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## The Bridger Generation

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## The Bridger Generation

Gary L. McIntosh

Move over, Boomers and Busters. There is a new generation waiting in the wings, a generation that is technically skilled, community-minded, and open to change to a greater extent than any previous ones.

Business leaders dub them *Generation E*, as in future entrepreneurs. Others call them the *Ritalin Generation* due to the fact that 2.5 million Bridgers took (or continue to take) the drug for ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). In fact the use of Ritalin doubled during the decade of the 1990s as the oldest of this new generation grew up. A descriptive name is *Mosaics* that points out the fact that they are a heterogeneous generation of views, tastes, beliefs, and ethnicity. *NetGen* points out that they are the first generation to grow up with the technology of the Internet. *Smorgasbord Generation* refers to the full schedule of choices and activities that compete for this generation's time. Whether it is soccer, computer classes, ballet lessons or a host of other opportunities, this generation has a Smorgasbord of choices. Since many of them are the children of the Boomers, the name *Echo Boomerang* expresses their relationship to the first baby boom. One of the most popular names is *Generation Y* which is the logical extension beyond the older Generation X. Another popular name is *Millennials*, a name that highlights their movement into the twenty-first century.

For our purposes, the name *Bridgers* will be used to describe them as the generation that is coming of age in the transition from the twentieth to the twenty-first century, literally they are the *bridge* to the next century.<sup>1</sup>

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2002

The Bridgers, of course, are the children and/or grandchildren of the Boomers. Many are also children of the older Busters. Born between 1984 and 2002, they represent a nineteen-year generation that will take us well into the twenty-first century. By the time the final count on the entire Bridger generation is made, it is likely to equal 74,623,000 people or about 25 percent of the U.S. population.<sup>2</sup>

Like the generations before them, they cannot be described as a single unit, but are represented by at least two subgroups: the GenYs and Millennials.

#### *Generation Y*

The first portion of the Bridger Generation was born between 1984 and 1993. Today, they are eleven to eighteen years old and represent 39,262,000 people. They are comfortable with diversity and wonder if absolute truth exists.

#### *Millennials*

The Millennials were born from 1994 through the end of 2002. Currently they are between the ages of one and ten years old and it is estimated there will be 35,362,000 persons in the Millennial cohort. They are one of the most supervised generations to come along in some time and take for granted living in a point, click, view, interactive world.

Bridgers remain too young for many of their generation to have made major impacts on society. Most of them are influenced by members of the Buster generation. Britney Spears, JLo (Jennifer Lopez), Dr. Dre, NSYNC, Puff Daddy, the Back Street Boys, and Christine Aguilera are musical influences. Haley Joel Osment, who starred in two highly rated movies, is one member of this generation who has begun to make a mark, as is Leslie Carter. Bridgers who are interested in sports often look to golfer Tiger Woods as a model, while basketball players talk of Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant. Ben Affleck and Graham Ledger are well liked in cinema.

#### *Formative Experiences*

Generations cannot be understood apart from the events or milieu that forms their character. Life-shaping events are easier to define after a generation has grown older. Tracing a characteristic back to a probable cause seems more accurate than attempt-

ing to predict the future. But, from today's vantage point, the following appear to have impacted the Bridger Generation.

*Post Modern Era*

The beginning date of the postmodern era is difficult to nail down. While the roots of postmodernism were seeded as far back as Kierkegaard and Neitsche, the fruit became visible in the 1980s and 1990s.

The modern world was based on the premise that observation and experimentation could discover knowledge. Logical, linear thinking was the rule. Using the scientific method of thesis, analysis, and research, truth could be found and known. Once the truth was discovered, it could be used to create cures for diseases, or explain the supernatural, or solve human problems. Thus, the modern world was a world of hope and progress.

The postmodern world no longer accepts truth at face value. According to postmodern thinking acts and knowledge should be called into question. Globalization has led to the notion that there are multiple or correct truths to any question. The shift in worldviews looks to new styles of processing information. For example,

*Holistic thinking*: a comprehensive framework of categories that are interlinked.

*Chunking*: processing clusters of information by sticking them into a large, a pre-existing framework.

*Divergent thinking*: working under the notion that a problem may have multiple "correct" or acceptable answers.

*Multitasking*: performing several thinking/activity tasks simultaneously.

*Complexification*: recognizing that solutions to problems tend to be multifaceted, with interactive layers of factors.

*Paradoxicalism*: accepting that two apparently contradictory things can/do co-exist.

*Intuition*: trusting "gut-level feelings" and conclusions, even if there is no traditionally logical explanation to how you arrive at the conclusion.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the postmodern world is one where value is placed on diversity, justice, and tolerance of multiple points of view. Truth is found by giving serious consideration to inclusive, interactive, complex systems of thought.

