

3. PRELUDE TO THE PROBLEM

3.1 Introduction

The central problem being addressed within this study is that, as American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches struggle to respond faithfully to cultural change within a complex generational context. It is further being posited here that the resulting ineffectiveness of these churches in transmitting the Christian tradition to Generation X, the first post-modern generation, threatens their ability to sustain their witness through this transitional period. In chapter two, we began to develop a hermeneutical framework for this study by exploring the intergenerational praxis of the church in relation to the intergenerational praxis of society.

In the present chapter, we will maintain this focus upon the church's "mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of modern society" (Heitink 1999:6). However, our attention will shift toward an interpretation of the historical developments that have contributed to the formation of the central problem of this study. In a very real sense, the present chapter will function simply as a historical prelude to help establish the context for chapters four and five, which will deal more directly with the central problem under consideration in this study. Thus, this chapter renders an important service to the development of this study.

In providing this context, the present chapter will explore the interplay of the following themes:

1. The pervasive influence of the paradigm of modernity in shaping the praxis of American society, as well as the influence of the Christendom paradigm in guiding the church's praxis within modern society.
2. The evolutionary growth of modern institutional structures that have fostered increasing social distance and cultural differentiation between the generations, as well as the impact of these changes upon the intergenerational praxis of the church within society.
3. The manifestation of the social legacies of modernity and Christendom within the ranks of the G.I., Silent, and Boomer cohorts.

4. The emergence of an intergenerational crisis involving the members of these three generations that contributed to the post-modern transition and the disestablishment of Christendom, as well as the crisis this conflict posed for the church's praxis in relation to society.

As is reflected in the introduction provided above, the present study is concerned chiefly with four contemporary generations: the G.I., Silent, Boomer, and Xer generations. Each of these generations has, in its own way, contributed to the ever-changing intergenerational drama that has been unfolding throughout recent decades. Living representatives of each of these generations also continue to shape and influence the contemporary context with which this study is concerned. Bearing in mind the qualifications regarding birth-year parameters provided in section 2.3.2.2 above, it will be helpful to commence this historical survey by establishing the age location of these generations within the historical period under consideration here. For the purposes of this study, the birth-year parameters of these generations will be understood according to the following approximations: the G.I. Generation, 1902-1924; the Silent Generation, 1925-1945; the Boomer Generation, 1946-1963; Generation X, 1964-1981. While the birth-year parameters outlined here are not universally employed, they do closely reflect the framework that has been adopted on a broad scale among those engaged in generational studies (Hilborn & Bird 2002:101-148; McIntosh 2002:27-185).

The historical context provided by the present chapter will prove helpful in the chapters that follow for at least two reasons. In chapter four, we will be introduced to Generation X as the cohort directly bearing the impact of the social fragmentation and cultural change of recent decades. The current chapter will provide the background information necessary to understand the complexity of the world into which this marginalized generation was born. In chapter five, we will examine the immense struggle being experienced within many established churches as they contemplate what it means to respond faithfully to post-modern cultural change within a complex generational context. Indeed, these established churches are populated largely with parishioners representing the G.I., Silent, and Boomer generations introduced in this present chapter (Rendle 2002:50). By examining the events and influences that contributed to the formation of the *peer personalities* of these modern generations, we

will be aided in understanding why they have found it difficult to carry out the intergenerational praxis of the church in relation to Gen X.

3.2 A Paradigmatic Preface

In section 2.2, we were introduced to the concept of *worldview*. “Paradigm” is another term that has been used to describe this pervasive way of experiencing and understanding the world (Kuhn 1995:10-15). The concept of worldview plays an important role within this study, as we are concerned with the intergenerationally-manifested impact of changes within the prevailing worldview, the transition from modernity to post-modernity. As has perhaps been evident through the discussion in the preceding chapter, the philosophy of a period is not likely to be discerned chiefly through an examination of the intellectual systems that its adherents feel it necessary to defend. Rather, this is achieved by identifying the fundamental assumptions that adherents of all the diverse systems within the period unconsciously presuppose and that “appear so obvious that people do not know what they are assuming because no other way of putting things has ever occurred to them” (Whitehead 1997:48). Thus, in an effort to establish the context in which the post-modern paradigm shift has occurred, we will begin by introducing the paradigmatic assumptions that permeated the period under consideration in this chapter.

3.2.1 Functional Christendom

3.2.1.1 The Early Christian Experience

From a paradigmatic perspective, our central concern in this chapter is with the world of modernity. However, if we are to understand fully the dynamics of the church’s praxis within the era of modernity, we must set this exploration against the backdrop of the longstanding and pervasive influence of *Christendom*. Indeed, the entire course of American history must be understood as a product of this framework for experiencing the world. Traditionally, this term has described a relationship between the church and the broader culture in which the church “has an official ecclesiastical status through legal establishment” (Van Gelder 1998:48). Wright (2000:17-18) offers a somewhat more nuanced definition in describing Christendom as “the explicit or implicit attempt by the Christian church acting from a position of power, privilege

or patronage to impose Christian values by the use of social and political power in what are believed to be the interests of the kingdom of God.” The historic state churches of Europe have typified this status. However, this arrangement actually originated in the fourth century.

Prior to that time, the universal Christian movement had been composed largely of marginalized local communities that struggled to live in faithfulness to their divine calling in the midst of a seemingly alien culture (Harvey 1999:21-31). This was a community that understood itself as manifesting an alternative social existence rooted in the reign of God (Lohfink 1984:164; Harvey 1999:21-31). The church recognized the state as being important; it provided for the promotion of good and the restraint of evil and preserved a peaceful and socially cohesive context within which the church could spread the gospel. Nonetheless, the church understood *itself*, not the empire, “to be carrying the meaning of history” (Clapp 1996:25). Thus, the Christian community sought to live in redemptive tension with the prevailing culture and to engage in patterns of life “designed to re-form those pagans who joined the church into Christians, into a distinctive people that individually and corporately looked like Jesus Christ” (Kreider 1994:5).

The corporate testimony of this distinctive community caused it to be attractive to a watching world (Kreider 1994:5). As one early Christian remarked, “Beauty of life causes strangers to join the ranks... We do not talk about great things; we live them” (quoted in Kreider :12). Goheen (1999) offers the following description of the “exemplary life” in which the early church shared:

In part it was that the early church broke down barriers erected in the Roman empire—rich/poor, male/female, slave/free, Greek/Barbarian. It was the love they exercised toward the poor, orphans, widows, sick, mine-workers, prisoners, slaves, travellers (hospitality). It was the exemplary moral lives of ordinary Christians over against the rampant immorality of the average Roman citizen. It was the hope and joy and confidence experienced by Christians in a world of despair, anxiety, and uncertainty. It was their unity in a fragmented and pluralistic world...It was their forgiving love of their enemies.

(www.newbigin.net)

The compelling generosity and unity of the early Christian community is reflected further in the following second century description offered by Justin Martyr (cited in Kreider 1994:9): “We who once took pleasure in the means of increasing our wealth

and property now bring what we have into a common fund and share with everyone in need; we who hated and killed one another and would not associate with people of different tribes...now after the manifestation of Christ live together and pray for our enemies.” Truly, this was a community that posed a profound alternative to the prevailing patterns of society.

However, despite these origins, with the decision of Constantine to grant freedom to Christians throughout the Roman Empire (in the Edict of Milan, 313 AD) and the preferential status granted Christianity as a result of his espoused allegiance to Christ, the social position and mindset of the Christian community began to change drastically (Murray 2004:25). Toward the end of that same century, Theodisius I declared Christianity the official religion of Rome, a decision that would solidify the cultural standing of the Christian faith for centuries to follow (:106). This marriage of the Christian faith and the predominant culture would have profound implications for the way in which the Church understood its calling within society (Goheen 1999; www.newbigin.net). In essence, these developments thrust the church into the period of *Christendom*.

O’Donovan (1996:212) posits that the church embraced this new position within society, not so much out of a desire to move to the centre of power, but out of a sincere recognition of the opportunities this arrangement presented for “preaching the Gospel, baptising believers, curbing the violence and cruelty of empire and, perhaps most important of all, forgiving their former persecutors.” However, as an unintended consequence of the decision to embrace such responsibilities, suggests Murray (2004:74), “the Christendom shift radically re-engineered the church’s DNA so that what developed became progressively alienated from the Christianity of the New Testament and pre-Christendom” (cf. Wright 2000:14-15). Harvey (1999:72-73, 81) describes the impact of this shift upon the church’s sense of its identity in relation to God’s purposes within the world:

In its eagerness to perform this holy service for the world, Christians fell prey to a radically realized eschatology, thus effacing most of the meaningful distinctions that it had formerly cultivated between itself and the world as distinct political societies...As a consequence, the carefully drawn distinctions between the world and the church, the present age and the age to come, were largely (though not completely) fused into one entity, the *corpus christianum*.

As a result, the compelling question that captivated the attention of Christian leaders was no longer that of how the church might remain faithful and survive under Caesar, but rather how its expectations might be adjusted so that Caesar could be considered a faithful Christian (Clapp 1996:25-26).

