



UNDERSTANDING GENERATION Y – A DUMMIES GUIDE FOR AGING PASTORS

In January 2011 I commenced work on the final stage of my MA in Missional Leadership, a dissertation of 20,000 words. As a church pastor in my late fifties, with three sons aged between 18 and 30, I was keenly aware that young people now live in a very different culture to that of my youth. I therefore decided to explore a deeper understanding of this age group (or ‘Generation Y’ as it is frequently termed in the literature) and how this might help one to communicate the Christian faith to them in ways that were both relevant and authentic. As Newbigin wrote:

If the gospel is to be understood...if it is to be received as something which communicates the truth about the real human situation, if it is as we say “to make sense,” it has to be communicated in the language of those to whom it is addressed and it has to be clothed in

symbols which are meaningful to them.[\[1\]](#)

I was aware from my MA studies that ‘generation’ and ‘culture’ are highly problematic concepts, and that the aim of a better understanding of the culture of Generation Y might seem a naively simplistic undertaking. Understanding the culture of any group raises questions that engage the specialist knowledge and skills of sociologists, psychologists, historians, and ethnographers to name but a few, and this is before one introduces any theological perspectives into the discussion. Moreover which ‘young people’ was I seeking to understand? Surely any generalisations here were extremely vulnerable but for practical reasons I could confine my research area to my own community of Solihull, a relatively prosperous suburban area on the edge of Birmingham in central England.

It was the complexity of this challenge of understanding that intrigued me however. Are pastors and other Christian practitioners to rely on merely anecdotal comments and personal observations in seeking to understand the groups they are seeking to reach with the gospel? Should they feel intimidated and inadequate in seeking to form any more conceptual understanding? While it is understandable that one may give way to such doubts, the consequence is that practitioners can approach their missional task with a lack of any coherent or integrated picture of the significant factors and influences that shape the groups they are seeking to reach.

Perhaps a humble practitioner can assert a counter hypothesis to the belief that any credible understanding must be left to the academic experts. Is it at least plausible that there are a relatively few key concepts or themes that go a long way in helping to understand young people? Is it also possible that these themes are in some ways significantly interrelated and that this helps explain their collective cultural power in shaping young people’s view of the world?

I began my research by gathering some basic facts about Generation Y. Firstly this generation are not going to church. Between 1985 and 2005, the number of English young people aged 10 to 19 attending Sunday church fell from 863,500 to 394,300 and of those aged 20 to 29 from 520,900 to 230,600, falls of 54% and 56% respectively.[\[2\]](#) The 2005 English Church Census revealed that only 5% of young people between the ages of 15 and 29 attend church with any regularity.[\[3\]](#) Secondly all is not well with young people. There is much disturbing evidence that Western society is experiencing significant problems in the lives of its younger members – binge drinking, depression, sexually transmitted infections, self-harm, drugs and suicide.[\[4\]](#) Many young people are suffering the consequences of family breakdown, divorce and absent fathers which also compromise their own expectations of marriage and relationships. Thirdly many young people live in a world of cultural and spiritual poverty, dominated by television and the Internet. This is a world of instant chatter, soap operas, and celebrity entertainment. It is a world in which young people retain a deep need for relationships but where intimacy is lost in public digital communication on Facebook and Twitter. It is a world where language is rarely heard or acquired that could enable young people to express ideas of philosophical, religious or

spiritual depth. It is a world where purpose and happiness is often confined to the present, the material, the culturally banal and the spiritually vacuous.

In my initial field research I interviewed teenagers attending a ‘post Alpha’ group, a number of young people in their 20s, and three Christian youth workers. The teenagers were open to spiritual experiences, such as believing in miracles and enjoying contemporary Christian worship, but there was an attitude of wanting to relate to God on their own terms. Christian faith was not seen by them as central to their life or defining its purpose. The degree of ignorance, or what might be better termed ‘innocence’, about the content of the Christian faith was striking if not surprising given our postmodern, post Christendom world. The young people in their 20s were not antipathetic to Christianity but could not see what believing in God would add to their generally happy and satisfactory lifestyle. A colleague who helped facilitate this discussion summarised the views expressed:

They perceive no need of or advantage to Christianity. It is indeed a consumer approach. If the only thing it adds is a belief, followed by a trip to heaven, of which they see no need, then why bother with Christianity? That seems to me to be a particularly difficult area to approach as it must emanate from their basic philosophy of life. Added to that is a rather negative view of what being a Christian means i.e. no sex and drinking now for heaven later, which they don't want anyway. There is a mountain to climb here!

The Christian youth workers provided a number of agreed observations as to the issues affecting particularly older teenagers including: the pervasive influence of the media and its accompanying technology, educational pressures to succeed, consumer pressures to emulate their peers, and issues associated with identity and self esteem that directly affected physical and mental health. The prevalence of family breakdown was highlighted with its resulting insecurity, and the continual need for love, acceptance and belonging. Despite the many opportunities available to young people today through technology and travel, sports and leisure pursuits, many young people seem bored and disinterested, exemplified by a lack of imagination when it comes to the purposeful use of their time. As for religion it was seen as relatively powerless in making a real difference to one’s life.