*Technology/Internet*

Between 1946 and 1960 the number of computers in the United States grew from one to ten thousand, and from 1960 to 1980 to ten million. By the year 2000 there were approximately eighty million computers in the United States alone. Computer cost-effectiveness rose 100 million-fold from 1958 to 1997, i.e., computers were 100,000 times more powerful and 1,000 fold less costly. Frank Feather, global business futurist and author of *future consumer.com*, writes, "Today, a brand new PC is switched on for the first time in human history every second, 24 hours a day non-stop around the world."<sup>4</sup>

To most of us it may seem like the Internet has been with us forever, but in fact it has only been the last four years that terms like "dot-com" and "URL" have become mainstream. The Internet is growing at a faster rate than any previous communications medium. For example, it took radio 38 years and television 13 years from their inception to reach 50 million users in North America. It has taken the Internet only five years to reach 50 million users. It is suggested that at this rate of growth 64 percent of North American households will be on line by 2005, 79 percent by 2010! As of May 2000 it was estimated that 11 million domain names were registered for the Internet with 15,000 new names registered each day. By 2003, approximately 140 million domain names will have been registered. More cell phones are sold every year than computers. By 2003 there will be over one billion cell phones with half of them connected to the Internet.

*Variety of Music*

In the past music solidified teens by offering a common perception of life during their formative years. Music both separates and unites today's teenagers. As we enter the twenty-first century, musical taste is extremely fragmented. Loyalty is divided between such styles as "hip hop," "rap," "alternative," "metal," "techno," "house," "pink," "reggae," "R&B," "country," "classic rock," or "swing."

This variety goes beyond the music to include the language, fashion, activities, friends, and attitudes corresponding to their taste in music. A major influence is MTV. By offering 24 hour programming, MTV believes they "own the youth of America."

*Diversity*

The population of the United States grew by more people in the last decade than any other ten-year period in U.S. history. Swelling by 32.7 million people, the recent population growth was fueled in part by waves of new immigrants and a steady birth rate that outpaced deaths.

As a result, the newest generation of Americans is more racially and ethnically diverse than previous ones. Minorities make up a larger proportion of Bridgers than among former generations. Thirty-four percent of Bridgers are minorities compared to twenty-seven percent of the total population, according to the Census Bureau in 2000. When compared to other generations, diversity breaks down as follows.

Builders	82.2% white	17.8% minority
Boomers	74.9% white	25.1% minority
Busters	68.5% white	31.5% minority
Bridgers	66.8% white	35.2% minority

*Columbine*

On the morning of April 20, 1999 Columbine High School located in Littleton, Colorado was the scene of a mass shooting attack by students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. What has become known as the worst U.S. school shooting in U.S. history took place at an otherwise normal high school campus. Students throughout the United States watched in horror at news coverage of the event creating a feeling similar to the assassinations affect on the Boomers. While some students felt the Columbine High shootings were over publicized by the media, many students began to feel unsafe at school. Others hardened in their belief that they have the right to protect themselves, leading to more students giving consideration to carrying guns to school.

*Longer Lifespan*

In 1900 the median age was about 23 years. In 2000 the median age had risen to about 35. The proportion of people over 65 has tripled since 1900 from 4.1 percent to 12.7 percent. According to U.S. Census projections, sometime around 2050 people over-50 years old will be the majority of adults in the United States. An older population may mean a world that is less competitive;

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2002

less isolated, less harsh, less materialistic, and less gullible.

More importantly, however, is the increasing scale of our lives. For instance, a 20-year-old in 1900 would have had only about 25 years to build a career, rear a family, and come to terms with death. A 20-year-old person in today's world can expect to have 50 years ahead in which to do the same. Our youngest generation is likely to stay healthier and work longer than earlier generations. Plenty of time to enjoy life and make a difference in their world.

#### *Speed is King*

Businesses must move from an idea to the marketplace with projects in less than four months time. The reason? That is the estimated time of survival in the fast paced world of the Web. The mantra of the twenty-first century is "Run fast, but don't miss a step."

Thomas Middelhoff, Chairman, Bertelsmann AG, writes, "We have nothing less than industrial revolution. That makes it necessary to change how we see and run our business. That means Speed is King."<sup>5</sup> In the do-or-die deadline world of the Internet rule breakers are honored, and creativity is respected. Writes Neil Weintraut of 21st Century Internet Venture Partners, "If you have an idea, you have to act on it now. With the Internet, an idea has no time to evolve. It has to happen now."<sup>6</sup>

#### *Customized Lifestyles*

The American Dream used to revolve around personal home ownership, a life-long job, and a secure family. As we move in the twenty-first century, this cookie-cutter vision of life is changing to reflect a customized or individual way of looking at life. No standardized American dream exists. Each individual is customizing a personal dream tailored to their interests.

For example, days are carefully organized (customized) for younger people around school, play dates, ballet lessons, horseback riding, and an assortment of other time consuming activities.

Another form of customization is seen in advertisers using a magazine-catalog hybrid, or "magalog," to reach the new generation. This generation seemingly is bored just looking at standard catalog pictures. So, in an effort to hold their attention, magalogs combine stories with usually product information. Magalogs offer everything from music reviews to advice on

travel to tips on making CD-ROM movies.

Customization is reaching all areas of life, even fashion. The fashion industry has to reinvent itself nearly every six months to keep up with the latest expectations of the new generation.

