

What Missionaries Ought to Know about Generational Differences

A dozen years ago at the turn of the century I wrote about three generations: builders, boomers, and busters. At the time they were the only three generations involved in missions. However, since then a new generation, the millennials who matured as the new millennium began, have begun serving as missionaries. At the turn of the century, On the basis of the results reported by the Barna Research Group, I concluded that differences between the generations were basically cultural.

However, during the first decade of the new millennium, the Pew Research Center has done major research on the differences between the generations, and this research has revealed that those differences include far deeper issues, those of morality and religion. These differences can compromise cooperation and cohesion between missionaries of different generations.

What are the generations?

Although they differ on the exact years and disagree on the names used to describe them, most researchers consider a generation as covering about 20 years and name that generation after something that happened during that time.

- Builders (Also called the silent generation). Born before 1945, most builders are now 70 or more years old and are minimally involved in missions.

- Boomers. The many people born during the twenty years following World War II (1945-1964) were called the “baby boomers.” Now 50 or more years of age, the boomers were born into prosperity. They became well-educated, questioning, protesting, idealistic, and tolerant of many different lifestyles. As missionaries they brought specialized knowledge, a desire to continue their personal and professional development, and an emphasis on family.
- Busters (also called generation X). People born during the next two decades (1965-1984) were called the baby busters because there were fewer of them. Now 30 years of age and older, the busters, grew up in a world different from that of any previous generation. Many who came from broken homes and were victims of violence felt alienated, forgotten, cheated, and disillusioned with life. As missionaries looking for meaning in life, they were interested in spiritual things, open, honest, and aware of their needs. As such they make good team members.
- Millennials (also called Generation Y, Generation We, and Generation Next). People born between 1985 and 2004 were called millennials because they were the first generation to come of age in the new millennium. They grew up in the digital age with computers available to many of them. They communicated through cell phones, Skype, Facebook, and texting. They had high expectations and are characterized as confident, connected and open to change.

How do the generations differ?

During January 2010 the Pew Research Center called a nationally

representative sample of more than 2000 adults through both land lines and cell phones. At this time the millennials were 18-29 years of age. To be able to do a detailed analysis of them the Pew study called more than 800 millennials and smaller samples of the other generations. The full report is available at: <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2010/10/millennials-confident-connected-open-to-change.pdf>.

The Pew study found scores of similarities and differences. The major result that stands out is that the millennials are usually not markedly different from all the others. Rather, the differences are on a continuum, one in the order of the generations. For example, here are some questions about technology.

When asked, “Do you have a profile on a social networking site?” the percent answering yes is as follows (p. 25):

- Millennials: 75%
- Busters: 50%
- Boomers: 30%
- Builders: 6%

When asked, “Have you ever placed your cell phone on or right next to your bed while sleeping?” the percent answering yes is (p. 32):

- Millennials: 83%
- Busters: 68%
- Boomers: 50%
- Builders: 20%

Note that all the generations use technology, but some use it more than others. The same is true of nearly all of the questions asked in the Pew study, and the order of the generations is nearly always the same. Following are some specific ways the millennials are at one end of the continuum.

Technology (Chapter 4)

- More likely to text
- More likely to have cell phone only
- More likely to connect wireless to the Internet when away from home or work
- More likely to use twitter
- More likely to text while driving
- More likely to play video games
- Less likely to read newspapers

Most of these are differences with no moral or religious implications, but they do have great implications about communication. If boomers primarily communicate via email and millennials do so through texting, they may miss important messages. All generations on a field need to agree on some way to communicate so that information sent is always received.

Everyday Life (Chapters 5, 6, and 7)

- More likely to have tattoos
- More likely to have body piercing
- More likely to quit/change jobs
- Less likely to marry by 30
- Less likely to have “old fashioned” values about marriage/family

Though most of these have no moral or religious implications, the differences in everyday life may have more emotional potential than the mechanical differences in technology. Teams would do well to discuss how important these are to each other.

Politics (Chapter 8)

- More likely to be liberal
- More likely to approve of big government
- More likely to want government to solve problems
- More likely to approve of the way society is going
- Less likely to want religion in schools
- Less likely to vote

Political differences may be a minefield. Most people do not change their political views by discussion, so this topic is probably best left alone, just agree to disagree.

Morality (Chapters 8 and 9)

- More likely to approve of abortion
- More likely to approve of homosexual behavior
- More likely to approve of pornography
- More likely to believe in evolution
- Less likely to think Hollywood threatens Christian values

Missionaries of different generations are likely to differ on whether particular actions are right or wrong. The above issues divide people in the USA, and they may well divide missionaries on the field. It is best if each agency has positions on the most important issues, and then missionaries can decide if they can serve under those conditions. Such question should be asked, and fields should know what moral positions people take before they begin serving.

Religion (Chapter 9)

- Less likely to join church
- Less likely to attend services
- Less likely to say Bible is God's Word
- Less likely to pray daily
- Less likely to say religion is important
- Less likely to have certain belief in God

Disagreements about religious beliefs and expected behaviors are central to the missionary enterprise. How can people who do not belong to a church and do not attend church services be church planters? How can people who do not believe in God and say that religion is not important be missionaries? Such issues must be addressed in the selection procedures of the agencies.

One interesting difference

One question has been central to the missionary enterprise from the beginning. It is "What must people do to be saved?" The church faced this issue soon after Paul and Barnabas returned from their first term of missionary service. Nearly the whole chapter of Acts 15 is about this very question. Missionaries and their sending church could not resolve the issue, so they sent a delegation to headquarters in Jerusalem. Everyone involved had "much discussion," and all sides presented their case before they made the decision. Then they wrote a letter back to the local church and sent a delegation to answer any questions.

When asked whether Christianity was the only path to salvation in the Pew study, the generations did not follow the same order as in the previous statements. Only 23% of the builders, boomers, and busters (all very similar) agreed with the statement, "My religion is the one true faith leading to eternal life." However, 29% of the millenials agreed with the statement.

These findings have disturbing implications for missions. If nearly three quarters of Christians believe that "Many religions can lead to eternal life," one of the major motivations for missionary service is missing.

In addition, the Pew study notes that nearly three quarters of the millenials agree with the statement "There is MORE than one true way to interpret the teachings of my religion." It is interesting to note that they are more likely to say that Christianity is the only way to salvation but also more likely to say that there is more than one true way to **interpret** Christianity.

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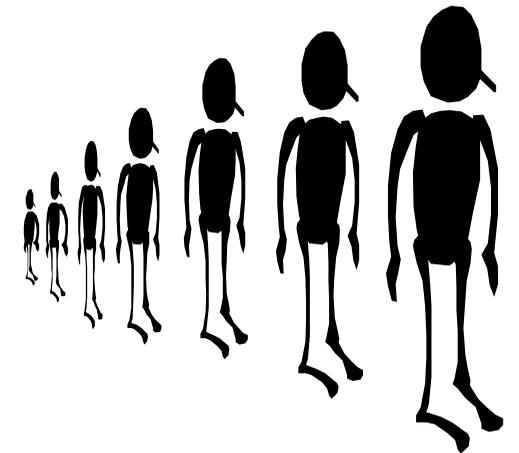
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