These changes in the identity of the Christian movement profoundly impacted the place of mission within the church's understanding of its own praxis. Murray (2004:217) notes that, in the pre-Christendom era, "missionary" was rarely a designated office or function assigned to appointed individuals. That being said, this term captures an integral dimension of the self-consciousness of these early Christian communities as they endeavoured to live in faithfulness to the evangelistic mandate given them by Christ. However, as the Christian empire arose, so too did the belief in the "triumph of finality" (Hall 1997:99). As Harvey (1999:142) explains, the notion of thoroughly realized eschatology resulted in a re-narration of the story of redemption "so that it conveniently converge[d] with the dominant social practices and institutions of this age." In turn, says Hall (1997:99), it was understood that "the divine work is truly finished already and remains only to be displayed to full view and acknowledged universally." This had a potent impact on the missionary consciousness of the Christian community in relation to the world (Shenk 2005:74).

This assumption that the church had come to know and *win* its culture caused it to develop an artificial distinction between mission and evangelization, with mission being directed to heathendom and evangelization addressing those already within the culture of Christendom (Guder 2000:92-93; Shenk 2001:76). While there was no biblical basis to support such a construct, it made sense within the context of historical Christendom (Shenk 2001:50). If one's context is essentially Christian, "Conversion, detoxification, and transformation are not needed. All that is needed is a slight change of mind, an inner change of heart, a few new insights" (Hauerwas & Willimon 1989:29). As a result of this way of thinking, evangelism in the New Testament sense "soon became irrelevant, except on the borders of Christendom" (Murray 2004:129). Indeed, the church of the Christendom era came to see mission as "a far off enterprise" (Mead 1991:15), one focused "over there" (Shenk 1996:75), and one delegated rather exclusively to special agencies (Murray 2004:130).

The divorce of church and mission, perhaps understandable in the Christendom context, would prove to be one of the profoundest legacies of this era (Murray 2004:130). Harvey (1999:81) suggests that, particularly in light of the fact that the very concept of Christendom had originated in the Church's understanding of its mission, the loss of focus upon the Church's missionary identity "is ironic as well as tragic." As one consequence of this shift, however, the Western church moved from a concern with existing as a missionary community within its culture into what some have described as a "maintenance mode" (Frost & Hirsch 2003:13; Murray 2004:129). Hunsberger (1998:78-80) notes that this shift in focus was bound up with the church accepting the role of "chaplaincy to the culture," a position that implied its location within the power structure of society (cf. Clapp 1996:26). Roxburgh (1998:191) explains the changes this brought about within the life of the church:

The church moved into a more settled, established, and organized form. No longer a mission band of God's people, it became a religious organization in which the means of grace were sacramentally communicated through an ordained priesthood and the reign of God identified with the church structures and its sacraments... The practices and training of the church's leadership were significantly formed by the assumptions of the empire even as the empire was itself transformed by the Christian presence at its center.

(cf. Roxburgh 2005:149)

The cultural and geographical "settled-ness" that became native to the life of the church, expressed in large part through the emergence of the parish system, caused it no longer to be seen chiefly as a distinct community, but rather as "a place where religious things happen" (Hunsberger 1998:78-80). As Ward (2002) expresses, this move toward settled-ness and structure represented the genesis of "solid church."

Such shifts in the prevailing concept of the church's nature and calling greatly changed what the Christian message required of the individual adherent and what it meant to belong as a member of the church. Christian commitment was no longer seen as being politically, socially, or economically disruptive. As Clapp (1996:26) observes, "In a real sense, it [became] fine and commendable for professing Christians to participate in the state and other realms of culture as if the lordship of Christ made no concrete difference." Mead (1991:14) explains what this meant for the expectations to which the "average" Christian was subject:

No longer is the ordinary participant in a congregation personally and intimately on the mission frontier. The individual is no longer called to

‘witness’ in a hostile environment. No longer is she or he supposed to be different from any other citizen... The Christian in the local situation is called upon to be a good citizen.

Indeed, adherence to Christian faith was actually deemed as entailing “strengthened commitment to shared social norms,” rather than the adoption of “the counter-cultural values of God’s kingdom” (Murray 2004:224-225). The “gospel” message tended to provide a moralistic and individualistic reinforcement of the status quo (:225).

Whereas identification with the Christian community formerly had entailed great risk and sacrifice, in the Christendom era “it would take exceptional conviction not to be counted as a Christian” (Yoder 1984:136). Thus, a sharp dichotomy between membership and mission was introduced into the consciousness of the Christian movement (Guder 1998:244).

3.2.1.2 The American Expression

Throughout the roughly fourteen centuries that spanned between the commencing of the Christendom era and the founding of the American nation, little occurred to challenge the fundamental assumptions of the world of Christendom. Notes Frost (2006:4-5), Christendom “had effectively become the metanarrative for an entire epoch... The net effect over the entire Christendom epoch was that Christianity moved from being a dynamic, revolutionary, social, and spiritual movement to being a static religious institution with its attendant structures, priesthood, and sacraments.” Even the magisterial Reformers left the fundamental assumptions of Christendom unchallenged (Clapp 1996:27; Roxburgh 2005:150). Later, with the colonization of North America, “A Constantinian, imperial church spread from Europe to early North America, where ten of the original thirteen colonies had state churches” (Clapp 1996:46).

Though a legal separation of church and state ultimately would come to be knit into the fabric of the nation’s founding principles, *Christendom* essentially describes the functional reality of the relationship that remained intact between the church and society in the US. While the Christian religion may not have been established formally from a legal standpoint, it certainly was so from a “cultural, ideational, social” perspective (Hall 1997:29); it was deeply entrenched “at the level of content”

(cf. Murray 2004:17). Van Gelder (1998:48) provides insight into what this meant for the American nation:

Various churches contributed to the formation of a dominant culture that bore the deep imprint of Christian values, language, and expectations regarding moral behaviors. Other terms like “Christian culture” or “churched culture” might be used to describe this Christian influence on the shape of the broader culture.

Thus, despite the official disestablishment of religion, and despite the fact that a minority of Americans actively participated in the institution of the church at the time of the Revolution (Finke & Stark 2005:27, 28), the church held a place of cultural hegemony and power within American society (Carroll & Roof 2002:39-40).

As a result, concludes Hall (1997:29), the establishment of Christianity in North America actually was “infinitely more subtle and profound than anything achieved in the European parental cultures.” In fact, he argues, the rejection of the European formal patterns of religious establishment may actually have produced a certain blindness toward the immense power of the informal, American “culture-religion” pattern; explains Hall, “Christ and culture are so subtly intertwined, so inextricably connected at the subconscious or unconscious level, that we hardly know where one leaves off and the other begins. The substance of the faith and the substance of our cultural values and morality appear...virtually synonymous.”

The implications of the Christendom paradigm’s legacy within the contemporary church and the need for it to experience the renewal of its witness will be developed at length in chapters five through seven. In the present chapter, however, the pervasive and profound influence of this paradigm upon the historical development of the church’s praxis in American society must be noted. More specifically, an awareness of the assumptions of Christendom can help us to understand the specific ways in which the church sought to respond to the social structures and praxes issuing from the modern worldview. Indeed, in this study we are concerned with tracking the impact of modernity upon church and society, as well as the backdrop that this paradigm provides for understanding the post-modern paradigm shift. That being so, we turn now to a brief exploration of its development and distinctives.

3.2.2 Modernity

Throughout the period that we will survey in this chapter, the modern worldview exacted a profound and expanding influence throughout American society.

Modernity has been described by some observers as the most pervasive culture of the world (Van Gelder 1998:25). Thus, a comprehensive analysis of the impact of this worldview upon the American situation would be impossible. Furthermore, much of that which could be said in providing a thorough analysis of modernity simply lies beyond the parameters of this study. However, as we will see throughout this chapter, this paradigm has played a pervasive role in shaping both several of the contemporary American generations and the established churches of which many of them are a part. Therefore, as we prepare to examine the events that have unfolded in recent decades, a period frequently described as *advanced modernity*, it is essential to outline some of the central tenets of this worldview.

Any attempt to characterize a historical movement such as modernity is fraught with risk and “invariably messy” because an entire culture “does not carefully walk along one circumscribed path” (Carson 2005:92). As Middleton and Walsh (1995:13, 14) observe, not only it is impossible to describe modernity as though its cultural and intellectual expressions can be reduced to one monolithic essence, it furthermore is difficult even to date this period (though they do suggest that it was born somewhere between the years of 1470 and 1700). However, while it is may be difficult to define precisely or categorically the distinctives of this period, “it is, nonetheless, appropriate to speak of the modern epoch as characterized by a dominant *spirit*” (:14). Penner (2005:19) similarly suggests that it is “hopeless” to attach dates to modernity because it is not about a strict historical period, but rather about general philosophical attitudes and trends.

In essence, modernity can be described as a series of movements and streams of thought that shared in common the exaltation of the potential of human rationality as the basis for understanding and experiencing the world (Van Gelder 1998:21). Grenz (1996:3) provides a sweeping summary of the central assumptions native to this worldview as it emerged into prominence throughout the Western world:

The modern human can appropriately be characterized as Descartes' autonomous, rational substance encountering Newton's mechanistic world... It became the goal of the human intellectual quest to unlock the secrets of the universe in order to master nature for human benefit and create a better world. This quest led to the modernity characteristic of the twentieth century, which has sought to bring rational management to life in order to improve human existence through technology.

