

Let Me Introduce You to Gen Z

I just love generational theory. The church is one of the most unique places in our society where all six living generations are in a community together. By helping people in the church awaken to the uniqueness of our current youth and young adults in Generation Z – aka Gen Z – we are better able to be a community together. People in Gen Z were born 1995-2012. What makes them tick? What makes them worry? What are they looking for in this world? How are they different? I think looking at these questions helps us think about how we might be the church for this next generation. Why get to know Gen Z? My main answer is relationships. Relationships are critical for the church, and understanding a bit more about generational theory helps us be better in relationships in the church. The snapshots of Gen Z below are pulled from the work of Jean M. Twenge, PhD, in her newest book, *Generations*. She beautifully looks at many research studies and datasets and pulls the information together to mean something. Some of the information below also comes from my experience over the last 15 years in youth ministry in the church. I have ministered with Millennials and Gen Z young people, and it's worth seeing the big and small differences in these generations.

Racially and Ethnically Diverse

This is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation in the U.S. They will likely be outpaced by the next generation which will likely be the first nonwhite majority generation.

- 52.9% White
- 15.3% Black
- 23.5% Hispanic
- 6.9% Asian, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander
- 1.5% Native American¹

Gender is Fluid

Gender not being binary is really important to this generation. They are very open minded to gender creativity. They have a whole language around gender like cis gender, gender fluidity, agender and so on. They are more willing to play with gender norms in their daily life – men may wear nail polish for fun and creativity, just like women decades ago expanded gender by wearing pants for the first time. This is similar when it comes to sexuality too. They are way more open to varying genders and sexualities and see it all as changing, fluid, and expansive. Embrace asking pronouns and using the names they ask for!

Growing Up Slowly

They are delaying major life events like buying a house, marriage, and children, and they are delaying smaller things like their first date, getting a driver's license, or drinking for the first time. An 18-year-old today might

¹ Jean M. Twenge, *Generations* (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2023), 45.

look more like a 14-year-old twenty years ago. And thus, they are much safer adolescents, with lower rates of teen pregnancy, car accidents, and drinking underage. They are just growing up a little slower.

Digital from Day 1

The very first iPhone was released in the US in 2007. They know no other world. They maintain both in-person and digital lives and have lived in both forever.

Physical and Emotional Safety

Emotional safety is new to the scene in this generation. They care more about emotional safety than they do about freedom of speech. So, it's not surprising when a college campus boycotts and rejects a commencement speaker they do not find emotionally safe. They appreciate things like trigger warnings and opportunities to care for their emotional safety.

Climate Change

Climate change is not a debate for this generation. It is their reality and the effects of a world impacted by a changing climate are all around them. They are frustrated that previous generations did not do more to slow or stop climate change and that it's a burden they have to face. They are making life decisions with the climate crisis in mind. Where do they live and is it climate stable? Will they have children and bring them into a world with an unstable climate? They are living and breathing the reality of climate change. The church has a theology for caring for the earth and climate and I think this would be a great connection to make with this generation.

Covid

They went through high school and college during Covid. At a time when relationships with peers outside the home are most important developmentally, those relationships were cut off and disrupted. Their schedules were changing day to day, their sleep was impacted, and their overall well-being and mental health were impacted by Covid, defining their adolescence – a crucial time in human development.

Politics

Percentage wise, their generation has the highest voter turnout in elections. They care about politics and activism. Think Black Lives Matters and March for Our Lives. Both of those were led by young people in Gen Z. They also know politics as only polarized. They see politics as extremes, and they don't know it any other way which impacts how they see the world.

Who are they in the workplace?

By 2030, Boomers will be exiting the workplace. Gen X and Millennials will be the leaders in the work world trying to hire and retain Gen Z employees. For Gen Z, flexibility is going to be a top priority. They will want options to work from home and wear comfortable clothes to work. (This will matter for church attire too – comfy over fancy.) They care very much about mental health and emotional well-being, so will desire mental health days off and you might see yoga and meditation being offered by the workplace as a higher priority than the staff ping pong table.

Ethical

They have strong ethics in many areas of their life. They care about where they shop from and about companies' values. They care if their car is good for the planet and if their food is locally sourced. They are very ethical.

Religion

They continue to follow the decline in religious participation. Being part of a religious organization isn't a priority. Millennials did this too, and folks hoped they'd come back after having children, but that didn't happen, and they don't expect anything different for Gen Z. What does that mean for us in the Church? Lots of things to consider! One thing might be offering ministries and love of neighbors that aren't in our buildings at all.

Mental Health

This is the biggest generational shift. We've seen a huge rise in depression, anxiety, and self-harm. There are many wonderings why, and it's been seen across the globe in other countries too, so not entirely unique to the U.S. These trends began around 2012. Also, in 2012, 3 out of 4 teens were regularly on social media. Remember the iPhone was released in 2007 and slowly got in the hands of all of us, including our children. Social media disrupts sleep, social media replaces some face-to-face time with peers, and social media offers social comparison which can lower self-worth. There is more and more worry that social media has deeply affected the mental health of this generation. When I think of mental health and Gen Z, I also like to think of Simone Biles (born in 1995) and when she pulled out of the Olympics because she was not mentally well. I am not sure any other generation could support this or do this except Gen Z, who craves stable mental health and works hard to treat their mental health.

This is just a snapshot of who our youth and young adults are today. This does not describe everything about this generation or each person in this generation, but generational theory gives us broad strokes to consider. And these broad strokes can help us, the Church, when we think about who they are and how we can love them as our neighbor. I love Gen Z. They are some of the best people I have ever met. They are leaders, creatives, playful, caring, authentic, and I am glad they are part of our world!

If you want to have this conversation with your congregation or a larger group, here is a digital class with the information included in the quick sheet:

Author Video: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1qfgrYwittya1IuS1juG5qdbFrBJHWZ_Z/view?usp=sharing

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