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What every Christian needs to know about Generation Z

Today's teenagers and 20s make up the first truly biblically illiterate generation. Tim Alford explores how the Church can best communicate the gospel to this unreached people group

What is the faith of the next generation worth to us? Because what we are doing isn't working. Analysis of the English Church Attendance Survey revealed that, on average, churches are losing 140,000 young people aged 14–16 every single week, and nearly half (48 percent) have fewer than five under-16-year-olds. Nick Shepherd, former chief executive of the Institute for Children Youth and Mission, points out that unless we change that trajectory, "those churches with fewer than five young people can literally be said to have no future".

Imagine you were commissioning a missionary from your local church to take the gospel to an entirely unreached people group. You would tell them to learn the language of the people and try to understand their customs and rituals. You'd probably encourage them to translate the scriptures, particularly the message of the gospel, into a language they understand. You would want them to build every cultural bridge possible in order to effectively communicate. Why is it, then, that the same missiology we would take for granted overseas, seems so foreign to us in our own land, where— in every respect — Generation Z are an unreached people group? Generation Z (those born between 1995-2012) are right in front of us. They're in our homes, our city centres and our schools. Yet, in large part, they're absent from our churches.

Generation Z are not only the largest generation in modern history, they are arguably the most influential. They have lived through unprecedented social and cultural change and as such are discontinuously different from the generations that preceded them.

It's important to note the oldest Gen Z'ers are now 24 years old and left their youth groups a long time ago – so this is not simply a youth work issue. It should matter to all of us, whatever our age or area of ministry. We should also note that the following seven hallmarks of Gen Z are not signs of youthful immaturity that this age group will eventually grow out of; they are deeply embedded generational paradigms that will shape the nature of the UK Church and its ministry in the years to come.

1. Recession marked



Gen Z'ers live in a post-9/11 world, which has been marked by financial crashes, economic recession and the War on Terror. They view the world as being broken and fragile. Because of this, they tend to be cynical about political leaders and the adults who voted for them. They want to undo the mistakes of the generations that preceded them and start again. Consider the narratives of some of their most popular films. The Hunger Games, The Maze Runner and Divergent all imagine a dark, dystopian future that is caused by the adults, and redeemed by the teenagers.

And it's not just fiction. The March for Our Lives movement, which is pushing for stronger gun violence prevention measures in the United States, is spearheaded by Gen Z'ers Emma González and Cameron Kasky. On 14 March 2018, following the death of 17 people at Parkland high school, thousands of young people participated in #NationalWalkoutDay, where students nationwide boycotted school to take a stand against gun violence.

On that day another Gen Z'er, Matt Post, gave a speech on Capitol Hill where he said: "The adults have failed us. This is in our hands now, and if any elected official gets in our way we will vote them out and replace them ourselves."

This is a generation that wants to completely reinvent everything that has gone before and start again.

2. Wi-Fi enabled



Gen Z have never known a time without smartphones. They are the "Wi-Fi in your pocket" generation.

According to Ofcom research, 11-15-year-olds spend six to eight hours a day consuming media. When Youth for Christ (YFC) asked 1,001 young people which activities they most enjoyed doing in their spare time, the top three responses all involved consuming media (YouTube, social media and TV/film). They also discovered that, while 94 per cent of young people go online every day, many (69 per cent) never attend a youth club of any kind.

Social media is where this generation is connected and shaped. It is thus our primary opportunity for influence. This is not without its challenges, of course. Excessive use of media can negatively affect brain development and identity formation, and it certainly has an impact on social skills. Perhaps most importantly, the ceaseless comparison and competition that social media enables is wreaking havoc on the mental health of an entire generation.

The answer, though, is not to simply tell Gen Z to "get off your phone". It's far more nuanced than that. My generation might say: "What's in front of you is real, digitalis fake," but this generation thinks about technology in a completely different way. Gen Z'ers are able to form real relationships via digital mediums, and their social circles are no longer limited by geography. This is why they experience genuine stress and anxiety

if they are separated from their phones. For them, switching off their iPhone is the equivalent of switching off reality itself.

What would it look like, I wonder, for the Church to prioritise the training and deploying of online pastors, engaging with young people in their native tongue?

3. Making a difference



Gen Z are self-starters, who through the internet, social media and in particular YouTube, are able to find whatever they're looking for without the help of intermediaries – such as libraries, shops, teachers or even youth workers. They're more independent and self-directed than any generation before them.

