



Bridging the Gap



JASON GARDNER

writes about
building
relationships
across the
generations

Facebook has killed church. Well at least that's the conclusion of Richard Beck – an experimental psychologist and theology buff from the United States. And just how did the world's most influential website supposedly put an end to the body of Christ?

First off clearly Beck isn't suggesting that the worldwide Church has gone the way of all flesh. He's referring to the exodus of Gen Y'ers (roughly those born between '79 to '99) from traditional church in America. And his rather pointed attack comes from noticing a distinction between the church going habits of the previous age cohort Gen X (born between '60 to '80) and those of Gen Y.

Deserting the Church

Gen Y is leaving the Church in droves in the way that Gen X didn't. Many think the reason for this is to do with a clash of ideologies. Survey young people today and their impression of the Church isn't great: it's too hypocritical, too judgmental, too homophobic.

But didn't Gen X think that way about the Church too? Think about

experimental church in the nineties in the UK and in particular the alternative worship movement. Gen X started doing church differently because they thought differently - a reaction against traditional church.

Gen Y can connect online

But they didn't always leave. Why? Because for them church still formed their social hub; it was the place they still used to connect with peers. And that's why Gen Y don't need church. They don't think it's relevant coupled with the fact that they don't need to connect with friends in a physical place anymore – they can connect online. As Beck puts it:

'They don't need physical locations for social affiliation. They can make dinner plans via text, cell phone call or Facebook. In short, the thing that kept young people going to church, despite their irritations, has been effectively replaced. You don't need to go to church to stay connected or in touch. You have an iPhone.'

Not the only nail in the coffin

It's easy to dismiss that as a phenomenon experienced mainly in the States but one look around the

pews/ comfy seats/ bean bags on a Sunday morning will tell us that Gen Y aren't exactly flocking to church in this country either. It's the question on the lips of most church leaders - not just how do we reach Gen Y but how do we keep them as well?

How do we keep Gen Y?

And that's the question we'll focus on, 'how do we keep Gen Y?' Because truth be told very few unchurched young people will start attending congregations where they don't find a proportion of their peers. If we can't make young people, who've grown up through church, feel at home, we'll struggle to do so with those outside of church too.

It's tricky to find answers because it's not just social media that plays its part in the decline, it's the whole digital shift, the explosion of information, communication and entertainment technology. The converged media device (that's a smartphone to most of us) in everyone's pocket can offer us far more exciting options than church. And that's a serious point - entertainment, and our 24/7 access to it, has replaced religion as the opiate of the masses in the west.

We have side-lined youth

But there's been a serious flaw in our strategy for keeping youth as well. We thought the answer was to hive young people off into children's church, then our youth programme. And we employed someone who - in an age of growing cultural gaps - could actually relate to the young people - the youth minister or worker.

In doing so though we actually gave church an excuse not to change its core culture. Instead of working to build relationships across the generations and create church that aims to connect at a cross section of ages, we effectively sidelined youth.

That means that someone growing up in our church from 0 -18 may have never sat through a 'normal' church service or heard a full sermon. Are we surprised that when they return from university we struggle to re-integrate them into 'adult' church? That they're much more likely to attend a church whose style reflects the youth approach to church that they've been used to?



Life, life and more life

This is something we've come to recognise as church. That we can't depend on one person - the youth minister - or a small team to build relationships with young people on our behalf.

And so there's much more of an 'it takes a village to raise a child' approach to church - a renewed focus on all-age church and family. We can see an 'evolution' taking place. More churches are employing youth and family workers, children and family workers, family and community workers. Then there's the growth of 'messy church' - where we see whole families learning and worshipping together. We're making church a welcoming place for 8's and hopefully 80-year olds.

Today's families do spend more time in each others' company. We shouldn't be surprised that the family that watches 'Doctor Who' and 'Britain's Got Talent' together on a Saturday night want to worship together on a Sunday morning rather than separately.

How to grow across all age bands

Many churches are growing right across the age bands so what are some of the factors that are helping them?

