

Transmitting Religious Capital from Generation to Generation:
Notes from the M7 Study of the Millennial Generation
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One of the most important responsibilities of the people of God is transmitting from generation to generation the religious treasure we have received. While Deuteronomy 6:7 speaks of this obligation from parent to child, other forms of intergenerational transfer are also important. I first benefited from this transmission as a child receiving from my parents and others of their generation. Before I could understand much at all I was introduced to stories of God's faithfulness, practices of spiritual discipline, and instruction in significant beliefs. There was not a great accumulation of financial capital to transfer, but there was a rich religious heritage. As I matured, I also received religious valuables from my brothers and others of my own generation. I have not always been appropriately respectful of my brothers, but I am deeply in their debt. Now in my later years I have the privilege of learning from the spiritual wisdom and examples of my children and grandchildren. This transmission process is essential.

This paper examines an exchange between generations. In the context of the M7 conference (Mission 2007) in Kansas City in February of 2007, hundreds of ministry-minded young people in what has sometimes been called the "Millennial generation" were invited to a dialogue about faith, culture, and the church. This generation, born between about 1980 and 1995, was between 12 and 27 years old at the time of the conference. It has also been called "Generation Y" and the "Shadow boom"

There were no doubt several motivations for the event. Dr. Tom Nees, who gave leadership to the event, hoped it "would be a place where individuals would experience a renewed call to ministry." (David and Rhonda Kyncl, 2008: 7). Another possible motivation for the study may have been the long-standing commitment of the Church of the Nazarene to nurturing its youth. Experience suggests that the denomination has usually listened to the insights, dreams, and concerns of its young people, even when we were obviously misguided. Motivation may also have come from a fear spread among evangelicals that young people are leaving the church at alarming levels and will not return as earlier generations tended to do.

This paper is based on the published report of the research, *Listening Inside Out: Conversations with Twentysomethings about Faith, Culture, and the Church*, as well as notes used in developing this book. The researchers/listeners most directly involved with the project might disagree with the selections I have chosen to include. Focused discussions have the advantage that many issues may be addressed candidly by participants. They have the disadvantage that the researcher must decide which issues should be included in a summary of results. This paper is one step further removed since it summarizes a summary. Therefore, while I hope this report will be interesting and helpful, readers interested in more complete information from the research should read the published report and discuss the findings with leaders who were there.

More than 400 students representing the millennial generation participated. Leaders of the church who work with young adults were asked to facilitate discussions structured around six

topics and thirty questions. The topics addressed were Personal Growth, Lifestyle, Ministry and Calling, Church and Community, Church and Society, and Compassion and Justice.

Personal Growth

The four questions asked in the group discussions regarding Personal Growth were:

- How does the church stay connected to your generation?
- Is the holiness message still relevant? What is the holiness message in your eyes?
- How does a Christian mature spiritually?
- What is the “role of authority” of Scripture? (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 121)

Three themes emerged from the Personal Growth discussion. The first was the need expressed by students for deep and lasting relationships within a faith community. This need was also expressed in the discussions of the other five general topics. In the words of student participants, “Build a community where college students are valued. We need mentors to help us navigate growing up.” “We need more merging of generations. We need to get away from the idea that you have to be ‘specialized’ to work with certain agegroups.” Intergenerational communities would allow them to be served and to serve as well. (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 26, 28-29)

The second theme emerging from the discussion of this topic was that students see the value of scriptural authority and are actively pursuing lives that incorporate Scripture on a daily basis. In the words of participants, “A good Christian daily submits to the Word of God. We will only grow if we do this on a daily basis.” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 26, 29)

A third theme was that students do not clearly understand the distinctive doctrine of their denomination. While one said, “Holiness is an appealing call toward righteousness and away from the enticements of ‘self’ and the world,” another said, “We’re too concerned about holiness and are therefore not connecting with people in life. For holiness to be relevant, it needs to be put into action, not just in word.” Still another said, “No one understands the concept of entire sanctification.” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 26, 31)

The authors of the published report conclude that “... strong, intergenerational relationships within the Body of Christ would alleviate the confusion that college-aged students feel about these doctrinal issues. Through mentoring and discipling relationships, students would see the purpose of these doctrinal concepts authentically demonstrated in the lives of their mentors—if in fact such issues are critical to the daily living out of our faith.” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 32)

Lifestyle

The four questions asked in the group discussions regarding Lifestyle were:

- What is Christian purity when it comes to lifestyle and sexuality?
- How is a Christian lifestyle distinct from a non-Christian lifestyle?
- Are there behaviors that Christians need to avoid? Why?
- Are there behaviors that Christians need to authenticate within their lifestyle? Why? (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 121)

