

For the

# LIFE of the WORLD

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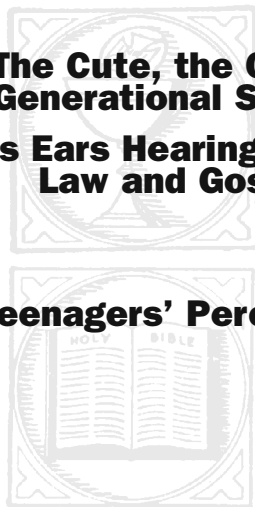
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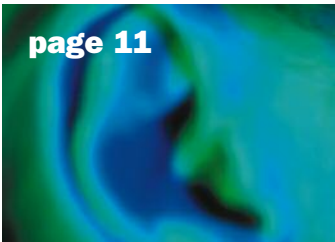


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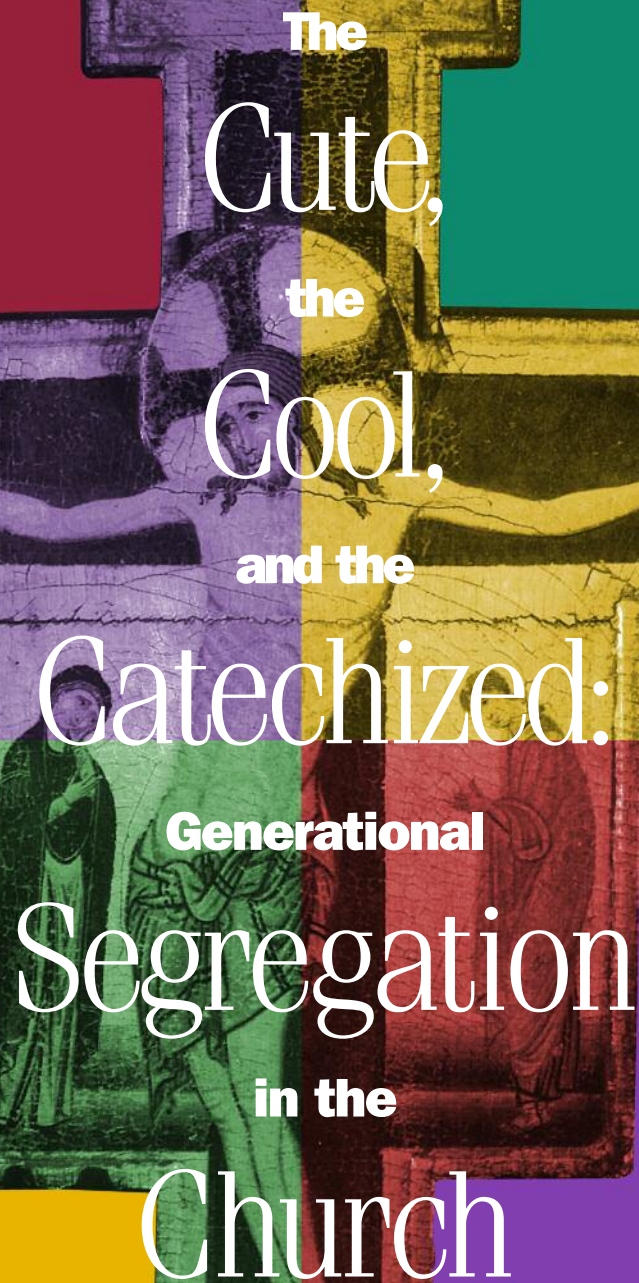
By Dr. Barbara J. Resch, Coordinator of Music Education, Indiana University—Purdue University Fort Wayne, and Director of Children's Choir, St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Ind.

Planners of youth gatherings and youth services typically assume that teenagers will be most open to the hearing of God's Word when it is carried by the styles of rock and popular music. There are several concerns with this approach to choosing music for worship, not the least of which is that it may be based upon a false assumption about teens' relationship to the music they consider "theirs."

