

5. Culturally Appropriate Worship for Generation X

In order to evaluate whether parish communion inhibits growing the church, we must know what kind of church we are going to grow – who we are trying to attract. I have focused on Generation X for several reasons: Together with children and young people they are the generation most conspicuous by their absence from our churches. Secondly, they are the generation presently having, or about to have children of their own. Children are the future not only of the church, but also of our society. Our best chance to influence their development, to inculcate the Christian ethos, particularly Christ's two Great Commandments, is to bring their parents into the community of the church, and into faith.

Talking to Generation X

To understand Generation X it is perhaps best to let one of them speak collectively for the group. They are our children. We have spent a lifetime trying, and often failing, to understand what they want; but perhaps not really listening to what they have to say. So let us do so now through Sarah Hinlicky, a Gen Xer. Her article Talking to Generation X appears at <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9902/hinlicky.html>. I have precised it below, endeavouring to retain the flow of her thought:

Our parents left religion and each other in unprecedented numbers. Failed ideologies were mother's milk to us: love didn't save the world, the Age of Aquarius brought no peace, sexual liberation brought AIDS and legions of fatherless children, Marxism collapsed. We can't imagine a world of cultural or national unity; our world is more like a tattered patchwork quilt. We have every little inconsequential thing, but not one important thing to believe in.

We know you've tried to get us to church. That's part of the problem. Many of your appeals have been carefully calculated for success, and that turns our collective stomach. In any event, you're not doing us any favours by telling us we're so important that age-

old prayers and devotions can be rewritten to suit our personal whims. We know intuitively that the stakes are too high for that. Mystery works up to a point, but it's addictive, and once we get hooked on it, the Church won't be able to provide enough to support our habit. Then, of course, there is the matter of telling us that the Church possesses the Absolute Truth. Gen Xers doubt the very existence of such Truth with a capital T. We're much more comfortable with the idea of a multiplicity of little truths than one single unifying truth. But even if universal truth does exist, we are extremely skeptical that you-or anyone else-can possess it.

Torn between rigid scientific doubt on the one hand and irrational credulity toward the supernatural on the other, we have a generalized belief in God but are doubtful of his personal concern for us. We refuse God's judgments, yet judge our parents harshly by canons in which hypocrisy is the only capital crime. And anything that smacks of the Establishment (a hangup inherited from our Boomer parents) elicits nothing but our contempt.

Each of us is the center of his or her own universe, and so we abhor any kind of coercion, no matter how gentle, socially beneficial, or genuinely correct. In our eyes, the Church's standards of orthodoxy and behavior are as coercive as the government's laws. Both seem to be convenient vehicles for affirming preconceived notions. We see complicity in the Church where you want us to see stability, moralism where you want us to see righteousness. The ultimate difference is that where you see the City of God we see only the City of Man.

Our stumbling block is Christianity presented as panacea. We have learned that nothing can be trusted, so we've given up on trust altogether. Don't tell us that the Church can be trusted because, frankly, we doubt it. Don't tell us Christianity is the answer to our problems, because nothing but death will take them away.

What do you have left to persuade us? One thing: the story. We are story people. We know narratives, not ideas. We treat our ennui with stories, more and more stories, because they're the only things that make sense; when the external stories fail, we make a story of our own lives. We're looking for the one story with staying power, the destruction and redemption of our own lives. That's to your advantage: you have the best redemption story on the market.

Perhaps the only thing you can do, then, is to point us towards Golgotha, a story that we can make sense of. Show us the women who wept and loved the Lord but couldn't change his fate. Remind us that Peter, the rock of the Church, denied the Messiah three times. Tell us that Pilate washed his hands of the truth, something we are often tempted to do. Mostly, though, turn us

towards God hanging on the cross. That is what the world does to the holy. Where the cities of God and Man intersect, there is a crucifixion. The best-laid plans are swept aside; the blueprints for the perfect society are divided among the spoilers. We recognize this world: ripped from the start by our parents' divorces, spoiled by our own bad choices, threatened by war and poverty, pain and meaninglessness. Ours is a world where inconvenient lives are aborted and inconvenient loves are abandoned. We know all too well that we, too, would betray the only one who could save us.

One more thing. In our world where the stakes are high, remind us that all hope is not lost. As Christians you worship not at the time of the crucifixion, but Sunday morning at the resurrection. Tell us that the lives we lead now are redeemed, and that the Church, for all her flaws, is the bearer of this redemption.

Of all the stories competing for our attention, the story of the City of God is the only one worth living, and dying, for.¹

What Gen-X is looking For

When Gen X does go to church, a study by George Barna shows that they are searching for excellence and authenticity. Once they find these qualities in a church, they remain surprisingly loyal. They have also shown a tendency to study the Bible more thoroughly than Boomers, and apply its teachings to everyday life rather than living dualistically. Moreover, they have shown a strong interest in connecting with the history of the Church. For instance, there is a renewed interest in many of the catholic worship traditions, but practiced with intense meaning and focus rather than rote memory.²

In fact, there are Gen-X churches, a sociological phenomenon with relatively little visibility among mainline churches. This is, perhaps, because they are mostly church plants, and are predominantly Pentacostal, or Reform tradition of some variety. A description of one will provide some idea of their worship tradition:

¹ Sarah E. Hinlicky, Talking to Generation X, found at <http://www.firstthings.com/ftissues/ft9902/hinlicky.html>

² J. David Shanks, The Gen-X Church: What can you expect from a bunch of slackers? A lot, found at <http://www.churchbusiness.com/articles/391cover.html>.