As we find reflected in these comments by Grenz, four central tenets of modern thought were (1) the agency of the autonomous individual, the finite "I" (Carson 2005:93), (2) a strong confidence in the exercise of human rationality and the rationality of the individual in particular (Raschke 2004:23), (3) the pure, "objectively" knowable nature of reason itself, and (4) the power of scientific factualism and technology to bring about progressive mastery over the material world (Bosch 1995:5; Roxburgh 1998:14-15; Webber 1999:18). As Reno (2002:33) insists, these distinctives cohered in "a confident hope: our humanity, however understood, provides the sufficient basis for the highest good." It will be helpful to explore these tenets further, as well as some of cultural implications that have issued from them.

3.2.2.1 Central Tenets

The concept of the "autonomous individual" holds a central place within the world of modernity (White 2001:172-173). Parented by the early influence of thinkers such as the rationalist René Descartes and the empiricist Francis Bacon, the emergence of modernity can be seen as an effort to provide a basis for human knowing beyond the constraints of monarchs and the Church (Van Gelder 1998:21). Foundational to this approach to the world was the assumption that "the human mind was the indubitable point of departure for all knowing" (Bosch 1995:5). This focus on the self-conscious, self-possessed human agent, it was believed, would lead to human emancipation (Best & Kellner 1997:18). Raschke (2004:24-26) argues that the emphasis on the autonomous individual championed during this period actually bore the influence of the spirit of the Reformation: "The singularity of personal belief and the sovereignty of individual conscience were construed almost exclusively as religious considerations during the sixteenth century" (cf. Drane 2000:112). However, he explains, by the early seventeenth century, this emphasis had become unmoored from these origins.

As some cultural observers would later come to conclude, the “age of reason” was in actuality a great “age of faith,” with this faith being invested in the potential of human rationality, unaided by the means of grace (Rachke 2004:29). John Dewey (1929:47-49) explains that, in contrast to the medieval insistence upon submission to ecclesiastical authorities, modernity entailed “a growing belief in the power of individual minds, guided by methods of observation, experience and reflection, to attain the truths needed for the guidance of life.” Reason was seen as possessing the potential not only to measure and categorize nature, but all the more to intellectually master and control an otherwise irrational and brutal universe (Penner 2005:23).

The emphasis on individual rationality and empiricism within this period caused all of reality to be divided into “thinking subjects” and “objects” that could be reduced to their smaller constituent parts, analyzed, and exploited through rigorous methods of empirical research (White 2001:172-173; Sweet, McLaren & Haselmayer 2003:200; Carson 2005:94). The exercise of reason came to be seen as technical and methodological in nature (Penner 2005:23). This emphasis upon rationality, which emerged early in the seventeenth century Enlightenment, continued to be fostered through the influence of prominent thinkers such as Locke, who contended that all ideas come directly from sense experience. Ultimately, this way of thinking reached the pinnacle of its influence in the early twentieth century with the development of logical positivism; this school of thought championed the “verification principle,” the rule that all claims about reality must be subjected to experimentation, observation, and the evidence of the senses (Raschke 2004:21, 27; cf. Erickson 1998:16). As Raschke (2004:28) expresses in characterizing this system, “The only consistent and dependable claims we can make are scientific ones, which have their own kind of ‘self-evidence.’”

Thus, modern thinkers also were guided by the assumption that epistemological certainty is fully attainable and, furthermore, desirable. The modern individual, as Middleton and Walsh (1995:14) note, “is self-assured and in control of his own destiny...knows what he knows and he knows it with certainty because he knows it scientifically.” Indeed, the modern worldview assumed that the human mind, “an atemporal epistemological pivot,” possessed an objectivity that was detached from

empirical reality (Penner 2005:23). This view of things also assumed a direct correspondence between reality and the rational individual's perception of that reality (Middleton & Walsh 1995:33). Because factual knowledge was deemed to be objective in nature, it was expected that rational humans could actually achieve *shared* certainty regarding what was true (Erickson 1998:17). As a result of this confidence, says Carson (2005:94), "Scholars could extrapolate and imagine a time when all their questions about this or that subject could be satisfied." Raschke (2004:38) explains that, from the modern perspective, "we can have an 'objective' and reliable picture of the way the world actually is, inasmuch as our 'subjective' concepts, or 'categories of understanding,' yield the exact same outlook for every 'rational being.'"

This optimism was fostered by the *foundationalist* orientation of modern epistemology. This term refers to modernity's search for infallible "foundations" of absolute certainty upon which the members of society could build a common structure of thought and action (Best & Kellner 1991:2; Erickson 2001:56; Penner 2005:22). As Raschke (2004:21) suggests, it was believed "that all sure knowledge must rest on those clear and indubitable premises that human thought is capable of ferreting out." Carson (2005:93) explains this further: "Some things, it is argued, are axiomatic—i.e., they are self-evident and thus suitable as foundations on which to build other things by appropriate logic and appeals to various kinds of evidence." Modern thought drew a distinction between "immediate" foundational truths, which were understood as being self-justifiable, and "mediate" truths, which are predicated upon more foundational truths (Greer 2003:236; cf. Grenz 1996:40). This foundationalist understanding of reality asserted that the rational mind could discern the distinction between mediate and immediate truths. Notes Greer (2003:236), "Foundational truths are universal and context-free, and thus available to any rational person."

Upon these unassailable *foundations*, modern thinkers expected to be able to erect valid meta-narrative structures that would be characterized by "ahistorical universality;" in other words, these "super stories" would be true in *all* times, cultures, and places (Grenz 1996:8; Carson 2005:94). In essence, they would express "absolute truth" (Greer 2003:15). By anchoring one's body of knowledge in an "invincible" bedrock of certainty, it was believed that one could be guaranteed that he or she

indeed had arrived at “*the truth*” (Erickson 2001:56; Greer 2003:236; Penner 2005:22).

3.2.2.2 Practical Implications of this Worldview

Throughout the pages that lie ahead, our interest in modernity is not merely or even primarily with its epistemological dimensions. Rather, we are interested in exploring the impact of this worldview upon the praxis of society, the generations that have both been shaped by and shaped this praxis, and the life of the church. Thus, it will be helpful for us to survey briefly some of the practical implications of this paradigm. Our focus will be concentrated on those aspects of modern life that most closely relate to this study. The practical outworking of these dimensions of modernity will continue to be developed throughout later sections of this study.

The empirical reductionism inherent within the modern view of the world contributed to a de-emphasis on *purpose*, something that the pre-modern world had been provided by its theocentric view of the universe. Instead, processes (natural, social, etc.) came to be viewed predominantly in mechanistic terms of cause and effect (Bosch 1995:5). The immanent laws of the physical universe were seen as fixed causes of all that occurs. As Erickson (1998:17) observes, “Not only physical occurrences but human behavior were believed to be under this etiological control.”

In addition, the scientific optimism of the modern world placed great emphasis on “progress, expansion, advance, and modernization” (Bosch 1995:5; cf. Best & Kellner 1991:2). Middleton and Walsh (1995:15) suggest that this spirit of progress actually became “the unifying commitment or civil religion of Western civilization.” Especially among the proponents of logical positivism, the belief emerged that the exercise of scientific rationalism would render progress not only *possible*, but *inevitable* (Bosch 1995:5; Middleton & Walsh 1995:17; Van Gelder 1998:22). It was widely believed that science and education would liberate humanity and that society could be built and managed on the sole basis of reason (Hunter 1996:21-22; Grassie 1997; Van Gelder 1998:21).

This preoccupation with progress led to the development of science-based technology and the accompanying application of “technique” to manipulate and master the social and natural world (Middleton & Walsh 1995:17; Shenk 2001:20). As Dewey (1929:47-49) asserts, “the patient and experimental study of nature, bearing fruit in inventions which control nature and subdue her forces to social use, is the method by which progress is made.” This emphasis birthed the age of the Industrial Revolution, which, in turn, fostered the entrepreneurial spirit of a market economy. As a result, the belief that “a rising standard of living (defined largely in economic terms) is the ultimate goal in human life and the only route to personal happiness and social harmony” came to be rooted deeply in the Western consciousness (Middleton & Walsh 1995:17).

Van Gelder (1998:29) suggests that the ascendancy of technological and technique-driven change caused at least three important myths to become deeply embedded within modern culture: (1) The new is somehow better and must necessarily replace the old once it is introduced; (2) What is efficient is more desirable and must necessarily replace what is only workable; (3) Science can address any problem through the application of adequate intelligence and diligence, while a technique can be developed to solve every problem (cf. Middleton & Walsh 1995:14; Erickson 1998:17). As will be evident throughout the pages that lie ahead, these myths have penetrated deeply into the bedrock of our society, including the life of the church.

