

For the

LIFE of the WORLD

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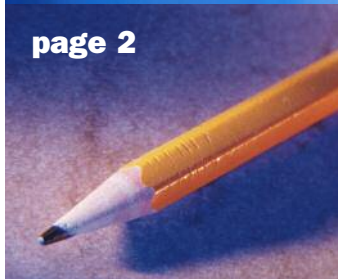


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For the **LIFE** of the **WORLD**

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Though their parents and grandparents lived through war on a far more colossal scale, many Baby Boomers took the opportunity to rebel, not only against what they considered an unjust war, but against the values and mind-set of their parents.

The Baby Boomer generation considered themselves different from the previous generation, and they were. A generation gap opened up. This was first noticed in the 1950s, as alienated youth began complaining that "my parents just don't understand me," and their parents admitting that, "yes, we sure don't."

Soon, a youth subculture developed. Music played a defining role as radio stations and record companies churned out rock 'n' roll for affluent young buyers—music which articulated their preoccupations and gave shape to their desires. While it is true that the silent majority of young people in the 1960s were law-abiding and relatively conservative, few were untouched by the more extreme manifestations of what began to be known not only as a sub-culture but a counter-culture. Not growing out of the infantile "pleasure principle" and refusing to acknowledge society's rules, many young people of the 1960s staged the "sexual revolution." Drugs, eastern mysticism and radical politics were other phases of the untrammelled pursuit of self-gratification.

When the hippies and the yuppies grew up, some of them reacted against the follies of their youth. Others brought their counter-culture with them into the American mainstream, so that today, Baby Boomer values rule in academia, government and the media. What was once a counter-culture has become the establishment.

The next generation gap

A funny thing happened when the Baby Boomers became parents. With supreme justice, their children rebelled against them. To the extent mom and dad had bought into the counter-culture, their children tended to go in the opposite direction. Fathers who had fought with their fathers over long hair now fought with their own sons who shaved their heads. Instead of the bright colors, flowing robes and floral patterns of Sixties clothing, the next generation wore black, leather and tattoos. Rock concerts had been love-ins of happy, melodic music and communal solidarity; the punk rock and heavy metal of the next generation featured harsh noise, depressing lyrics and mosh pits where concertgoers slammed into each other in a violent parody of dancing. Parents who believed in flower power often had to deal with children paralyzed by cynicism. The simpering "peace and love" ideology of the Sixties was mocked by the violence and nihilism of the new pop culture.

And no wonder. The Baby Boomers split up their families with carefree abandon, which meant that their children were victimized by broken homes. Baby Boomer parents were so self-absorbed that they often forgot to raise their children. They liberated their babies and made school fun. Now their children lacked discipline and bitterly resented their useless educations. The Baby Boomers initiated the sexual revolution; now their children had to deal with AIDS. The Baby Boomers started the vogue of drugs; now their children were left with mental breakdowns and twelve-step programs. The Baby Boomers thought their ideals of peace, love and new consciousness would

change the world; their children saw that it was all a big lie.

Unlike the Boomers, members of the so-called Generation X dislike being all grouped together under a generational stereotype. Whether they are "slackers," paralyzed by apathy and hopelessness or driven achievers and money-makers, they tend to have a cynical edge and a wholly admirable distrust of phoniness. Another trait is their frustration that Baby Boomers, however old they get, still demand all the attention.

How not to minister to the different generations

It has been said that the major problem of Baby Boomers is that they refuse to grow up. Though adults, they reject adult responsibilities. While this, like other generational assertions in this essay, is a sweeping generalization with many exceptions, it contains much truth.

For example, notice how aging Boomers still tend to listen to the same music they listened to when they were sixteen. We Baby Boomers (and remember I include myself in all of these criticisms) do not consider that it might be a sign of some infantile clinging to childhood when we do not allow our taste to change and mature. We tend to think that we are the ones who are not only cool but contemporary.

Many churches today feel the need to be contemporary. The assumption is that in order to reach people the church should throw off its old-fashioned styles and get with the times. The hoary liturgy should be done away with and those archaic hymns should be replaced with music people are listening to today.

Notice that these assumptions—that old forms are not relevant, that people today are somehow different from those of the past, that being alive means being entertained—are relics of the Baby Boomer generation. In fact, it is usually Baby Boomer pastors who are implementing these kinds of reforms.

Now here is the irony, which is immediately recognized by Generation X-ers—contemporary worship services, with their "contemporary" music, are seldom contemporary at all. The ubiquitous "praise songs" have more to do with the style of Peter, Paul, and Mary than with actual contemporary music today.

Certainly, Baby Boomers often do demand their kind of music in church. This is another one of their (our) traits—to be demanding and self-absorbed and intolerant of other styles. The World War II generation never demanded worship services with Big Band music.

It should also be recognized that what might work for the Baby Boomer mind does not necessarily work for Generation X-ers. Much of the panoply of church growth techniques are designed for the former. Generation X-ers tend to be skeptical of attempts to manipulate them.

They tend to see right through slick programs and fake friendliness that many churches resort to in an attempt to reach them.

Though both Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers represent "lost generations," it may be that the latter holds more promise. Perhaps their children—already the subject of scrutiny as "Generation Y"—will achieve normalcy and the obsession with generational differences will fade away. In the meantime, it is instructive to note the yearning expressed by a number of X-ers for authenticity and spiritual substance.

Many churches today feel the need to be contemporary. The assumption is that in order to reach people the church should throw off its old-fashioned styles and get with the times. Notice that these assumptions—that old forms are not relevant, that people today are somehow different from those of the past, that being alive means being entertained—are relics of the Baby Boomer generation. In fact, it is usually Baby Boomer pastors who are implementing these kinds of reforms.

