

Generation X and the Church of the Nazarene

Kenneth E. Crow

Generation X is the focus of considerable interest in the Church of the Nazarene. We want to be effective in ministry to this group and we are concerned about the impact they will have on our ministry. The birth cohort labeled “Generation X” has also been called the “Baby Busters,” and sometimes the “13th Generation.” Members of this cohort were probably born from 1965 through 1975, although some writers stretch that period another eight to ten years (1965-1985) to make it similar in duration to the baby boomer cohort.

Some of what we are being told about this birth cohort is undoubtedly accurate and insightful. However, the popular literature in this area suggests the need for caution since much of the material being produced is offensive to the very people we wish to serve more effectively.

There are several problems. First, while members of this birth cohort share the experience of coming of age during the seventies and eighties, they are too diverse a group for simple descriptions. Xers have been portrayed with such contrasting descriptions “as slackers and activists, grunge kids and techno whizzes, passive MTV consumers and creative artists” (Andy Crouch, *Christianity Today*, November 11, 1996: 31). They are either the “disillusioned generation” — alienated from God and society — or the “proactive generation” — responsibly addressing the challenges of modern life — depending on the viewpoint of the author.

Many of the descriptions are, unfortunately, insulting. Marc Spiegler, writing in *American Demographics*, expressed the hope that his series would not be called the Generation X column since, “For those of us actually inhabiting this particular demographic niche, few terms ignite more loathing.” He argued that “the term is so ridden with negative connotations that no one in their right mind would willingly slap it on themselves.” His research suggests that most popular descriptions fit a small segment of the cohort rather than most members. He says the label “arose around the same time as *Time* magazine’s famously sloppy ‘twentysomething’ article, which kicked off the myth of the slacker. At that time, the president of the well-respected market research firm where I worked asked me to look into the phenomenon, using our extensive attitudinal database. I dutifully ran the numbers, and came to a fairly clear conclusion: The only cohort significantly different from its predecessors were white and well-educated. In other words, the children of *Time* editors and their buddies” (*American Demographics*, December 1996: 27).

A second problem is that marketing and ministry observations about Generation X may contribute to stereotypical thinking about this birth cohort. Stereotypes about any group may include some element of truth. Problems arise when the truth about a few is generalized to describe the group.

For example, the generalization that Xers are religious consumers, picking and choosing from the buffet of religious options, seems to be based on the fact that “10% regularly divide their attendance between two or more churches.” The stereotype ignores the fact “half of the young adults (52%) claim that they always attend the same church” and that another “one-third

(31%) say they usually attend the same church, but visit some others in the area” (Barna, 1992: 133).

In 1994, *Newsweek* magazine published an article called “Generalizations X” which argued that twenty-somethings have been the victim of unfair and untrue stereotyping. The article says, “There are 38 million Americans in their 20s, but there are only two generalizations we can make about them with any degree of certainty: they are Americans, and they are in their 20s” (Jeff Giles, *Newsweek*, June 6, 1994, page 63).

“To put it simply, people in their 20s have suffered through so many negative labelings that they’re label-phobic. Any kind of label, no matter how seemingly innocuous, will go over wrong. And vis-à-vis “Gen X,” as my writer friend Frank, 27, pithily put it: ‘That term’s not at all multicultural; it’s just Douglas Coupland’s friends. I’d only use it in a sarcastic way.’ I advise you to do the same” (Marc Spiegler, *American Demographics*, December 1996: 27). Douglas Coupland wrote the 1991 novel, *Generation X*, which labeled the cohort.

A third problem is that ministry strategies directed toward Generation X may be, or may seem to be, manipulative. This is the cohort that is presumed to be more aware of marketing exploitation. As Marc Spiegler describes this problem, “our ire’s a natural reaction for a generation that’s watched more TV than our predecessors, and thus developed greater sensitivity to marketing of all sorts, especially niche targeting. As the social-criticism journal *The Baffler* (put out, yes, by people in their 20s) has repeatedly trumpeted, American advertising thrives off invented hipness. ‘I’m tired of everything I do being termed Gen X,’ says waitress/painter Meliz, 25. ‘It’s just a little tag attached to youth culture’ To us, the phrase ‘Gen X’ screams, ‘Duck, you’re in the crosshairs!’” (Marc Spiegler, *American Demographics*, December 1996: 27).

In fact, Generation X is a conceptual fiction. It is a media and marketing creation rather than a self-conscious group. It is a category of people characterized by variety rather than uniformity. Still, there are some things that seem clear about this birth cohort which may be important for effective ministry.

First, the life experiences shared by members of any birth cohort affect their beliefs and attitudes.