The above information was supplemented by interviews with a number of adults who work closely with young people in a number of different environments including education, mental and physical health, and social work. In addition a wide ranging literature review was undertaken examining the views of a range of secular academics and Christian writers on the culture of Generation Y. From all this material I sought to identify and extract what seemed to be the dominant themes or concepts. I was consciously looking for those concepts that appeared most significant to a Christian perspective and would contribute to a missiological understanding. This led me to an initial identification of four key themes:

Innocence– most young people have a very limited understanding of the Christian faith and of

Christian values. Christianity is a faith that needs to be taught and many young people have no experience of such teaching.

Identity- in the main young people's view of themselves is shaped by their current lived experiences, their close relationships, and their individual consumer choices - not from any meaningful and active religious beliefs or any sense of a spiritual identity.

Immediacy- modern culture shapes the lives of young people with its emphasis on immediate communication, consumption, entertainment and access to knowledge - and this electronic culture is a vital medium through which to communicate with them.

Intentionality- most young people are focussed on living life now, feeling happy and good about themselves, and not on how their lives may relate to any greater or divine purpose in the world.

I wove these four themes together to better understand why members of Generation Y may tend to see Christian faith as irrelevant or inessential to their lives:

*An **innocence** about the gospel means that Generation Y's **identity** is shaped by their present world, which is reinforced by a culture of consumerism, and the **immediacy** offered by today's digital media and communications. This results in a lack of **intentionality** in pursuing any longer term purpose or transcendent truth which in turn contributes to a lack of interest in, and **innocence** about, the gospel.*

Extensive discussion on all four of these themes can be found in both Christian and secular literature. The main literature I drew for development of each of the themes is given in the endnotes.[5] There seemed broad evidence and support for the view that a combination of innocence about religious experience and church communities, an identity shaped by consumer choices, and life in the immediacy of an electronic culture, provides few incentives or resources for young people to desire or discover a deeper meaning or purpose in life. As Howe & Strauss concluded in their study, nothing in the average Generation Y existence 'stimulates self reflection'. [6] As a result Savage, Collins-Mayo et al concluded that it takes time for even a basic 'formative spirituality' to emerge in young people - that is a conscious search to understand one's identity and place in the world.[7] Moreover they assert that this formative spirituality cannot be assumed as immediate evidence of an unspoken interest in a transcendent God, or the desire to be a Christian. The quest may only be for a better sense of well being - what they call the 'happy midi-narrative'. [8] Therefore to present the starting point of the Christian gospel to Generation Y as 'Jesus saves you from your sins' does not give space for such young people to ask their first spiritual questions about who they are in the world. David Hay has also argued that a certain developing consciousness of one's spirituality precedes the answers of a particular religious faith and tradition.[9] This consciousness, as Tacey discovered in his work with undergraduates, may not be of God but rather that 'something is missing', and a

sense that it is urgent and important to find it.^[10] He also discovered that the quest was not primarily intellectual in origin, but often came from a sense of personal crisis in relationships, or a recognised dysfunction or trauma in life, or a wider sense that something is missing in society at large. Without such triggers it seems the four themes work together to militate against a spiritual search.

In exploring the above model with a number of interviewees the question was asked if other key concepts were missing from the model. The words that came up time and again were 'relationships' and 'trust' or the vital need of young people for 'trusted relationships' whether with parents or friends. Young people often lack such relationships, especially when they feel the adults closest to them have let them down (for example through family breakdown). On the other hand healthy relationships with parents were seen as enormously beneficial to a young person's sense of well-being, confidence and security. Relationships therefore form the world in which Generation Y experiences either happiness or hurt. Their key need in relationships is '*finding people who believe in them so they can believe in themselves*', which may be a needed step to them believing in God.

A fifth theme therefore emerged, which I termed the 'relational environment', comprising parents, school or work colleagues, friends and mentors, and all those interpersonal dynamics in a young person's life, which can strongly influence them for good or ill. I found this theme corroborated in an interesting way when I came across Desmond Tutu's thoughts on the African concept of *Ubuntu*, a term difficult to translate into English but which conveys the idea that 'A person is a person only in relation to other persons'.^[11] Further support for this fifth theme, and its importance, also came from the major Religion and Society research programme sponsored by the UK Government. Its first conference meeting reported that the main theme, arising from research with young people, was their need for *authenticity* or *trusting relationships*. The theme of *relational environment* therefore, needs to be added to the matrix. In fact this theme, the specific social context where the other themes play out, in considerable measure determines the way they are experienced.

What conclusions did I draw from my research about Generation Y? Firstly these findings are not very congenial to Christians who would like to think that young people are latent spiritual seekers who have a deep down if unarticulated sense of their need for God. In most cases they don't. Their knowledge of the Bible is minimal. Missional work with young people should not start with an over optimistic presumption. This is mission in a pagan culture.

