

Haydn Shaw: Churches need to improve their generational IQ

In churches, as in the workplace, generational differences are a challenge. Understanding those differences helps congregations ask the right questions, says the author of two books on generational issues.

Tuesday, January 26, 2016

Just as in the workplace -- where employers today struggle to manage workers from four different generations -- in today's church, generational differences are a major challenge, says Haydn Shaw, a business consultant and writer on generational differences.

When young people 14 and under are taken into account, churches today for the first time have five generations among their members.

"We've simply never dealt with five generations in the church before," said Shaw, the author of "Generational IQ." "We're the first generation that has to deal with it, and it is throwing off some sparks."

Theologically, for example, different generations have been influenced in different ways and so bring a different understanding to Scripture, he said. The era in which we were born and raised shapes us with both spiritual strengths and spiritual weaknesses.

"Generational intelligence is understanding the basic facts about different generations so you can take those into account when you plan for your church," he said.

Understanding generational differences can be particularly helpful for churches trying to figure out how to attract millennials and other young people. It can help churches learn how to ask better questions, he said.

Shaw is a business consultant with FranklinCovey and also conducts research and writes about generational issues in the workplace. His new book, ["Generational IQ," \(link is external\)](#) is about generational issues in the church. He is also the author of "Sticking Points: How to Get Four Generations Working Together in the 12 Places They Come Apart."

"'Why won't they come to us?' is a dead-end question," Shaw said. "It either makes us feel bad or puts them down and makes them the problem. It's more effective to ask what we have to do differently so that they would find us a place of spiritual health and help."

He spoke recently with Faith & Leadership. The following is an edited transcript.

Q: Before we talk about your new book, "Generational IQ," tell us about the earlier book that it builds upon, "Sticking Points." What was "Sticking Points" about?

It was about how organizations deal with the fact that for the first time, four generations are in the workplace. It doesn't matter what kind of organization -- a university, a business, a government agency, a church. All organizations are impacted by having four generations on staff. Or, if a nonprofit, four generations of volunteers.

Q: Explain the notion of “sticking points.” What are they?

Pew Research surveys have shown that people believe there are big generational differences. In fact, more people today say there are generational differences than they did in 1969 at the height of the “generation gap.” The difference is, back then, two-thirds of people thought it was creating major problems in the country, and today, only a third do.

It's not that different generations collide or crash into each other. It's more about sticking points -- places where the generations get stuck, places where they answer the same questions differently.

If we learn how to deal with those effectively, they can also be the places where the generations learn to stick together.

Q: What are some of the most common generational sticking points?

Work ethic is one. [A manager will say,] “My millennial employee came in 20 minutes late with no explanation and carrying a Starbucks, whereas if my boomer employees are late, they call in with a complete action plan.”

Feedback is another. The older generations had either formal feedback or “no news is good news.” Now, they're managing and leading people who are used to seeing their grades and test scores on the computer screen all the time.

Communication is another. Is it OK to text a message when you're going to miss work? “I'm texting in sick” -- is that respectful?

Do we wait our turn? Or do we push forward a new idea that we think would be effective, even if other people feel like we haven't paid our dues? How long do you have to wait before you suggest new ideas or criticize the way something's been done?

Everybody wants all of those things -- work ethic, feedback, communication, respect -- but each generation defines them differently.

Q: And in “Generational IQ,” you say these same kinds of generational issues are at play in church life.

Yes. In the book, I suggest that generational differences are the largest challenge that churches face.

We've simply never dealt with five generations in the church before. We're the first generation that has to deal with it, and it is throwing off some sparks -- that's for sure.

Q: Where are the sparks coming from?

Well, theologically, different generations have been influenced in different ways, and so they read Scripture with different lenses.

Once you understand what the research says about the generational themes and values of each generation, then you can see how that influences what people emphasize in Scripture, and what they put into practice.

Generational intelligence is understanding the basic facts about different generations so you can take those into account when you plan for your church. It's about understanding the spiritual strengths and weaknesses of each generation, how when we were born shapes how we see God and how we relate to God.

When we were born sets us up for some great spiritual strengths, and also some real spiritual vulnerabilities, or weaknesses.

Understanding that allows those who teach to plan more helpful messages. And it helps churches ask better questions.

When it comes to the generations, churches rarely ask helpful questions.

Q: You contend in the book that generational research contains good news for the church, that "Christianity isn't dying, millennials aren't the problem, and the future is bright." How so?

Christians love to scare each other with statistics. We love to tell each other scary stories. We've been doing that for years. "It's the decline of America!" "The Communists are coming!"

But I think we make better responses to things when we're more thoughtful.