#### *Characteristics*

The Bridger Generation is still young, of course, so it is difficult to make a final determination of what will ultimately characterize them. The formative years for the younger half will continue into the 2000s. A Bridger generational mystique does appear to be developing, one that will mature, to be sure, but one that can be identified at least in its initial phases.

#### *Entrepreneurial*

It is impossible to track all the baby sitters and lawn cutters, but experts note that today's youngest generation seems more inclined to go into business than past generations. Dr. Marilyn Kourilsky, a Boomer and vice president of the Center for Entrepreneurial Leadership in Kansas City, writes, "A Peace Corps mentality also comes with that entrepreneurial spirit. They feel obligated to give back to the community. I find that different from my generation. I call them generation E."<sup>7</sup>

Part of this may be due to the fact that parents are giving more power to the Bridgers. As of 1999, 70 percent of mothers worked outside the home compared to only 20 percent in the 1950s. This has caused the United States to move from a patriarchy to a matriarchy to a filiarchy, where a great deal of power is given to kids.

Boomers remember struggling with their parents in what became known as a generation gap. In an effort to keep bridges built between them, they displayed a strong desire to be friends with their children rather than an authority figure. This gave more power to their children. Parents see their children as much more advanced than when they were the same age, leading them to give more authority to their children.

Another thing driving the entrepreneurial spirit is the fear that the job market is not open to them. Bridgers feel that many of the advantages the economy offered to previous generations have slipped over to the global economy, and jobs that future Americans will be qualified to hold have gone overseas.



*Technologically Savvy*

Being a Bridger means you need e-mail (which means you need a computer, preferably your own), and a cell phone. Some may still use a pager, but that is so old (read Buster or GenXer). About 36 percent of Bridgers say they regularly use a home computer and 63 percent say they would rather go on-line than watch television.

Bridgers have adopted the Internet for numerous activities—96% for sending and receiving e-mail. According to Forrester Research in 2000 the top online activities for Bridgers were:

Send or receive e-mail	96%
Instant message	69%
Download software	63%
Play online games	59%
Download music	54%
Read news	52%
Listen to music/radio online	49%
Search for jobs	42%
Research products	41%
Purchase products	40% <sup>8</sup>

*Neotraditional*

“One of the macro-trends we’re seeing is neotraditionalism,” says Kristy Doig, vice president of Youth Intelligence, a trend-forecasting group based in New York City. Bridgers “. . . are fed up with the superficialities of life. They have not had a lot of stability in their lives. It’s a backlash, a return to tradition and ritual. And that includes marriage, It’s all about finding ‘the right one’—as opposed to sleeping around.”<sup>9</sup>

The new traditionalism leads Bridgers to hold romantic views of love and marriage and making home life a priority. Though they want to find a life partner and stick with them, they are more tolerant than their grandparents. Cross-cultural and interracial unions are not taboo, but in fashion. Bridgers may like tradition, but they are not traditional.

*Super Fragmented*

In contrast to the Boomers, who are a homogeneous generation, Bridgers are extremely heterogeneous. Their super-fragmentation is observable in their magazines and music.

Magazines fighting for the attention of this generation are adapting by offering numerous sub-categories of magazines. For years young girls read *Seventeen*, *Teen*, and *YM*. Now new entries include *Jump*, *CosmoGIRL!*, and *Latingirl* that cater to various subgroups. Young men continue to read *Sports Illustrated*, but e magazines like *GamePro* and *Nintendo Power* target different segments of the generation. Still other subcategories include *Transworld Skateboarding* and *Warp* for snowboarders and skateboarders.

As noted previously, the styles of music that attract the attention of Bridgers, is highly segmented. Styles like "hip hop," "rap," "alternative," "metal," "techno," "house," "pink," "reggae," "R&B," "country," "classic rock," or "swing" divide loyalties so much that no standard style bonds the generation together.

*Sophisticated*

The youngest of the Bridgers, those under twelve-years-old, are growing up faster than even the Buster generation. Not long ago, they preferred playing with Barbie dolls, climbing trees, or reading about Cinderella. Now many favor surfing the Web, watching teenage movies, or shopping at the mall. Bruce Stein, Mattel Inc.'s president acknowledges, "We're losing them sooner. They're in sensory overload . . . There are so many things competing for their interest."<sup>10</sup>

They are being looked at as maturer. For example, since 1994, Liberty Financial Companies Inc. has been pitching mutual funds to children under twelve-years-old.

What seems to be driving this newfound sophistication is dual-career parents who are practicing a new style of parenting. The new type of parenting is to give children more choices about everything. And, when young children are given power, they begin to act like adolescents.

*Interactive*

Bridgers think, organize, and process ideas differently. They interact with everything around them and appear to have short

attention spans as they click from one bit of information to another.

Bridgers use the Internet for communication, research (projects in schools now require research on the Internet), they use instant messaging, and chat rooms. Bridgers watch MTV on their computers and chat with six or seven friends on the Internet at the same time. Parents realize that Bridgers need lots of technical stuff they never did and feel like they are cutting their children off socially if they do not provide technical gadgets.

Bridgers believe the Internet should be free and that no charges should apply to anything that is shared over the Internet. They perceive the recent court decisions that require Knapster to charge as unfair.