Three themes were reported from the Lifestyle discussion. The first was that "... purity is an issue that reaches far beyond the challenge of abstaining from pre-marital sex." In the words of student participants, "Sexuality is only one aspect of purity; it's dangerous to separate it out of the whole of life." "Purity should deal with putting God first and yielding everything to Him. It is a purity of heart, not just actions." (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 41)

A second theme was expressed in the conclusion that "Most students focused on the failure of their local churches and local church leadership (i.e., pastors, Sunday School teachers, youth leaders) to adequately and maturely address the topic of sex in meaningful conversations with them." The authors also conclude that, "Many students hold the desire to live pure lives as part of a dynamic community that would encourage and affirm their efforts." "Students long for relationships with older adults as well as with younger members of their congregations. They call for the removal of age divisions and the establishment of a more family-oriented community where they may belong, follow, and lead." (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 43, 45-46)

A third lifestyle theme was that the Christian lifestyle is best expressed by love and acceptance. "Student after student noted the essence of living Christlike as one who loves and serves others." "While this critique is sharp, the desire of the millennials is obvious as well: to be part of the solution. They want to be part of the faith community that grows up, addresses the issues it has not faced, and moves forward in faith together." (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 47-48)

Ministry and Calling

The three questions asked in the group discussions regarding Ministry and Calling were:

- Describe your understanding of calling.
- How do you plan to live out your ministry or your calling?
- What does it mean to be missional? (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 121)

Two themes appear to have emerged from the Ministry and Calling discussions. The first was that everyone is called to ministry. "Everyone has a role in the Kingdom." "People don't have to be pastors to have a calling." The authors of the published report noted discomfort with language like "full-time Christian service" and perhaps with an ordained clergy when other careers are also full-time in obedience to God. In the words of one participant, "Sometimes I wish I had picked a different major and then just added the ministry as an outlet, like being a teacher and going somewhere to teach English. We need to be educated in many different areas so we can understand other people's experiences and minister in practical, meaningful ways." (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: page 58-65)

A second theme appears to have been the importance of relationships. In the words of a participant, "For our generation, it is imperative to have a personal relationship with Christ. Our generation needs mentorship and discipleship; until we get those, we are lost, even as Christians." (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 59)

Church and Community

Eight questions were asked in the group discussions regarding Church and Community:

- What is the role of the local church in your life?
- What do you see as your role in the life of the local church?
- What are the things you think the church is very concerned about that it shouldn't be?
- What is most effective way to introduce your age-group to Jesus?
- What are you doing to address social issues in your city?
- Does the church have the authority to tell you anything?
- Does the church have authority?
- How should we respond to leaders in the church? (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008, page 122)

Three themes appear to have emerged from the Church and Community discussions. The first was the issue of the role of the local church in the life of these believers. It was clear that their church plays a significant role for many of these students. As they expressed it, "My church is my family; I could not be here without that family." "The church is mentoring me and providing a place of connection." "I couldn't be a good Christian apart from church." (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 72)

A second theme was the authority of the local church which, at least for some, was conditional. "Church itself has no authority; it only has authority if it is doing God's will." "Church has authority regardless. You go to church because you want to. God places people in authority in the church. But, we should always evaluate what they say." (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 71)

A third theme was the priorities of their church. There was a perception that there was too much emphasis given "to the numbers, particularly in the areas of attendance, buildings, and cash." Students were critical of these quantitative measures. They wished there were more focus on social concerns. As one student expressed it, "Social issues are a huge part of this generation. We are aware of issues and want to work to fix them." They also expressed some concern that a focus on technology and church as entertainment not be seen as a replacement for relationships or message. "Be careful that the message is not lost in changing methods." (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008, page 73-75, 78)

Church and Society

The six questions asked in the group discussions regarding Church and Society were:

- Is denomination important?
- How do you feel about the American evangelical church and U.S. foreign policy?
- Describe the dynamics of the changing culture in and out of the church.
- What are a few ways you can impact the local and global church?
- How do you define tolerance?
- What is the church in twenty years? (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 122)

Three themes could be identified from the Church and Society discussions. The first was the legitimacy and role of denominations. While there was some criticism of denominations'

tendency to become isolated from other groups, student participants appeared generally to be positive about denominations. In their words, “Denominations give us something small to connect to, they bring relationships.” “Denominations provide opportunities for smaller congregations to do things on a bigger scale.” “Denominations are great for resources, a belief system, and networking.” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 91-92)