On 22 March 2019, an estimated 1.6 million young people around the globe walked out of school in protest at what they viewed as insufficient action being taken by governments to combat climate change. Greta Thunberg, a 16-year-old from Sweden, became the unexpected founder of this international youth movement. This astonishing achievement was only made possible because she is Wi-Fi enabled.

Anna Taylor, one of the four founders of the UK Students Climate Network, says: "It's all from Greta, yeah. It's gone viral. I'm in a group chat with a representative from every country. I'm the UK rep and there's a student from all the countries involved– there's an Italian representative, a German, someone from Belgium, New Zealand, America, Canada...We're coordinating our strikes across the globe to have more impact." Leadership for Gen Z looks much more like collaboration and contribution than command and control. So are we creating avenues in the Church for their voices to shape our programmes and ministries? Are our church governance structures ready to set loose a generation that is passionate and able to make a difference?

4. Family influenced



You might be surprised to learn that young people see their family as a massive positive influence. In the aforementioned YFC survey, 59 percent said family was the number one thing that made them feel good about themselves, 82 per cent said that making their family proud was their number one priority, and 73 percent of young people who believed in God said their family was the main influence on their faith.

Young people long for family, and the Church can and must be that for a generation who are not strangers to broken families, absent fathers and living between estranged parents. I love the moment the Apostle Paul gives this account of his ministry philosophy: “Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well” (1 Thessalonians 2:8). Are we sharing only the gospel with our young people, or are we inviting them to be part of our day-to-day lives too?

5. Visually orientated



In 2015 the official Oxford Dictionary's 'word' of the year was the "crying with laughter" emoji. This accurately reflects how the nature of communication has changed dramatically within a generation. For Gen Z, their language is more rooted in videos, GIFs and emojis than in spoken words.

This must have an impact on our communication of the gospel. A 40-minute entirely spoken presentation will not engage the Snapchat generation. The use of media, props, videos, photos and visual presentations is paramount if we are to communicate the unchanging message of the gospel in a way this generation can understand.

6. Sexually fluid



For Gen Z, tolerance is the ultimate value – the cultural North Star for most of their upbringing. Inclusivity, diversity and equality are the ideals that have shaped them. They are sexually and relationally amorphous, rejecting any labels that would box them in. The Voxburner Youth Trends Report found that most young people (59 per cent) have negative feelings towards labels of any kind when it comes to sexual orientation. A recent YouGov survey in the UK revealed that 49 per cent of people between 18-24 identify as something other than 100 per cent heterosexual.

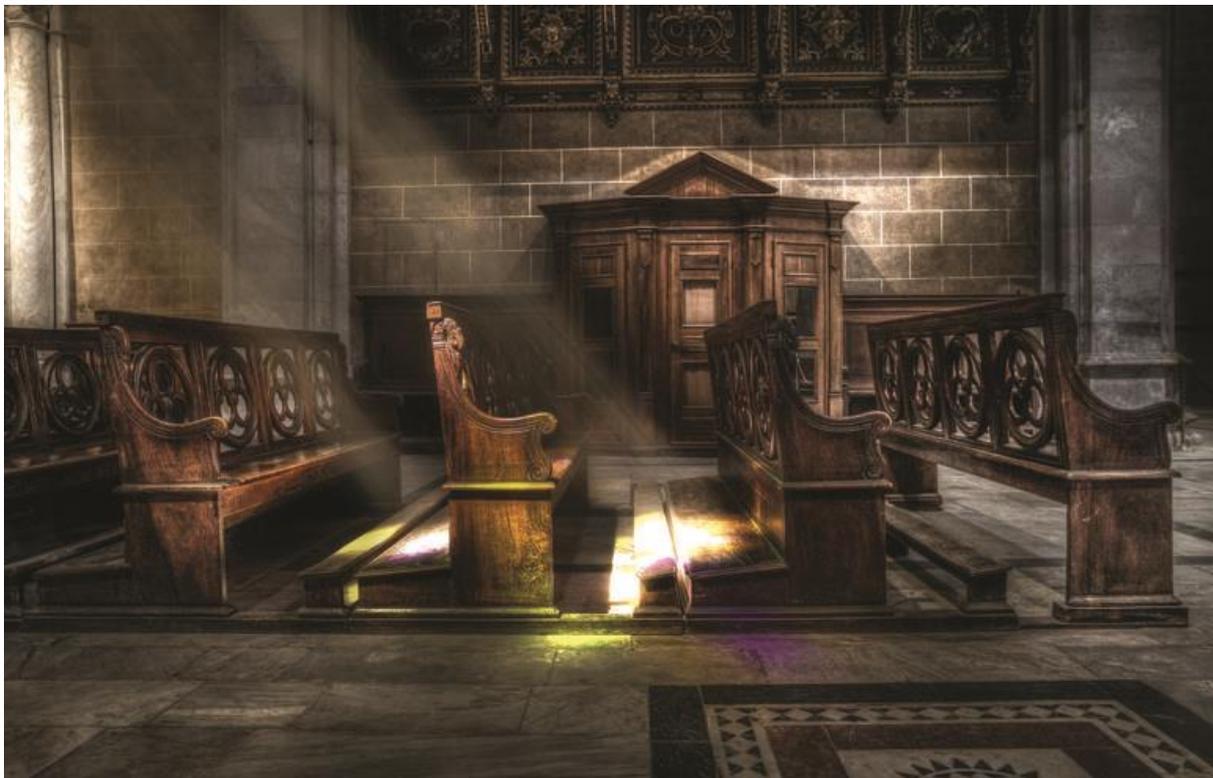
In Meet Generation Z (BakerBooks), James Emery White writes: "What is being revealed is an increasing sexual fluidity that refuses either the homosexual or heterosexual label. The idea is that both labels are repressive. Sexuality should be set free from any and all restrictions, and people should be allowed to follow their desires, moment by moment."