#### *Demanding*

The sequencing of Millennial's schedules creates quick boredom, as well as a loss of creativity, leadership skills, people skills, and conflict management skills. They demand to have their time filled with activities.

Those used to high-speed Internet access at college or work, find it difficult to work from home on dial-up modems that are sooooooo slow. Students who normally talk to friends online, leave their computers on all night to receive messages from friends, and download music and movies, find it nearly impossible to use modems that are 100 times slower. A new generation gap—a technology gap—is developing between Bridgers and the generation before them. Their desire for faster access to the Internet carries over into other aspects of life where they demand service and quick response to their needs.

#### *Diverse and Tolerant*

Bridgers are the most diverse generation in United States history. More than one-third are minorities, whereas only one-fourth of Boomers are; and only one-fifth of Builders are. Overall, 85 percent of the Builders are non-Hispanic white. Among Boomers, 75 percent are non-Hispanic white. The Busters are about 60 percent non-Hispanic white.

Bridgers do not want to hurt others. The large amount of diversity has led them to respect other people and their points of view. They believe it is important to be sensitive to other people's feelings. Therefore, they will listen to what another person believes without challenging them. It may be right for you, and

that is cool, but it may not be right for me, which is also cool.

*Connectedness Crazy*

In the twenty-first century, the phrase “we’re all connected” is not just a part of a telephone jingle. The urge to connect is particularly evident among those who embrace technology.

Increasingly, Bridgers are turning to the Web for a sense of community, as well as for general information. They are heavy communicators with access to the Internet, cell phones, and Palm Pilots.

Approximately 5.6 million people used the Web in 1994, but that number has risen to at least 50 million in 2001. In 1997 the typical Internet user was a 33 year-old, affluent, and well-educated male. Among all Internet users . . .

5% were Builders  
42% were Boomers  
44% were Busters  
9% were Bridgers.

While Bridgers do not make up the largest number of Internet users, their usage is growing. As they age and are able afford computers on their own, it is predicted that they will overtake the other generations in their usage of the Internet. They have no fear of technology and pick it up quickly. They find it a rich source for new friends, support in time of need, and a source for practical information.

They are gadget-oriented with 35 percent of those 12 to 19 years old in 2000 owning their own cell phone projected to be 68 percent by 2005. They use the cell phone as “land line displacement.” Older generations see the phone as a place, but Bridgers think of a phone as a person.

*Group Reliant*

When Boomers were children, friends would ask each other, “What does your dad do for a living?” When the older cohort of the Bridgers was growing up, friends asked, “Does your dad live with you?” The peer group has always weighed heavily in the decisions of younger people. But, as the question asked among this generation suggests, many Bridgers lacked a nuclear family.

They only trust those who hang with them 24/7. It is not that they do not trust people over 30, but that they only trust

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2002

those they get to know at a deeper level. They are resigned to the fact that everyone is flawed in some manner, so they tolerate each other's problems, since that is authentic. The group they hang with becomes their guide during this portion of their lives.

Bridgers are the second largest generation in United States history. As such, it is only a matter of time until they begin to push their agenda and values in the adult world. During the coming 15 to 20 years they will begin proposing a new way of thinking in the workplace, homes, and churches of America. By the year 2040 they will begin the process of taking control from the Busters. Church leaders must begin now to understand this newest generation, if they hope to faithfully reach them for Christ in the coming decades.

#### *Bridgers and the Church*

If you are not feeling older after reading the last section on the Bridger generation, the following is sure to create that emotion. The oldest of the Bridger generation is just entering college and the following is a characterization of them as developed by the staff at Beloit College in Wisconsin.

- Bridgers have no meaningful recollection of the Reagan Era and probably do not know he was ever shot.
- Bridgers were less than 12 years old when the Soviet Union broke apart and do not remember the Cold War.
- Bridgers think bottle caps have always been screw off and plastic.
- Bridgers are too young to remember the space shuttle blowing up.
- Bridgers have never feared a nuclear war.
- Bridgers do not understand the expression, "You sound like a broken record."
- Bridgers have never owned a record player.
- Bridgers have never seen a black-and-white television or one with only 13 channels.
- Bridgers believe roller-skating has always been inline.
- Bridgers have only known Jay Leno as the host of the Tonight Show.
- Bridgers never saw Larry Bird or Magic Johnson play basketball.
- Bridgers think of the Vietnam War as history similar to the Civil War, WWI, and WWII.
- Bridgers have never heard "Where's the beef?" or "I'd

- walk a mile for a Camel." Or "de plane, de plane."
- Bridgers do not have a clue how to use a typewriter.
  - Bridgers think MTV has always existed.
  - Bridgers do not care who J.R. is or who shot him.
  - Bridgers have no idea who Mork was or where he came from.
  - Bridgers do not know Americans were ever held hostage in Iran.
  - Bridgers have always cooked popcorn in a microwave.
  - Bridgers do not remember Atari, Pong, or Pac Man.
  - Bridgers have always had VCRs, cable, answering machines, and CDs.<sup>11</sup>

### *Two Halves*

Similar to other generations, a nineteen-year generational span creates two halves, or cohorts, in the Bridger generation. Being the oldest half, most research has been conducted on the GenYs. Study of the younger Millennials is just beginning to take place. Thus, most of what we know about this emerging generation is based on the older half. Recognizing that this entire generation is still in their formative years, means that attempts to prescribe ministry for them should be done carefully. Postmodern Bridgers are often seen as hip, aloof, demanding, unreachable, searching and gadget-savvy. They will mature and change in the years to come. However, at this point in the development of Bridgers, church leaders are wise to consider the following.

