
What About the First Generation?

The first generation began as the good guys? How did they come to be the problem for the second and third generations? Are they clueless? Mean? Stubbornly intransigent? Wrong? Domineering?

In order to have a second and even a third generation, the first generation will have aged. Western cultures lack respect for elders. With productivity as the god, old people simply don't rate very high. Wisdom doesn't matter when you can simply "Google" whatever you need to know. To be kind (and yet crass), put the first generation into an old folks home and let them do crafts until they croak! Few will say it so bluntly, but their actions communicate it.

Contrast that to the biblical admonition, "Show respect to old people; stand up in their presence. Show respect also to your God. I am the LORD" (Lev 19:32, NCV). One of Solomon's proverbs reminds us, "Gray hair is a glorious crown worn by those who have lived right" (Prov 16:31 TEV).

Change describes young people. Growth spurts, radically new hair styles or hair colors, changing clothing styles, likes and dislikes, romantic crushes, temporary jobs, college majors, job hopping, church hopping, friends dropping in and out of their lives, temporary addresses, fluctuation in causes and commitments, multi-tasking, physical workouts. Change in society usually begins with young people.

Consistency describes old people. Beliefs, rituals, traditions, patterns, the same hair styles, the same clothing styles, the same car, predictable likes and dislikes, long-term commitments, love, church attendance, friends, naps, repeating stories, focus, routines. You can count on old people to be consistent.

Both young people and old people fail to keep in mind two basic realities:

1. Old people were young at one time
2. Young people will become old

It may seem obvious, but it needs to be said, and understood, and appreciated.

Ask old people to tell stories about when they were young. Yes, they will demonstrate their "selective memory" but their stories can be helpful and instructive to those who are younger, in addition to fostering the relationship between the generations. Honor the pioneers and appreciate the vision and dreams they followed. If it weren't for them, you wouldn't have the head start that you do!

Ask young people to share their dreams as well. Don't dampen them. By not knowing yet what they can't do, they might just go ahead and do it! Fan the flames of optimism, hope, risk, and possibilities. Then turn to prayer for divine power. Encourage skill development, but also faith reliance.

One religious educator termed the older years of the lifespan as a time in which faith can become resolute (Gillespie, 1988). "Resolute" could be a euphemistic way of saying, "Stuck." But why would someone want to change what they have found works for them? After years of trial and error, why go back to experimenting when you have already the tested answer? In this sense, "resolute" has more to do with certainty than stubbornness.

The first generation has lived long enough to observe cycles. They know that fads come and go, and worthwhile things cycle through being hip and then not hip, and then hip again. They aren't wowed by new songs. They don't feel compelled to change the style of worship each week. Just because someone complained of boredom

doesn't mean the worship service must change. Maybe the individual needs to change. The worship service seems to be fine. They won't "sell the farm" on a whim. In fact, now they aren't likely to sell the farm at all.

The first generation probably has a greater loyalty to the church than the second and third generations combined. One way this shows is through regular church attendance and even church board attendance. They show up! They are present. They do this week after week; month after month, even year after year. The second and third generations don't have time for boring meetings. As a result, they don't set the agenda for the church. And then they complain when it's not what they want.

Don't expect the first generation to simply hand over the reigns to the second or third generation. It means too much to them to give it away so glibly. Besides, how do they know the next generation will stick with it, giving it the respect, dignity, and value commensurate with the first generation's investment? Successive generations must put in the time, side by side, with the first generation in order to take the leadership without a battle and a war. The value from the mentoring and the short cuts gleaned from their years of experience could save the second and third generations decades of mistakes. It can also bond them to the Body of Christ rather than relying on sociologically comfortable, like-minded people groups.

The easy copout would be to separate the second and third generations from the first generation, and let each follow its own path. But if you divorce the first generation from the second one, the second generation then becomes its own first generation.

Likewise, segregating the second and third generations from the first generation leaves the first generation alone. With no second or third generation, the first generation becomes terminal rather than renewed.

"Now all of you together are Christ's body, and each one of you is a separate and necessary part of it. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad" (1 Cor 12:27, 26 NLT).

References

Gillespie, V. B. (1988). *The experience of faith*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press.