

Generational Differences and Similarities in U.S. Congregations of the Church of the Nazarene

Generational differences have received considerable attention by the church in recent years. Articles, books, sermons, and seminars have provided many helpful insights. Congregations have been helped to become aware of needs and opportunities for more effective ministry. Some questions remain. For example, what are the specific areas where generational differences in a particular denomination present a need for tailored approaches or new programs? Is there common ground where similarities between the generations give opportunity for shared approaches, or is everything so different between the generations that radical change is required?

Fortunately, the U.S. Congregational Life Survey provides data for shedding some more light on generational differences and similarities. In April and May of 2001, more than 6,000 people attending worship in Nazarene congregations participated in the U.S. Congregational Life Survey. The random sample for the study was drawn from all Nazarene churches in the United States with an average worship attendance between 25 and 500. Of the 498 congregations invited to participate, 109 took part (21.9%).

The birth years and the labels used below are recognized to be somewhat arbitrary. Different beginning or ending years for any cohort would result in somewhat different findings. This is especially problematic in regard to the size of the cohort, however apart from a comparison with similar cohort size in the larger U.S. population, group size is not the focus of this analysis. For purposes of this study, it is assumed that the four age groupings used here generally represent generational cohorts that may affect the ministry of churches.

The survey question, “In what year were you born?” was used as a close, although not precise measure of age in April of 2001. The following table summarizes the distribution of participants.

Birth Years	Age Group	Nazarene		United States*
		Number	Percent	
1975-1986	15 to 26	849	15%	18%
1965-1974	27 to 36	776	13%	18%
1945-1964	37 to 56	2,235	38%	38%
Before 1945	57 or older	2,003	34%	27%

*Statistical Abstract of the United States: 2000 – similar age groupings

“Millennials” – Born between 1975 and 1986: The youngest participants in the study were fifteen years old. The cohort born between 1975 and 1986 was 15% of the respondents. This is 3% smaller than the 18% in the similar group in the U.S. population.

About one-third (36%) of this group report participating in this congregation two years or less, with another 31% participating three to ten years. A large majority (82%) in this age group say they usually attend “every week” or “more than once a week”. A majority (62%) of this generation are students. While 18% are in their first marriage, most (75%) have not married. This pattern seems more likely to be a result of life stage than of generational difference.

“Busters” or “Generation X” – Born between 1965 and 1974: The smallest cohort of Nazarenes in the study was the one born between 1965 and 1974. This smaller size is partly due to the fact that the time period is shorter and partly to the lower level of births in the United States during those years. The size of the Nazarene cohort (13%) is about 5% smaller than in the larger population (18%).

About one-third (35%) of this group report participating in this congregation two years or less, with another 39% participating three to ten years. A large majority (83%) in this age group say they usually attend “every week” or “more than once a week”. Two-thirds (67%) are in their first marriage. One in twenty (5%) say they are divorced with another 9% reporting that they are remarried after a divorce. A large majority (80%) of this generation, which has sometimes been called a generation of “slackers,” are employed with 40% reporting an annual household income of at least \$50,000.

“Boomers” – Born between 1945 and 1964: The largest cohort of Nazarenes in the study was born between 1945 and 1964. Nazarenes in this age group are proportionate to the larger population with 38% of both Nazarene respondents and the U.S. adult population in this group.

About one-fourth (24%) of this group report participating in this congregation two years or less, with another 36% participating three to ten years. A large majority (86%) say they usually attend “every week” or “more than once a week”. Three out of five (59%) are in their first marriage. One in ten (10%) reports that they are divorced and another 20% say they are remarried after a divorce. A large majority (83%) are employed with 49% reporting an annual household income of at least \$50,000.

“Veterans” – Born prior to 1945: The oldest cohort, born before 1945, is the second largest both among Nazarene respondents and in the larger population of the United States at least fifteen years old. This relatively large size is primarily due to the extended time frame used. Among Nazarene participants, this group is somewhat overrepresented. The 34% is 7% above the national proportion of 27%.

A minority (39%) in this age group report participating in their congregation less than ten years. Most (92%) say they usually attend “every week” or “more than once a week”. A majority (54%) are in their first marriage with another 20% widowed. Three out of five (61%) are retired, which may be most of the reason 48% report an annual household income of less than \$25,000.

Involvement: Most are involved in Sunday school (Millennials 59%, Busters 56%, Boomers 61%, and Veterans 63%). Majorities in each cohort say they mostly feel at ease talking about their faith and do so if it comes up (Millennials 56%, Busters 57%, Boomers 5%, and Veterans 51%). Additionally, some in each group say they feel at ease talking about their faith and seek opportunities to do so (Millennials 14%, Busters 20%, Boomers 25%, and Veterans 33%). In the past 12 months, majorities of all age groups have invited “friends and relatives who do not now attend a congregation” to worship services (Millennials 59%, Busters 68%, Boomers 70%, and Veterans 73%).