### *Assist Bridgers To Discover Truth.*

As a spiritual generation, Bridgers are moving from the generic to the specific and looking for a faith that is rooted in doctrine. Phyllis Tickle, who tracks religious publishing trends for *Publisher's Weekly* ([www.publishersweekly.com](http://www.publishersweekly.com)) writes about one Bridger who said, "Don't tell me why being a Methodist is better than being a Presbyterian...I'm not going to listen to that...but do tell me what it meant originally to be a Methodist. Don't tell me all about spirituality, just tell me what you mean when you say Christian spirituality...and then let me decide for myself what to believe."<sup>12</sup>

Churches must help Bridgers discover answers for themselves, rather than simply telling them what to believe. However, Bridgers do need to be taught that truth exists and that challenging other people's viewpoints is okay. In their desire to

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2002

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accept others, Bridgers are overlooking the truth of God's written Word.

*Give Bridgers Take Home Value.*

Growing up in a consumer society has created a highly opinionated consumer generation whose habits will shape the United States for most of the twenty-first century. Bridgers are pragmatic, convenience-focused, and value-focused when it comes to spending their money or investing their time. What attracts them to an Internet site, a class, or a meeting is its perceived usefulness. Bridgers look for up-to-date content with good service.

For churches to effectively minister to them, it means developing practical ministries that offer Bridgers immediate take home value. Bridgers must be able to see that a given ministry has immediate impact in their lives.

*Let Bridgers See Your Faith.*

Bridgers have faced serious problems in their early years. AIDS, crime, violence, and divorce cast shadows over their formative years. Those who had working parents or single parents had to assume adult responsibilities early in their lives. This has caused many Bridgers to be more confident, competent, and cautious than other generations at the same age. They are creative, ingenious, and self-actualized. And, they do everything their way. Being cautious, they do not accept statements made by churches at face value, but need time to observe church leaders to see if their behavior matches their pronouncements. Wise church leaders will give Bridgers time and space to observe the active faith of church members. Only after seeing the truth lived out in real lives will most Bridgers chose to unite with a community of faith.

*Disciple Bridgers Holistically.*

Spiritual growth is seen by Bridgers as a multi-layered pilgrimage for one's entire life, rather than a single event or moment in time. Discipling post-modern Bridgers is not about debate, proposition, and linear thought; post-modern discipling is about connection, holism, and dialog.

Numbers of churches made the mistake of splitting evangelism and discipleship in the second half of the last century. This led to the separation of salvation and maturation; the separation of being a believer and being a follower. Such a division in disci-

pleshship was never intended. The Great Commission involves all aspects of salvation, assimilation, and maturation.

Bridgers understand that spirituality involves holistic living. Thus, churches must help them understand that believing in Christ involves following Christ in all areas of their lives. Holistic discipleship means leading Bridgers to be followers of Christ from the beginning.

*Involve Bridgers Technologically.*

The generation gap that existed between the Builders and Boomers seems to have disappeared. Forty years ago, parents and kids were arguing over going to Viet Nam, music tastes, and commitment levels. The clash between Builders and Boomers was due in part to the difference in educational attainment.

Today, the similarities are more striking than the differences between parents and children. About one-fourth of Boomers and Busters graduated from college and the same percentage is expected of the Bridger generation, according to the Census Bureau. Entire families now dress in blue jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers. Most Bridgers respect their parent's opinions and think parents are pretty much up-to-date.

The gap today seems to be a technology gap. Bridgers adapt to technology with greater ease than their Boomer and Buster parents and grandparents. However, the lack of technology knowledge among older generations is more of amusing among Bridgers than a problem.

Churches that desire to attract and keep Bridgers must embrace technology as a ministry tool. Computers and cell phones are necessities in the Bridger's world and they assume pastors and churches will use them. They expect churches to use PowerPoint projection and video clips in worship services, as well as classrooms. Bridgers view overhead projectors as old news. Churches that are serious about ministry to Bridgers will make haste to replace overhead projectors with computer projection systems.

*Show Bridgers Biblical Tolerance.*

If we had to choose one word to describe the Bridger generation, it would be diverse. As the most ethnically diverse generation to come along, they are the first one to seriously question traditional racial and ethnic categories. Many Bridgers are children of mixed races. The largest group are children of black and



white parents, but white and Asian parents are close behind. About one in thirty-five Bridgers are of mixed-race.<sup>13</sup>

Builders and Boomers were born into a segregated society, with school, neighborhoods, and public facilities often separated by race or ethnic heritage. The move toward a more integrated society began with the Busters, but has taken off with the Bridgers. Most of the members of the Bridger generation have friends from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. They appreciate ethnic foods and have heroes, especially in sports, who are of every race. Bridgers of all backgrounds listen to rap, hip hop, country, and Tejano music.