At around 7:00 on a Tuesday evening in Denver, young men and women, most displaying body piercing or tattooing, are directing traffic in the parking lot of a converted warehouse. By the time they're done, more than 1,500 people—averaging about 26 years of age—will have filed into the building for the weekly service of a six-year-old church called The Next Level. (The church picked Tuesday evening because they thought it would be easier for people to attend then; they picked 7:17 as their start time just to be different.) Those wandering inside will pick up the bean-based beverage of their choice, take a seat on the folding chairs or the floor, sing along to alternative Christian music, and listen to a blunt sermon by 28-year-old pastor Trevor Bron, he of the shaved head. Welcome to church, Generation X-style.³

Gen X churches tend to operate by charismatic leading. Church staffs are smaller and less hierarchical. There's a strong emphasis on all church members helping out. They take seriously the idea that God is the leader of the church. Ministries are not always planned by the leadership; but are often instigated by church members who feel led by God. Xer churches put their emphasis on relationships. Programs are seen as means and not ends. Their purpose is the lacing together of souls. Church events, and spontaneous gatherings are less about learning or doing than about just being together. Xers are willing to take the time for relationships; for that is where their priority lies.⁴

While Boomer churches, such as Willow Creek or Saddleback, emphasize "excellence" in church ministries, Xer churches emphasize "realness." Xers don't care much if the preacher stumbles over his words or the singer is mediocre, or the small-group leader doesn't know much about the Bible. They do insist that people be authentic. Posers are not allowed. Moreover, Xer churches have a dual orientation concerning time: they are naturally comfortable with the culture; but also have a high degree of respect for the Christian traditions.⁵

³ Eric Stanford, [The New Wave of Gen X Churches: Get Your Glimpse of the Future Here](http://www.next-wave.org/dec99/new_wave_of_gen_c_churches.html), found at http://www.next-wave.org/dec99/new_wave_of_gen_c_churches.html.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Xer churches are holistic; honouring intellect, emotions, doctrine and intuition. This is evident in a highly narrative preaching style, interposing both the stories of the Bible and those of Christians today. It can also be seen in the worship, which involves a broad and frequent use of the arts; and in Xer apologetics, which is essentially about urging people to say yes to Jesus on a daily basis.⁶

Finally, Xer churches are cooperative. They see that God is working in the lives of non-Christians, and that Christians are not too different from non-believers in many ways. They don't care for the walls put up between denominations. To many Xers, even the walls between Orthodoxy, Catholicism, and Protestantism seem ready for demolition.⁷

Xer worship is characterized by:

1. Darkness. They prefer a dimly lit room with lots of candles.
2. Mellowness. They prefer a mournful almost-blues style music; a "meditative singing," that is soft and contemplative.
3. Participation. They really believe "worship is the act of the people." They despise performance and ego-tripping worship leaders. In fact they put the band at the back or the side, and let the worship leader (sitting right in with everybody else) use a mic to start music and keep the tempo moving. The practice is for the leader to let his or her voice fade out so that the worshippers hear the collective singing of the entire audience.
4. Singing as prayer. They see singing as a means of prayer. In fact, they make prayer the primary content of worship; through singing prayer that includes adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and even supplication.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Stanford, op.cit.

5. Sensory. They want to touch, taste, smell, and feel something in worship along with seeing and hearing; and endeavour to find ways to incorporate all of these aspects in the service.⁸

Given the above, it may not be surprising that Taizé services are popular with Gen-X. The good news is that Taizé is a worship style whose appeal spans all generations among those with a predisposition to contemplative worship. Other influences include: Catholic, Orthodox and Celtic spirituality, *Lectio Divina*, Meditation, Respiratory Prayer, The Jesus prayer, praying the psalms, Chant, Icons, Incense, and Repetition.⁹

Gen Xers place the emphasis on the journey - on going rather than arriving.¹⁰

Considerations

Given the above, it would appear that that the service of parish communion would be daunting for a Gen Xer who was not raised in Anglican worship, and familiar with its rituals. In the beginning, until relationships had been established and they had checked out the authenticity of the both the church and its members, it would seem that a service of Morning or Evening Prayer would be most conducive to bringing them into an Anglican Church. In particular, the latter, since it lends itself to a more contemplative form of service, The use of chanted psalms, prayers and canticles - and perhaps devotions before the Blessed Sacrament - would enhance the worship for a Gen Xer. Such a service need not be from the Book of Common Prayer, nor a full Solemn Evensong in the cathedral or St. Thomas's tradition. I attended a perfectly lovely and appropriate Evensong at the Church of the Redeemer, which was based on the Book of Alternative Services. Care had been taken in the selection of canticles and chant tones, and the service was sung, led by a

⁸ Keith Drury, *Five Recent Worship Trends*, at <http://www.indwes.edu/tuesday/1wortren.htm>

⁹ Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 133-138.

¹⁰ Ibid.

cantor where appropriate. Coincidentally, the majority attending on that occasion were from Generation X.