As was mentioned above, many of the early shapers of the modern experiment were motivated in this endeavour by expressly Christian convictions. However, with time, the objectification of the material world led to a divide between the “secular” and the “sacred” (Best & Kellner 1997:17). While this was not necessarily the intent of many of the early modernists (Veith 1994:33), empiricism came to strip the physical world of mystery, causing it no longer to be viewed as pointing to reality beyond itself (Roxburgh 1998:33). Basically, the “disenchantment” of nature brought about by the Newtonian, mechanical view of the universe did not have need for a supernatural dimension. Furthermore, the ascendancy of empiricism was heralded as making possible society’s emergence “from the darkness of superstition” (Middleton & Walsh 1995:17). Within this framework, all true knowledge was deemed factual, value-free, and neutral. Religious convictions did not fit this category, as they could not be tested

and verified empirically. With time, matters of religion came to be seen merely as a point of taste. Thus, as society became increasingly secularized, this resulted in religion being either dismissed or relegated to the “ghetto” of the relative and the private (Bosch 1995:5; White 2001:170-173; Raschke 2004:28). Raschke (2004:23) describes this vividly as “the secularist mugging of Christianity.” As will become evident in the pages that follow, this would have profound ramifications for a church conditioned by the assumptions of Christendom.

By demanding an empirical basis for all knowing and by prioritizing the “new”, the world of modernity involved a movement away from an understanding of truth as embedded within tradition (Van Gelder 1998:22). Best and Keller (1997:17) characterize the modern worldview as entailing the “shattering” of tradition, while Penner (2005:24) describes it as a tradition that prides itself on not being a tradition. Because Cartesian scepticism was seen as the only means for the modern self to guarantee that he or she has not been deceived or “shackled” by tradition, modernity could have no respect even for its own past, let alone the wisdom of the pre-modern world (Harvey 1990:11). While it did not altogether negate the possibility of human knowing arising as a product of revelation, it no longer found this necessary (Smith 1995:205; Carson 2005:93). As we will see, this departure from tradition would prove to pose significant challenges for the praxis of the church in relation to the praxis of society.

Through the exaltation of the objective individual knower, the world of modernity in effect became “self-centered.” This being the case, suggest Middleton and Walsh (1995:48), the individual found his or her “centre”, or “point of unity, cohesion and identity” precisely within himself or herself; stated otherwise, “perhaps we could more accurately say that this is a self-centering ego—constantly in the process of constructing and reconstructing its own center, its own identity, in its own place in the world.” Erickson (1998:17) comments upon the personal liberty this individualistic emphasis was perceived as assuring:

The ideal of the knower was the solitary individual, carefully protecting his or her objectivity by weighing all options. Truth being objective, individuals can discover it by their own efforts. They can free themselves from the conditioning particularities of their own time and place and know reality as it is in itself...Any

externally imposed authority, whether that of the group or of a supernatural being, must be subjected to scrutiny and criticism by human reason.

As a result, individuals essentially become a law (*nomos*) unto themselves (*autos*).

The focus upon the centrality of the autonomous individual reduced social belonging to a matter of *voluntary association*. Social contract theorists such as Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau asserted that individuals make choices out of personal self-interest. Recognizing the inherent difficulty that this reality posed for the construction of a social order, these modern thinkers posited that “the collective effect of individuals choosing out of rational self-interest would lead to the promotion of the common good in the whole of society” (Van Gelder 1998:24). Because modernity conceived of human nature as inherently rational, it seemed reasonable to conclude that free individuals would reach similar conclusions about important intellectual, moral, and civic matters (Middleton & Walsh 1995:67; Thompson 2003:27). Thus, concludes Van Gelder (1998:25), faith in the freely choosing individual, one “deciding out of rational self-interest to enter into a social contract in order to construct a progressive society,” became a central ideology of this period. This notion of autonomous choice would extend into the arena of religious belief and practice and would profoundly alter traditional notions about ecclesiology (Carroll & Roof 2002:32; Van Gelder 2007:76-77). As we will see, even the church would come increasingly to be seen as “expressive” of personal preference (Thompson 2003:27).

Within a view of the world that assumes that each individual is autonomous and in which association is understood as voluntary, getting individuals to function together toward a common end would prove to be an inherent challenge. Particularly with the advance of democratic and industrial revolutions, the development of increasingly complex social structures gave rise to the need for new approaches to organization. The “technique” orientation described above would lead to the bureaucratization of social groups. As Thompson (2003:119) notes, “Bureaucracy functions on the basis of rules and regulations, overseen by persons in specific roles who are appointed supposedly because of their specialized training and expertise.” Thus, asserts Sollers (1995:61), while the modern era brought about the termination of aristocratic systems, these came to be replaced quickly with new hierarchies. In addition, the continued emergence of management sciences would lead to the championing of an

“instrumental” understanding of the nature of organizations (Thompson 2003:27; Van Gelder 2007:77). In turn, with the advance of modernity, an increasing emphasis would be placed upon “standardization” (Jencks 1995:26). These developments, we will see, caused the church to adopt an increasingly instrumental and standardized approach to its own identity and mission (Van Gelder 2007:74-81).

3.2.2.3 Internal Tensions

It is important for the purposes of this research project to note that a well developed conception of modernity should not be limited merely to “the values, assumptions, and ideals inherited from the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment” (Moore 1994:126). Despite its optimism and assertions of certainty, the modern world was plagued by persistent undercurrents of tension. Throughout its history, the values of modernity were hotly contested (Best & Kellner 1997:18). Veith (1994:35) notes Romanticism and Existentialism as two manifestations of this reality. While these were “phases” of modernity, they also were “anti-modern” in nature, “counter-impulses” within the prevailing paradigm (Best & Kellner 1997:28). Romanticism assumed that emotion is at the essence of our humanness (Veith 1994:35-36). The Romantics exalted the individual over impersonal, abstract systems. Self-fulfilment provided the basis for morality. Thus, Romanticism cultivated subjectivity, personal experience, irrationalism, and intense emotion as central values. Existentialism, championed by prominent figures such as Nietzsche and Sartre, similarly emphasized the notion that, since everyone creates his or her own meaning, every meaning is equally valid (:38).

Rooted in the legacy of these subversive strands within modern thought and culture, *modernism*, “the birth-twin of modernity,” began to emerge with increasing cultural force with the advance of the twentieth century (Van Gelder 1998:30-31); this term can be understood to denote “an aesthetic phenomenon—literary art roughly since Flaubert, visual art since Manet, and their deconstruction of verbal and visual language, respectively” (Moore 1994:126). Much like the Romanticism by which it was preceded, this movement attempted to capture in the arts and literature the dimension of personhood that is “emotive, affective, intuitive, and experiential” (Van Gelder 1998:30). The human spirit, the proponents of this movement asserted, could

not be adequately contained within or expressed through the modern construct of the self as an autonomous, rational individual. This recognition gave rise to a search for meaning through the exploration of feeling, experience, and desire. “This counterpulse within the larger development of modernity,” suggests Van Gelder (1998:31), “is as shaping of the modern self as is its rational side.” As shall be demonstrated in this chapter, the incongruous emphasis upon experience and sensation on the one hand and rational process on the other would produce an inherent and unresolved tension for the citizens of the modern world. Ultimately, this tension would give rise to a conflict with longstanding implications for the relationship between the American generations and for the life of the church within society, one that would set the stage for a shift in the prevailing paradigm.

Having considered briefly the influence of the Christendom and modern paradigms, we now are well positioned to proceed with an exploration of the intergenerational praxis of society, as well as that of the church, in recent decades. Before doing so, however, we will consider briefly the backdrop of the broader American historical context. This will help to punctuate the reality of a quickened pace of cultural change and the heightened generational complexity with which church and society have been faced.

3.3 Early American Antecedents of the Contemporary Situation

In the early stages of American Colonial history, a widespread agrarian culture encouraged cooperation and continuity between the generations. As Hamburg (1992:24) observes, in that cultural setting, the members of the nuclear family worked closely together throughout the day. These families also tended to live within close-knit rural communities, often among a network of extended family. Hamburg suggests that, within this agrarian cultural configuration, intergenerational relations were fairly secure. Reflecting upon this era in American history, he offers the following comments,

[E]arly learning of norms in small-scale societies tends to induce lifelong commitments to traditional ways of life. These commitments are reinforced by the continuing experience that self-respect and close human relationships are intimately linked with behaviours conforming to social norms. A sense of personal worth is predicated on having a meaningful role and belonging to a

valued group; a sense of belonging, in turn, depends on the ability to undertake the traditional tasks of that society with skill, to engage in social interactions in ways that are mutually supportive, and on the personally meaningful experience of participation in group rituals marking shared experiences of deep emotional significance. All of these traditional activities are experienced within the context of a small, intimate group that provides the security of familiarity, support in times of stress, and enduring attachments through the life cycle.

(:22-23)

It is important to note that this era was by no means wholly devoid of tension or change between successive generations (Strauss & Howe 1992:113-150). However, when viewed from both the *microsociological* and *macrosociological* perspectives, it is fair to conclude that early American society provided a context that affirmed the worth and value of all age groups, that encouraged intergenerational solidarity, and that promoted the perpetuation of traditional mores and values (Roberts, Richards & Bengston 1991:13).