Bridgers expect churches to be racially and ethnically inclusive. While churches have always had good intentions to be multi-racial and multiethnic, in practice it has been exceptionally difficult to build such a church. The Bridger generation may be the one in which multi-ethnic churches will become a reality.

However, as might be expected, greater racial and ethnic diversity is also creating a polarization among some members of this generation. Hate groups are increasingly visible, neighborhoods remain segregated for the most part, and racial tension among students is still reported. But, even with this backlash, more Bridgers have first hand experience with integration than any previous generation.

The greater tolerance for diversity in all forms shows up in the Bridgers acceptance of gays in society. One of the common themes of discussion among Bridgers is homosexuality and bisexuality. While churches must hold to biblical moral and ethical standards, they must demonstrate love for the sinner while hating the sin. And, rather than shying away from such topics, churches must begin to address these and similar topics with grace.

*Help Bridgers Build Strong Families.*

As the children of divorce, Bridgers are determined to build strong families. Nearly 16 percent of Bridgers grew up with a stepparent. Thus, they will likely take longer before choosing a mate and taking vows of marriage. They desire to be connected to people who are like family to them, which is part of the reason they hunger for the interlinking provided via the Internet, cell phones, and other similar technologies.

Churches have always been strong in promoting marriage and family and this will be an avenue to pursue in reaching

Bridgers in the early part of the twenty-first century. In addition churches must help connect Bridgers with real live local Christians. The technology that Bridgers love has a dark side of isolating them from real face-to-face relationship and biblical community. One of the challenges of church ministry will be to incarnate the message of Christian community with technology.

*Include Bridger Women.*

Bridger women outnumber Bridger men at college and by 2020 half of all graduates of computer science programs are predicted to be women. Most Bridgers, nearly 52 percent, feel that a woman working or serving in a leadership role is okay. This new thinking is a result of the women's movement of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as laws like Title 9 that prohibits sex discrimination in college athletics. Add to that the fact that the United States is home to more than nine million woman-owned companies (38 percent of all U.S. companies), and one can see what Bridgers accept women in leadership.

While Bridger women desire strong families, and wish to be there for their children, they still desire to have their own careers. The continuing design on a career seems to be a direct result of the high divorce rate of their parents and grandparents. Essentially they want a career as a means of protection in case they get divorced too. Churches that tap into the unused potential of Bridger women in appropriate ways will find that Bridgers are attracted to their ministry.

*Train Bridgers Interactively.*

Observant church leaders have noticed a cultural change in the Bridger generation. The ministries that effectively reached previous generations are not connecting with the tech savvy Bridgers. Churches must learn to design worship and study events that present the Gospel via multiple venues. Worship and study of the scripture must be interactive allowing for those in attendance to collaborate on ideas, insights, and issues.

In an effort to build worship services and study times that Bridgers understand, some churches are experimenting with a new version of the old coffee house approach. Often considered a video café, the difference is that numerous activities are going on at the same time. Bridgers sit around tables talking with their friends while a nearby video projects on a wall or screen. Music from the video or a live band fills the air. Some surf the Internet

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2002

or talk on cell phones to friends in distant places, or just across the room. Candles or dim lights create atmosphere. Leaders or mentors sit or walk nearby, available to talk if needed, but not intrusive to conversations on the topic of the day.

Bridgers desire to see faith at work in the lives of their leaders and mentors. As churches begin to understand them and develop new approaches to communicate with them, they are open to respond. Faithful churches in the first years of the twenty-first century will redefine the boundaries of technology and help Bridgers become followers of Christ in an interactive way.

#### *Winning Bridgers*

No one who has answered the call to help fulfill the Great Commission can ignore the Bridgers. They are open to the gospel, but, as Ron Hutchcraft, President of Ron Hutchcraft Ministries notes, "...the 'millennial generation,' so different from the generation that went before, will largely not respond to the traditional outreach approaches with which we are comfortable."<sup>14</sup>

Reaching the Bridger generation with the Gospel of Jesus Christ may be the single greatest challenge facing the church today. According to the research by Dr. Thom S. Rainer, only four percent of them claim to know Jesus Christ as their personal Savior. Depending on whom you read, the consensus is that about 85 percent of those that accept Christ as their personal Savior do so before their twentieth birthday. The Bridgers are the faces of young people. If we do not win them to Christ before they become young adults, they may live the rest of their lives without Him.

The following insights are not the final answer to the dilemma of reaching Bridgers, but they are some ideas that may spark your creativity.

#### *Create Lifestyle Settings.*

A primary objective should be to create an environment attractive to Bridgers. For the most part, this means developing a unique atmosphere where Bridgers can experience spiritual growth in a non-traditional setting. Such a setting must enhance social connections and offer multiple interactive activities. It must be safe and appealing so Bridgers will desire to "hang" with friends there.

As an example, First Church of God in East Central Indiana created a setting called "The Living Room." Bridgers who attend

find live music, good food, gourmet coffee, and a smoke-free and alcohol free atmosphere. It is a warm and welcoming place where Bridgers can engage mentors and peers. The Living Room is located in a converted second-story space in the heart of downtown Muncie next to Ball State.

