Discipleship and Gen Y

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Abstract
This paper looks at some key characteristics of Generation Y and how that might shape our
discipleship and evangelism.
The Missing Generation

There are currently 7 million university and college students in the UK. Around less than 1% of students can be accounted for in churches or other Christian groups on campus. They, along with the rest of the 18-35’s, have been donned the ‘Missing Generation’ from church.

Therefore, to reach and release this generation we need to have a better understanding of how they differ from previous generations so that we can shape our approaches to call and disciple them more effectively.

As with every generation, there are generalisations made about their positive and negative traits. This paper will outline a number of these and their implications on discipleship and mission. It focuses on four key areas: Community, Spirituality, Finance and Commitment.

Generation Y

Sociologists have defined the current generation at university as Generation Y. Sometimes called the Millennials, they are those born in the 1980’s and 90’s. They grew up in relative stability with a growing economy and their parents had jobs for life with promotions.

1. Community

Gen Y are incredibly community-minded. They place a high value on family and are pro-marriage. The previous generation, “Gen X” are sometimes referred to as the “Friends generation”, partly because of the TV show but also due to the way that their friends became their families. For Gen Y, their families have become their friends, even their parents. They are the result of higher levels of parental nurturing and encouragement. They have less need to rebel because their parents have given them more space and less discipline. They are consequently more restrained than Gen X.

This focus on family means that church communities need to be like families, where students are generously welcomed and unconditionally loved. A key to discipleship is to share life, not just see students on Sundays or in meetings. Students want to really get to know others, be involved in their lives and they will be most influenced by those who let them do that – be that their hall mates, their sports team or their church.

They are a highly connected generation, with electronic media having a huge impact on the way they live their lives. Student workers need to be part of these online communities, communicate through them and understand, with a slightly critical eye, their effects. Media and technology have had a huge influence on the worldview and values of Gen Y. Even for

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those brought up in church, the media has had a much greater impact than most of the Christian doctrine they have been exposed to.\textsuperscript{6}

Authenticity is another important Gen Y value.\textsuperscript{7} They build community through collaboration, transparency and openness. Authority also comes from personal authenticity.\textsuperscript{8} They respect leaders who are themselves, who have integrity and aren’t putting on an act. What they see of church and individuals, both online and in person needs to be consistent and authentic. They value relational leadership where leaders are not on a pedestal but are approachable and able to be their friends.

\section*{2. Spirituality}

Gen Y are more spiritually aware than the previous generations. A recent article in the Telegraph\textsuperscript{9} stated that “teenagers and people in their early 20’s emerged as less likely to reject prayer than their parents’ generation”. Only 9\% of 18-24 year olds would never pray about anything compared to 17\% of 50-60 year olds.

For a lot of Gen Y, ethics is the new spirituality.\textsuperscript{10} They are a generation passionate about justice, whether or not they have a faith. For Christian ‘Gen Yers’, justice is part of their holiness and they will value being challenged will bring challenge around that area.

Gen Y aren’t cynical but are optimistic and highly tolerant of other people’s views and lifestyle choices. Their main goal in life is happiness for themselves and others and they are looking for a religion that helps with this goal.\textsuperscript{11}

They are described as having a ‘make do and mend’ approach to spirituality.\textsuperscript{12} Gen X had a ‘pick and mix’ approach which implies an active searching. In contrast, Gen Y are quite happy with the bits of spirituality that they’ve got and are not actively looking to extend it. They are happy to talk about faith and are often interested in how others see the world, but they are not looking to shift their thinking.

This desire for happiness and a ‘make do and mend’ approach can lead to another major discipleship issue. The trouble is that being a Christian doesn’t automatically make you happy. God doesn’t just fix our lives. As Christians, we still have to journey through the ups and downs of life, but we have a God who journeys with us through the good and the bad. What happens when life doesn’t go as we expected or wanted? This generation needs a good theology of suffering to have a flourishing, lifelong faith that can cope with the good and the bad of life. They need a theology that can be stretched so they don’t walk away as soon as they find something that doesn’t fit with their view of God.

\begin{thebibliography}{10}
\bibitem{6} Wilson, R. (2013) “Discipleship in a Digital Age”\url{www.fusion.uk.com/hello/resources/whitepapers}
\bibitem{7} “Making Sense of Generation Y: the world view of 15-25 year olds”, page 151.
\bibitem{9} \url{http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9953128/britons-still-believe-in-prayer-and-young-lead-the-way-poll-suggests.html}
\bibitem{11} “Making Sense of Generation Y: the world view of 15-25 year olds”, page 38.
\bibitem{12} “The Faith of Generation Y”, page 37.
\end{thebibliography}
Gen Y are mostly becoming Christians through friends who already know Jesus and live authentic lives in front of them. They need to see the difference that Jesus makes in our lives today, rather than just the promise of eternity.

There is also an interesting differentiation to be made between the concepts of guilt and shame for Gen Y. Guilt says “I’ve got something wrong”, whereas shame says “there is something wrong – you aren’t being the person you could be or ought to be”. Guilt is about sin: shame is about identity. Gen Y are more familiar with shame than guilt yet our evangelism message still focuses on guilt rather than shame. We need to be speaking to their identity, showing them how God sees them, loves them and values them as our first message.