In addition to this, another explanation can be cited for the relative absence of intergenerational tension during this period of American history. Simply stated, the realities of a short lifespan encouraged intergenerational respect and cooperation. Freedman (1999:41) observes that, within the Puritan era, only two percent of the population lived past the age of sixty-five, and the median age was only sixteen years old. As a result of this, a “cult of age” developed that “was fed by scarcity value.” Able-bodied youth fulfilled a vital role within a labour-based economy. At the same time, because literacy was rare during this era, elders played a critical bridging role between the generations as “keepers of the culture.” As Freedman explains, “In an economy that changed slowly over time, the know-how and skills of the older population were immediately pertinent to the young. In a society oriented toward tradition and traditional values, older adults were ‘living representatives of the past, armed with ancient precedents and cloaked in the authority of ancestral ways.’” In this setting, generations of inhabitants within a community were left with little choice but to value one another. Furthermore, because the age stratification of the members within a community was so limited, the potential for intergenerational differentiation also was minimized. Even by the time of the American Revolution in 1776, as Dychtwald (1989:6) notes, this situation had changed little. At that time, the average life expectancy of an American was thirty-five, while the median age remained sixteen years old.

The churches of this era were closely enmeshed with the vision and values that guided the family and community. Churches held what Holifield (1994:28) describes as a “comprehensive” place within the life of the community. As he explains, “The founders of the first congregations intended that they should comprehend the community: one congregation for each mission, village, town, or county.” Ward (2002:23) further explicates this vision: “with economies located mainly on the land, communal life was based around a sense of place. So the idea of a parish expresses the way that the church served all of those, rich and poor, those who worked on the land and those who owned the land. Community, organized around the village or the small town, was inclusive, even if it was not always equitable.” In contrast to the more complex congregational organizations that would emerge in later centuries, these congregations understood themselves fundamentally as providing a context for corporate worship.

It is important to note that, while encompassing an entire community, these congregations also tended to be organized (e.g., the seating arrangements for worship) in a manner that paralleled the racial and socio-economic divisions within that community. This being said, age was not generally a basis for the drawing of such distinctions within the life of the worshipping community (Nel 2000:51). In a manner reflective of the values of the larger community, these congregations employed a process of religious socialization that promoted inclusion across the spectrum of ages and, thus, the intergenerational perpetuation of the faith. As Leith (1990:43) articulates, “The structure of a community in which a family had lived for generations and the family itself gave to an individual his or her identity, which frequently included membership in the church.” Truly, this was very much the world of Christendom.

3.4 Industrial Revolution Precursors to the Contemporary Situation

As in other Western nations, the American cultural situation began to undergo profound changes with the advent of the Industrial Revolution. The process by which traditional mores and values had been perpetuated intergenerationally was dramatically impacted as families relocated from their rural communities of origin to

their new homes in urban centres (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:29). In addition, as Hamburg (1992:26) observes, fathers began to work at a distance from home and, thus, no longer were in a position to serve as direct role models in the same way that they had previously. As a result, industrialization rendered the home less able to prepare youth for all of life in society (Milson 1972:35-36; Mogeys 1991:57). Instead, they would need to receive training for specialized work roles outside of the home. These developments would set the stage for dramatic changes to come in the twentieth century.

In addition to this, the Industrial Revolution began to introduce artificial and arbitrary boundaries between age groups within society. Chudacoff (1989:184-185) suggests four primary factors that he sees as having given rise to the significance of chronological age as an objective means of regulating and controlling modern industrial society. First, age was seen as providing a convenient objective indicator of when certain skills and abilities could be expected from the rising workforce. Second, the grading of society according to age provided an organizing mechanism for society-wide standards for the administering of services and institutions. Third, age grading represented a move away from kinship-based traditions of employment. In emphasizing age, rather than family or social ties, provisions were made to avoid nepotism. Fourth, expectations based on age were seen as providing a more objective reference point regarding when people could be expected to transition between roles and responsibilities.

This development began to change conventional perceptions of the life course and of the interrelationship between age groups in society. In pre-modern times individuals retired from their occupations at their own discretion, while “old age” was viewed in more flexible, individual terms (Lyon 1995:87). However, because industrialization brought about the need for the “standardisation and bureaucratisation of the life course around the administration of retirement pensions,” the age of sixty-five was established in many contexts as the normative age for retirement (Vincent 2003:9-10). Those who had reached this age came to be treated as a distinct segment within society (cf. Williams & Nussbaum 2001:251). In addition to this, as the Industrial era advanced, the perceived need to protect the adult workforce against excessive competition for limited employment within the industrial economy led to the passage

of child labour laws (Esler 1971:161). While these laws were motivated at least in part by a humanitarian concern regarding the exploitation of the young, “the motive to keep children out of the labour market, was often due to economic and selfish reasons” (Nel 2000:31). With the introduction of such changes to the American social landscape, whereas the population previously had been accustomed largely to thinking holistically regarding its intergenerational existence, the groundwork was laid for the segmentation of society into distinct age-based peer groups to become viewed increasingly as “natural” (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:33). These changes would produce unintended, but dramatic, consequences that would come to impact profoundly the direction of intergenerational relations with the arrival of the twentieth century.

Amid this climate of change, the place of youth within society underwent gradual evolution as the nineteenth century advanced. This is evidenced in part through the role that education played within the lives of American teens. Throughout this period, widespread acceptance of high school was very slow to develop. Many parents could not foresee how it would enable their youth to attain a better quality of life within a labour-driven economy (Hine 1999:139-140). Others simply could not afford the financial cost of sacrificing the income generated by their children (Palladino 1996:xv). Thus, as Hine (1999:139-140) observes, “During much of the nineteenth century, there were probably more teenagers working in mines than attending high school. There were certainly many more teenagers working in factories. Through most of the century, there were a dozen on farms for each one in high school.” Although the high school population doubled nationally during the final decade of the nineteenth century, only six percent of seventeen year olds earned high school diplomas in the year 1900. Even by 1910, a mere fifteen percent of seventeen year olds went to high school, and only a fraction remained long enough to graduate (Palladino 1996:xv). Thus, though the place of young people within industrial society was undergoing change as the transition to the twentieth century began, their experience of youth was still very much oriented toward their integration into the adult population. Esler (1971) cites numerous isolated instances throughout this period of industrialization in which the changing place of young people within society gave rise to “youth revolts” that strained intergenerational relations. With the

advance of the twentieth century, however, such tensions would come to be experienced on a much broader scale.

Holifield (1994:33-38) suggests that the changes occurring within society at large during this era of industrialization were coming to bear on the life of the church, as well. In the place of the “comprehensive” congregations of the Colonial period, the arrival of a diversity of ethnic groups from overseas, the urban migration spawned by industrialization, and the formation of numerous denominations caused a multiplicity of “devotional” congregations to emerge. Furthermore, the “voluntary principle”, which played so integral a role within the American understanding of the separation of church and state, caused the free “religious economy” to be marked increasingly by “competition” (Finke & Stark 2005:3; Van Gelder 2007:76). By the mid-1800s, a number of religious leaders were identifying the prevalence of the voluntary principle as a significant source of concern (Finke & Stark 2005:7).

As a result of these changes in the religious landscape, observes Ward (2002:23), “Community became relocated in various gathered groupings based on culture and shared experience.” The church began to take on more of a “corporate” and “programmatically” identity (Van Gelder 2007:74, 79). Understandably, these congregations were considerably more homogeneous than their “comprehensive” predecessors had been. In fact, as Holifield (1994:33, 34) explains, these congregations actually embraced a way of life that fostered further sub-groupings according to homogeneous affinity:

By the early nineteenth century, the congregation no longer served a unifying function in the communities...Americans now led far more segmented lives than their forebears...Congregations felt all of these changes; in cities and towns, at least, they drew a segmented and self-selected clientele. Their primary purpose was still worship, but now they began to segment worship. In addition to the regular Sunday services, they formed prayer meetings, Bible classes, Sunday schools, devotional gatherings, and mission societies that brought people together in small groups, often organized by age and gender.

As Holifield suggests, one consequence of the developments occurring during this period was that the gradual trend toward age based segmentation evident within the larger society was becoming reflected within the church family. The development of the Sunday school was one of the ways in which this segmentation according to age

came to be expressed. By the 1820s, as free public education began to spread, Sunday schools, which originally were developed as a means of directing educational and evangelistic efforts toward unchurched child labourers, began to be transformed into religious societies for children within congregations (Wolfe 2004; www.youthspecialties.com). Thus, by the 1850s, most congregations had adopted an understanding of the Sunday school as a vehicle for promoting the instruction and devotion of the young. The notion that a faith community should be divided into groups according to age was beginning to become a part of the corpus of established assumptions upon which the church organized its life.

With the advance of the Industrial era, the life of the church underwent further transformation as “devotional” congregations gave way to a more complex “social” expression of congregational life. Holifield (1994:38-43) explains that, beginning in the late 1800s, the notion emerged that the church should become a “social home” for its members. By 1890, this thinking had gained considerable momentum. Holifield (:38-39, 42, 43) explains further the implications of this change:

Whether they were imitating each other or enacting a common vision, many of America’s 165,297 congregations displayed an eagerness to develop new patterns. The result was the emergence of the social congregation. It is well to specify the limits of the generalization. Many congregations changed little in either their internal structure or their self-conception in the century between, say, 1850 and 1950... These congregations [that did change] represented one form of the social ideal, extending their activities to meet the social needs of their neighborhoods and regions... The late nineteenth century introduced new ways for congregations to realize the seventeenth-century ideal of comprehensive influence. If they could no longer comprehend a geographical region, they could still comprehend a wider spectrum of the activities of their members.

