they still have influence, but they often get less respect than other generations.



▪ Idealist

Typical members of an idealist generation grow up as indulged youths after a secular crisis, and they come of age

during a spiritual awakening. At midlife they tend to emphasize principle, and they may become moralistic. As elders, they are the visionaries in the next secular crisis. An idealist generation is a dominant one that focuses mainly on the inner world.

▪ Reactive

Many members of reactive generations grow up as underprotected and criticized youths during a spiritual awakening. They are likely to be alienated risk-takers as they come of age, and pragmatic leaders during a secular crisis at mid-life. As elders they tend to be respected but reclusive.



Four generations of today's adults

Applying these observations, here's how Strauss and Howe label the four generations that include nearly all of today's adults.

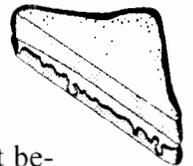


▪ The G.I. generation

Its members were born between about 1901 and 1924, so today their ages range from about 72 to 95. World War II, a major secular crisis, had life-shaping influence that made this a civic generation. All seven U.S. Presidents from John F. Kennedy through George Bush have been members of this dominant generation.

▪ The Silent generation

This adaptive group's members were born between about 1925 and 1942, mostly during depression and war, and they grew up during World War II. No member of this recessive generation has been president of the U.S.



This generation has sometimes been called the sandwich generation. Many of its members have felt caught between dominant, high-achieving, G.I. Generation parents and institutional leaders who have held onto their power, and the Baby Boomers who have claimed power early. Silent Generation members are left feeling that they've never gotten their chance to shine. They've often felt spread thin, too, by having to be caretakers of their parents and their children at the same time.



Also, members of this generation are young enough to realize the need for some recent societal changes, such as women's

entry into more public leadership roles, but they're no longer young enough to reap full benefit from these changes. One prominent member of the Silent Generation has said, "We were born 20 years too soon, or too late."

▪ **The Baby Boom generation**

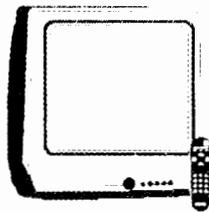
This generation's members were born between about 1943 and the early 1960's. Most came of age in the rebellious 60's. President Clinton is a Baby Boomer, as are many others of today's political and business leaders. Because members of this generation are so numerous compared to the generations before and after them, their needs and wants get an unusual amount of attention. Because the Baby Boomers are now approaching retirement age, for example, we're currently seeing great concern about whether Social Security will be able to support all of them.



As a dominant, idealist generation, the Baby Boomers have been instrumental in changing many customs and standards that earlier generations considered permanent. With the Baby Boomers came an increase in divorce, for example, and in couples living together without being married. Our churches have been severely affected not only by this kind of changes but also by this generation's failure to continue the pattern of automatic churchgoing and denominational loyalty that earlier generations of Christians tended to follow.

▪ **Generation X**

This reactive, recessive generation has also been called the Thirteeners, because in Strauss and Howe's scheme it is the 13th generation since the U.S. began. Its members, also called the Baby Busters, were born between the early 60's and the early 80's, so are currently young adults. They're the first generation to have had television during their entire lifetime. They've also grown up with computers and the information revolution, the threat of nuclear war and destruction of the environment, rapid technological change, and many other features of contemporary society that members of today's older generations didn't encounter until later in life.



Why does any of this matter?

Knowing about these generational differences and responding appropriately to their effects is apparently going to be vital for our churches' future effectiveness. In fact, the mere survival of some traditional mainline denominations and congregations may depend on whether or not they respond appropriately to the ways in which today's generations react differently to the church.



Most mainline Christian denominations today include a disproportionate number of members from the G.I. and Silent generations. We're short on Baby Boomers and very short on members of Generation X. Yet to keep doing what God calls the church to do, we'll have to keep attracting younger generations as committed Christians. We can't do that by continuing to communicate, worship, minister, teach, or evangelize only in the ways that have attracted the older generations that are now in the majority in our membership.



Xers—unknowns, or Christian leaders?

One of our churches' greatest needs right now is to learn about Generation X and to pay attention to what its members are saying. To many of us older church members, they're mostly unknown. We've tended to write them off because their music is louder than we like, their clothes aren't always what we consider attractive or proper, and some of their behaviors are different from what we like and are used to.

"I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you."
—2 Timothy 1:5

The people who are looking more deeply at Generation X, however, and especially at Xers' reactions to traditional Christian churches, are seeing some interests and concerns of Generation X that go much deeper than music and clothing preferences.



"I was hungry and you gave me food ... Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

—Matthew 25:35-40



In the next issue of *Connections* I'll write about some of those concerns. They include the desire for true community, for true intimacy, for authenticity, and for doing one-to-one ministries that deal directly with the suffering people that surround us in our everyday lives. Those features seem familiar, don't they? It seems to me that they're es-

entially what God has been asking us to provide all along as Christians.

Barbara

Next . . .
**Generation X—
a lot of what they're
looking for is what real
Christianity is meant to be**



Connections 1-97
Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple, TX 76504-3629

Bulk Rate
U. S. Postage
PAID
Temple, TX
Permit # 380

Address correction requested

Today's generation gaps

**Lord,
you have been
our dwelling place
in all generations.**

—Psalm 90:1

If you've just discovered *Connections* and you want to start receiving it monthly, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want any of the 4 years' back issues that are available, add \$5 for each year you want. For more information, write to the address above, phone 817-773-2625, e-mail bcwendland@aol.com, or on the Internet, see <http://www.vvm.com/~bcwendland/connhome.htm>.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and I'm neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative and partly at my own expense, speaking only for myself. *Connections* currently goes to about 12,000 people in all 50 states—laity and clergy in at least 12 church denominations and some non-churchgoers.