One-fourth or more of each group (Millennials 24%, Busters 24%, Boomers 31%, and Veterans 33%) say they are involved in congregational evangelism or outreach activities. About one in five (Millennials 22%, Busters 17%, Boomers 21%, and Veterans 23%) say they regularly take part in congregational activities that reach out to the wider community in community service, social justice or advocacy activities.

Social and Service Activities: The three older generations are quite similar in their social and service involvement. They voted in the last presidential election (Busters 71%, Boomers 77%, and Veterans 79%). They have donated money to a charitable organization in the last year (Busters 62%, Boomers 69%, and Veterans 66%). Also within the last year they have donated or prepared food for someone outside their family or congregation (Busters 45%, Boomers 55%, and Veterans 54%). Millennials’ social and service activities were somewhat different than older generations. Within the last year a majority have loaned money to someone outside their family (59%). Among those who would have been old enough to vote in the last presidential election, 51% say they voted. One-third (33%) donated money to a charitable organization.

Belonging: Large majorities say they have a strong sense of belonging to this congregation (Millennials 70%, Busters 76%, Boomers 77%, and Veterans 83%). Majorities of each cohort say they are currently members or are in the process of becoming a member (Millennials 59%, Busters 71%, Boomers 75%, and Veterans 78%), although the proportion increases with the age of the group. Two in five say they are regularly involved in congregational fellowships, clubs, or other social groups (Millennials 41%, Busters 41%, Boomers 42%, and Veterans 39%). About one in five (Millennials 19%, Busters 23%, Boomers 22%, and Veterans 24%) say most of their closest friends are part of this congregation, and in addition, more than half (Millennials 57%, Busters 52%, Boomers 55%, and Veterans 63%) say they have some close friends in the congregation as well as other close friends who are not part of this congregation.

Growth in Faith: Majorities (Millennials 58%, Busters 64%, Boomers 62%, and Veterans 67%), of each age group say they have experienced “Much growth” in their faith over the last year. This growth was more likely to be “mainly through this congregation” (Millennials 35%, Busters 44%, Boomers 42%, and Veterans 46%) than through other groups/congregations or private activities. Millennials were a little more likely than other cohorts to say their growth in faith was mainly through other groups or congregations (Millennials 12%, Busters 7%, Boomers 8%, and Veterans 7%). In each

cohort at least one in ten attributed their growth in faith to their own private activities (Millennials 11%, Busters 13%, Boomers 12%, and Veterans 15%).

The oldest group was considerably more likely than any other group (Millennials 34%, Busters 46%, Boomers 56%, and Veterans 75%) to say they spend time in private devotional activities daily or most days. Another one-fourth in each of the three younger groups (Millennials 24%, Busters 25%, and Boomers 24%) and 14% of the Veterans say a few times a week they spend time in private devotional activities.

Music Styles: Traditional hymns are much more likely to be valued by Veterans (84% selecting this as one of two preferred worship music styles) than by Millennials (33%), with 50% of Busters and 63% of Boomers choosing this music style. The top music style preference for Millennials was Praise music or choruses (56%), which was also among the top two preferences for most Busters (66%), Boomers (72%), and Veterans (67%). About one-fourth of Millennials (24%), Busters (27%) and Boomers (23%) but only 9% of Veterans have contemporary hymns as one of their top two preferences in worship music. Nearly one-third (32%) of Millennials and one-fourth (24%) of Busters prefer contemporary music or songs other than hymns compared with only 14% of Boomers and 3% of Veterans.

Worship: Large majorities (Millennials 82%, Busters 83%, Boomers 86%, and Veterans 91%) in each age group say they go to worship services at this congregation “Usually every week” or “More than once a week”. Choices of the top three most valued congregational aspects were more diverse among Millennials and more concentrated among the other groups, especially the Veterans. Therefore, while respondents in all four groups were more likely to choose sermons than anything else as one of the three aspects of the congregation that they personally most value, the percentage selecting this top choice is lower for Millennials than for the other groups (Millennials 30%, Busters 44%, Boomers 50%, and Veterans 44%). The second most often selected valued aspect for Millennials (29%) and Busters (30%) was ministry for children or youth. The second most valued congregational aspect for Boomers was Bible study, prayer, or other discussion groups (29%). For Veterans traditional style of worship or music was their second most valued aspect of the congregation (35%).

Experiences during worship services “Always” or “Usually” include “A sense of God’s presence” (Millennials 71%, Busters 82%, Boomers 87%, and Veterans 88%), “Inspiration” (Millennials 69%, Busters 79%, Boomers 83%, and Veterans 84%), and “Joy” (Millennials 77%, Busters 84%, Boomers 82%, and Veterans 84%). For at least half in each group, worship experiences also include “A sense of fulfilling my obligation”. The proportion experiencing this sense of duty increases with the age of the group (Millennials 50%, Busters 59%, Boomers 64%, and Veterans 74%).