3. Finance
Gen Y are the first generation in 50 years who will not be better off than their parents. With vast changes in the global economy there is a financial challenge that previous generations have not had to face. Many couples with two good salaries are not being able to afford houses until their mid 30's, except with help from family. Students are leaving university with major debt after years of grants and highly subsidised tuition fees. They are also leaving university into a difficult job market. This is a real shock to Gen Y who have been brought up through relative stability and have been told that anything is possible.

Gen Y watched their parents working long hours in jobs they didn’t love. They respect what they have done but want more than that for themselves. They want the dream of working hard but for less hours and for enough money to do all the other things they want to do. For some of them that is a pipe dream but others are managing it. We need to help them set good expectations of what is possible and make good decisions for their future, understanding the consequences.

4. Commitment
Another comment on Gen Y is their lack of commitment. They are seen to be people who either don’t commit or drop out when they do. However, many observers believe it is not a lack of commitment, but a delay of the onset of adulthood. Due to a number of different cultural causes, adulthood is beginning to be embraced later in life than in previous generations. Some researchers place it at around 21-25, but other studies place it as late as 28-30.

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13 “Reaching and discipling the missing generation” - https://soundcloud.com/dioceseoflondon/ruth-bushyager-bob-mayo-reaching-discipling-missing-generation
14 “Today’s young will end up 25% worse off than their Boomer parents”, Daily Mail, 11th October 2011 - www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2047665/Todays-young-end-25-worse-boomer-parents.html
It is part of the church’s role to call students into adulthood. To help them connect individually with God, have a vision beyond themselves and make good decisions. Encouraging them in their commitment is part of this but there can be very good reasons for students’ perceived lack of commitment. This generation is pulled in a number of different directions, with more options that ever before. It is important to have conversations about priorities and values rather than simply pushing them to turn up to things. The goal is for them to have balanced lives, where they spend time with God, in Christian community and also connected to the world. This is not achieved by them always being in Christian meetings.

There is a dichotomy in Gen Y: although they like to be connected and value relationship, they can also be very individualistic and can seem selfish to older generations. Students sometimes need help to realise that their behaviour has an impact on the wider community - that when they turn up or don't turn up, it makes a difference. They need to realise the potential they have and that the church is key in helping them realise this. Students can go from hardly turning up to being fully engaged simply because someone speaks into their life and believes in them.

Within a work context, most Gen Yers value their work-life balance more than the needs of the organisation and they are staying in jobs for shorter lengths of time. However, this isn’t surprising as organisations are no longer offering jobs for life and the development of staff is often low down the priority list. Gen Y are craving development and opportunity and if they get developed in the workplace they stay for years longer.

Considering this, it is important to think about what development opportunities are available to students within church. If students are treated as people who don't have much to contribute or as guests, they will see themselves in the same way and probably move on. Because of their age and some of the Gen Y generalisations, the potential of students can be underestimated. It can be easier to simply welcome them into your church community, feed them lots of food and give them a safe place to hide away from the craziness of student life. In contrast, releasing them into leadership can be a risk and requires time and strategy. Leadership potential can be well hidden, especially with the spirit of consumerism that is so rife in our culture, even in our churches. But God sees huge potential in Gen Y and the church has a part to play in raising up this generation of leaders who will be led by God and not by their culture.

Gen Y respond to visionary leadership. They want to be part of something bigger than themselves and play a significant part in it. That means we need opportunities for students to lead and not just small groups of other students but in all contexts - leading meetings, prayer, speaking, mission, organisation. Leadership training is now seen as a key part of education in schools. It is not just about completing tasks but learning responsibility and

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19 "It’s the church’s job to call students into adulthood", Fusion blog - http://www.fusion.uk.com/hello/fusionblog/its-the-churchs-job-to-call-students-into-adulthood.html
20 Crumpacker & Crumpacker (2007)
authority. Churches need to take risks to release students into leadership, just as Jesus did with his disciples. Sometimes it means that quality needs to be sacrificed but with the right support and accountability, the potential is vast.

There is another challenge for the church here: are we developing leaders or volunteers? Mike Breen from 3dm puts it like this: “While most churches believe they have leadership development programme, they actually have a volunteer programme. A volunteer is someone who executes someone else’s vision. A leader is someone with a vision of his or her own… Are our development programs about releasing leaders to the missional frontier? Or, more likely, are they about recruiting volunteers to keep the machine of the church running?”

At a basic level, discipleship is about enabling and encouraging people to be who they have been created to be. Gen Y are a dynamic generation with an entrepreneurial spirit but need help to engage fully and use what God has given them to shake up this world. They have been told that the world is their oyster but what does that look like in their first job post-uni doing admin in an organisation they aren’t passionate about? A key discipleship lesson for Gen Y is summed up in this quote by Mother Theresa: “Be faithful in the small things because it is in them that your strength lies”.

Psalm 145: 4 & 13

“One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts… Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and your dominion endures through all generations.”

Further Reading


Living Mission (2013) – Swafffield, M. & Wilson, R.