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## Generations in Conflict

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## GENERATIONS IN CONFLICT

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**John W. Elas**

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### **Introduction**

If I could present only one brief message to churches today, this would be the one. A failure to understand and deal with this present challenge is creating conflict and numerical decline in a multitude of churches. These issues are not limited to any region or religious tradition. Churches that understand the real

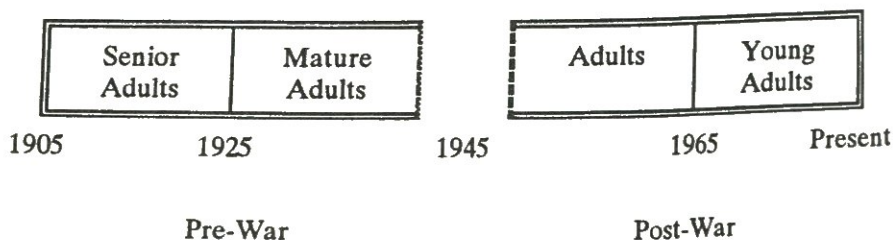
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issues and address them through effective ministry are experiencing significant results in growth.

Christians must recognize that there is a generation gulf. There exists not only an incredible difference in the values, perspectives on life, and needs of your future church members as compared to your present church members, but more important, even now, there is a vital difference that already exists between members of your present congregation. This difference is so great that it is best described as a gulf.

About twenty years ago the common buzz-word everyone was talking about was the "generation gap." As I listened, my conclusion was that the whole concept was silly. Anyone could see there was a gap between every parent and child -- age, size, education, maturity, interest, etc. I could not visualize any reason to give this serious attention so I dismissed the idea.

As time passed, I realized that much more was being conveyed in the idea of a generation gap. Perhaps the following diagram will help illustrate the gulf:



Persons born after 1905 and prior to 1925 are listed as senior adults, from 1925 to 1945 as mature adults, from 1945 to 1965 as adults, and from 1965 to the present as young adults. Another classification is the pre-war and post-war generations. The magnitude of the gap or gulf between these two generations is so wide that none like it has ever existed before in American history.

Failure on the part of church leaders to take this gulf seriously, and address the problems that arise, results in conflict in many churches. Some congregations are experiencing tensions over issues related to worship activities, types of ministry, leadership, and financial allocations. Other churches that have long ago suppressed the drive to understand and reach the post-war generation are seeing their churches becoming increasingly gray due to the absence of younger adult members.

This gulf crisis will not go away any time soon. Rather it is getting more serious. America has a population of about 250 million people. Adults born between 1946 and 1964 make up 76 million people and are called baby boomers. Their children add another 70 million people to the post-war generation.

Together they make up 146 million or 58% of the American population, and the numbers are growing.

It gets worse! Seventy-five percent of all Americans are unchurched.<sup>1</sup> We live in an increasingly secular society and most of the 75 percent that are unchurched consist of baby boomers and their children. Churches, as never before, need to understand the values, perspectives, and needs of a generation not being reached with the Gospel.

The pre-war generation is getting smaller while the post-war generation is getting larger and more unchurched. There are no more than six countries of the world with a total population as large as American's unchurched population of 146 million people. America is a mission field!

Churches need to listen again to the Apostle Paul who said, "to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22). His life and ministry demonstrated the willingness to understand the lost and to build bridges to them. He did not expect the unchurched to adopt all of his values and perspectives of life. Rather, he made the sacrifices, understood the unchurched, and went to them with an eternal message. Churches have the same challenge to understand the post-war generation and how to minister in a way that we become all things to all people that by all means we might save some.

Paul's message implies a gaining of understanding, a willingness to change, and hard work. Change alone is enough to make many churches balk. Therefore, step one for church members is understanding -- why are there major differences between the pre- and post-war generations? Armed with good reasons, Christians can deal with the needed changes. The church, leaders and members, will need valid and clear answers.

Social scientists have spent the past two decades studying and communicating these issues. A wealth of secular and Christian books and articles exist on the subject. A bibliography is also available from the Center for Church Growth upon request. This article will hopefully offer a start toward understanding.

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Unchurched American - 10 Years Later*, (The Princeton Religion Research Center: Princeton, NJ, 1988), p.2, George Gallup, Jr. defined the unchurched as a person who is not a member of a church or has not attended services in the past six months. My view is more conservative. In his survey 35% claimed no membership in a church or synagogue, and another 23% of the church had only attended services once a month or less. From a participatory standpoint, 58% or more of Americans are unchurched.



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## Reasons

Each of us is to some degree a product of our environment. As children grow, they develop their values and perspectives on life. During the informative years -- 10 to 20 years of age -- each person is deeply effected by their life experiences. Studies indicate that people who have had similar childhood experiences share similar views of life, while those who have not had similar childhood experiences, view life very differently.<sup>2</sup>

Children born after World War II have grown up under conditions never before experienced by other generations. Remember, the key issue is not what a person has experienced because the pre-war generation has seen it all; it is the childhood experiences that are most important. The post-war generation, as children, has endured changes that have never been experienced before in human history.<sup>3</sup>

Two momentous changes have been high mobility and mega-stress. Dozens of other changes could also be explored; but these two alone have created a group of men and women with their own particular needs and views of life quite different from those of the pre-war generation.

About 30 years ago my family experienced close community. Mom and dad, sister and brother, grandmom and granddad, aunt and uncle, and all of the cousins lived in close proximity. We were an extended family with close ties. No neighborhood kid could bully cousin Ed without facing the rest of the clan. If I was hurt while Mom and Dad were away, I still had Grandmom and Granddad. No one felt isolated and alone because someone was always there to help.