A culture of apprenticeship and succession This requires a radical shift in our approach to leadership

as a church. We seek to bring people to maturity by giving them responsibility, not waiting until they are mature before giving them responsibility. This means giving key roles to young people at earlier ages. More and more churches are increasing the proportion of twenty somethings on their leadership teams. This ties in with a digital culture that is more about enablement than it is about control. For instance the internet increasingly invites us to take part in shaping its story - broadcasting our news on social media sites. We need to give young people freedom to experiment and freedom to fail - but to help them learn whilst they do so.

Mentoring A buzz word on the lips of most youth workers at the moment and with good reason. Mentoring plays a key role in providing ongoing support for young people during key transition stages in their lives. Training up adults in the wider congregation to accomplish this is crucial. Often it's only in one to one conversations that we can actually discern where a young person is on their faith journey and help them move forward. However, don't expect young people to sign up for a mentor overnight, you need to build up relationships between youth and adults first. Also ensure that contact is maintained should the young person move away for university.

continued on page 6 ➤



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continued from page 5

Making Faith Visible at home

No youth worker, children's worker or church leader can 'out impact' a parent when it comes to spiritual formation. Enabling young people to stay with their faith through to adulthood is largely dependent on our ability to equip parents for their role as disciple makers within the home. Parents are going to need plenty of help with this as we've become too dependent on Christian 'professionals' taking on this role for us.

Say no to 'nuclear' With little sense of wider community within society these days people can often retreat within their nuclear families and are jealous of protecting 'family' time. Quite right to a degree but if we're going to develop our children's social skills we need to help them connect across the ages – to see church as extended family. For some churches this means doing more 'life' together – treating the church building as a joint home, more eating and playing together. For others it's about 'family obedience' the church family getting involved in social action projects – tidying up a school playground together on a Saturday morning.

The lessons of Facebook

Social media sites are so popular because one of our chief appetites is for connection. We all want to be wanted, to fit in, to be accepted. And we might not think we can compete with our young people's peers when it comes to connection

– teenagers care more about being accepted by other teenagers than adults, right? But it's not always so, they're still looking for mentor figures and we can all remember how fickle peer loyalties are.

Offering a better family experience

Adults within the Church can play a major stabilizing role within those key adolescent years. We don't have to offer a better peer experience for our teens, we have to offer a better family experience – seeing the gaps in our society not so much as cultural but relational.

After all isn't one of the central ideas behind Church mission simply helping expand the family that is the Holy Trinity? 

Recommended resources

My book, *Mend the Gap: Can the Church reconnect the Generations*, IVP, 2008

For great mentoring training and a programme contact Jon Langford at St Paul's Salisbury www.stpaulssalisbury.org

Another book *Almost Christian*, Kenda Creasy Dean, OUP USA, a great exploration of the spirituality of young people today and a call to the Church to model passionate faith.

Messy Church: Fresh Ideas for Building a Christ-centred Community Lucy Moore, Barnabas Press

about the writer

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About the photographer

All the photographs in James Gardner's article and the biking picture on the front cover were taken by Ed Morgan (pictured above). Ed who is ReSource's Webmaster, is studying Mechanical Engineering at Bristol University and is passionate about bikes and cricket. He is also a youth leader at Pip n Jay in Bristol where he spent a year as an intern.



Christianity and the University Experience in Contemporary England is a three-year study by academics from the Universities of Durham, Derby and Chester. It includes a survey of students and the provisional results have just been published.

They reveal that of the 3600 students from 31 universities questioned, 54% regard themselves as religious/spiritual, 53% identifying themselves as Christian. The second highest group were those with no religion (36%).

- Almost 72% of Christian students attended church before university.
- Just under 50% of Christian students do not attend church while at university. However, 70% attend church outside university terms suggesting that churchgoing is perceived as a family tradition and activity and associated with home, not campus or student life.
- Almost 75% of Christian students do not have a close friend committed to another religion.
- Of Christian students, just over 65% have done some voluntary work or given to charity during the past 12 months compared with 48% of non-Christians.

More details at www.cueproject.org.uk