There are three reasons why Christianity isn't dying. First, church attendance is only down 10 percent in 40 years. Nobody likes to see a 10 percent drop, but it is not "Christianity will be gone in three generations."

Secondly, when you dig into the actual numbers on the "nones," you discover some surprising things. When we talk about a 7 percent jump since 2007 in the nones, we're looking at a jump in people who didn't actually attend church or weren't active in their faith but [in the past because of the social stigma] claimed to be Christian on surveys.

But many nones go to church. They don't claim Christianity as their religious affiliation, but they attend church. As many as 2 percent attend church every week, and volunteer, and give money; they just don't want to be labeled. Others attend church on Christmas and Easter and other times,

so they're not opposed to church. They would call a church if they were hospitalized. They see that as their church. They just don't want the label.

The millennials really are less churched and are slightly less believing in God. But the percentage of people in the United States who believe in God has dropped 2 percent since the 1940s. It's dropped just a little under 10 percent since 2007 for the millennials.

So yes, there has been a drop in faith in God. And there has been a change in how people define and conceive God. But that is a far cry from saying that churches are dying. Churches were never as big -- Christians were never as big -- as we thought. So the drop is not nearly as big as we thought.

Q: Give us some examples of how generations differ.

Let's just take the four generations that you've got traditionally.

Generally, traditionalists were born before 1945, so they're 70 and above.

And then you've got baby boomers, 1946 through '64, and then the Xers, born '65 through 1980. And then the millennials, 1981 through 2000. And then there's another generation, probably around 14 and younger, that no one's agreed on the name.

So we've got five generations in the church for the first time!

Traditionalists were shaped by the Great Depression, and World War II, and sacrifice, and everyone working together, and so they had some really great strengths. Traditionalists are the givers in the church; 70 percent of the money still comes from people who are over 70 in many churches.

On the other hand, they often struggle with the idea of retirement. We live so much longer that this generation, the traditionalists, are the first generation to truly experience a second adulthood -- this new life stage between retirement and when you are physically unable to do the things you were able to do before. Some people have 15 to 30 years of additional active life before they become what in the past we would have called being "elderly."

We literally have two new life stages: a longer emerging adulthood for the 20-somethings and one for folks that retire. These are uncharted areas for both groups, and they pose new challenges for the church.

The boomers also have some great strengths. They brought God close. Doctrine was a major focus of the traditionalists, but today, in many denominations and religious traditions, it's much more focused on an expansive God, a relationship with God, being close to God.

At the same time, the boomers can take that too far in being hyperindividualistic, evaluating everything by whether or not it makes me happy or meets my needs. It's more of a consumer mindset.

Look at the way people church-hop today. It's not that people didn't switch churches before. But in the past if people left a church, it would have to be for a pretty big reason; it would be after they got pretty mad.

Baby boomers wouldn't church-hop because they were mad but because they thought something was better someplace else.

Q: What about the millennials? What's your take on them?

The millennials have brought a focus on authenticity, which is great, because it is possible for churches to be too polished and to not feel authentic.

Millennials also tend to be tribal. We've all seen them in their natural habitat, a restaurant where 20 of them spread out at five tables talking to people at their tables while texting people who aren't there.

And millennials have great relationships with people who are older, whereas the boomers were saying, "Don't trust anybody over 30."

Millennials think that the traditionalists -- their grandparents -- are the greatest generation, and they think the Xers are a little whiny. The millennials want to be mentored, both at work and at church, and that is a huge opportunity.

Most churches don't know what to do with 20-somethings. They are the most underserved group in almost every church. It is probably the most complex part of the church to minister to.

These 20-somethings -- emerging adults -- are characterized by change and exploration, and not settling down. By moving around, and switching roommates, and sometimes switching lovers. And churches do best with stability.

But the research shows that if we take an older adult and we match them up with a person 18 to 23 and they just text them every other week, keep some kind of connection with them, the likelihood they will drop out of church is cut in half. It can't be their parents; it has to be some other adult in that church or congregation who cares about them and is willing to stay in contact with them.

Q: So what should churches do? What's the best way to reach millennials?

The best way to go about it is to ask a different question, ask a better question.

Asking, "What's wrong with them?" -- the millennials are the problem -- ends up putting us on the spot. We spend our time saying, "I don't know what's wrong with them" rather than asking, "What do we have to do differently so that they think we're a place of spiritual life and growth?"

“Why won’t they come to us?” is a dead-end question. It either makes us feel bad or puts them down and makes them the problem. It’s more effective to ask what we have to do differently so that they would find us a place of spiritual health and help.