As Holifield suggests, while a widespread phenomenon, the degree to which the change toward a “social” ideal came to bear on the life of individual congregations varied from church to church.

This being said, as Nel (2000:51, 86) observes, it was a certain inability to adapt during this same period that led to the emergence of a new category of congregational ministry: “youth ministry” or “youth work.” While the congregation previously had been largely “a family-organisation with very few activities for specific age groups,” as a result of the changes brought about through Industrialization, many adults and churches “could not (or would not?) change or adapt old traditional forms and thought

patterns...to integrate the youth meaningfully into the local church and to minister to them as part of the whole.” Thus, in a manner similar to the society at large, the church began to segment its youth into a separate and distinct group. Beginning in the 1880s, this trend was aided by the work of youth oriented organizations like Christian Endeavor, which “encouraged kids to put their faith into action” and “unleashed massive energy and growth” in support of the discipling and evangelization of youth (Wolfe 2004; www.youthspecialties.com). The activity of such organizations, explains Wolfe, “convinced young people that they were important.” In turn, however, the growth and impact of such ministries caused some churches to fear that “these highly committed young people would take over the church,” while “[o]thers feared that these kids would start their own churches!” These fears were never fully realized. However, the changes to which they gave rise would set the stage for the capacity of local churches to transmit the faith intergenerationally to be profoundly tested with the advance of the twentieth century.

3.5 The Twentieth Century Path to the Contemporary Situation

With consideration having been given briefly to the intergenerational praxis of society and church within the Colonial and Industrial Revolution eras, our attention now shifts to the twentieth century and the emergence of today’s living generations. Once again, it is helpful to be reminded that the purpose of this survey is to outline the conditions in which the post-modern cultural shift and the development of a complex intergenerational context have occurred, as well as the manner in which the church has chosen to respond to this context. As attention is lent to the evolutionary cultural developments of this century, the following comments from Côté and Allahar (1995:159) provide a particularly fitting introduction:

[T]he current state of affairs has slowly evolved over the past century as a result of thousands of individual political and economic decisions. These decisions have been made by individuals in power who act on self-interest and the interests of the groups to which they belong or with which they identify....We are not arguing that these groups sat down and masterminded a conspiracy against young people. To the contrary, many of those making these decisions thought that they were acting in the best interest of young people. And many of their decisions have been in the interest of young people. However, when these decisions are viewed in their entirety, one has to conclude that numerous unanticipated, negative consequences have resulted from many of them.

(cf. Williams & Nussbaum 2001:27)

As will become evident in the pages that follow, the possibility of difficulties arising between younger and older generations has been fostered by the ways in which the modern state has chosen to structure its institutions and the individual life course (Lyon 1995:87).

3.5.1 The Pre-Boomer Generations and Traditionalist Culture

The focus of this survey now moves forward chronologically to the period in which the oldest of the contemporary generations began to emerge into prominence within American society: the post-WWII years. It is fitting for this survey to focus upon this post-War period, because the two oldest generations with which this survey is concerned, the G.I. and the Silent generations, were both profoundly impacted by their passage through this period. Furthermore, it is essential to consider the manifold ways in which this period, which was shaped greatly by the values of modernity and Christendom, provided the conditions out of which the tumultuous post-modern transition would come to be born.

3.5.1.1 A Culture of Conformity

As America advanced into the relative calm of the post-WWII years, an emphasis on conformity began to take root deeply within society. Russell (1993:12-13) provides this explanation: “With stability finally at hand, no one wanted to upset the status quo. It was as though the entire nation was holding its breath, hoping nothing would disturb the unfolding good fortunes of so many families. Conformity became of paramount importance, since it was a way to maintain stability and keep the good times rolling.” Thus, summarizes Elwood (2000:8), Americans “wanted to be against conformity, a bad thing, while at the same time conforming to ‘The American Way of Life,’ definitely a good.” As a result, as it “decried ‘mass man’ and ‘mass society’ and exalted individualism in principle,” post-war America actually imposed a culture of conformity on various levels (:67). In their own ways, both the G.I. and Silent generations had been conditioned to embrace and reinforce this culture of conformity. It will be helpful to lend consideration briefly to how this came to be.

a. Conditioned for Conformity

1. The G.I. Generation

The leading edge of the G.I. generation, alternatively described in much of the contemporary generational literature as “Builders,” entered the world at a pivotal moment in the course of the Industrial age. In the early years of the twentieth century, as industrialization dramatically shaped American society, the potential for intergenerational tension became readily apparent (Strauss & Howe 1997b:75). In the face of such social potentialities, largely evidenced within the “lost” generation by which the G.I.s were immediately preceded, the adult members of society became conscious of their need to provide greater protection and care for the young in their midst (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:28). As a result, these G.I.s would come to be treated as “special kids” who, according to Strauss and Howe (1992:263), grew up in “the most carefully shaped of twentieth-century childhoods.” Community life during the formative years of this generation tended to revolve around the institutions of family, church, and school, which “worked together to build a fairly stable life” (McIntosh 2002:37). With only a very small percentage of their mothers working outside the home, these children received a generous measure of attention and nurture (Hamburg 1992:30).

By carefully constructing the formative experiences of this generation, adults “injected a new, explicit insistence on conformity into childhood” (Rodgers 1985:130). As Strauss and Howe (:265) observe, “As children, they were nurtured to believe that anything standardized and prepackaged was more likely to be wholesome.” New youth organizations, such as the Boy Scouts, were formed to redirect the “gang instinct” evident in the previous generation toward more productive purposes. As a result, “Armies of young scouts learned to help others, do things in teams, develop group pride, and show respect to adults.”

As this generation progressed through its formative years, this cooperative mindset was only further encouraged by America’s passage through the Great Depression. Within their own homes, G.I. youth were forced to stay with their families and focus on providing help. The bulk of any income that they received was shared with the family (Esler 1971:74). On a societal scale, The New Deal of President Franklin D.

Roosevelt essentially constituted a social intervention in the face of a potential revolt among those youth who were marginalized by the economic limitations of the Depression (Hine 1999:4). This initiative made provision for these youth to be incorporated into a massive redirecting of energy. According to Esler (1971:194), The New Deal represented the first major effort to institutionalize and integrate youth into society since the beginning of the industrial era. Strauss and Howe (1992:271) go so far as to suggest that this initiative actually “reshuffled the economic deck in favor of the aggressive young over the positioned old.”

In the final analysis, there has been considerable debate regarding the extent to which the organizations and programs instituted as part of this New Deal actually helped to reverse the effects of the Depression; however, posits McIntosh (2002:34), there is little question that they were quite important to the development of the peer psyche of this generation. Young G.I.’s emerged from their formative years as “a generation content to put its trust in government and authority” (Strauss & Howe 1997a:159). They consistently displayed a propensity toward convention (Esler 1971:74) and placed a high value on being “general” or “regular”, “since regularity is a prerequisite for being effective ‘team players’” (Strauss & Howe 1992:264).

The early years of this generation corresponded to what has been described as “the social rediscovery of adolescence in the United States” (Elkind 1984:21). According to Elkind, this rediscovery, “engendered by the new knowledge about adolescence provided by social science,” resulted in “the recognition that in a highly industrialized society, young people needed a period between childhood and adulthood, a period before the final assumption of adult responsibilities and decision making” (cf. White 1988:79; Williams & Nussbaum 2001:30; Lytch 2004:214-215). Thus, the major institutions of society all essentially agreed to promote and protect the need for youth to experience a defined period of “adolescence.” By 1914, almost every state had adopted laws prohibiting the employment of young people below a certain age (Elkind 1984:20). As a result, the rate of child labour in America fell by one-half during the G.I. youth era. This constituted the largest one-generation decline in child labour in the history of the nation (Strauss & Howe 1992:266). Côté and Allahaar (1995:108-109) suggest that this “rediscovery” of adolescence essentially marked the

beginning of an era guided by a new “ideology of youth”, a phenomenon that would shape the entire period under consideration here.

As one facet of this “rediscovery”, the American public began to lend support to the notion that their young needed to be provided education and training in order to prepare for jobs in an industrial economy (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:31). Thus, G.I. youth were encouraged as no previous generation had been to continue their education through the high school level. By 1930, one-half of teens were in high school. A decade later, close to seventy-five percent of all fourteen to seventeen-year-olds were in high school and one-half of seventeen year olds were high school graduates. Thus, as the 1930s came to their conclusion, this generation that had experienced such a marked decline in child labour also had participated in “the largest one-generation jump in educational achievement in American history” (Strauss & Howe 1992:267).

With more teens attending than not, school became “an important socializing force” for the members of this generation (Strauss & Howe 1992:270). While educators clearly had certain aims in promoting high school education, the youth of this generation saw it as presenting other opportunities (Palladino 1996:xvi, 45). The “Roaring Twenties,” a period of “escapism” following WWI, was a prosperous time within which many Americans enjoyed a rise in their standard of living (McIntosh 2002:31). Amidst these conditions, suggests Esler (1971:46), “for the first time, school became the center of teen social life.” Within this setting, young G.I.’s constructed the first modern “peer society” (Howe & Strauss 2000:332; Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:27). This peer society was reinforced by the growth of “pop culture,” which, largely through the facilitation of the technological innovations of radio and cinema, was for the first time becoming an important shaping force in the lives of American youth (Esler 1971:41-42, 181; Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:27). For the first time in American history, this enabled young people everywhere to gain exposure to common cultural influences and thereby participate in aspects of a widespread and distinct youth culture.