Similar approaches are being used successfully by other churches. At College Avenue Baptist Church in San Diego, California dim lights, candles, and an outdoor coffeehouse welcome Bridgers to "The Flood." Community Church of Joy in Glendale, Arizona started "The Crossing." It is a multidimensional effort with a sports and fitness center, classrooms, lounges, arts and learning center, café, and nightclub. Bridgers who attend The Crossing become involved in drama, media productions, technology, a hot line, crisis counseling, and support groups.

Churches throughout the United States are experimenting with other lifestyle approaches. Suggested names for such meetings range from "Graceland" to "Boogie Bookstore" to "ChurchWorks Station."

*Share Compelling Stories.*

Bridgers reject simple formulas and solutions. The simple salvation formulas used in the past, such as the Roman Road, The Four Spiritual Laws, and The Bridge To Life are not as effective as they once were in winning younger people to Christ. Bridgers are not looking for a "Bible answer man" approach to learning, but prefer an interactive, multi-layered approach whereby they share in the conversation. The key to winning them is to engage them with a compelling true story of faith. We used to call these compelling stories testimonies, i.e., a person with a story to tell, talks to another person who has a story to tell, and shares the story of Jesus in the process. Such a storytelling approach takes more time, as well as good listening skills. But it works by drawing the Bridger into the process by letting them tell their story and then relating the story of Jesus to theirs.

*Accept Bridgers into your Community.*

What is out is an institutional approach to ministry. What is in is community. In the modern world of the past century, people became involved in communities of faith (churches) after they gave their lives to Christ. It was expected that a person would first believe, then behave or change their lifestyle, then they could belong to the community of faith. In the postmodern

world of the twenty-first century, Bridgers want to be involved in community before they give their lives to Christ. The new expectation is that a person will first be accepted into the community of faith whereby they can experience and learn about the Christian faith. Then in the process of belonging come to a point of belief, and finally learn to behave. Of course, each church must reach its own comfort level concerning the participation of pre-believing Bridgers. But whatever the determination by a church, it is crucial that Bridgers feel they are accepted personally, even though we may not accept their sin.

*Practice Intrigue.*

Bridgers want to feel like they are ahead of the crowd, decoding something that no one knows about yet. Blatant and obvious means nothing to them. They are intrigued by the new and cutting edge. For example, in teaching try using intrigue by telling a Bible story and leaving the ending open. Then let Bridgers write their own ending in small discussion groups. After they have had an opportunity to share their endings, then tell the rest of the story by bringing back in the biblical ending. Allow questioning and do not expect passive acceptance. Bridgers are more likely to question authority. They desire to take active roles in designing their own learning events. Ministries that successfully reach Bridgers will welcome questioning and encourage participation.

*Become Part of Their Headset.*

Churches should be involved in establishing relationships with Bridgers even if they are not ready to accept Christ or attend church. Whether Bridgers become regular churchgoers is anyone's guess. But churches need to close the gap by becoming part of Bridger's headset.

The problem is figuring out how to get in on the conversation. While the Web is one way to communicate with Bridgers, the best way remains word of mouth. As an enthusiastic Bridger shares with another Bridger their excitement about Christ and the church, unchurched Bridgers will listen. Personal witness by Bridgers who are committed Christian is key.

Bridgers believe technology is cool. Another way to tap into their headset is to take a cue from the business world and call on Bridgers to help build church web sites, run computer projection equipment, create videos, develop CDs for teaching and educa-

tion, etc.

*Use Online Games and Contests.*

If the 1970s were the “ME” decade, the 2000s will be the “Linked” decade. Bridgers are increasingly turning to the Web for a sense of community and commerce. They use the Internet to socialize and search, to shop and sell. To attract their attention, churches should build a Web site that delivers something special.

One way to set your church apart is to develop an interesting Web site. Web sites that use online games and contests are likely to capture the short attention spans of Bridgers. The “click rate” for Bridgers 12-17 years old is 0.19%, i.e., they do not stay at a site very long. Thus, it takes something unique on a site to get them to stay long enough to read it. They respond best to web sites that offer something for free or practical information.

*Use the Radio.*

Direct mail proved to be an effective way to reach Boomers. However, Bridgers suggest that the best way to reach them is through radio and cable TV. About 95 percent of Bridgers listen to the radio, averaging more than ten hours per week. Bridgers love music and the radio allows them to be highly selective in the style of music they listen to.

Radio allows a targeted approach for reaching different segments of the Bridger generation. Segments can easily be selected according to ethnic, gender, and geographical characteristics. Radio goes with Bridgers where every they venture. It is with them at home, in their cars, actually wherever they go.

*Hang Out 24/7.*

One thing Bridgers desire is hanging out 24/7. Why do they want this? They desire to see other Christians internalize truth rather than exegete it. Careful interpretation of the Bible is important, but results start with relationships.

The Key is to “hang, hang, hang” by providing lots of ways to interact and participate together. Those who have successfully reached Bridgers spend as much informal time with them as possible. Pastoral staff that is hired to ministry directly with Bridgers should be encouraged to spend lots of casual time with them.