If we’re going to reach other people not like us, we’re probably going to have to do it a little differently. And I think asking those questions is more effective.

But the No. 1 thing we can do to reach the millennials is to understand this new life stage of emerging adulthood.

If we don’t get a little more generational intelligence, we will focus on the wrong things, and get upset about small things, and propose things that aren’t going to help.

Secondly, even as we figure out how to reach millennials, we also have to ask, “What do we do with their grandparents?”

They’ve still got another 10 to 20 years’ worth of life, and nobody wants to be put out to pasture for 10 or 20 years. So what are we going to do after we make the changes to reach the younger generation?

One of the beautiful things about the millennials is that they really want to know what older generations think, and how they’ve sorted things through. So this is a match made in heaven.

You’ve got older people who are living longer and want to know how to make an impact on their retirement. You’ve got younger people who are wanting somebody in addition to their parents that they can go to, and think out loud with, and sort through all the new choices that previous generations didn’t have and didn’t have to make.

That’s the second point I want to make about reaching the millennials: we’ve got a match made in heaven here between them and older people who are looking for something more than just folding bulletins or singing in the choir in their retirement. The field is ripe to harvest.

[The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together,](#)

One real dilemma of intergenerational worship is that it engages differing, and often competing, generational cohort values that live side by side in the congregation. People of different generations often like and enjoy being with one another. They may even see themselves as similar to one another, coming from the same families or living in the same community. Nonetheless, because of the cohort differences, discomfort below the surface commonly makes sharing worship, program planning, or decision making difficult across generations.

A generational cohort is that group of people who were born around the same time as one another and who learned the same life lessons because of their shared historical location in the culture that shaped their expectations. The lessons each generation has learned, the values it has adopted, and its way of seeing serve as a lens or a filter through which the world is experienced and understood. Such generational filters lead to a natural conclusion, arrived at by each successive generation, that there is a “right way” to be in the culture. It is this assumption of a “right way” that leads to so much tension and misunderstanding between generations. Older generations quite naturally but mistakenly assume that the difference between them and younger generations (their children and grandchildren) is an issue of maturity. The assumption is that once the younger people “grow up,” they will behave more appropriately—that is, they will dress better for worship, they will more readily sign on for committee and board responsibilities to help with the work load, they will sign a pledge card, they will. . . .

However, these are not issues of maturity but of differences. People with differing and competing values sit side by side in worship, as they do in all of congregational life. In too many congregations intergenerational worship is simply a search for those compromises that will be most palatable or least offensive to the participants. Leaders too often go out of their way to head off conversations about differing expectations in worship, rather than helping members and participants to engage in and sustain essential conversations about how the congregation will now behave. Yet it is the conversations that engage the differing generational value systems that can bring some understanding and vitality to the congregation and offer a real future to the faith.

Preference and Purpose

To be intergenerational requires us to make the effort to see beyond our own cultural or generational lens. Being intergenerational is clearly a leadership issue. Being intergenerational is not limited to worship but includes programming, stewardship, mission outreach, even community formation itself. Being intergenerational is one of the most difficult challenges of congregational leadership in a fast-changing culture, because leaders must constantly be more focused on learning how to speak to the shifting culture than on speaking in familiar and safe language that is already embedded in the congregation.

A significant challenge in intergenerational congregations is to train and challenge leaders to look beyond the “preferential.” The natural tendency of leaders in a voluntary institution such as a congregation is to satisfy the current constituency—to find the preferred way the current congregation likes to worship, to plan, or make decisions, and to embed those preferences as the

approved practices of the congregation. There are problems, however, when leaders simply follow the “preferred” ways too closely.

One problem is that when leaders simply endorse the preferred practice in the congregation, it becomes much more difficult for those leaders to hear and to respond to the new voices of people coming into the congregation. The preferred way is established as the norm and is not easily challenged. The necessary argument that will lead to faith-shaping accommodation will be missing because only one voice is allowed in the room. The deeper problem, however, is that when leaders assume it is their responsibility to satisfy the people who are already active members of the congregation, it becomes increasingly difficult to lead change and to learn new ways. One of the most difficult “kinds” of congregation to lead is the satisfied congregation because, quite naturally, it does not want to go anywhere different. Seeing intergenerationally means understanding that the task of leaders is far more than satisfying the members.

We need to understand that what satisfies most people is to remain in their preferred practice—their established *strategy* for doing anything from cleaning a kitchen to worshipping God. Congregations too commonly mistake strategies for purpose and hold on to particular strategies as if the practice were itself holy rather than a way one might approach the Holy. Leaders must look at worship and other congregational practices from the perspective of purpose rather than preference. Rather than asking how most people *like* a particular practice, leaders must learn to explore how choosing a practice will most faithfully fulfill the purpose of the congregation. Worship planners will help deepen the worship life of the congregation when they increase the congregation’s awareness of the power and purpose of their worship. In addition, the community life of the congregation will likewise be deepened as generations engage one another in a healthy conversation to reshape the practice of the faith in an appropriate way.