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The  
Cute,  
the  
Cool,  
and the  
Gatechized:  
Generational  
Segregation  
in the  
Church

by Gene Edward Veith

The Valley Cathedral, a Phoenix mega-church affiliated with the Assemblies of God, offers three services: The “traditional service”—that is to say, a traditional Assemblies of God pentecostal service with old-time gospel music, hand-clapping, and speaking in tongues—is for the older members. The “contemporary service”—with electric guitars, drums, and praise songs—is for the no-longer young baby boomers. Then, presumably for those neither old nor middle aged, for the young people and Generation-Xers, there is a service “rooted in high-church rites and liturgies.”

According to the pastor, Dan Scott, author of *The Emerging American Church*, the kind of worship that will wither away is

the non-liturgical lecture-style services that characterizes much of Reformed Protestantism. “What is disappearing,” he says, “is the middle ground between the liturgical and the contemporary.”

Lutheran casualties of the worship wars might be surprised to hear that liturgical worship is now being hailed as the style of both the present and the future. Writing in a major evangelical journal, Daniel Harrell cites what he describes as “post-contemporary worship.” “Surprisingly,” he writes, “from the standpoint of younger generations, this new ‘seeker-sensitive’ version of Christian worship left many longing for some of those things that had been identified as obstacles . . . Whatever the reason, many younger leaders are turning from seeker-sensitive forms toward recapturing ambiguity and antiquity.” He goes on to describe how Generation-Xers are attracted to ancient rituals, icons, and Gregorian chants, though often as an eclectic sampling with little theological coherence.

Will it be possible for these churches to maintain a Lutheran style with an evangelical substance? Probably not. A new sacramentalism is arising in various Reformed church bodies, along with accusations of “crypto-Lutheranism.”

Certainly, even the evangelicals—including the mega-churches—are troubled by the worship wars. Rev. Scott, he of the three generational services, is concerned about this three-way generation gap. “What we are seeing is a struggle between three very different generations, each of which rejects the others’ approach to worship,” he said. “This is distressing, to say the least. At some point, you have to find some source of unity.”

Even within regular-sized, one-worship-service congregations, there is generational segregation. Very young children sing cute baby songs; they play games and color in Sunday school and often have their own sermons, an object lesson in the front of the sanctuary, with the pastor in his robes squatting down to be on their level.

With children who have reached middle school, though, the fun and games stop. Confirmation class force-feeds them memory work and serious theology.

“Youth group,” though, is something else again. Teenagers lead each other around blindfolded in “trust walks” and fall backwards into each others’ arms to develop self-esteem and to build faith in each other—never mind that self-esteem and faith in human beings does not quite accord with what the Bible teaches about sin and faith in Christ. And never mind that such relationship-building exercises that teach you to trust your friends fly right in the face of the other major message of youth ministry: Don’t give in to peer pressure! It seems you had better not trust your friends after all.

Then there are Singles Groups, then Couples Groups, and, once children come along, Young Marrieds, a group which often stays together until, to their horror, another group gets organized that is younger than what they have become. All along, there are the older members of the congregation who go to Voters’ meetings, serve in church offices, put on the church dinners, and serve as the dependable backbone of the congregation. Often, though, each group has its own agenda, with little interaction with the others.

I do not really intend to put down the age stratification in the church. Clearly, there are different developmental stages in children. Adults, as they go through the different stages of their lives, profit from the mutual support of fellow Christians at the same stage.

Problems come when the different stages and the different groups within the church are unrelated to each other, when they become separate and incompatible, when the church is not unified. Ideally, these stages should be developmental, allowing a member to grow up from Baptism on into the full, shared life of a spiritual community, in which a wide diversity of ages and sensibilities come together in the Body of Christ.

How is this done? By catechesis. As the note in the Catechism reminds us, the questions and answers “drawn up with great earnestness of purpose” by Dr. Luther “are no child’s play” but are “for both young and old.” “As for myself,” said Luther, “let me say that I, too, am a doctor and a preacher—yes, and as learned and experienced as any,” and yet “I must still read and study the Catechism daily.” Indeed, “I cannot master it as I wish, but must remain a child and pupil of the Catechism.”