A second theme was the role of the church in national politics. In the words of participants, “A lot of churches are way too patriotic. We’ve equated Christianity and nationalism. This has hurt us as we’ve related to the rest of the world.” “Democrat or Republican, no president—good or bad—will affect my Christianity.” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 93)

A third theme in this area of church and society was the importance of Christian love in circumstances difficult to understand or tolerate. As they expressed it, “September 11 brought along a lot of tolerance, including trying to understand where someone is coming from.” “Love is our goal, not tolerance. Tolerance is one step below love. You can’t just tolerate the poor and homeless, you have to love them.” “Be willing to listen and hear the other person’s story. Accept the person; don’t preach. Give them an opportunity to explain.” “Loving the sinner and not the sin is hard to live.” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 93-97)

Compassion and Justice

The five questions asked in the group discussions regarding Church and Justice were:

- What is poverty (U.S. and global)? How should Christians respond to poverty?
- What responsibility does the church in America have in addressing poverty worldwide?
- What are the most significant social issues facing your city? The world?
- How does your local church encourage or build community?
- How should Christians respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis? (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 122-123)

The Compassion and Justice discussions raised at least two general themes. The first of these was engagement of the issues that cause suffering around the world. In the words of student participants, “We have to equip other nations to get out of poverty.” “Not only say we are going to do something, we have to actually do it.” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 109-110)

The second theme was the need for local churches to be involved in solving problems in their own communities. As students expressed this, “The work of churches in international mission efforts proves to be suspect when it is not coupled with outreach to the poor and the lost right outside our own front doors.” “The church sends people overseas, but ignores the needs at home.” “Many churches are blind to the poverty around us and are looking at global poverty.” “We are disappointed in churches leaving areas of plight and going to new suburban areas.” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008, page 110-114)

Some Observations

The initiative from USA/Canada Mission/Evangelism leaders and college presidents to involve representatives of the Millennial Generation in the M7 Conference was impressive. Students

were encouraged in their commitment to God. The imagination and vision of students was stirred. Using the published report of the initiative, *Listening Inside Out*, as the basis for the 2009 denomination-wide CLT study, churches are listening and learning from the perspectives and insights of the more than 400 participating students.

Some of the themes raised by the discussion seem especially noteworthy. For example, the authors of the published report repeatedly note students desire for intergenerational help. As one student put it, “We need mentors to help us navigate growing up” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 28-29). This desire is a timely reminder that Christians of all ages or generations have religious treasures to transmit to and receive from other generations.

Transmission of the treasure of sound doctrine is no doubt difficult and only somewhat successful. In the report of the discussion of holiness and sanctification there appears to be evidence that some participants are clear in their understanding and practice. However, as Christian Smith found in his study of the religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers, while there is “a significant number of American teens who are serious and lucid about their religious faith, there is also a much larger number who are remarkably inarticulate and befuddled about religion. Interviewing teens, one finds little evidence that the agents of religious socialization in this country are being highly effective and successful with the majority of their young people” (*Soul Searching*, 2005: 27).

We must do better. One of the M7 student participants said, “We don’t see role models. The character of holiness shown in others is in short supply.” (Kyncl & Kyncl, 2008: 31). On a personal note, when I remember those who taught me, I realize that I was fortunate not only to have had teachers in my family and the church who carefully explained doctrines to me, but also to have had models of holy, Christlike living who demonstrated that these truths could really be experienced and lived out.

The published report of the M7 event suggests to me that there may be a need for better articulation of the church’s affirmation of and requirements for ordained clergy. Christians called to minister as medical professionals would surely be expected to need special commitment, discipline, education, and credentialing. However, there appears to be some discomfort with the similar expectation that Christians called to minister as pastors or in other roles as clergy might be expected to need special commitment, discipline, education, and credentialing.

The M7 Conference event and the book *Listening Inside Out* are good examples of the Church of the Nazarene intentionally listening to its “twentysomethings” While this is noteworthy, my personal experience suggests that it is not new. My recollection is that at every life stage the church has listened less than I wanted and more than I deserved. There has been, for me, a balance of the church listening to my dreams and perspectives and the church teaching me truths and practices that have been tested and passed down through many generations. At every age the church has been receptive to me and at every stage it has given me the correction and guidance I needed.

Some Cautions

There are very helpful insights to be gained from generalizations about the various generations. Undoubtedly, the circumstances of our lives as we come of age shape some of our ways of thinking and acting throughout our lives. For example, living with threats of terrorism during all of their formative years will surely have some lasting effects on younger members of the Millennial Generation. Understanding the characteristics formed in this group by their experiences during their formative years should help the church minister more effectively and the M7 discussions are a significant help in this.