A Way of Seeing

Intergenerational leadership is a way of seeing—a way of seeing each other, a way of seeing the purpose of the church, a way of seeing the need to be flexible in our strategies for worship, leadership, and decision making. To be intergenerational, leaders need to be prepared to share the leadership table with people of different “cohort values” and to appreciate the differences that these others will bring. In a good number of congregations the challenge of developing an intergenerational way of seeing means getting the right people around a safe table for the conversations needed.

Intergenerational as a way of seeing is also an act of Christian hospitality—rich Christian hospitality. Too many congregations limit their practice of hospitality to politeness. I was confronted by the difference between politeness and hospitality in my last congregation soon after we began sharing our facilities with a new church in the Latino community surrounding us. We hired a pastor from Puerto Rico and provided worship, program, and office space. However, we also unwittingly provided many expectations about how that space was to be used. Finally, my Puerto Rican colleague had to come to me and, speaking for his congregation, say, “It is wonderful to be invited into our brother’s house. However, it is not easy always being reminded that it belongs to our brother.”

Intergenerational worship, programming, stewardship, decision making, and faith formation require so much more than politely allowing others to do it their way “in our church.” It is a way of seeing and being with each other that goes deeply beyond politeness to true hospitality, where we see God in one another and shape a new community because of what we see.

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FEATURED RESOURCES

[The Church of All Ages: Generations Worshiping Together](#) edited by Howard A. Vanderwell

Among the questions congregations struggle to address are these: Should we try to hold the generations together when we worship? Is it even possible? Led by pastor and resource developer Howard Vanderwell, nine writers-pastors, teachers, worship planners, and others serving in specialized ministries-offer their reflections on issues congregational leaders need to address as they design their worship ministry. They guide readers as they craft ministries and practices that fit their own community, heritage, and history. Each chapter includes questions for reflection and group discussions, and an appendix provides guidelines for small group use.

[Designing Worship Together: Models and Strategies for Worship Planning](#) by Norma deWaal Malefyt and Howard Vanderwell

This book draws on more than two decades of collaborative worship planning by pastor Howard Vanderwell and musician Norma deWaal Malefyt, offering thoughtful, field-tested processes and tools for planning, implementing, and evaluating life-enriching weekly worship.

[The Multigenerational Congregation: Meeting the Leadership Challenge](#) by Gilbert R. Rendle

Congregations need to learn new cultural languages and practices in order to speak to and be heard by new generations of people. But how do congregations enter the wilderness of ministry with these new generations when many of those in the entourage do not appreciate the trip? Rendle shows us how to talk with and really understand one generational cohort while another cohort is present “looking over one’s shoulder.”

This article was adapted from her new book, [Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation](#),

In my bedroom, I have a Gabbeh rug, woven in deep browns and greens. Not the typical elegant Persian rug, this one has thick choppy wool, rough edges, and crooked lines. Made with vegetable dyes, each row changes colors, leaving a wonderful earthy richness. In a region known for its fine and intricate carpets, these rugs are bottom of the line because they are constructed and carried by nomadic tribes who pack them on animals until they set down a temporary home, then unfold them onto the ground, where their family can gather on that four by six-foot area.

While preparing to put our house on the market before our move from Rhode Island to Washington, D.C., I realized I needed a carpet to cover the shiny wood flooring my husband and I had recently installed. I also imagined it would be comforting to have a bit of familiar space to unpack upon reaching a strange land. So as I got ready to move for the seventh time in sixteen years, I bought the carpet and packed it into the trunk of my car. I needed a familiar space that I could take with me, something that was sturdy, warm, and not likely to wear out anytime soon.

I don't travel with a caravan of extended family and friends, but like many in my generation of thirty-somethings, I move often with my spouse and daughter, increasingly away from my family of origin. When I unpacked my boxes in Arlington, Virginia, I rolled out the rug in my bedroom. My daughter and I sat down on the thick pile as we listened to books on tape and admired the brown and green diamond shapes. The soft itchiness tickled my hands, connecting me to my history in Rhode Island, as well as its own years of tradition tightly wound up into its threads.