This is a rare experience for the post-war generation. It was a regular part of childhood experiences for older adults. Most pre-war adults grew up with the wonderful setting of an extended family. Stability characterized America during these years -- stable communities, homes, and marriages. One can not over estimate the value of stability and the extended family to the human spirit.

This type blessing of family, roots, and belonging has almost disappeared in America. About one out of five families move each year; and the post-war generation has lost a sense of community and belonging. All of this has created a host of related problems.

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<sup>2</sup> C. Kirk Hadaway, Stuart A. Wright, and Francis M. DuBose, *Home Cell Groups and House Churches*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1984), p. 183. For a provocative but thorough presentation on the process of value programming see the training video by Morris Massey entitled, *What You Are is Where You Were When*, produced by Morris Massey Associated Inc., 34 Prima Court, Boulder CO 80303.

<sup>3</sup> Robert J. Blast, *The Missing Generation*, (Nashville, TN: Church Growth, Inc., 1991), p.50.  
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Mobility has removed young adults from their places of birth and their extended families. Even neighborhoods have lost their ability to be a community as in earlier days. Without regular socialization with one's family and neighbors, socializing has shifted to the workplace. However, work places are often environments of depersonalization, competition, and stress. And the socialization shift has left people frustrated and isolated.

Mobility is also a major contributor to the family breakdown. In earlier years, young couples were surrounded by family. When troubles came, they had a support system they could count on. When marital conflict arose they felt the expectations of their support system to work through the problem. Today, very few young married couples have a support system. They lack help at critical junctures in life. Equally damaging is society's value system that reinforces low marital expectations -- if it does not work, dispose of it and get a new one. A fast pace, mobile, and change-oriented life style is taking its toll on America's post-war generation.

Lack of a support system, competition being the name of the game at work, and a host of other changes has generated mega-stress for adults today. According to the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, one-fourth of the baby boomers have experienced an illness called chronic fatigue syndrome. Though this mysterious condition is also called "yuppie flu," it should be considered as a serious matter. The cause is unknown, but its symptoms have led to hospitalization and even death of some patients. There are some professionals who believe that it is related to stress overload caused by a wide range of social conditions.

Changing times with mobility and mega-stress give a glimpse into the reasons for the generation gulf. There are other equally important contributors that require the attention of church leaders. People who experienced the Great Depression, for example, gave a very different view of work, security, and money when compared to the younger generation. On the other hand, the cold war, Vietnam, and Watergate, have produced some young adults with very different views.

If churches take Paul's teaching (1 Cor. 9:22) seriously, then understanding is the starting place. Based on an understanding of both generations, churches can bridge the gulf with meaningful and effective ministry that meets the needs of both. So, what are some post-war generation needs and how can the church reach them?

### Post-War Generation

One of the greatest generational differences is in the area of relational needs. Baby boomers and their children are far more concerned with the need



for meaningful relationships. This should make sense based on their childhood experiences with mobility and the loss of extended family. Everyone needs community in varying degrees. Older adults have had many of those needs met through past extended family experiences. Even mobile young adults raised in the church have had some degree of community experience. However, the problem is acute for the post-war generation that is unchurched.

The advertising and marketing industries daily capitalize on this cultural condition to sell their products. They make a science of knowing the needs of society and using the information to market their products. Television programming focus on the felt needs for community and family with highly popular programs like the *"Bill Cosby Show"* and *"Family Ties."*

The marketing industry also promises numerous options -- "who will be at the Silver Bullet tonight?" This familiar phrase comes from an advertisement depicting a small group community having a wonderful time. The promise is, come down to the bar where you can experience real community, have fun, and drink our product. To most Christians this is first-class false advertisement through making false associations. The bar scene is not providing meaningful community, and many young adults are beginning to realize it. But where will they turn?

God has given Christians the greatest avenue of community that the world has ever experienced -- the church. It is a community of believers made possible through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:1-4). It represents a gift that must be nurtured and made available to a society hurting for quality human relationships. It is imperative that Christians learn to build and share community because it is based on a relationship with the Son of God. Without this relationship no one can see the Father (John 14:6; 1 John 1:1-4).

This generation has also become a highly mobile group of church shoppers. They are not as concerned about doctrinal correctness as they are about quality relationships and quality services. These are not ideal motives but we are all part of a consumer society wanting more and better services. These attitudes and values are pouring over into the church selection process. When people move to a new residence they will visit several churches. As many as 50 percent of the people will join churches of a different tradition from that of their childhood or the one they preferred previously.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia W. Sayre and Herb Miller, *The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) New Member Study*, Department of Evangelism and Membership of the Division of Homeland Ministries of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), (Indianapolis, IN: 1985), p. 16.  
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This can be tragic news for churches that depend entirely on growth from members who transfer from the same religious tradition. However, it can mean good news if the church wants to attract new members and grow. It will require specific strategies and careful planning that take into consideration the needs of the baby boomers. For the most part, they are looking for churches that provide channels to experience meaningful community, Bible teaching, and worship assemblies that are uplifting and inspiring. These are so important to them that they are willing to shop around for the right church.

When a baby boomer visits your congregation you can be sure they are bringing with them an unwritten and unspoken psychological contract. One expectation is that the larger the church the greater the level of performance and excellence. They anticipate these qualities in the preaching, singing, prayers, announcements, and even the reception they receive as guests. And these are some of the activities that can be improved by planning and effort.

### Conclusion

People over 45 may not identify with all the needs or views of those under 45 years of age. There is a difference in their concerns and views. But the church should seek a clearer understanding of the differences in the now generation. These differences should then be communicated to the congregation to encourage understanding, acceptance, and ministry to both.



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