

Ministry Questions: Reaching Across Generations

By Bob Young

Pastor's Weekly Briefing responded to a question concerning effective ministry to younger generations. The question seems almost pervasive, especially among older, rural congregations. How do I lead my church to effectively attract a younger generation?

In recent years, more and more churches, ministers, and elders are asking about inter-generational church dynamics. Older churches in rural areas especially experience the graying of the pew and the absence of young families. This is due to natural mobility patterns as young people leave a community for urban areas and few of them return; it is also due to the diminishing interest of younger generations in the church. These general observations are affirmed by statistics published by *Leadership Journal* (Summer 2009).

- Rainer Research estimates that 70% of young people leave the church by age 22.
- Barna Group says that the figure increases to 80% by age 30.
- The Southern Baptist Convention says their growth is not keeping up with the birth rate.
- The conclusion seems to be that many churches are failing to attract younger worshipers and are not holding on to the ones we have.

Here are eight things churches might consider as we seek to make a positive impact in this critically important area of cross-generational ministry.

- Pay attention to the “look” and “feel” of the areas reserved for the younger generations—nursery, children’s ministry classrooms, teen areas, young adult classrooms. Make certain they are top notch, fresh, clean, cleaned and prepared, appropriately heated or cooled, and that the groups can feel ownership of the areas.
- Be flexible concerning policies that may distract from or prohibit fellowship, e.g. availability of coffee, juice, milk, refreshments, etc. in the classrooms or common areas.
- Create an authentic environment where it is okay to be real. Many teens and young adults (20-39) say that the church fails to address the real problems they struggle with and the brokenness that has already entered their lives.
- Give younger generations responsibility and control for areas of church ministry specific to their age groups. It is not enough to say that the young people are the church of today, we must demonstrate our connections and confidence by equipping and releasing them so that their gifts, talents and abilities are recognized and valued.
- Make certain that shared events (meetings, ministries, worship) involve all generational groups. Encourage members from various generations to help lead in worship, serve communion, usher, greet, read scripture, and pray.
- Integrate younger people into leadership roles where they can receive coaching. Develop them, and make them co-players in the development of the primary leaders and the development of the church.
- Do more than outsource the responsibility to connect with younger generations. Do not consider the responsibility exclusively that of the ministry staff. Go out of your way to converse with them. Listen to them. Spend time with them.
- Purposefully develop intergenerational activities such as adopt-a-student, adopt-a-grandparent, and occasions that honor specific groups. Consider planned interactions between groups that do not always connect.

This list is not exhaustive. You can think of many other ways to reach and engage the young men and women within your church. The church must minister to every generation!