Coming of age during the fifties was a somewhat different experience than coming of age in the seventies and eighties. Susan Littwin, in *The Postponed Generation*, identifies several significant changes in the American culture. The relative prosperity of the fifties and sixties produced a sense of entitlement which resulted in unrealized expectations. A higher proportion of Americans went to college and it became harder to get the good jobs that a college degree had promised. Child rearing became more permissive. Schools moved toward more individualized instruction. Divorce became more acceptable (1986: 19-39).

Undoubtedly these and other changes have affected Generation X. The challenge is to accurately assess the nature and extent of the effects. Most of the Generation X articles and books written, the sermons preached, and the seminars presented attempt to identify these effects. There are many helpful insights in the articles, books, sermons, and seminars. Unfortunately, there are also many extravagant assertions which leave the very people we wish to effectively serve saying, as noted above, “few terms ignite more loathing” than “Generation X” (Marc Spiegler, *American Demographics*, December 1996: 27).

The challenge can be illustrated. Some Xers are no doubt accurately described by labels like “slackers” or “the disillusioned generation.” However, other Xers would be more accurately described as “the proactive generation.” It was a Generation Xer, Wendy Kopp, who founded *Teach for America*. This organization places well-prepared Xers in one- or two-year assignments in those inner city or rural schools which have difficulty recruiting good teachers. In the last six years 18,000 have applied and 3,000 have been placed (*Swing*, April 1996: 47).

People who think in stereotypes have always dismissed the worthy members of the maligned group as rare and atypical. However, while Wendy Kopp is noteworthy, she is only one of many Xers who are deeply committed, disciplined, creative contributors to the American culture.

Generation X stereotypes seem to give a clear, if perhaps somewhat overstated, picture of the cohort. The “typical” Xer presents some clear challenges for the church, but at least he/she is clearly identified. Unfortunately, this sense of clarity is may lead us to decisions and ministries which miss, and perhaps offend, most Xers.

“Years ago, sociologists frequently spoke of *national character* and *modal personality* in this regard. Whereas I spoke of the value of individualism in American society, it is an easy jump from that to thinking of the “typical” American as being individualistic; similarly, we may think of the ‘typical’ Japanese as polite, the ‘typical’ Italian as emotional, and the ‘typical’ German as rigid. In recent years, sociologists have devoted less attention to such concepts since they tend to create mistaken views about all the members of a given society being alike” (Babbie, *The Sociological Spirit*, page 99).

When broad generalizations make us more sensitive to human need, they serve the church. However, when they cause us to overlook the unique needs and strengths of individuals and subgroups within any generation, they do not serve us well. Therefore, it is important to note that in addition to the shared life experiences of a birth cohort, other important factors shape every group of people.

Second, the myth of the typical Generation Xer should be replaced with the reality that there is significant variety within this generation.

In 1994, *Newsweek* magazine dealt with this issue. An article called “Generalizations X” identified seven misleading generalizations about the cohort:

- Myth One: They’re slackers
- Myth Two: They’re whiners
- Myth Three: Generation X is white
- Myth Four: They’re all psychically damaged children of divorce
- Myth Five: Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain was Generation X incarnate and beloved by all
- Myth Six: They’ll buy anything
- Myth Seven: Generation X exists

If these are some of the prominent myths about Generation X, what are the facts? One source of good data is the General Social Surveys. These surveys have been conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago most years since 1972. Each survey uses an independently drawn sample of non-institutionalized English-speaking persons aged 18 or older living in the United States. Most years there have been about 300 respondents in the 18 to 29 year-old age group. With a sample of that size the margin of error

would be plus or minus 6% at the 95 percent confidence level. In other words, if all non-institutionalized English-speaking adults had been surveyed, the chances are about 19 out of 20 that the results would not differ from these findings by more than 6 points.

The Official Guide to American Attitudes summarizes General Social Survey responses in a variety of areas. Throughout the book, summary tables break out responses by age group. Among the age categories is one for 18 to 29 year-olds, the age in 1994 of the cohort born between 1965 and 1976. The following representative tables highlight some of the diversity to be found in Generation X around religious issues.

First, there has been some speculation that Generation X is largely unchurched. According to this reasoning, Generation X will not be able to return to the faith of their youth, as members of earlier cohorts tend to have done, because they have no religious background.

Table 1 is, therefore, somewhat reassuring. In fact, 8% of the Generation Xers say they were not raised in any religion. If there are 38 million Xers, as *Newsweek* reported, that would be more than 3 million people for whom ministry approaches which assume a religious background will not be effective. On the other hand, a large majority (87%, or about 33 million) say they were raised in the Christian religion — either Protestant (52%) or Catholic (35%).