Consider the Lutheran group *Lost and Found*, whose music with its "alternative" sound is genuinely contemporary, as opposed to, say, their Baby Boomer counterpart Barb and Dave. In their song, "Opener," they offer a Generation X flavored indictment of church-growth-style worship services. Instead, they crave substance, namely, the Body and Blood of Christ:

*I'm looking for something stronger—Than my own life these days,
Yet the church of my childhood—Seems like the YMCA.*

*Well, every Sunday—Is just like the last,
As if the church has no history—And the people have no past.*

*We just sing what we like to sing—And we preach about the news,
And think of some new thing—Just to fill up the pews.*

*I want palms on Palm Sunday—And Pentecost still to be red.
I want to drink of the Wine—And eat of the Bread.*

*And they search for attendance—While I starve for transcendence.
But I count among this Body—Of both the living and the dead.*

The poignant emphasis the singer puts upon the word starve—"while I starve for transcendence"—expresses well the spiritual dilemma of our day. The Baby Boomers, in their narcissism, prefer a touchy-feely, emotional, entertaining, self-aggrandizing approach to everything from education to the workplace, including church. The next generation—casualties of what the Boomers have done to the culture—are often cynical, depressed and sometimes to the point of nihilism. They yearn for something real and authentic, but everything they see in this media-saturated commercialistic culture they have inherited seems phony. Maybe everything is phony, which is a refrain of postmodernism, so that the only proper response is a detached yet bitter irony.

Churches, tragically, play into this perception. Most churches today have been taken over by the Baby Boomer mentality, exhibiting the values of mass-market commercialism, the rejection of the past and hedonistic individualism. Meanwhile, those who may never have known a stable family yearn for a sense of belonging to some community bigger than themselves. They are "looking for something stronger / than my own life." They "starve for transcendence."

This is why I believe Lutheranism holds such potential for the next century if churches can be found to practice it. To a generation hungering for belonging, we can offer membership in a "Body—Of both the living and the dead." To those hungering for something real, we can offer the Real Presence of Jesus Christ.

The other good news for the church is that we Baby Boomers are getting old and will soon die out.

From generation to generation

It is true that American society today is generationally segmented. In fact, more generations and sub-divisions of generations have been identified. Even within a particular generation, there are hosts of sub-groups. These often identify themselves with trivial signs, such as taste in music.

Notice what happens when a church aims itself, through its music or worship style, at one particular generation or sub-group. The others, in this generational and cultural crazy-quilt that is the typical American congregation, will be alienated. What is happening in church will appear to be geared for the particular privileged group.

When churches go to a "contemporary service," older parishioners of the World War II generation object. How could they be expected not to? Those who have devoted their lives to the

church for decades feel, as one told me, that "they have taken away my church." It is unfair to categorize such objections, as is often done, as being overly tradition-bound or as some unwillingness to evangelize. They are responding both to the feeling of being unwanted in their own church and to the fact that they can hardly worship in such an alien language.

The answer, however, is not to give them a Big Band service. Nor to give Generation X a punk or hip-hop or death metal service. The answer is in the genius of the hymnbook.

When we are singing hymns in church, we are not following the preferred "style" of anyone in the congregation. This is church music, wholly different, whatever its origins, from the currently preferred musical taste of any of the generations assembled to worship. No one is offended; no one is excluded; everyone is lifted out of a particular time, generation or in-group, into the extra-ordinary experience of worship.

In *The Lutheran Hymnal*, one can hardly find a trace of Glenn Miller, though his band was very big in 1941, when the hymnal was first published. *Lutheran Worship* of 1982 has nary a disco tune. Perhaps its most up-to-date music can be found in the liturgical settings, which are far more "contemporary" than the 1960s-era praise songs that are now brought in to replace them. There are 20th century hymns, such as those by the great composer Ralph Vaughn Williams, but there are few, if any, concessions to the year's Top Forty. The fact is, pop music of every kind is excluded, since fashions, by their very nature, come and go. Furthermore, church music is to have a very different use than the music put out by the entertainment industry, namely, to be sung corporately (most pop music works at best only as a solo performance) under the Word and in the presence of God. Music with origins in the folk culture (the old hymns specifically passed down from generation to generation) or the high culture (compositions old or new of artistic greatness) has the capacity to be universal, transcending time and place as Christ's church is supposed to do.

The Christian church, St. Paul tells us, "consists of many diverse members who come together in the unity of the Body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12: 12-27). "There should be no division in the body" (12:25), we are warned, so that generational differences, like those of "ethnicity, race, gender or social class" (Gal. 3:28), must not be allowed to get in the way of the unity we have in Jesus Christ.

This unity extends through time, "throughout all generations," including those generations of the past. In a typical church service, the hymns that are sung literally do span the generations. A typical worship service thus exemplifies the commerce of ages that is intrinsic to the communion of saints.

A new baby represents a new generation, but the baby is baptized into the one Body of Christ. In church, the old and young, rich and poor, parents and children, Boomers and X-ers, kneel together in prayer, hear the Gospel each of them desperately needs and join together in the unfathomable spiritual intimacy with Christ and with each other, that is Holy Communion.

There are different generations, but they are all equally in need of Christ. The Church is the place where generational differences are to be transcended, not reinforced. Where ephemeral fashions and cultural distinctions are subsumed into an eternal perspective, into a kingdom which "endures from generation to generation" (Daniel 4:34). Only a church which resists being merely of one generation can be relevant to them all.

Dr. Gene Edward Veith is Dean of Arts and Sciences at Concordia University, Mequon, Wis.