As the place of young people underwent transformation within society at large, these changes were mirrored within the life of the church (Codrington & Grant-Marshall

2004:235). As Wright and Kinser (2006) observe, “Adolescence as we know it was recognized as a reality that the church must address” (www.youthspecialties.com). As a result, beginning in the 1930s, many denominations came to be influenced by the programs of the New Deal, as well as the emerging fields of psychology and sociology (Pahl 2004; www.youthspecialties.com). As one consequence of this, these denominations sought to bring youth ministry under the umbrella of Christian education. The rationale behind this was that Christian education would aid the church in “passing on the faith” (Ward 2005; www.youthspecialties.com). Wolfe (2004) sees this development as “a mixed blessing.” He explains, “Since education was often the most powerful function in the church, it offered youth ministry stability and resources. But it also stripped youth ministry of its longtime tie to evangelism and service. Education and ‘fellowship’ became the focus of youth ministry.” Wolfe further observes that these ministries were patterned after collegiate “fellow groups,” which were known for their commitment to diligent study. Thus, in youth fellowship groups, “understanding your faith” came to replace evangelistic aims as the primary goal of youth ministry (www.youthspecialties.com).

By 1936, most U.S. denominations had embraced and begun to promote this approach. Numerous denominational headquarters published handbooks that encouraged a close relationship between youth fellowships and the local church. While remaining subject to adult supervision, this system provided young people with both a solid foundation in doctrine and an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution within the life of the church. Thus, while this development tended to subvert the continuation of youth ministry’s evangelistic mandate, it did help to encourage the intergenerational perpetuation of the faith. However, as we shall see, in generations to come, these changes would beget developments far more profound and greatly more challenging.

At the conclusion of the G.I. formative years, though the shape of the adolescent experience clearly had undergone evolutionary development, the transition from adolescence to adulthood remained relatively brief (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:5-6). For the majority of G.I. youth, “Early marriage for females and entry into the labor force after high school graduation for most males established clear boundaries between adolescence and adulthood” (:18). As Rainer (1997:4) observes, “A high-

school education was sufficient to find a good-paying, secure job in their early adult years.” Thus, though the place of teens within society and church was changing, and though the high school years had come to serve an unprecedented socializing function for the members of this generation, their social world remained largely devoted to guiding them toward maturity and helping them prepare to take on adult responsibilities after graduation (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:5-6).

2. The Silent Generation

The members of the Silent Generation were born during the national crises of the Great Depression and World War II. Rollin (1999:107) suggests that, as a result of having arrived during this difficult period, the Silent generation was forced to grow up too quickly. As they advanced through their formative years, everyone was expected to contribute within the contexts of home and community. Silent children were accustomed to living in households in which resources were scarce. Many of their families were faced with the need to share limited space and survive on rationed goods. Strauss and Howe (1992:286) suggest that the mood of this era caused the parents of Silent children to be overprotective: “as threats against the national community deepened, children were bluntly told that older generations were making enormous sacrifices so they could grow up enjoying peace and prosperity.” Meanwhile, amid the distractions this period posed for adults, claims Eeman (2002:28), the members of the Silent generation were “left free to explore human emotions and work through relationships” and to “acquire a rich understanding of the range and depth of this part of humanity.” As would later become evident, this would constitute a critical dimension of the peer personality of this generation.

As they became teenagers in the years during and following WWII, observe Schneider and Stevenson (1999:5-6), for the members of the Silent generation, school “evolved into the outright center of youth culture.” Esler (1971:85) similarly asserts that, “at midcentury, school occupied most of teen life, sheltering and nourishing a separate teen culture.” It was during this time that the term “teens” began to be used to describe the youth of America as a social grouping. This was a significant development because, while this term had been in use since the 1600s, never before had it been employed to describe a cohesive cultural group (Hine 1999:8). Clearly, an

important change was taking place within the American cultural mindset. Regarding these changes, Palladino (1996:46) observes the following: “Although they were not ‘teenagers’ yet in their own or anyone else's mind, the concept of a separate, teenage generation was beginning to gain ground.”

The period in which many members of the Silent generation passed through their teen years was characterized as the “Fun 50s” (Esler 1971:214). Yet, from the perspective of this generation, this period had its darker side. Strauss and Howe (1992:286) suggest that, while “[w]atching from the sidelines, they saw the nation celebrate thirtyish war heroes and an indulged new generation of postwar babies.” Furthermore, Silent youth were made well aware of the dangerous prospects posed by the “Cold War” that raged around them. Their teen years were coloured by the uneasiness they felt in the face of potential annihilation (Esler 1971:220). Though American society enjoyed “outer-world calm,” Silent young people “came of age feeling an inner-world tension” (Strauss & Howe 1992:288). *Time Magazine* described this generation as one “waiting for the hand of fate to fall on its shoulders, meanwhile working fairly hard and saying almost nothing” (in Elwood 2000:222). While “Silent generation” was a name that these young people did not like, they recognized that it was perhaps a fitting descriptor (Strauss & Howe 1992:286). In reality, suggest Strauss and Howe (:281), the boundaries of this generation would be “fixed less by what they did than by what those older and younger did—and what the Silent themselves just missed.”

Esler (1971:214) notes that “underlying resentments flickered” for the youth of the Silent Generation in reaction to the institutionalization of “being cut off from significant involvement in the larger world around them.” For Silent youth, the arbitrariness of the laws that gave shape to the period of adolescence was becoming evident: there was no consistency in the laws regarding the age at which one legally could drink, marry, enter military service, drive, or discontinue compulsory education (:105-106). At the same time, however, the economic prosperity of this period provided a source of distraction for Silent youth, and thus “opened the door to an entirely different teenage world” (Palladino 1996:xvii). Schneider and Stevenson (1999:16) indicate that, “In their adolescence, members of this generation found themselves in a world of expanding occupational opportunities, steady employment, and increasing consumerism.” As evidence of this, among students enrolled in high

school in 1953, twenty-nine percent of males and eighteen percent of females maintained part-time employment (Côté & Allahar 1995:134). While these percentages may appear marginal by today's standards, they were significant in that, for the first time in the twentieth century, the money earned by teens remained largely in their own pockets rather than going toward the support of the household. Thus, at the same time that Silent youth were being cut off from meaningful involvement in the adult world, they were presented with the potential for newfound independence (Esler 1971:113).

Because of the emphasis on teens as a distinct social group and the economic power these teens possessed, the marketing industry began to provide them focused attention. Palladino (1996:53) provides this summary: "Now advertisers began to address high school students as teenagers on the prowl for a good time, not earnest adolescents in training for adulthood...Advertisers were beginning to identify and create a specialized teenage market, and they were appealing to the high school student's age-old desire for independence and separation to do so." This marketing craze was fuelled by the emergence of the television, which provided a medium through which advertisers were able to reach their youth market and promote a youth culture. In turn, teenagers were enabled to develop their own tastes in music, clothes, cars, and movies (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:16).

Whether or not the impulse to which advertisers appealed truly was an "age-old desire for independence and separation," as Palladino (1996:53) suggests, greater independence is precisely what was achieved during the Silent teen years. The personal freedom of teens was manifested in increasing access to TV and cars (:101); indeed, perhaps no two technological forces were more significant in the formation of 1950s youth culture (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:17). As a result, Esler (1971:120) indicates, "evidence began to emerge of patterns of parental authority and guidance having lessening impact on teen decision making as well as increased time and funds spent on addressing the perceived gap." Palladino (1996:46) similarly observes that, "once they had money of their own to spend, and products to spend it on, their world—and that of their parents—would never be quite the same again."

Within the realm of the church, by the height of the Silent formative years, the fellowship groups that had been created to address the needs of the previous generation largely were no longer perceived to be meeting the needs of young people (Wolfe 2004; www.youthspecialties.com). As the concept of adolescence continued to take root deeply within the consciousness of the American culture, profound philosophical shifts in youth ministry occurred during this period. This is reflected in the comments of Young Life founder, Jim Rayburn (in Ward 2005), who suggested that, “If you want young people to come to Sunday school don’t hold it on a Sunday and don’t call it school.” Ward insists that Young Life, Youth for Christ, and similar organizations founded during this period represented “a new pattern based on entertainment” and “the belief that evangelism among young people must find a way to reach them within their own cultural world” (www.youthspecialties.com).

This was a decisive shift. Whereas the educational model of youth ministry had developed youth ministry around “adult understandings and priorities,” the entertainment model radically changed this. Ward (2005) explains this further:

The turn to entertainment meant that we were shaping youth ministry around the priorities of young people themselves, or at least around what Christian leaders thought they wanted. The result was that in their efforts to reach young people in their cultural worlds, youth ministry became more adolescent. Instead of youth ministers helping young people become more adult, the opposite was happening; youth ministers were becoming more like young people.