However, it is also important to recognize that generalizations may lead us to stereotypical thinking. The people born between about 1980 and 1995 are not a monolithic, self-conscious group. Like previous generations, they make up a category of people characterized by variety as well as uniformity. Stereotypes about any group tend to include some element of truth. Problems arise when the truth about a few is generalized to describe the whole group. If the church does not recognize the variety as well as the similarities, we will not be as faithful in ministry as we should be.

Some of the predictions about the Millennial Generation are cause for alarm. Some have speculated that this generation will leave the church in record proportions. While the church experienced defections from other generations as they lived through their twenties, the speculation is that Millennials will not be as likely as previous generations to come back into the church as they move into their thirties and begin to take adult responsibilities more seriously. In reality the available data is limited. It is not adequate to confirm or falsify the hypotheses about how these fifteen year olds or even twenty-five year olds will act as they work through their thirties. This limitation has not, however, prevented the negative predictions.

Solomon asserted that continuity should be expected, “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). However, some of the writing about generations suggest that discontinuity must now be expected. Since the advent of Generation X or the Millennial Generation, or post-modern philosophy, or 9-11, we must discard most of what we have learned over the decades and start over.

The accuracy, or not, of predictions about Generation X give us a helpful example for evaluating current predictions about the Millennial Generation. In 1992 it was the members of Generation X who were the twentysomethings. Born between about 1965 and 1976, they were ages 16 to 27 when George Barna joined many others in asserting that “busters” (Generation X) were significantly different from previous generations and would reshape American institutions. He said, “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).

This alarmist prediction has not proven to be true. By 2003, when Gen Xers were 27 to 38 years old, thirtysomethings, it was clear that the prediction of discontinuity, radical change from previous generations, had been overstated. An article in the January 2003 issue of *American Demographics Forecast*, quoted a then recent study of the Gen Xers. It said, “Gen Xers are nothing like what people thought they were. . . . “In fact, they’re serious and relatively conservative.” According to the article, the “lazy slackers” who had been expected to transform America had instead followed patterns of earlier generations. Instead of being underachievers, they had achieved a higher level of educational attainment than Boomers at the same age, tended to be married, and placed a higher priority on saving for the future than Boomers did when they were in their late 20s and their 30s.

Some Conclusions

The M7 Conference discussions with representatives of the Millennial Generation remind us that we have received a religious heritage that should be transmitted from generation to generation. As the student participants suggested, we are not just generic Christians or generic Evangelicals. Their responses also make it clear that we need to give some attention to our own understanding of what we value enough to help new people acquire and to the processes of transmission. It is clear that denominations sometimes allow an erosion of the theological, ritual, and social treasures that sustain their distinct religious tradition. However, this erosion is not inevitable. (Nancy T. Ammerman, 2000)

Nazarenes have a rich tradition to transmit. We value our Wesleyan-Holiness heritage. We value the belief that God offers to all people forgiveness of sins. We, like Wesley, believe that God can do more than forgive sin; God can and will break the power of sin and deliver the person from bondage. We value the Bible as the primary source of spiritual truth confirmed by reason, tradition, and experience. We value the mission to which we believe God has called us participating with God in the building of the Church and the extension of His kingdom throughout the world (see the Core Values document *A Living Faith: What Nazarenes Believe*). We value worship, music, printed materials, rituals, programs that teach and disciple children, youth and adults, church colleges, and heroes of the faith. These are some of the treasures we have received and value greatly. They are valuables worthy of transmission from generation to generation.

Deuteronomy 6: 12 warns that the people of God tend to forget. When we settle into and become comfortable in the places and cultures where God has taken us, we too often allow subtle erosion of things we received at great price. It is not inevitable that we would allow loss of identity, erosion of religious capital, failure to pass on the valuable heritage we have received. However, drift, forgetfulness, and erosion are normal tendencies. If we desire to resist, the Bible and the research literature provide helpful suggestions.

Deuteronomy 6: 4-25 suggests the importance of families in the transmission of faith from one generation to another. It directs the people to God to impress their children with the importance of their religious experience in their everyday relationships, by symbols and practices and by telling the stories of God’s faithfulness. One of the reasons so many adult Christians report that

they came to faith as children is that families are so influential in our lives. Children's ministries through the church are important. Still, as in other areas of our lives, the primary group of the family is especially significant.