What is not accepted by the Bridger generation is the simple

dispensing of answers apart from the living incarnation of truth in real life. "If its real, it must be true" is one way Bridgers seem to perceive life.

*Become Their Mentors.*

A caring adult easily influences Bridgers. Studies made of youth from troubled homes who later made good in life have found that in almost all cases a caring adult figure was present as a constant in that kid's life. Divorce care workshops; discussion groups; counseling programs; retreats; and support groups for children of alcoholics, children from abusive homes, and children living in blended families, all facilitated by a loving adult, will reach the hearts of many Bridgers. What is out is Bible study leaders. What is in is parent-like mentors. The key is to understand that they are not looking for mentors out of weakness but from a sense of loss and hope for the future.

*Build on Adrenaline.*

Going to extremes is one way to characterize Bridgers. The five fastest growing sports in the United State as of June 2001 were in order: Wakeboarding, snowmobiling, artificial wall climbing, surfing, and paintball. The sports that are declining slightly are stationary cycling, archery, baseball, racquetball, and beach volleyball (Source: American Sports Data, Inc.). Churches that are serious about reaching Bridgers should consider developing events and activities built around these growing sports.

*Be Honest and Open.*

Stick to your core identity. Do not try to be something you are not. Bridgers are astute enough to see through a church, or church leaders, that do not honestly believe what they are saying. Pastors, and other leaders, should be themselves and speak directly from their own life experience. One's own personal story of faith is the most powerful message to be delivered to this generation. Being authentic about one's struggles, doubts, and confusion regarding spirituality will get attention and respect.

*Engage Their Senses.*

Technology fosters activity. Churches that successfully reach Bridgers use interactive approaches rather than passive ones. What is out is delivering truth only through proposition. What is in is delivering truth through all the senses.

Do not expect Bridgers to respond to typical brochures, newsletters, or sermons. The key is to use art, music, poetry, media, the Internet, drama, and lots-n-lots of stories. Visuals, audio clips, sound bites and other learning aids are an important means of reaching Bridgers.

The Bridger generation may be the greatest challenge for the church in the twenty-first century. But, they also may be the greatest opportunity. Bridgers will influence society well into the second half of the new millennium—to at least 2070. As we grow in our understanding of them, and find new ways of reaching them for Jesus Christ.

We will not hide these truths from our children,  
 But will tell the next generation  
 about the glorious deed of the LORD.  
 We will tell of his power and the mighty miracles he did.  
 —PSALM 78:4 New Living Translation

#### Writer

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#### NOTES

1. The term Bridgers is adapted from a book by Thom S. Rainer, *The Bridger Generation* (Nashville, Broadman & Holman, 1997).
2. Some demographers define the Bridger Generation as those born between 1977 and 1994. The reason is that another baby boom occurred during those years. It was similar to that of the Boomer Generation when births topped the charts in 1946 at 3,289,000 and grew each year until they peaked in 1964 at 4,027,000. Between 1965 and 1976, annual births dropped from 3,760,000 to 3,168,000. This drop in total births be-

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Journal of the American Society for Church Growth, Winter 2002



came popularly known as the baby bust. But beginning in 1977 births began to rise again from 3,327,000 to a peak of 4,000,000 in 1993. The total numbers of people born between 1977 and 1994 was roughly 72 million, just shy of the 76,000,000 of the baby boom. Clearly the period between 1977 and 1994 was another baby boom. However, I have chosen to call those born from 1977 to 1983 the Boomlet and group them with the previous Buster Generation. This leaves the Bridger generations as those born between 1984 and 2002 in my bracketing.

3. Reported in ChurchChampionsFax, Volume 4, Number 6, March 22, 1999.

4. Frank Feathers, future consumer.com (Toronto, Canada: Warwick Pub. Inc., 2000), 37.

5. Thomas Middelhoff, "Fast Talk," Fast Company (May 2000), 86.

6. Quoted by Katharine Mieszkowski in "How to speed up your startup," FastCompany (May 2000), 141.

7. Quoted by Vivian Marino, "Generation E is studying reading, 'riting 'n' retailing," The San Diego Union-Tribune, Sunday, August 24, 1997.

8. Quoted in "Just Surfin' Through," American Demographics, January 2000, page 12.

9. Quoted by Helene Stapinski, "Ynot Love?" American Demographics, February 1999, page 63.

10. Quoted by Lisa Bannon, "Little Big Spenders," The Wall Street Journal, October 13, 1998, page 1.

11. Adapted from "Feeling Old," Beloit College, Wisconsin, January 2000.

12. Quoted in "Books to Come...What People will be Reading in the Future," NetFAX, September 28, 1998.

13. Susan Mitchell, "The Next Baby Boom," American Demographics, October 1995, 25.

14. Ron Hutchcraft, "Reaching the Global Youth Culture," 2001. [http://www.gospelcom.net/lpea/firstpriority/spring2001/pf\\_feature\\_hutchcraft.shtml](http://www.gospelcom.net/lpea/firstpriority/spring2001/pf_feature_hutchcraft.shtml)