

# Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

NUMBER 52 - FEBRUARY 1997



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## Generation X— Christian? or unknown?

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This generation is sometimes called the Baby Busters because they are much less numerous than the Baby Boomers who preceded them. They're also called the Thirteeners, because theirs is the 13th in the sequence of generations that make up U.S. history.



Their becoming committed Christians is crucial for the church's future, but traditional churches don't reach them very effectively.

It's vitally important, therefore, for us to look at the Xers with open hearts and minds. We need to find out what's important to them. We must face the fact that many of them are turned off by the church activities that older Christians like or even consider essential. We need to know how we can express the Christian faith in ways that will let members of Generation X recognize its value.

## There's more than meets the eye and ear

People who are investigating the differences between today's generations see some characteristics of Xers that are less obvious than what's on the surface but are probably more important. Older church members often see only the surface, and we let it turn us off and keep us from looking further.



## Bridging the generation gap

A recent newspaper article shows an example of what churches can do to help bridge generation gaps, and of how rewarding the experience can be ("Family to Family Ties," by Rick Shefchik, Knight-Ridder Newspapers, in the *Corpus Christi Caller Times*, Dec. 2, 1996).



Eva Mae Cleator, a 76-year-old member of the G.I. Generation, has spent most of her life in a quiet Minnesota town and is the mother of four Baby Boomers. Through a local Episcopal Community Services program, she and her husband Warren volunteered to be mentors to a Generation Xer, 31-year-old welfare mother Debbie Allen, and her three daughters. Eva Mae went shopping with them and made cookies with them, and she and Warren took them on picnics and trips.



## It wasn't always easy

The experience wasn't a bed of roses. Debbie and her children didn't always express thanks or use the table manners that Eva Mae considered essential. However, she came to appreciate the difficulties of the obstacles that Debbie had to deal with, many of which were very different from what Eva Mae had faced in raising her children.

Debbie and her children thought some of Eva Mae's expectations were old-fashioned and unreasonable, and they didn't like the music she played on the car radio when they rode with her. However, they came to see that many of her rules and customs made life easier and more pleasant than what they had been used to. Most important, they came to appreciate her endless capacity for caring.

## "It was really warming"

"When Eva Mae stepped into my life, it was like I got a mom, somebody I can talk to," Debbie says. "It was really warming to have somebody call to say 'How're you doing?' That made me feel real good." Eva Mae feels good, too. She came to realize, she says, that our shared future depends on repairing cross-generational bonds. Maybe we all need to realize that.



We may only see clothes that we consider inappropriate, and hear music that to us is ugly and far too loud. In the movies and TV shows that many Xers like, we see blatant sexuality, violence, and cruelty that in our view give a picture of life that is



misleading as well as harmful. However, if we want Xers to become Christians instead of the unknowns that they now are to many church members, we'll have to look below these surface features and respond to what we find.

### GenX pastors describe their age group

Stanley J. Menking, Associate Dean of a United Methodist seminary, has extensively studied Generation X and especially its view of the church, and he offers help. He called together a nationwide, multi-ethnic group of pastors who are in Generation X and are especially effective, to learn how churches can reach their age group, and he has published what he learned from them (*Preparing for the Future*, 1996, Perkins School of Theology; \$10, or less in quantity; call 214-768-2264 to order).



These GenX pastors pointed out, as many other observers have, that a high proportion of Xers

- ✓ have experienced a broken family
- ✓ know someone their age who committed suicide
- ✓ don't expect to have as much as their parents, because of today's economy and job market.

Other observers point out that unlike earlier generations, Xers' parents have had access to effective birth control, and many women in that generation have chosen not to be full-time mothers or not to be mothers. Thus many Xers, even those who were wanted and are loved, have gotten the impression that they are unwanted.

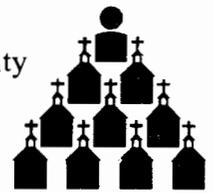


### Reacting to painful experiences

Because of these painful feelings, and these experiences that are mostly beyond their control, many Xers

- ✓ don't feel they have a real say about anything
- ✓ are anxious and fearful about the future

- ✓ are skeptical of all or most absolutes
- ✓ care more about relationships than ideals
- ✓ don't trust institutions, especially those based on top-down authority
- ✓ prefer to help suffering people in practical one-to-one ways, not through bureaucratic systems
- ✓ are risk takers because they feel they have nothing to hope for and nothing to lose.