In his 2007 presidential address to the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, "Singing and Solidarity," R. Stephen Warner explored the importance of rituals and music for understanding "the remarkable, stubborn, long-term persistence of religion in our modern society." Like other secular academics, he said, as an undergraduate Warner took for granted the theory that evangelical Christians would find it difficult to maintain plausibility. He found instead that the scientific, rational worldview "was itself precarious and dubiously plausible for the evangelicals." Warner observed that "the most systematic category of outsider to any community is its own offspring. So if we are to understand how most people become members of the religious communities to which they are more or less committed as adults, we have to recognize that the first steps of that commitment are not discursive." He used a quotation from Garrison Keilor to illustrate the point that children absorb the practices of their tradition while they are very young, perhaps still sitting on their parents' laps. (2008: 181-182)

If you ask an audience in New York City, a relatively "Lutheranless" place, to sing along on the chorus of "Michael Row the Boat Ashore" they will look daggers at you as if you had asked them to strip to their underwear. But if you do this among Lutherans they'll smile and row that boat ashore and up on the beach! And down the road! Lutherans are bred from childhood to sing in four-part harmony. It's a talent that comes from sitting on the lap of someone singing alto or tenor or bass and hearing the harmonic intervals by putting your little head against that person's rib cage.

It's natural for Lutherans to sing in harmony. We're too modest to be soloists, too worldly to sing in unison. When you're singing in the key of C and you slide into the A7th and D7th chords, all 200 of you, it's an emotionally fulfilling moment.

I once sang the bass line of "Children of the Heavenly Father" in a room with about 300 Lutherans in it; and when we finished we all had tears in our eyes, partly from the promise that God will not forsake us, partly from the proximity of all those lovely voices. By our joining in harmony, we somehow promise that we will not forsake each other.

I do believe this: people, these Lutherans, who love to sing in four-part harmony are the sort of people you could call up when you're in deep distress. If you're dying, they'll comfort you. If you're lonely, they'll talk to you. And if you're hungry, they'll give you tuna salad! (in R. Stephen Warner, 2008: 184)

Nancy T. Ammerman reminds us that as important as family influence is, it is not the path some take on their journey to the religious commitments of adulthood. She notes that because of mobility and religious switching many churches have members who did not grow up in their denominational tradition. As part of the "Organizing Religious Work for the Twenty-first Century: Exploring Denominationalism" project, which had major funding from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., Ammerman's team conducted interviews in 549 congregations across the United States and in several religious bodies. Extensive results from the study were published in her book, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and Their Partners*. In an article based on this research and published in *Christian Century* she wrote, "On the cusp of the 21st century, a strange thing is happening. Congregations – not all, but a noticeable number – are choosing to highlight their denominational particularities." She suggests that, "What distinguishes

congregations where denominational traditions are valued and sustained from those that resign themselves to their 'genetic' fate is the way they undertake three key practices of congregational life – worship, mission and education. In the face of multiple curricular choices, they opt for their own denomination's educational materials. In the face of vast changes and blending of worship styles, they emphasize the distinctiveness of their own tradition. And even when working with many other partners, they highlight the good programs and mission work of their own denomination." (2000)

In an address delivered around 1968, Howard Hamlin discussed the cost of transition from a new religious movement to a respected denomination. He said,

A teenager of my vintage was a "speckled bird" simply because he was a Christian; but he was a definite oddity if he were a member of a Holiness Church. Such an evaluation was not only universally accepted by the non-Christian segments of the community; but it was also shared by the other elements of the Evangelical Christian Community.

Then as the Nazarenes became more numerous, their collective voice began to be heard in the inter-church conclaves; and the Christian community began to accept us as something more normal than a two-headed calf. Now we are one of the largest single segments of the evangelical community, and we cannot be longer ignored by our brethren. In the United States we are now among the "top ten" as a sending agency for missionaries.

And, for this recognition I fervently thank God! But my thanksgiving has been sobered by the possibility that we may be paying too much for our respectability.

(Hamlin, unpublished, undated manuscript)

The M7 discussions with Millennial Generation representatives were no doubt valuable in stirring up the imagination and vision of students. The summaries of responses provide evidence that the heritage is being transmitted and that we are still learning. The great treasures like our message and mission have not been entirely squandered; eroded. However, the people of God are always at risk of failing to pass on what they have received and experienced. Perhaps the greatest dangers are not conscious decisions to turn away from the pearls of great value that God has entrusted to us, but that we will make apparently unrelated or inconsequential decisions that lead us subtly away. Deuteronomy 6: 10-19 warns us that when God has helped us to become successful and respectable, we may be tempted to forget that we were slaves and God delivered us. If we forget, we will probably discount the value of the religious treasures we could pass on to future generations.

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