Table 1
RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)
Protestant	52%
Catholic	35%
Jewish	2%
Other	3%
None	8%

Source: General Social Surveys - 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 178.

*Responses to the question, "In what religion were you raised?"

Similarly, when asked for their religious preference, 16% of Generation Xers indicate no religious preference, but three-fourths (76%) think of themselves as Christian — either Protestant (47%) or Catholic (29%).

With 38 million members in the cohort, 16% would be about 6 million people. We will need better approaches to reach those 3 million Xers who have no religious heritage at all and the additional 3 million or so who appear to have rejected the religion in which they were raised. At the same time, our ministry strategies need to take into account the fact that about 35 million Xers say they were raised in a Christian Religion.

Religious preference, of course, is not the same as religious belief. There has been some fear that Generation Xers do not believe in God. The 1994 General Social Survey asked, "Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God?" Table 2 summarizes

responses. Half (53%) of the Generation X cohort members say they believe in God without any doubts, “I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.” Another 21% believe, but have some doubts. This is not to say that everyone who believes would agree with Nazarene doctrine, or that all believers practice their faith. Still, this cohort is not made up primarily of people who are confirmed unbelievers.

Table 2
BELIEF IN GOD*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)
No doubts	53%
Believe, but have doubts	21%
Believe sometimes	4%
Believe in a higher power	8%
Don't know, no way to find out	6%
Don't believe	4%

Source: General Social Surveys - 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 181.

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because “Don’t know” and no answer are not included.

*Responses to the question, “Which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God? 1) I don’t believe in God; 2) I don’t know whether there is a God and I don’t believe there is any way to find out; 3) I don’t believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind; 4) I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others; 5) While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God; 6) I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.”

Generation Xers tend toward the Nazarene position in their beliefs about the inspiration of the Bible. As table 3 reports, about three out of ten (28%) affirm a more fundamentalist belief that, “The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word,” while half (52%) say they believe “The Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word.”

Table 3
 BELIEFS ABOUT
 THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE *

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)
Literal word of God	28%
Inspired word of God	52%
Ancient Book of moral precepts	16%

Source: General Social Surveys- 1984 and 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 195.

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because "Don't know" and no answer are not included.

* Responses to the question, "Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? 1) The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; 2) The Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word; or 3) The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men."

Faithful practice of religion is more problematic. In fact, it seems probable that in every cohort for the last 2,000 years many more people thought of themselves as Christians and believed in God and the Bible than attended worship services faithfully. This is certainly true of Generation Xers. Most Xers (59%) attend church less than once a month. Only 22% participate weekly or more often. The 16%, above, who have no religious preference is matched by 16% who never attend religious services.

Table 4
 RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)
Weekly or more	22%
One to three times a month	18%
Up to several times a year	43%
Never	16%

Source: General Social Surveys - 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 186.

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because "Don't know" and no answer are not included.

* Responses to the question, "How often do you attend religious services?"

There has also been some speculation that Generation X has no moral standards. In fact, as table 5 indicates, a large majority (82%) of Generation Xers believe extramarital sex is always

wrong. When asked, “What is your opinion about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner—is it always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all,” only 3% said it is not wrong at all.

Table 5
EXTRAMARITAL SEX*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)
Always wrong	82%
Almost always wrong	10%
Wrong only sometimes	5%
Not wrong at all	3%

Source: General Social Surveys - 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 386.

* Responses to the question, “What is your opinion about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner—is it always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all.”

On the other hand, only 17% believe premarital sex is always wrong. This compares with the 25% of Americans of all ages who in 1994 answered “Always wrong” when asked, “If a man and woman have sexual relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?” This is somewhat worse than the 32% of all ages who in 1974, answered “Always wrong” to the same question. Americans in general, including Generation X, apparently have a much stronger commitment to sexual morality within the marriage relationship than they do before marriage. Furthermore, approval or tolerance of premarital sex has increased in the last twenty years.

The General Social Survey findings are supported by other research. For example, in April 1996, *Swing*, a magazine named to symbolize the social influence of twenty-somethings and written by and for that cohort, published the results of two surveys of 18 to 34 year-olds commissioned by the magazine. Two telephone surveys of random samples were conducted in January of 1996 by Blum & Weprin Associates, Inc. Each sample was just over 500 in size and included adults between the ages of 18 and 34 in all 50 states (*Swing*, April 1996: 56).

Respondents were equally divided between male and female. Almost three-fourths (74%) were white with 13% African-American, 7% Latino, and 3% other. Their educational level, which was undoubtedly affected by their age within the cohort, ranged from 1% with only grade school to 8% with education beyond the college level. The highest level of education for 29% was high school graduation, while 22% were college graduates, and another 31% had some college.

