

Gen Z & Ministry

By [Jessie Cruickshank](#)

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When I started in full time ministry, generational studies were a fairly niche conversation. I had just accepted my first managerial role as the Program Director of a wilderness ministry. That first summer, being a boss and not just a guide, I trained and treated the new guides the same way I had been mentored. And it was an absolute failure. One of my board members took me to a seminar on generational cohorts and I learned for the first time about the differences between Gen X and Millennials. Everything they talked about named what I had experienced, what I had done wrong, and gave me strategies on how to do things better. In short, it was a game changer for me as a leader.

Since that year I have maintained a living spreadsheet on the generations, adding to it both learnings for others and personal observations. To the normal academic categories of observation, I have added several of my own. As a disciplemaker, I am interested in how a generation identifies truth and how they define spiritual maturity. About 2017 I started interviewing articulate middle schoolers to hear how Gen Z was making meaning of their world, making predictions on how they would mature and holding out questions for continued inquiry. I have regularly interviewed Gen Zers over the past few years, taking significant time this past year to hear from Gen Z what they thought about God and ministry. The following article includes both observations and their own words.

~ **Jessie Cruickshank**

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Introduction to Gen Z

Gen Z is the generation born between 1997-2013. Unlike previous generations, the events that mark them are also global events, making the characteristics of Gen Z more consistent across cultures.¹ Some of those events include the attack on the US twin towers in New York City and the resulting 20 years of war in the Middle East. The global market meltdown in 2008 and global pandemic of 2020 make this generation one that has experienced more significant prolonged crisis events during their formative years since the early 1900s.

On the local front, they have also grown up with consistent mass school shootings. A phenomenon that began around 1999 in Colorado, school shootings and regular drills remind one of nuclear attack drills from the 1950s. Only school shootings are a very present threat with at least one occurring somewhere in the United States literally every school day.

Finally, Gen Z is also the first fully digital-native generation, being born after the advent of the internet. Through technology, they have been keenly aware of recurrent world crises, leading to generational characteristics that are both positive and negative.

Keystone Characteristics

The brain science of development includes the following factors when considering how people make meaning of their lives and their world. The first is a sense of identity, which answers the question “I am...” The second is a sense of belonging, which answers the question “My people are...” This third is a sense of purpose, which can be defined in spiritual terms as telos, or the natural end for which something is created.

To get a sense of how Gen Z thinks about identity, belonging, and purpose, I have been interviewing middle schoolers, high schoolers, and young adults (as soon as they were old enough). The substance of those interviews, additional observations, and ongoing research have been summarized below. Where possible, Gen Zers’ answers are given in their own words.

¹ This could not be said of the previous generational cohorts, whose characteristics were distinctly North American, or more generally, the global-west.

Identity

Observations

- 50% bi-racial
- Ok with 'tags' – positive disposition towards naming things
- Constant low-grade sense of dread
- Overly-aware of the world at a young age and lack of agency leads to low/no sense of stability

Gen Z will be the most racially diverse generation ever. Most of them will be bi-racial or multi-racial. Previous generations have had to choose which racial heritage they more closely identify with. Gen Z is likely to express more of a fusion orientation towards racial heritage. (I expect that to force a change in demographic forms from choosing one race to describe themselves to choosing as many as apply.)

Another difference from previous generations is the proclivity to 'name' things, and create an abundance of categories. Those who are older are often reticent of naming and 'labeling' which they view negatively. Gen Z, however, thinks of the names in a more dynamic fashion, like 'tags' or 'hashtags.' It is more like the difference between Outlook's file folder structure where a 'label' puts you in a defined box, and Gmail's dynamic tagging system where an unlimited number can apply without such constraints.

An additional overall observation is the possible impact of global awareness due to technology. Many young adults have been aware of multiple world crises since a young age. They did not have the benefit of innocence to world-ending dynamics or local constant threats of violence due to school shootings. This sense of danger, combined with the lack of agency to do anything about it has led to a pervasive sense of dread.