Urban Tribes

The carpet reminds me that each place I find myself, I try to quickly set up a little area where I can meet friends and gather a makeshift family. Evidently, even though I feel dreadfully alone sometimes, I'm not alone. Ethan Watters wrote an article about meeting his young unmarried friends every Tuesday night at a particular restaurant and labeled them an "urban tribe." From the outpouring of mail the little piece received, he realized that the sociological trend was widespread, so he wrote a book on this development.

The term "urban tribe" strikes a chord with me too, although I'm married and have a child. Away from my family of origin, I long for community. As a pastor, I see that the best work of our church springs up when these groups begin to form: small, cohesive parties who can depend on each other for interesting friendships, pet sitting, and meaningful holidays.

Forming Tribal Churches

When I began as a twenty-seven-year-old pastor of a small rural church, ministering to young adults seemed like an impossible task, especially when I looked at newspapers, philosophy, and church growth trends. Newspapers and magazines often dressed young adults up as greedy slackers, ever-sponging off our parents and never assuming responsible roles in society.

I often did not recognize the people our popular culture described. No matter what cause united moms, how much volunteering dads engaged in, or what trends twenty-year-olds began, they were inevitably compared disparagingly to Baby Boomers, the civil rights movements of the sixties, and were eternally dwarfed in that Boomer-looming shadow. How could the church understand young adults if it continually looked at them through the tinted spectacles of older adults?

Then I read church growth material, which thoughtfully categorized younger generations. I loved studying books like *Soul Tsunami*, but when I tried to put some ideas into practice in my elderly congregation (like the instructions to “get glocal”), I realized the great gulf between where we were as a church and where we needed to be to implement the suggested ideas. I began swimming and swirling, feeling hopeless, like I had to reinvent two thousand years of solid traditions and practice to reach out to my generation.

Visiting contemporary worship services particularly designed for young adults made me feel irritated and empty. I was a part of a large, growing segment of spiritual young adults who wanted nothing to do with contemporary worship. As soon as I saw that white screen slither down from the ceiling, I knew that I was going to have a difficult time stomaching the next twenty-five minutes. Someone was trying too hard to be hip. Like my high school English teacher’s attempts to be fashionable and cool, it just seemed *wrong*.

I was being unfair. Actually I think that I was just jealous. Obviously, there was a place in our society for slick worship, but I was like most pastors. I could never be hip, even when I tried really, really hard. I could buy a pair of designer jeans to wear on a Sunday morning and use the word “awesome” a lot, but I was still perfectly square.

My rural church was far from cool too. It was small, ancient, and full of people over sixty—and the perfect place to effectively care for young adults. Like those nomadic tribes, our church needed a rug—a comforting space for young adults, a place where years of tradition formed something beautiful. And they came, and they began to join. Over time, we began to weave a rich tapestry of diverse, intergenerational people. We did not discover the formula for a booming Gen X megachurch in just three years; instead, we reversed the trend of lost membership, kept the original members, and had a consistent ten percent growth made up of individuals of various ages. Our congregation became an intergenerational meeting ground, a place for supportive tribes to form, and I began to realize that our mainline denominational church has great assets for reaching out to young adults. When I moved to Rhode Island, I noticed the same thing happened in that bayside New England town of Barrington. Then I joined the staff of Western Presbyterian Church, an urban church in Washington, D.C., where the flow of young members seemed to rise every week.

Weaving Connections

Though young adults came, we realized how easy it was for them not to. It’s no longer important for someone in their twenties or thirties to go to church. Denominational affiliation has very little power in our politics or workplaces. The societal expectation to attend worship is gone, the blue

laws faded a long time ago, and now children have plenty of sporting and scouting opportunities during those once-sacred hours.

When a young person walks into a church, it's a significant moment, because no one expects her to go and nothing pressures her to attend; instead, she enters the church looking for something. She searches for connection in her displacement: connection with God through spiritual practices, connection with her neighbors through an intergenerational community, and connection with the world through social justice outreach.

The church has been making these vital connections for thousands of years, and we can easily respond to the young, weary travelers in our midst, letting them know that they can find a spiritual home within our worshiping communities and that we will provide a supportive space for them so that they can form their tribe.

Our churches can weave a source of connection. I have seen tribes gather in a variety of settings: in a college town, the rural countryside, a New England community, and an urban setting. Watching relations and groups develop in a church, creating and maintaining space for them, is a vital part of what I do as a pastor.

Envisioning what the church will look like in the next twenty years, I imagine a body that gathers together to worship God, strives for social justice, and cultivates tribes. Even the smallest churches—*especially* the smallest churches—have the resources to respond to young adults in meaningful ways when they understand their contexts and make a place for them. These relationships take shape when our intergenerational groups of displaced families and single people begin to weave a rich tapestry of familiar space.