The *Swing* surveys concluded that Generation Xers are “a decidedly conservative and abstemious group.” “[T]hose polled have a strong spiritual core. A whopping 90 percent say they believe in God, and nearly 70 percent attend religious services,” although only 30% say they attend church at least once a week. They “think more about computers and car pools than

cocaine. An astounding two-thirds of those polled say they have never used an illegal drug, and more than a quarter never drink alcohol.” “They see their family relationships as the most important ones in their lives — more than one-third chose a family member as their personal hero.” “They define success as a well-honed balance of work and home — putting an emphasis on home life — rather than as the amount of free time or money they have.” “Finally, three-quarters are satisfied with their jobs” (*Swing*, April 1996: 56).

Some of George Barna’s findings also support the relatively positive cohort portrait that seems to emerge from the General Social Surveys. Barna found that, “Almost four out of ten Busters engage in religious activities during a week. About 36% attend a religious service in a typical week.” “While there is a significant rethinking taking place among the Busters, many continue to patronize the same religious institutions in which they were raised.” Furthermore, many Xers apparently do more than merely attend religious services. “Four out of ten discuss their religious beliefs with others whom they believe maintain different religious views” (1992: 80-81).

Without doubt Generation X presents great challenges for the church. We cannot assume that the methods and ministries which met the needs of earlier cohorts will be effective for this one. However, as we prayerfully consider the needs of Xers, it seems important to remember that the “typical” Generation Xer probably does not exist.

In their book, *Inside the Soul of a New Generation*, Tim Celek and Dieter Zander present many useful insights. Perhaps the most important is their observation that “If we were going to China and wanted to reach out to the people of a rural village, we would go live among them, learn their language, build relationships, and work to discover what kind of redemptive analogies we could find in their culture to communicate the message of the Cross to them. That is what we must do if we hope to make Jesus relevant to Busters” (1996: 99).

It is, of course, less demanding to think of the “typical” American, “typical” male, “typical” white, or “typical” Xer. Moreover, there are certainly tendencies among Americans, males, whites, or Xers from which generalizations may be drawn. However, effective ministry demands a careful understanding of the particular segments of the population and the particular individuals that we serve. If our call was to China we would know we needed the missionaries’ spirit, understanding, and strategies. We would prayerfully study the subculture into which God directed our ministry. Surely ministry in the subcultures of Generation X deserves similar commitment and understanding.

Third, this generation is not as radically different from earlier generations as some suppose.

Some presume that due to great changes in their shared life experience, Generation Xers are dramatically unique among generations. According to George Barna, for example, “From a purely sociological perspective, Busters comprise a very different breed of Americans than we have previously witnessed. They were raised differently; they communicate distinctively; their aspirations are unique; they allocate their resources in unique ways; and their numbers position them as a force to be reckoned with. In the power transitions that will unfold in the coming decades, their novel views and behaviors will radically recast America and the global politic in which we are a major player” (1992: 13).

If Generation Xers are that radically different from earlier cohorts, Solomon may have been wrong when he argued that things tend to be cyclical and relatively stable, “The thing that hath

been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1: 9).

There is some tendency among Americans to compare the worst aspects of our day with nostalgic memories of the best in earlier days. Educators imagine a time in the past when most students were genuine scholars. Family advocates remember a time when there were few dysfunctional families. Church leaders reminisce about the Christian era in America when most people were actively involved in their faith week by week. Some of the comparisons are accurate. Others rest on superficial observation of the present and faulty recollections of the past. If we had similar data from the present and the past, we could distinguish between the accurate comparisons and the faulty memories.

Fortunately, the General Social Surveys have asked many of the same questions each year since 1972. Therefore, it is possible to compare the beliefs and attitudes of Generation Xers with the beliefs and attitudes of Baby Boomers when they were the same age. When the 1974 survey was conducted, the 18 to 29 year-olds were the early Boomers — born between 1945 and 1956. Twenty years later, in 1994, the 18 to 29 year-olds surveyed were Xers — born between 1965 and 1976. Therefore, the following tables, which were created from the more extensive analysis of *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, allow a comparison of Boomers and Xers at the same life stage.

As someone observed at the 1996 joint annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and the Religious Research Association, it is difficult to tease out subtle differences between the generations by using the General Social Surveys data. However, teasing out subtle differences will be unnecessary if Xers are radically different from earlier cohorts, as many have argued. If the generalizations are accurate, the following tables should show substantial differences in beliefs and attitudes between Xers and Boomers. Instead, the differences tend to be relatively small.