Gen Z reject sexual labels and believe individual sexuality should be expressed as and when they feel it appropriate. This is what theologian and youth ministry practitioner Andrew Root describes as the "Age of Authenticity", where the narrative of culture loudly

asserts: “If you desire it, you should have it.” In the age of authenticity, nothing that is external –whether it is a parent, peer group, the law or the scripture – is given more authority than that which is internal, because in the age of authenticity you are your desires– and thus freedom to fulfil your desires is no longer a mere pursuit of personal pleasure, it is amoral obligation. Truth is relative, and fulfilment comes primarily through discovering “who we really are” and having the freedom to authentically express that inner reality without hindrance.

It is for this reason some are reinterpreting scripture to conform to personal desire, rather than conforming their personal desire to scripture. Whatever our theology of human sexuality, the broadly accepted narrative of “whoever wants to find themselves must be true to their desires” is the opposite of the gospel, which teaches “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves” and, “whoever loses their life for me will find it” (Matthew 16:24-25, my emphasis).

7. Post-Christian



I’ll never forget the moment my wife, who is a primary school teacher, came home and told me one of her pupils had genuinely thought Christianity was a game on the X-Box 360.

Gen Z is the first truly post-Christian generation, having been raised by non-Christians. Thus they lack even the memory of the gospel story. They are almost entirely biblically illiterate.

In 2017 The Barna Group published some research that found that “For Gen Z, ‘atheist’ is no longer a dirty word: The percentage of teens who identify as such is double that of the general population.” Perhaps that sounds like bad news, but I’m not so sure! Gen Z

don't come with the hang-ups about Christianity – and Church in particular – that many millennials (those aged 23-38) do, and as such we have a clean slate, an opportunity to communicate the true beauty of the gospel, untarnished by generational assumptions. What is clear, though, is that we must never assume knowledge. Everything we communicate must be couched in explanation, and we must ruthlessly eliminate all religious jargon from our vocabulary if we are to communicate a clear gospel in a way Gen Z can engage with and understand.

Emery White presents us with this conundrum: “The challenges for the Church at such a time are profound .A generation that finds itself at the crux of such change has a significant responsibility for shaping the new ways of thinking that will define its own age but also the coming era. When Christians get it right at such times, adapting themselves to the changing culture and finding new language for timeless truths, the Gospel spreads more easily for years to come because it makes sense to people. However, when the church gets it wrong by resisting change and enshrining nostalgia, we risk apparent irrelevance and an upward struggle...The challenge is the same: To reinvent the Church without changing the message, to reach this generation for the sake of the age to come.”

The Church as family

One night a dad and his young sons sat down with a bowl of popcorn to watch a movie. They turned on Netflix and began scrolling through the seemingly infinite library of films to decide upon their viewing for the evening. After a while the dad landed on Die Hard and, being an irresponsible father, said: “Die Hard! Son, have you ever seen Die Hard? There's Bruce Willis. He's wearing a vest. It's incredible!” And the son replied: “Maybe Dad, but let's see what else there is.” So they continued to scroll, and that's when they saw The Lion King. And the son said (for the 100th time): “Dad! Let's watch The Lion King.”

Which movie did they watch that night? They watched The Lion King, of course. Why? Because in a family, the older generations are always willing to make personal sacrifices in order to include and engage the younger. This principle is foundational for healthy, loving and functional families.

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