In their own words

Most of the Gen Zers interviewed did not believe they would ever be financially stable. One said it was likely that they would all be dead by 60 and "it would be their fault." Several of them commented that they don't look at the future too much because it only increases the

feeling of hopelessness. Each of them admitted to lots of private crying at night. Many were afraid of nuclear war. One individual expressed that they believed society tells them they are too young to make decisions, but they feel like they are healthier and “in reality more” than the older generations.

Belonging

Observations

- Implicit integration of life and ministry/ being the ‘church’
- Compartmentalization of faith and life not in their paradigm
- Care about commitment, consistency, church is a choice and they own it
- Integrity (their definition of it) is a core value
- Prefer in-person communication
- Justice oriented

When discussing church, ministry, and belonging it becomes immediately apparent that there is no compartmentalization between everyday life and faith. This is distinct from previous generations who tend to argue about the ‘role faith serves’ in one’s life. This integration finds expression in some of their perspectives about ‘church.’ It is either something that they choose to be a part of as a lifestyle choice, or they choose not to be a part of for the same reasons. For those interviewed, church was not an event to sometimes partake in, and sometimes not. It is more deeply connected to the community they belong to and their commitments. While this works to the benefit of a chosen church community on one hand, it also presents a significant barrier to those who have made choices against church on the other. For them, church is not an event to invite people to as ‘test to see if religion is for them.’ They have likely already made that decision. For those outside of faith communities, the work to entreat them to faith will be very similar to missionary work in other countries where the journey is long and the cost is high.

An additional interesting observation is the connection between integrity, a value for authenticity and presence leading many to choose not to engage in social media at all. But whether a Gen Zer is digitally connected or not, in-person communication and relationships are still viewed as the most genuine and real.

This value for justice will have a profound impact on what institutions or networks they will join. Because of their core value for justice, Gen Z will be reluctant to join things with exclusionary statements. Their awareness of the experiences of others, even those with whom they disagree, will impact their willingness to join things that they can't invite their friends to. This means institutions will have to find a way to express their values in a way that communicates the cultural core and what they are for, rather than what they are against.

In their own words

When asked about how Gen Z thinks about community and belonging, Reyna² observes 4 distinct groups in her Gen Z peers.

1. The activists – these individuals are aggressively trying to change the world
2. The victims/martyrs – these individuals seem to be more easily offended and often blame towards others for what is wrong
3. The anxious/depressed - these are individuals who feel overwhelmed by it all
4. The hedonists – these are individuals who see the world in chaos and choose to lean into coping mechanism that provide escape

Reyna was firm to express that her friends who fall within these different groups still all cared deeply about justice, they just respond differently to the injustice around them. She said they all want justice and truth. A desire for justice has been a hallmark of this generation since I started interviewing them in 2009. But it has been surprising how self-aware they are about this core value since such a young age.

Purpose

I would summarize the purpose to which Gen Z feels compelled towards is justice. When talking about purpose for their own lives, those interviewed spent a long time discussing spiritual maturity marked by resilience.

² This is Reyna Martinez's observation and articulation. Any reference to this should cite her as the original source.

Observations

- Shallowness detector - Shallowness was expressed as the opposite of spiritual maturity
- Still participate with processes if they have purpose
- Attracted to Kingdom, repelled by EMPIRE

The search for authenticity and stability has led those who claim Christianity to speak often of 'seeking the Kingdom.' The Gen Zers I have interviewed want to have a deep, organic experience of God and a faith community. They value process, if it has a real and lasting purpose. Filler programs, emotional manipulation or over-selling create a strong negative reaction. Pragmatism, combined with an intense desire for what is 'real' will cause them to pursue the Kingdom of God, while rejecting religion or empire (as some call it).

In their own words

- Admire people whose 'fruit' was deeper than surface level and were the same person when no one was watching.
- Self-awareness
- Having the ability to sit with another person in their pain
- Patience with other people when they are in frustrating or struggling situations
- Emotionally settled despite circumstances
- Not easily offended, but also not faking calm
- Consistent, constant, not easily triggered, of a sound mind
- Someone who has been through a lot of pain and become a resilient person, following God through it all

When asked how someone becomes spiritually mature, the group I interviewed said it was up to God and how serious the person was about being submitted to the Lord no matter what life brings. They saw people who learned how to advocate for others without enabling them.