This involves a process by which children and teenagers are formed into fully-functioning worshippers, initiated into the whole life of the congregation, in which all—regardless of their age or interest groups—come together in the Presence of Christ. Young children, confirmands, teenagers, Generation-Xers, middle-aged Baby Boomers, and retirees should all be growing ever more deeply in Word and Sacrament, worship and the Christian life, as their capacities and life experiences make the Catechism relevant in new and multi-faceted ways.

Our habit of age stratification derives largely, no doubt, from the habit imposed by the schools, which sort diverse children according to the one criterion of what age they are. The Catechism reflects a different educational tradition, the developmental approach of the classical liberal arts, in which grammar (learning content) leads to dialectic (understanding the content through questions and answers) which leads to rhetoric (expressing and applying one’s understanding).

It is much easier for very young children to memorize Bible verses and the Catechism (the grammar of Christian education) than it is for middle school children, the age when catechetical instruction often begins. Young adolescents—already in a mood to question authority and to “talk back”—are developmentally ready for dialectic, the give and take, the questioning of “what does this mean?” that is reflected in the very question and answer format of the Catechism. Teenagers are indeed at the stage of trying to express themselves and to reach out to their peers, the rhetoric stage that in part justifies some of the conventional youth group exercises. This is the stage in which they can best learn to apply their faith in both the realistic temptations they are facing in their lives and in a full participation in the worship and sacramental life of the congregation.

Then adults, as they take on themselves the various vocations—as parents, as servant/employees, as masters/bosses—described in the Table of Duties, and as their life struggles give them more experience in cross-bearing, can find themselves delving deeper and deeper into the truths of God’s Word.

In the meantime, everyone is worshipping together in a

liturgy that is truly trans-generational and, extending back through time, multi-generational. Everyone worships in a style that is not a matter of their particular favorite kind of music—whether “big band,” soft rock, or grunge metal—but in a style that connotes “church,” following a form not because it comes back in vogue, but because it bears God’s gifts.

A major problem with the current generational segregation is that, in the crassest pragmatic terms, it does not really work. Much of the child-oriented material aims at cuteness, but cuteness is for adults. Children themselves do not relate to each other on the basis of cuteness and are often embarrassed by the baby-songs they are asked to sing. Teach them to sing hymns, teach them to chant psalms and sing the liturgy. In this way, they will feel the profound satisfaction of actually participating with the grown-ups, a sense of acceptance and belonging that children crave.

As for teenagers and young adults, the attempts to cater to them by trying to be fashionable only comes across as manipulative and—since adults can never be up to date, and it is embarrassing for them to try—lame. “The church always goes wrong when it tries to appear cool,” Generation-Xer Tom Beaudoin has commented. “It never goes wrong when it tries to attend to people’s deepest thirst.”

Beaudoin, the author of *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, does advocate setting aside some “generational space” within a congregation so that people of a particular age can have fellowship with their peers. But “worship needs to be something shared by everyone,” he insists. “When you set up Gen-X young adult ministries, they can’t be allowed to become a church within a church.”

Nor is he in favor “of taking Smashing Pumpkins and Sarah McLachlan and making that church music,” he says. “What works for us in our secular lives doesn’t necessarily have to work for us at church. To be honest, I find most Gen-Xers suspicious when the church comes too closely to resemble what they’re doing in their secular lives.”

“There seems to be a both/and sensibility about Gen-Xers toward church services,” he says, echoing a distinctly Lutheran concept.

“We tend to want both our secular lives, our CDs, our Internet relationships, attention to fashion, our own culture, our movies, and something else, something different, maybe even more traditional liturgy, maybe more traditional forms of worship.”

After all, what both children and young adults yearn for is a sense of belonging, something that cannot be achieved when they are segregated in their own insulated worlds within the church. Nor can older adults feel a sense of belonging when their church casts out what is meaningful to them in a futile attempt to please the young. The fact is every generation belongs in church, because every generation belongs to Christ.

*Gene Edward Veith is Professor of Humanities at Concordia University, Mequon, Wisconsin*

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