Secondly Generation Y places huge emphasis on individualism and freedom of choice in shaping their identity, but ironically they are profoundly, if unconsciously, moulded by the consumer values of contemporary Western culture and their pervasive promotion through the media. Consumer identity, 'we are what we buy', permeates their whole attitude to life so that even religious beliefs are discussed as something one personally chooses 'to buy into'. Christian workers need to think through what the gospel 'offers' to the consumers of Generation Y, and

the likely contemporary offence of the cross of Christ.

Thirdly in Generation Y we are dealing with a digital and Internet generation. Their primary organ of communication is not the mouth or the ear but the mobile phone. Those who want to communicate with this generation have to use their choice of media as well as presenting the message in words they can understand, and these are unlikely to be in traditional theological language.

Fourthly as long as members of Generation Y seek their fulfilment in a consumer identity and its promise of personal happiness they will show little overt intention in pursuing any deeper spiritual quest. Their busy lives give no time to think of eternity. They are not attracted to the perceived monolithic ideological or religious beliefs of their parents, rather their watchword is 'Keep your options open.' However can the gospel connect with their recognition that 'something is missing' in this world and challenge young people to find and be part of the solution?

Within this often spiritually bleak and challenging landscape another ray of light appears. Generation Y people, like all human beings, need relationships and specifically trusted relationships. Generation Y may not trust church but Christians who come across as authentic, who live out a different sense of values, and talk of a God found in personal experience, are people they may find interesting, able to trust, and be willing to talk to.

[1]L Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, (London: SPCK, 1989)

[2]P Brierley, *The Tide is Running Out - What the English Church Attendance Survey Reveals*, (London: Christian Research, 2000), derived from table on p121

[3]P Brierley ed., *UK Christian Handbook Religious Trends No. 6, Analyses from the 2005 English Church Census*, (London: Christian Research, 2006), p2.7

[4]In the US for example the 2003 Report by The Commission on Children at Risk in the United States, *Hardwired to Connect, The Case for Authoritative Communities*, New York: Institute for American Values, 2003, summarised the recent increase in mental illness, emotional distress and behavioural problems..

[5] On Innocence see: Savage, Collins-Mayo, Mayo and Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2006); Grace Davie, *Religion in Modern Europe: A Memory Mutates*, (Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2000); David Voas and Alasdair Crockett, *Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging*, *Sociology*, 39(1): p11-28; Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: understanding secularisation 1800-2000*, (London: Routledge, 2001); [Hugh McLeod](#), *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Danielle Hervieu-Leger, *Religion as a Chain of Memory*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); Collins-Mayo, Mayo, Nash and Cocksworth, *The Faith of Generation Y*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2010); Jo Pimlott and Nigel Pimlott, *Youth Work After Christendom*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008); Linda Woodhead, *Epilogue*, in Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Pink Dandelion, *Religion and Youth*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010); Tim Sudworth with Graham Cray and Chris Russell, *Mission-Shaped Youth*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2007)

On Identity also see: Pete Ward, *Youth Culture and the Gospel*, (London: Marshall Pickering, 1992); E. Mayo and A Nairn, *Consumer Kids: How Big Business is Grooming our Children for Profit*, (London: Constable, 2009); Rebecca Huntley, *The World According to Generation Y*, (Crows Nest NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2006); S Miles, *Youth Lifestyles in a Changing World*, (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2000); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991); P Heelas and L Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving way to Spirituality*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions : the Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009)

On Immediacy additional works include: Gordon Lynch ed., *Between Sacred and Profane: Researching Religion and Popular Culture*, (London: IB Tauris, 2008); Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 1998)

On Intentionality: Savage, Collins-Mayo, Mayo and Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2006); Martin Robinson, *The Faith of the Unbeliever*, (Monarch 1994); M Mason, A Singleton and R Webber, *The Spirit of Generation Y: Young People's Spirituality in a Changing Australia*, (Mulgrave: John Garratt Publishing, 2007); Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003) Chapter 1, *Falling In and Out of Love*; Douglas Coupland, *Generation X, Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1991); Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995)

[6]N Howe & J Strauss, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation*, (New York: Vintage, 2000), p184

[7]Savage, Collins-Mayo, Mayo and Cray, *Making Sense of Generation Y*, (London: Church House Publishing, 2006) – see the discussion on p121-123

[8]The 'happy midi-narrative' is a term the authors use to describe a mindset or world view that sees happiness as the self-evident purpose of life and that happiness is found not in the transcendent nor in the individual alone but in the network of personal relationships, hence a 'midi'-narrative.

[9]David Hay, *Something There: The Biology of the Human Spirit*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006)

[10]David Tacey, *What Spirituality Means to Young Adults*, in S Collins-Mayo and P Dandelion eds, *Religion and Youth*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) p67

[11]Desmond Tutu, *God is Not a Christian*, (London: Rider, 2011), p21-24



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