One person also mentioned it was about embracing character growth over skill growth. They said they would follow a person who has earned the capacity to sit with others in their grief and pain.

Truth

Observations

→ How they identify truth: “I am seeking”

Gen Z might be the most inherently religious and spiritual generation in 80 years. Whether that religion is humanism, activism, hedonism, or one of the more easily recognized world religions, they are searching for justice and stability. But their lack of confidence in their worldview was striking. Usually that is something that should accompany their specific age and stage of development. It seemed as if they were robbed of the stability that comes from defining their faith and precociously accelerated towards the uncertainty of the ‘dark night’ without either the time or experience to emotionally handle it.

In their own words

When asked if there was a generalized ‘truth’ for their generation, they talked about justice and equality. They said one of the problems with each person finding their ‘own truth’ is that then no one can fully agree or have a shared ‘truth.’ For them this meant that no one’s truth was, in fact, really true.

They expressed sadness at this loss of ‘shared reality’ and I wondered if it was a contributing factor to the loneliness they felt. Connection is created in a deep sense by mirroring one another and having an experience of ‘mutual mind.’ This is where two people resonate with one another on a neurobiological level. The feeling of connection it creates is nonconscious and affects the whole body. But without a sense of shared reality, this type of connection would be quite difficult to make. The lack of ability to connect over past experiences would heighten the need to find connection through current, shared experiences.

Ministry

It was fascinating that none of them are interested in full time or vocational ministry. It was not an ambition for any of them, nor any of the Gen Zers I have interviewed since including those who run ministries. Those who run ministries are intentionally co-vocational. They would rather live a faithful life as a follower of Jesus than be a successful vocational minister.

For those who serve in church ministry, many said they find church boring. But choose to be there anyway because, “you can’t say you are part of something and not show up.”

When asked what they want out of ‘church’ they gave the following list:

- A new wineskin
- To build and discern the next chapter together
- To co-create instead of being told
- Experiential
- Real-time updated communication
- To be invited into the conversation

Gen Z has grown up with unending choices. They have learned how to navigate that world, and own their choices. Overall, they take commitment more seriously than the Millennial generational cohort. Again, the drive for stability and security comes to bare.

Gen Z has their own experiences of ‘church hurt’ and failures of institutions. Many of those I interviewed who serve in ministry were strongly anti-institutional. They want small, organic expressions of the Kingdom that God makes happen, or nothing at all. Some still serve in traditional churches though. When asked why, one said that the system is flawed and broken but that they want to help make it better. Another felt called into the gap created by a flawed church and to care for others so that they would not feel the same hurt. Some create communities of faith, but are adamant it is not church and refuse to call it church. For them, the stigma of ‘church’ are church-associated rituals and buildings, are so upsetting to them or their peers that they have recreated *ecclesia* but are not able to associate it with ‘church.’

I'm not sure current leadership in existing churches or ministries are aware of how stridently Gen Z is observing and judging them. Churches, ministries, and denominations may finally build the leadership pipelines long discussed, but the hour is too late. Gen Z does not want to take what is being handed to them. They also don't want to sustain the ministry empires built by previous generations. They are suspicious of recruitment to pipelines that don't help them develop the God dreams in their own heart. And they have no interest in being a statistic on someone's ministry success report. The older generations ignored them for too long, prioritizing church growth over discipleship and building their own legacy over developing others. The next 20 years will see many ministries close, but many new ones will also be birthed.

Every generation has its challenges, which carve and shape it into its own beautiful expression. There is much to be optimistic about for Gen Z. They will have convictions that change the world. They will challenge us and make us healthier. And they will do this with or without us. If we can hear their hearts and meet them where they are, they will benefit from our longevity and we will benefit from their justice.

To learn how to reach Generation Z. Purchase Jessie Cruickshank's book:
Ordinary Discipleship: How God Wired Our Brains for the Adventure of Transformation.

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