

**“Houston, we have a problem”:
Bridging the Generational Gap in our congregations**

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If you are a Baby Boomer or from the Silent Generation, you may be watching younger generations and asking: “Tattoos, loud music, sloppy clothing? I don’t get it.” While the younger generations are saying: “Why does everything have to be done the same way it’s always been? Let’s change things!”

This year, while developing a teen evangelism program, five14, I have done a comprehensive study of the MTV generation (born between 1975-1985) and the Millennials (1985-1995) and how they relate to the world around them, including their interaction with and contrast to other generations. The results of interviews, studying statistics and culture - with both young people and their elders – show that there is a relational gap caused by generational differences. And, working in outreach, speaking with congregational leaders and members all day long, it has become increasingly apparent that this gap has emerged in our congregations.

In relation to this article alone, the first difference occurred. I’m sure that, when those under 30 read the title of this article, which I expect to be few, they thought to themselves: “‘Houston, we have a problem?’ Hmm, I’ve heard that quote before. I wonder what it’s from?” However, the majority of you, born between 1925 and 1960, immediately knew to what I was referring.

When I talk about five14 with Baby Boomers and members of the Silent Generation (1925 to 1945), I usually receive two responses and often in consecutive order:

The first response often is: “Good. We need to reach young people.” And, the second: “I just don’t get you guys. What is up with the tattoos, punk rock music and apathetic dress code?” This is usually followed by a story about how, when they were our age, got gussied up for the movies or even the baseball game. This blows my mind. When I think of the movies, I think of a sweat suit; and the baseball game: a hat, tennis shoes and running shorts. I mean, who wants to dress up on their day off of work? The jeans and t-shirts that movie stars wear on talk shows, to which they’ve been invited, continually appall my grandma while my brother and I take style tips.

Tattoos? Well, they are a way to express what we are passionate about. Yes, I do have a tattoo. It’s on my back. It says: “Ephesians 2:8 Saved by Grace,” forming a ring of words with a cross and Jesus fish in the middle. I had this done as a way to strike up faith-sharing conversation. Granted, my tattoo usually warrants a better response from older generations than the content of the tattoos my friends have; but, none-the-less, I am asked why I didn’t just have it printed on a t-shirt. (Okay, to be honest, at this stage, I ask myself that question as well. <insert nervous laughter here>)

All in all, we just don’t think tattoos are a big deal. And, it upsets us that the older generations equivocate tattoos with an immoral lifestyle. 50% of my generation has one – the MTV Generation, that is. And, yeah, our tattoo may be illegible in 35 years as we age; but, half of our friends will suffer the same problem. In other words, we’ll be in good company. (Plus, there’s just no going back now.)

You don't get us. We don't get you. There is segregation between generations. This is the problem. Now, as members of Christ's church with a calling to make disciples of all nations – including all generations – and to be unified as His church, what can we do to bridge the gap?

Tips:

1. Stop casting judgement on one another.

"You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat...Therefore, let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way." Romans 14: 9-13

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Matthew 7:1-2

2. Get past outward appearances, including tattoos!

"The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." 1 Samuel 16:7

3. Find unity and cohesion in what we share: Jesus Christ.

"Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." Ephesians 4:2-6

4. Recognize that, although our histories and struggles are different, we are all undergoing trials. Pray for one another.

Millennials are struggling with temptation, growing up in a society of addiction, sexual dissipation and body image issues. The MTV Generation, also known as Generation X, is struggling for job security, trying to figure out how to afford it all: a house and children, keeping a stable marriage and staying out of debt. Baby Boomers are struggling with empty nest syndrome, preparing for retirement, and getting out of debt. The Silent Generation is, for the most part, on a fixed income, with real health threats and Medicare problems rising.

5. Concentrate on what you can do, personally, to encourage other generations. How can you serve their needs? How can you alleviate some of their burden?

"And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Hebrews 10:24

"Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms." 1 Peter 4:10

6. Ask God to fill your heart with love and understanding.

"Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good." Romans 12:9

“Serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command:
"Love your neighbor as yourself. Galatians 5:13b-14

7. Create fellowship events that tie generations together.

We often segregate generations by separating events by age: i.e. Children Ministry, Youth Ministry, Young Adults, and Senior Citizens. We should incorporate events where generations are caused to interact and serve with one another.

- Apples of Gold is wonderful example of this is. Older women in the church teach this 6-week course to younger women training them in the way that they should go: as a wife, as a mother, as a hostess, as a cook, and includes a weekly meeting between mentor and young woman, developing a bond. Not only does this provide a great opportunity for cross-generational fellowship, but also it provides mentoring for younger ladies as they develop. I went thru this course shortly before I was married and it developed my level of maturity, my heart for service and my understanding of being a Godly woman.
- Couple mentoring. This can be from an honorable and Godly couple of the church – whether they are in their 40s, 50s, 60s or so on, to an engaged or newly married couple. My husband and I had a couple from our church meet with us every Thursday night for our 9-month engagement, going through a Christian engagement workbook. This was a wonderful time of openness and growth as a couple and a time for learning to be a Godly and stable couple ourselves. When we have questions or just want to talk, we know that we can call or email Don and Donna anytime and they will be there, caring for us and our situation.
- Encourage younger generations to provide rides to doctor visits or the grocery store for elderly members of your church.
- Create service projects for each generation in the church, meeting their needs and addressing their struggles. Encourage people of all ages to serve in these events. This will not only encourage love from the server to the recipient through service, but it will also encourage fellowship across generational lines behind the scenes working as a team in service to someone else.

Resources:

- For more information on Apples of Gold, visit http://www.applesofgold.org/people_about.shtml.
- For curriculum and ideas on mentoring couples, consider purchasing [51 Creative Ideas for Marriage Mentors: Connecting Couples to Build Better Marriages](#) by Dr., Les and Leslie Parrot.
- To find out more about LHM's teen evangelism-training program, five14, visit <http://www.whatsfive14.com/>

About the Author:

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