In table 6, it seems clear that there is no dramatic difference in religious preference. Xers are somewhat more likely than Early Boomers to state a preference for no religion or for some other religion, although the differences are within the \pm 6% margin of error for this size samples.

The proportion who prefer a Christian religious group has dropped from 85% to 76%. That 9% drop is undoubtedly significant. The erosion in Christian preference appears to have taken place primarily among Protestants. Still, this does not appear to indicate a new type of Americans who reject the idea of religion.

Table 6
RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)	Early Boomers at Same Age**
Protestant	47%	55%
Catholic	29%	30%
Jewish	2%	3%
Other	6%	1%
None	16%	11%

Source: General Social Surveys- 1974 and 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 176.

*Responses to the question, "What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, some other religion, or no religion."

** 18-29 year-olds in 1974.

The proportion of Generation X who believe the Bible is inspired is 80%. This is very similar to the 81% of the younger Boomers who hold this belief. This question was not asked in 1974 so it is not possible to compare this belief with Early Boomers. Late Boomers, born between 1955 and 1966, were 18 to 29 in 1984. About half of both Generation X and younger Boomers choose a belief about the inspiration of the Bible which seems consistent with the Nazarene understanding. A more fundamentalist understanding of a literal, word for word inspiration is held by 28% of Generation Xers. There appears to have been virtually no change in the proportion (16%) believing "The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men."

Table 7
BELIEFS ABOUT
THE INSPIRATION OF THE BIBLE *

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)	Late Boomers at Same Age**
Literal word of God	28%	35%
Inspired word of God	52%	46%
Ancient Book of moral precepts	16%	16%

Source: General Social Surveys- 1984 and 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 195.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because "Don't know" and no answer are not included.

*Responses to the question, "Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible? 1) The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word; 2) The Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word; or 3) The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men."

** 18-29 year-olds in 1984. This question was not asked prior to 1984

Generation Xers appear slightly more likely than Early Boomers to believe in life after death. The proportion who do not believe there is life after death has dropped from 25% to 19%.

Table 8
BELIEF IN LIFE AFTER DEATH*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)	Early Boomers at Same Age**
Yes	72%	65%
No	19%	25%
Undecided	8%	10%

Source: General Social Surveys - 1975 and 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 184.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because no answer is not included.

*Responses to the question, "Do you believe there is a life after death?"

**18-29 year-olds in 1975.

There is no dramatic difference in religious participation between Generation Xers and Early Boomers when they were in their twenties. Xers appear slightly less likely than Early Boomers to attend religious services weekly and slightly more likely to say they never attend.

Table 9
RELIGIOUS PARTICIPATION*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)	Early Boomers at Same Age**
Weekly or more	22%	26%
One to three times a month	18%	16%***
Up to several times a year	43%	45%
Never	16%	13%

Source: General Social Surveys - 1974 and 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 187.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because "Don't know" and no answer are not included.

*Responses to the question, "How often do you attend religious services?"

**18-29 year-olds in 1974.

***This percentage may be incorrect. There appears to be a misprint in this *The Official Guide to American Attitudes* table.

Generation Xers and Early Boomers are significantly different in their attitude toward extramarital sex. Contrary to what one might expect, Xers are more likely than Early Boomers to believe it is always wrong for a married person to have sexual relations with someone other than their marriage partner.

Table 10
EXTRAMARITAL SEX*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)	Early Boomers at Same Age**
Always wrong	82%	59%
Not wrong at all	3%	5%

Source: General Social Surveys - 1974 and 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 387.

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because “Almost always wrong” and “Wrong only sometimes” are not included in this comparison.

*Responses to the question, “What is your opinion about a married person having sexual relations with someone other than the marriage partner — is it always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?”

**18-29 year-olds in 1974.

Generation Xers and Early Boomers at the same age are much more similar in their attitudes toward premarital sex. If there has been a change between these generations, it appears to be that Xers are more likely than Early Boomers to believe having sexual relations before marriage is always wrong.

Table 11
PREMARITAL SEX*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)	Early Boomers at Same Age**
Always wrong	17%	11%
Not wrong at all	52%	50%

Source: General Social Surveys - 1974 and 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 384.

Note: Percentages do not add to 100 because “Almost always wrong” and “Wrong only sometimes” are not included in this comparison.

*Responses to the question, “If a man and woman have sexual relations before marriage, do you think it is always wrong, almost always wrong, wrong only sometimes, or not wrong at all?”

**18-29 year-olds in 1974.

Trust in the church as an institution has declined between the time of the Early Boomers and Generation X. As table 12 indicates, two in five (40%) of the early Boomers had a great deal of confidence in religious leaders when they were the age Generation Xers are now. However, when that cohort was asked the same question in 1994, when they were 40-49 years old, only 20% gave that answer. The difference between the 40% in 1974 and the 22% in 1994 is

apparently a less trusting culture across all age groups rather than a less trusting cohort in their twenties. It appears that over the last twenty years Americans in general have become less willing, or able, to place confidence in their religious leaders.