Congregational Growth: The correlations summarized in the following table suggest that churches which had experienced higher rates of membership increase, Sunday school increase, and increase by profession during the three years prior to the survey tended to have higher proportions of Busters attending on the day of the survey. Conversely,

churches that had lower rates of growth in these three areas in 1999 through 2001, tended to have higher proportions of Veterans attending on the day of the survey. Changes in average worship attendance in the three years leading up to the survey were not significantly correlated with the proportion representing any generation.

Correlations between Generation Representation and
Rates of Congregational Growth from 1999 through 2001

	Percentage of Congregation Who Are:			
	Millennials	Busters	Boomers	Veterans
Membership Change	-.017	.349*	.090	-.253*
Worship Participation Change	-.008	.181	.121	-.178
Sunday School Participation Change	-.064	.349*	.102	-.231*
Rate of Additions by Professions of Faith	-.134	.444*	.115	-.403*

* $P < .05$ $N=107$

The tables above and below allow a comparison of these correlations in the three years leading up to the survey with the three years following it. There were more statistically significant correlations between generational representation and measures of numerical growth in the three years prior to the study than between generational representation and these measures in the three years since the study. Furthermore, the three statistically significant correlations that remained were weaker for the years following the study than for the years leading up to the study. This seems to suggest that the effects of higher proportions of Busters or Veterans may result from growth rather than causing or preventing growth.

Correlations between Generation Representation and
Rates of Congregational Growth from 2001 through 2003

	Percentage of Congregation Who Are:			
	Millennials	Busters	Boomers	Veterans
Membership Change	.018	.267*	.014	-.174
Worship Participation Change	-.023	.087	.102	-.101
Sunday School Participation Change	-.084	-.079	.076	-.047
Rate of Additions by Professions of Faith	-.069	.329*	-.014	-.221*

* $P < .05$ $N=104$

Conclusions

There are some significant differences between the generations attending Nazarene worship services. These differences present opportunities for ministry tailored to the needs identified.

- Veterans are much more likely than Millennials to seek opportunities to talk about their faith.
- Veterans and Boomers are more likely than Busters or Millennials to say they regularly take part in evangelism or outreach activities.
- Millennials are more likely than members of other cohorts to say they are not a member of the congregation, although they regularly participate there.
- Private devotional activities tend to increase with age. Veterans are more than twice as likely as Millennials to say spend time every day or most days in activities like prayer, meditation, and reading the Bible alone.
- Traditional hymns are much more valued by Veterans than Millennials and contemporary hymns or other music is much less valued by Veterans.
- Worship experiences are a little less likely to include Inspiration for Millennials than for other cohorts. On the other hand, Millennials are less likely to say in worship services they “always” or “usually” experience a sense of fulfilling their obligation.

There are also some noteworthy similarities in the generations. Where these shared characteristics represent strength, they suggest the need for continuing effective approaches and programs. Where they represent weakness, they suggest the need for improved or new approaches and programs.

- Large majorities of all four groups report usually going to worship services in their congregation every week or more than once a week.
- Only about one in five members of each generation say they regularly take part in community service, social justice or advocacy activities through their congregation
- Majorities of all groups say they have invited unchurched friends and relatives to a worship service within the past year.
- Most members of all groups say they have strong sense of belonging to their congregation.
- About two in five members of each generation say they are regularly involved in congregational fellowships, clubs, or other social groups.
- Majorities of all generational groups choose praise music or choruses as one of the different styles of music they prefer in congregational worship.
- Worship experiences for two-thirds or more of each group include a sense of God’s presence, inspiration, and joy.

Some of the observations about generational differences may be explained by life stage as well as by age cohort. This is most obvious in the proportions of Millennials whose employment status includes “student” and whose marital status is “never married.” It may also be part of the explanation for the fact that the representations of Millennials and Busters among Nazarene participants are somewhat lower than similar segments of the

U.S. population; in the period between leaving home and starting their own families, some Americans may be less inclined to participate in any religious group.

The advantage of generalizations about age cohorts is that they make planning for ministry more manageable. They give us a clear, if perhaps somewhat overstated, picture of the cohorts. The “typical” Millennial, Buster, Boomer, or Veteran presents some clear challenges for the church, but at least he/she is clearly identified. However, at least among the Nazarene participants in the U.S. Congregational Life survey, generational characteristics are rarely shared by everyone in a cohort. Therefore, there appears to be a need for caution in adjusting ministry based on the broad generalizations. The sense of clarity that makes these descriptions so attractive may lead to decisions and ministries which miss, and perhaps offend, members in the cohort who are not well described by the generalization.

There are certainly some significant differences between the generations. However, there are also many similarities. Radical change may sometimes be called for. In many cases what seems needed is a continuation, with adjustments, of the programs and approaches that are serving all of the generations.

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