
Introduction

"How are the kids?"
It could be an innocent question, or just small talk. Or it might be another adult wants to make comparisons or maybe even a cry for help or hope. Some use it to begin an inquisition!

"How are the kids?"

It probably depends on when you ask. Some who fared well in childhood don't do so well in adolescence. And some who seemed like model teenagers went off the deep end when they went away to college. Investing in Christian education paved the way for some, but inoculated others to God. After racing through college in five or six years and tens of thousands of dollars of debt, then what? Parents hold their breath wondering if their child will be another "failure to launch" saga. What if the opposite occurs—a young adult obsessed with work and climbing the imaginary ladder of success?

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There's the whole dating game and sexual promiscuity and marrying the right person, or maybe not getting married, or what if there are questions about one's sexual orientation? If things do "go well" and there is a marriage, at what age does that happen? Is that good or bad? How soon will babies come into the picture? Will they be okay? Will your children be good parents? Will they be just like you? Will their children be just like they were? What if they live too far away? What if they're too close?

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What about God and faith and scripture and church participation? Will your children be active in church? Will it be your church or different one? You invested so much and did the best you could. Admittedly, you made mistakes—who hasn't? But you tried; you really tried. Are you proud, pleased, or panicky? How long does that last? Will you cling to Proverbs 22:6 and hope? Have they chosen for themselves? Did they have a choice? How much will they be like you? Is that good news or bad news? If they have cut you off and claimed they need some space, how much space do they need, and for how long?

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In simple, agrarian societies, the family unit stays together. Roles remain clear. Males work the fields while females care for the household. The seasons dictate the annual cycles. God provides the sunshine and rain, although not always the way one might choose.

Industrial societies take more family members away from the house for longer periods of time. The work seems more monotonous and school replaces the home as the primary socializing agency by mid-childhood. Advanced education offers hope for something better, but at a cost of time, finances, and sometimes distance. God provides for our needs and the church offers a reprieve from the daily grind as well as a social gathering for the entire family.

In an information age, children soon know more than their parents in some areas, and they seem more nimble and adaptable. Multiple options make commitment difficult. Busyness easily snatches every available moment lest people miss out on another opportunity. With so many options, God is just one more—take it or leave it; this time or (maybe) next time.

Sociologist Christian Smith conducted research on teens in America. His National Study of Youth and Religion polled the general public, not simply Christians. He reported about three fourths consider themselves to be Christian, with 16 percent not religious and the rest spread over a variety of religions (Smith, 2005). It seems that American teens consider themselves to be Christian. But what kind of Christian? Rather than a specific denomination, Smith found verbal assent to Christianity, but a vague idea of what that meant. The common thread he found which described the religion of most teens could be labeled "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism" (Smith, 2005, p. 162). Five components comprise this "new religion."

1. God exists. He created this world and watches over it.
2. God wants people to be nice and fair, which is what most religions espouse.
3. The main goal in life is to be happy and to feel good about one's self.
4. God isn't really involved in one's life, except to solve occasional problems.

5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

Where in the world have American teenagers come up with this hodge-podge, independently egocentric and polite religion? According to Smith (2005) and Dean (2010), this comes from their parents and the congregations where they attend church.

Five years later, Smith conducted a follow up study with the same group, now ages 18-23. He discovered with these emerging adults that about half stayed with the religious group they had been with five years earlier. Between one-fourth and one-half switched to another religious group, with the largest switch being to “non-religious” (Smith, 2009).

The frustration and fear that a generation will lose faith seems to happen for some, although it remains a minority. The greater revelation seems to be that young people continue to be the lightning rod for church drop out discussions, when they simply demonstrate what older generations believe and practice. According to George Barna, more adults than teens leave the church (Barna, 2001). The dropout started back in the 1960s with the Baby Boomers (Kinnaman, 2011).

But at a time when Evangelicals are wringing their hands because so many are dropping out of congregations that claim to spread the Gospel, one has to wonder what’s happening. Are younger generations simply acting out their parents’ non-commitment, but being more honest about it by not showing up at church? Are they fed up with a superficial church as they seek the living God? Are they tired of the show and desire intimacy with the Divine? Would they prefer to make a difference by serving others rather than quietly filling a pew? Is this just a restless phase until they settle into church, much like (some of) their parents have done?

On October 18-20, 2011, the Center for Youth Evangelism at Andrews University hosted the fourth annual 180° Symposium. Executive Director Japhet De Oliveira coordinated this gathering and Alex Bryan, pastor of the Walla Walla University Church, facilitated the discussions. Participants spent the first day of the symposium responding to papers prepared and read in advance. These dealt with the topic of “Reaching the Second and Third Generations.” Those papers appear in the second half of this book.

The second and third days the group served as a “think tank” and addressed the topic through a group process of brain-storming, analysis, and evaluation. The book editor took the written and spoken results of those two days to comprise the first portion of this book. Additional chapters by the editor further flesh out the topic.

In addition to generational differences, immigration challenges show themselves when considering the second and third generations. Several papers address the Hispanic drop-off in church attendance and participation in Hispanic churches in America. Are they transitioning to Anglo churches or dropping out of church completely? What can be done about this perceived problem? The radical changes from one generation to another with immigrants has challenged not only Hispanics, but also Koreans, Japanese, Yugoslavians, Russians, Filipinos, Haitians, and others. Language and worship services seem to be the litmus tests for such groups. Continued immigration masks the dropout, while reduced immigration exposes it.

If you are reading this, it is likely that you can place yourself somewhere in the cycle of generational faith. Are you a first generation believer, or do you have a heritage of faith? If so, how have you continued what those before you started and how are you different from them? And what role will you play when it comes to the generation after you?

The likelihood remains high that the next generation will be similar, although not identical, to the one preceding it. But they aren’t at the same place right now, and they might not take the same pathway. Where they end up won’t be known for at least another decade or two. In the meantime, there are things we can do. Continue reading to discover them.

References

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