Some have argued that the day of denominations and denominational institutions has passed. Perhaps that is true. However, it may instead be that the day of blind trust has passed. It appears that you probably can still fool all of the people some of the time and some of the people all of the time. But, you probably can't fool all of the people as often as in earlier days, and the proportion who can be fooled all of the time has probably decreased significantly.

Table 12
CONFIDENCE IN RELIGIOUS LEADERS*

	Generation X (Age - 18-29)	Early Boomers at Same Age**	Early Boomers (Age - 40-49)***
A great deal	22%	40%	20%
Only some	56%	49%	53%
Hardly any	22%	10%	24%

Source: General Social Surveys - 1975 and 1994, National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, as reported in *The Official Guide to American Attitudes*, page 187.

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 because "Don't know" and no answer are not included.

*Responses to the question, "As far as the people running organized religion are concerned, would you say you have a great deal of confidence, only some confidence, or hardly any confidence at all in them?"

**18-29 year-olds in 1974.

***1994 responses of people born from 1945 through 1954.

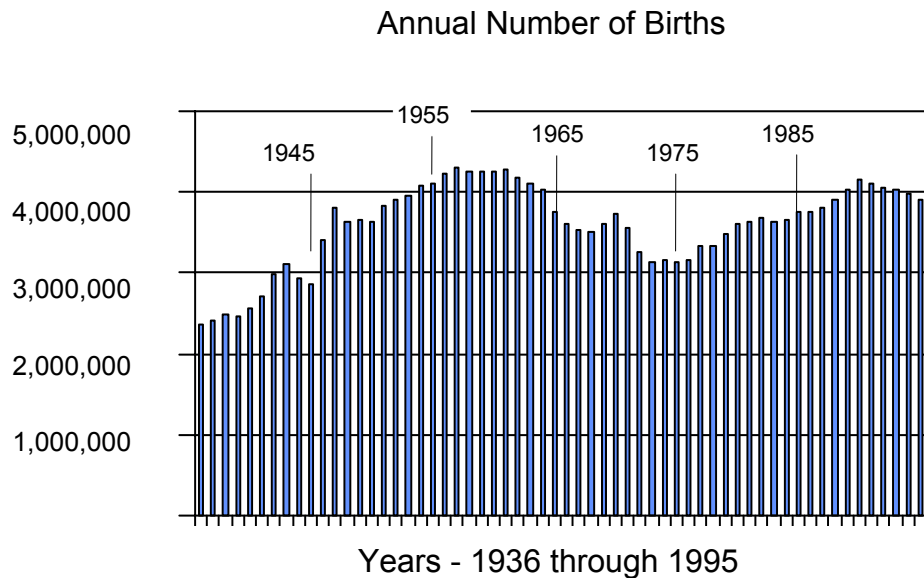
Some of the differences attributed to generational change are probably more a matter of life stage. Americans in their twenties, whether they are Xers or Boomers, tend to see some things differently than do people in their forties. Furthermore, some of the change which has been attributed to the unique nature of Xers is actually a shift in the larger American culture. For example, Xers are significantly less likely to trust religious leaders than Boomers were at the same age, but no less likely to trust than those boomers are now.

There is little doubt that there are important differences between the members of Generation X and the Early Boomer cohort. However, it appears that those differences are subtle rather than radical. Indeed, when good data are substituted for nostalgia, Solomon's assertion that there is nothing new under the sun seems to have more support than the assertions that the church must learn to serve a new kind of American.

Finally, the mere sizes of the “Boomer” and “Generation X” cohorts have had, and will have effects on the Church of the Nazarene.

This is probably the most significant fact to be understood about Generation X. We might not be discussing “generations” so widely if the “Baby Boom” had not been so much larger than the previous cohort. And Generation X is noteworthy in part because it was significantly smaller than the boom cohort. Undoubtedly there are many other significant observations to be made regarding these groups, but the impact of their mere size should not be overlooked.

The following graph presents the number of births in the United States each year from 1936 through 1995. In the decade from 1936 through 1945 there were nearly 27 million births. The following decade — the first half of the baby boom — saw 38 million babies born. During the second half of the boom, 1956 through 1965, 41.6 million babies were born. Then came a decade with significantly fewer births. The 34.2 million births during the baby bust (Generation X) were considerably more than earlier cohorts, but were down sharply from the large boom decades. From 1976 through 1985, in what some would call the second half of the baby bust cohort, births increased slightly to 35.3 million. Finally, from 1986 through 1995 the number of births, 39.8 million, has been larger than during the first half of the baby boom.