### Living in a multi-cultural high-tech world



Other features of today's world also give Xers viewpoints and preferences that differ greatly from

those of earlier generations. Most Xers have grown up in a multi-cultural setting and a culture that isn't dominated by the Christian faith. Therefore they often question traditional beliefs and practices, and they are tolerant of different beliefs and lifestyles.

Probably because they have grown up with TV, computers, and high-tech sound equipment, Xers

- ✓ are used to multi-sensory presentations in which many things happen at the same time and all messages are brief and change quickly
- ✓ express themselves through music and use it as a soundtrack—a constant background for life
- ✓ are bored by rituals and by the kinds of speeches and reading materials that older people like.

### Hungering for dialogue, hope, spirituality

The Generation X pastors whose views Stanley Menking reports saw that most Xers

- ✓ want dialogue, not being "taught down to"
- ✓ hunger for a spirituality that can give them hope.



Few Xers, however, see the church offering anything that seems likely to satisfy the spiritual hunger they feel. Many find church irrelevant. When they attend, they hear rituals that they find slow and boring, and they don't hear "their" music, which is so important to them. They don't find their real questions addressed, either—at least not in ways they recognize as helpful.



Stan Menking, like many other observers, finds that the issue of God is very important to Xers but that what they're looking for is not objective proof, cognitive arguments, or doctrine. They want to know what difference God makes. They say, "If there is a God, God must relate to my life."



The main aspects of Jesus that get Xers' attention are his human side, his compassion, and his faithfulness to himself, his commitments, and his friends, more than his divine nature. For Xers to see the church as the body of Christ, it must visibly embody these features. It will have to be, Menking reminds us, "a community that cares, is a friend to the friendless, is willing to face the suffering of others and stand with them, and if necessary give its life for the sake of others."



Stan Menking reminds us that Xers want to know from those who make a claim for any truth, "Is it working for you?" Only when they can see that it is, he assures us, do they see any need to consider accepting the claim. And too often, they aren't seeing convincing evidence that our claims about the truth of the Christian faith and the value of church participation are working for us.



### Real Christianity has what they want

These attitudes are disturbing, because real Christianity includes much that Xers apparently are looking for. True Christian spirituality offers hope. True Christian fellowship offers intimacy and relationships that can be trusted. Real Christian love and justice reach out and give personal, practical help.

**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.**

—Romans 15:13

**"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

To some extent we're practicing these parts of true Christianity but keeping them private, so that the Xers in our midst don't see them. And we're often expressing the Christian message in

ways Xers are unlikely to hear or find convincing. We need to get busy remedying that.



However, many of our words and actions, as individuals and as institutional church groups, are actually contrary to the love and justice that real Christianity requires. And when Xers see churches' actions or lack of action contradicting their pious words, the Xers don't see any reason to take the church's claims seriously or even to listen to them.

Given these feelings and views, it shouldn't surprise us that most Xers have left the church or have never been in it.

### A big challenge for the church

The GenX pastors in Menking's meeting felt that only a radical transformation in the church would let it reach many Xers, but making such a transformation won't be easy. As Stan Menking observes, it is very hard for church members "to



believe that what has been so important in our faith journey no longer has the power to attract others, does not deal with their questions, or is viewed as out of touch with their reality."

To minister effectively with Generation X, Menking suggests, we will have to affirm and accept its members as they are and as they can be. We'll have to get to know them personally and individually. This will often mean putting the church where they are, outside of our church buildings.

We'll need to show Jesus clearly as servant, compassionate friend, guide, and liberator. We'll have to risk being real friends, guides, and liberators



ourselves, too, taking first-hand, personal responsibility for healing the brokenness in our local communities as well as in the wider world.

We'll have to have worship that is joyous celebration and speaks to all the senses. We'll need team ministries and visionary, servant leadership.



We'll have to identify the real leaders among us, including those in Generation X, and let them lead. This will mean giving

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