HOW HAS CHRISTIAN EDUCATION BEEN IMPACTED BY GENERATION Y?

If we are obedient to God by being “salt and light,” and as 1 Peter 3:15 says: “always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you,” then it is vital we understand how the changing generations impact our lives and how critical it is we live-out and teach them a Christian worldview (ilivevalues.com).

In the past years Christian schools have been struggling with declining enrollment. Past generations have sent their children to Christian schools because they believed it was Biblically necessary. There were no discussions about: home schooling, public education, school of choice, charter schools. The decision was probably made even before the children were born.

Today’s families not only have multiple educational choices, but research on how this generation is impacting Christian education clearly shows an uphill recruitment battle. This generation has been labeled “Generation Y” (Gen Y) and they were born between 1980 and 2000. In 2010 Generation Y became the largest generation in the history of America.

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Generation Y is not anti-Christian or anti-religion, but they are, in general, just not interested in religion, says a new book (Generation Y Millennials – Not anti-Christian or anti-religion but apathetic) based on a survey of members of this generation.

An apathetic attitude toward religious and spiritual matters is common among members of this generation, according to The Millennials by Thom Rainer, president and CEO of LifeWay Christian Research, and his son Jess, a Gen Y born in 1985. Members of this generation are likely to care less about spiritual matters than those from previous generations, the Rainers wrote.

Nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of this generation rarely or never attend religious services, according to the survey conducted by LifeWay on 1, 200 Gen Ys. And spiritual matters were ranked sixth, below friends and education, in a list based on an open-ended question on what is
important to respondents (Generation Y Millennials – Not anti-Christian or anti-religion but apathetic).

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The above paragraphs are sobering. Christian education is not competing against public education it is competing against a movement away from religion. What this means is that Christian schools need to change how they are marketing and communicating with this generation if they want to appeal to Generation Y parents.

This report questions: “How has Christian education being impacted by Generation Y?” According to Generation Who, What, Y? What you need to know about Generation Y. (Leslie A. Goldgehn -April 8, 2004), Generation Y looks to their mentors, their parents, and significant others to “tip” them in the right direction in life. Yet other research reveals how persons in the 16-29-year-old age bracket, who make no claim to being Christian, may not be listening when it comes to matters of religion.

Why are they not listening? The analyzed results, according to the authors, scream "image problem" for Christians and for receptivity of our faith among today's youth. The impressions that mark us as followers of Jesus Christ, when read by the above age group, are predominantly negative, creating rejection of our Christian faith among these to whom the future belongs (Unchristian, Julie A. Gorman, Fall 2009). Before we can begin to recruit students for Christian schools the first project may be to address their concerns with religion.

As a repeat clarification, Generation Y involves people born between the ages of 16-29 years old. Because many of them are newly married and/or having their first children they are the future parents of Christian education. If they choose Christian education for their children!

The purpose of this research proposal is to work only with persons between the ages of 16-29 years old and living in the United States. This report will not look at previous generations. This research proposal will also not addresses the issues related to Generation Y and religion. It will only be addressing the question of Christian education and Generation Y.

As Christian schools have been struggling with declining enrollment, the assumption is that the end decision is about dollars. The thought is that families just do not want to spend money on Christian education. This research paper will show that this is a simple answer to a complex question. (Generation Y: What’s faith got to do with it?, October 28, 2009, The Foundry)
This study can be used as a tool in student recruitment, advertising, marketing and addressing why Generation Y does not see Christian education as a viable learning experience for the children.

During this research process more than a dozen articles were dissected. The 'tinkering' generation--religion after the baby boom, and UnChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity are the two articles that shaped this research paper.

The ‘tinkering’ generation – religion after the baby boom, (Fall 2009, Julie A. Goorman) states, “If I were a religious leader, I would be troubled by the facts and figures currently describing the lives of young Americans, their involvement in congregations, and their spiritual practices.” The ‘tinkering’ generation continues, “Their religious behavior is closely intertwined with these major life cycle decisions.”

UnChristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity is framed by five concerns:

1. As Christians, we face a critical image problem among outsiders.

2. God clearly commands us to reach out to unChristians, so we need to pay attention to #1 as followers of Jesus.

3. The image problem we face is present also among Christians in this age range within the church.

4. The size and variety of Christianity in America today makes it a prime target for the charges leveled by the identified generations whose post-modern values conflict with the church's stance (the core of which must not be compromised for acceptance.)

5. Our own personal walk with God can be transformed as we recognize prejudicial patterns and self-preoccupied agendas, described by this survey as harmful to our (and ultimately God's) image in His world (Unchristian: What a new generation really thinks about Christianity).

Without the base of an active religion, these articles shed light on the possibility the real reason Generation Y isn’t choosing Christian education for their children.

A positive that we know about Generation Y is that they want to know why! They are curious, they want the facts, they want the hard data, and most of all they want the truth. Advertisements and creative marketing tactics do not easily sway this group. They do their research before they believe most things they hear and see. Purchasing behaviors of Generation Y show that the group is extremely brand conscious as well as brand loyal (Generation Who, What, Y? What you need to know about Generation Y.)

Local, further, research should be conducted. The research proposal should include current, active participation with Generation Y people from West Michigan. A gathering of men, women and various ages, all with Christian high school diplomas themselves, should be gathered.
Face-to-face interviews are recommended for this proposal. During the process of these interviews each person should be asked a variety of questions:

1. Why did their parents choose Christian education?
2. What do they value about their Christian education?
3. Did they choose a Christian college for themselves?
4. How has their Christian education shaped who they are today?
5. If married, did their spouse attend a Christian high school?
6. Do they attend a church? Routinely?
7. How do they feel about religion?
8. Do they have children?
9. What weighs into their decisions for Christian education for their children?

The above questions are simply a sampling for gathering thoughts and information. With the information gathered from face-to-face interviews a plan can be developed to bring back Generation Y to Christian education.

The optimal outcome would be to use the information gathered from the face-to-face interviews, combine that with what the research has shared about Generation Y, and begin to develop a plan that helps this generation become brand loyal to Christian education.

The recommendation of this report would be to use unbiased researchers for the face-to-face interviews. The research should be concluded within one calendar year. Implementation plans for marketing, recruitment and communications should be developed and implemented within three years.

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