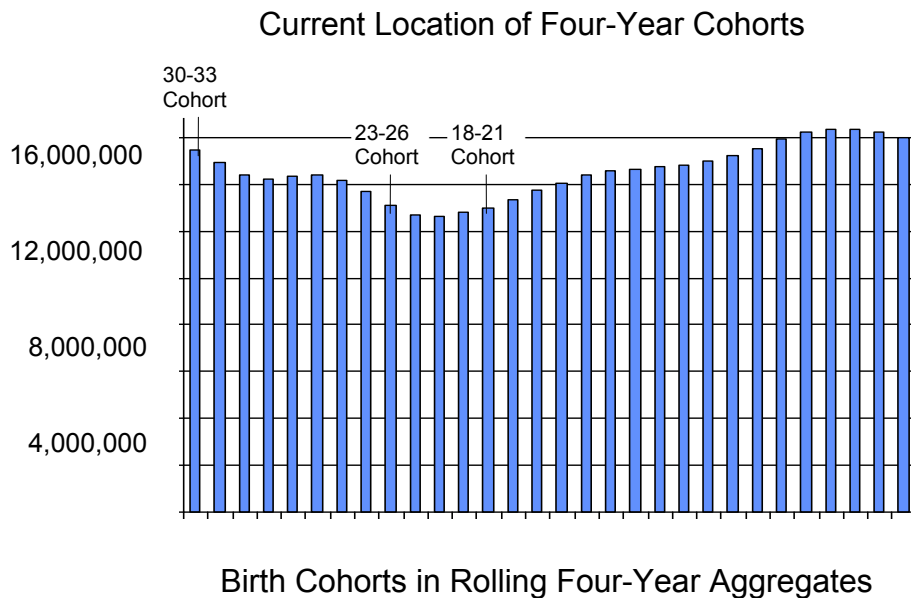


These fluctuations in size have affected the Church of the Nazarene, and often without our awareness that the mere numbers were having any significant impact on our ministry. For example, by 1976 the baby bust, or “Birth Dearth,” was evident in Nazarene Sunday schools. In some children’s departments there were more adult workers than children. Some no doubt recognized that the decade of fewer births was having an effect, but others began to believe that Sunday school as a ministry strategy was no longer effective. In 1976 the General Assembly restructured the Sunday school as the Christian life department, perhaps partially to revitalize a program suffering from the extended downward fluctuation in the number of children in the population of the United States.

Two decades ago the relatively small size of Generation X seriously challenged the survival of the Sunday school. However, the fluctuations in cohort sizes have now produced a significant opportunity for the Sunday school and other children’s ministries. There has been an “Echo Boom” over the last decade as the large number of Boomers started families. Enrollments in public schools reached a new record high in the fall of 1996.

Demographic fluctuations have also affected denominational colleges. Two new colleges were authorized at the 1964 General Assembly. The research which led to that decision was conducted between 1960 and 1964, probably before the end of the baby boom was evident or widely anticipated. It seems likely that if the research had been conducted a quadrennium or two later, the baby bust would have been observed. Its effects on the nationwide college enrollment declines of the 1980s would have been predictable and decisions might have been different.

As the buster cohort began reaching college age, in the early 1980s, college enrollments began declining significantly. Retrenchment and adult education programs became survival strategies. Some were convinced that the declining enrollments were a sign that loyalty to the denomination had significantly changed. However, as the larger cohorts of the late Generation Xers begin enrolling in college in the mid-1990s, they should have a positive impact on enrollments. As the following graph indicates, the size of college-age (18-21) cohorts will gradually increase through about 2010.



The graph summarizes four-year cohorts of potential students. Each bar on the graph represents the number of people in that year plus the preceding three years. For the traditional college-age (18-21) cohort, each bar is an indication of the size of the birth cohorts making up the existing student body plus the entering freshman class. As the graph suggests, this cohort is at the beginning edge of larger enrollments. The increase is very gradual, especially in the first few years. However, succeeding four-year cohorts will continue to increase in size in each of the next fifteen years. As the graph suggests might happen, the 1996 fall enrollment report from

Nazarene colleges/universities reported slight enrollment increases in traditional programs at five of the eight U.S. liberal arts institutions.

Since entering seminary students are typically at least four years older than beginning college students, the effects of the larger size of the echo boom would not be expected to affect NTS for a few more years. The graph shows the leading edge of seminary age cohorts nearing their smallest years. Most of the demographic declines have now passed. However, it will probably be another four or five years before the larger cohorts reach seminary age.

By design, Nazarene Bible College serves older students. About half of the NBC students are in their thirties. As the “Baby Bust” (Generation X) cohort moves through their thirties, beginning in the mid-1990s, the Bible college might expect a decade of reduced enrollments unless a higher proportion of “Boomer” students enroll.

Generation X will impact the church in important ways, and among the most important will be the mere size of this cohort in comparison with the size of the baby boom cohort. Fortunately the cohort size fluctuations are very predictable. Their effects can be anticipated. The church’s programs and institutions are not, of course, merely helpless victims of demographic realities. Appropriate modifications in policies and strategies can change potential decline into actual improvement of ministry effectiveness. However, successful adaptation is much more likely when the church prayerfully considers the demographic facts.

Conclusions

The “Typical” Generation Xer probably does not exist, so one size does not fit all Xers! Congregations who want to serve Xers effectively will need more of the missionaries’ spirit and strategic methods. In recent years the American church has become more aware of other cultures through Work and Witness initiatives, short term mission assignments, and urban plunges. We have not been as aware of the important, though more subtle differences within our own culture. As Celek and Zander observed, “If we were going to China and wanted to reach out to the people of a rural village, we would go live among them, learn their language, build relationships, and work to discover what kind of redemptive analogies we could find in their culture to communicate the message of the Cross to them. That is what we must do if we hope to make Jesus relevant to Busters” (1996: 99). And it will not be enough to learn about Xers in general. We need prayerful, significant, missionary-like understandings of the Xers in our community and the subtle, yet important, differences between American sub-cultures.

Dropout members of every cohort are a special challenge. Tex Sample, in his *U.S. Lifestyles and Main Line Churches*, describes nine major subgroups in the American culture. Two of those nine are groups of people who seem to withdraw from, or rebel against, the larger culture. At the upper end of the economic scale are children of affluent, educated parents who are in a narcissistic, often exhibitionist, assertive life-stage which Sample labels the “I-Am-Mes” (1990: 26-28). At the lower end of the economic scale is a group of alienated, disruptive, often self-destructive rebels whom Sample describes as “Hard Living” (1990: 60). These groups probably only account for 10% to 20% of Generation X and other cohorts. They should probably not be allowed to define this, or any, cohort. Nevertheless, these minority groups within the cohorts are among those for whom Christ died. Therefore, mission strategies to reach them should no doubt be developed — without ignoring the other 80% to 90%.

Blind, undeserved loyalty which suspends personal responsibility is less acceptable than it was in the past. Leaders probably cannot hide questionable decisions or actions behind a wink and a nod, or a bland, “Trust me on this,” as easily as some once did. Both Boomers and Generation Xers are less trusting. Selective honesty inevitably erodes trust. While there is still a significant minority who trust religious leaders, that proportion has fallen from about 40% to about 20%. Blind loyalty was never universal or, in fact, healthy. Furthermore, mutual responsibility and accountability is probably more consistent with Nazarene ideals.

Young professionals can probably be motivated to become involved deeply in the work of the church — as partners. However, they will probably not be easily taken in by token authority. If, for example, we wish to revitalize assemblies, we will probably need to find sincere ways to draw on the expertise of these dedicated professionals as we develop strategies and ministries.

Aging Boomers continue to be a major mission field. The fastest growing segment of the American population is the senior adults. In our rush to serve Generation X, the ministry needs of the older birth cohorts must not be ignored. In some communities there is a large potential for vital ministry among older Americans.

Discontinuity appears to have been overstated. Most Generation Xers do not appear to be radically different than first wave Boomers were at the same age. Undoubtedly there are important differences between the generations. However, the Xers do not appear to be a new kind of American for whom church structures and ministry will need to take fundamental new forms.

REFERENCES

- Babbie, Earl. 1988. The Sociological Spirit. Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- Barna, George. 1992. Baby Busters: The Disillusioned Generation. Chicago: Northfield Publishing.
- Celek, Tim and Dieter Zander with Patrick Kampert. 1996. Inside the Soul of a New Generation. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Crouch, Andy. 1996. "A Generation of Debtors," Christianity Today, November 11, 1996, pages 31-33.
- Hochman, David. 1996. "The Young Conservatives," Swing, April 1996, pages 40-57.
- Littwin, Susan. 1986. The Postponed Generation. New York: Quill, William Morrow and Company, Inc.
- Mitchell, Susan. 1996. The Official Guide to American Attitudes. Ithaca, New York: New Strategist Publications, Inc.
- Rushkoff, Douglas. 1994. The GenX Reader. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Sample, Tex. 1990. U.S. Lifestyles and Mainline Churches: A Key to Reaching People in the 90's. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press.