(www.youthspecialties.com)

As we shall see, in the decades that followed, this change in the orientation of youth ministry would certainly pose certain benefits, but also would contribute to profound challenges within the life of the church.

In the final analysis, while the members of the Silent generation were presented with the opportunity to craft their own youth culture, the anxiety and timidity common to the members of this generation produced within their ranks a lack of creativity in influencing the shape of their cultural identity. As G.I. historian William Manchester (1974:706) would later observe, “Never had American youth been so withdrawn, cautious, unimaginative, indifferent, unadventurous—and silent.” This was described as a generation “with strongly middle-aged values....possessing an ‘outer-directed’ personality and taking cues from others” (Strauss & Howe 1992:279). The

impact of this lack of creativity is summarized in the following observation from one member of this generation: “We had no leaders, no program, no sense of our own power, and no culture exclusively our own...Our clothing, manners, and lifestyle were unoriginal—scaled-down versions of what we saw in adults” (:279). As a result, this period would solidify within the consciousness of Silents certain notions about the place of adolescents within society that would set the stage for a crisis in future generations. That being said, as we will see, this generation would prove to be ill prepared to do little more than blend into the cultural system being advanced by their elders.

3.5.1.2 Traditionalist Society Comes of Age

a. The G.I. Generation and Traditionalist Society

With the members of the G.I. Generation returning home from WWII victory as heroes, this generation of young adults was filled with a renewed hope for the future. For the members of this generation, the link between conformity and the success they had experienced reinforced their sense of the correctness of their core values (Smith & Clurman 1997:25; Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:28). As Elwood (2000:15) observes, “Having won a hard but tremendous victory...[G.I.s] were supremely confident that they and their generation could accomplish anything.” While the new realities of a world that seemed to have been thrust irreversibly into “Cold War” produced anxiety within the American people (Wuthnow 1988:44-45), the members of the G.I. generation “saw themselves as profoundly confident and optimistic” (Elwood 2000:x). As the economy boomed, G.I.s were presented with the opportunity to be the first generation to share completely in the American dream (Strauss & Howe 1992:268; Smith & Clurman 1997:26). Vast numbers of young couples began to settle into rapidly growing suburban communities and commenced raising their “baby boom” children within their newly constructed homes (Gillon 2004:24). Within this context, to a degree unmatched previously in American history, the prevailing notions of family came to be redefined according to a fixation upon the privatized experience of the *nuclear family*.

In this changing setting, the emphasis upon conformity that had been so integral a part of the G.I. formative experience began to gain “mature” expression. As Russell

(1993:12-13) suggests, during this period, “maturity” emerged as the “code word” employed to describe conformity; Russell further explains that this was seen as “a significant, even heroic goal for adults of the 1950s,” and was believed to be achieved “by accomplishing a series of life tasks, including marrying, having children, managing a home, working, and participating in public life.” Within this social vision, “The ideal male was at once hard-striving and selfless, the ideal female the devoted mother of a flock of Boom kids” (Strauss & Howe 1992:273). Self-sacrifice and delayed gratification were seen as integral aspects of personal maturity (Rendle 2002; Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:77). Guided by such ideals, the G.I. generation set out with modernistic confidence and enthusiasm to help build a thriving, yet “traditional” society (Roozen, Carroll, & Roof 1995:61). Indeed, suggest Strauss and Howe (1992:273), G.I.s “were hard at work institutionalizing the most wholesome American culture of the twentieth century.”

b. The Silent Generation and Traditionalist Society

At this same time, the members of the rising Silent generation were experiencing pressure to conform. However, this pressure did not come so much from their peers as from their elders (Strauss & Howe 1992:286). By the later Silent teen years, a growing minority of high school seniors expressed the desire to finish college (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:74). In fact, the members of this generation attended university in unprecedented numbers (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:33). However, living in the shadow of their G.I. elders and feeling stung by the condescension they experienced at the hand of these heroic predecessors, many Silents moved quickly to demonstrate their maturity. As Eeman (2002:30) recalls, “Boys and girls went steady, exchanged pins, and got married at ever younger ages (The average marrying age for both men and women reached an all-time low in 1955—23 for men and 20 for women.)” Strauss and Howe (1992:286) similarly suggest that “Silent youths put up false fronts and used early marriage as a fortress against adult doubts about their maturity.” They add, “Making babies quickly and frequently, millions of young householders merged unnoticeably into suburban G.I. culture.”

The older generations of this era did not expect the Silent generation to achieve anything great, but rather simply to devote themselves to calibrating and “fine tuning” the “hydraulic machine” being constructed by the G.I. generation (Strauss and Howe 1992:288). At the same time, suggests Esler (1971:224, 226), the members of the Silent generation largely saw no viable alternative to the system by which adult society was being guided. A November 1951 *Time Magazine* article examining “The Younger Generation” provided insight into this reality by characterizing the Silent generation as a “grave and fatalistic” group that had learned to “expect disappointment,” adding that “these young people are conventional and gregarious, men and women alike wanting careers and marriage and a ‘traditional’ family” (in Elwood 2000:221). Similarly, a 1949 *Fortune Magazine* article chastised the crop of Silent college graduates that year for “taking no chances” and for displaying a “grey flannel mentality.” Such characterizations were based in part upon the results of surveys taken during this period, which showed most Silents intending to work for large organizations and almost none desiring to start their own businesses (Strauss & Howe 1997a:162). This led *Fortune* to conclude that Silents were “interested in the system rather than individual enterprise” (Strauss & Howe 1992:286).

Lacking either the courage or creativity to pose alternatives, the members of the Silent generation essentially embraced and became absorbed into the G.I. “system” (Esler 1971:224, 226). As Martin and Tulgan (2002:2) suggest, they “adopted their elders’ values of loyalty, dedication, and commitment to command/control leadership in hierarchical organizations,” all the while looking forward to the “ultimate rewards” of “status as an all-American family owning its own home, lifetime employment in a solid organization, and a comfortable retirement.” Smith and Clurman (1997:18) note that this Silent capitulation to the values and motivations of their immediate elders has been verified empirically. The uncertain formative experiences of this generation had taught its members to value security as one of their highest ideals. This security was provided clearly within “the system.”

While the members of this generation generally did not question the permanence of G.I. institutions, the sensitivity they had gained throughout their formative years caused them to seek to contribute compassion and refinement within an age seemingly lacking in both (Strauss & Howe 1992:288-289). Silents were wary of anything that

seemed arbitrary or smacked of repressive conformity (Eeman 2002:35). When they observed discrimination and prejudice within society, their “youthful sense of fair play and sympathy was awakened” (:28-29). The solutions promoted by this generation included fairness, openness, expertise, and due process. These values may have betrayed a lack of surefootedness, but also reflected “a keen sense of how and why humans fell short of grand civic plans or ideal moral standards....a self-conscious humanity and a well-informed social conscience” (Strauss & Howe 1997a:188). Unlike their G.I. elders, the Silent believed in “options, negotiation, diversity, mobility, complexity,” and sincerely hoped that more dialogue would somehow help to build a better society (Strauss & Howe 1992:283; 1997a:215). Out of this motivational framework, the members of this generation founded several organizations of political dissent that later would become radicalized by the following generation (Strauss & Howe 1992:281).

3.5.1.3 The Resurgence of Religion

The period of the late 1920s and 1930s had constituted a time of pronounced controversy and decline in American religiosity (Hudnut-Beumler 1994:29). However, intriguingly, both the optimism and the pessimism of the post-WWII period contributed to a marked resurgence of participation in religion. In fact, both *Time* and *Life* magazines identified as a major post-war phenomenon the American “return to religion” (Elwood 2000:11). Commenting regarding the optimistic impulse behind this return, Elwood (:48) explains, “As for hope, by the late 1940s and 1950 there was, at least within religious institutions themselves, an almost triumphant mood, a great sense that religion had been vindicated, that it was indeed the only hope for the world.” Following the pain of the Depression era and WWII, by mid-century, the focus shifted to “the full development of a civil religion” (Van Gelder 1998:53). Amid this atmosphere of optimism and prosperity, the civic G.I. generation became “exceptionally active” in a forward-looking religious climate (Elwood 2000:x; cf. Wuthnow 1988:31).

At the same time, the anxiety of this period also helped to foster this resurgence of religiosity. The realities of WWII and the atom bomb “had chastened the modern secular sense of inevitable progress and...recalled the Christian concept of life as

subject to God” (Elwood 2000:44). As a result, as Hudnut-Beumler (1994:31) observes,

At the beginning of the 1950s, postwar church growth had already been noted and an explanation advanced by Benson Y. Landis, editor of the *Yearbook of American Churches*: “The people of the United States turned to churches in a period of war, international crisis and the atomic age—1940-1950—to a much greater extent than during the depression years of the ‘30s or the relatively prosperous years of the ‘20s.”

World War II and the battle against “godless” communism had come increasingly to be understood in America as struggles of faith against faith, of the “American Way of Life” against other ways (Elwood 2000:2, 11). Elwood (:1) explains that, despite all the outward signs of prosperity, “anxiety, anger, and mistrust haunted the hearts of many in America, and some of them joined churches in part because churches were seen as a bulwark against communism.” Thus, with religion being infused with this “renewed version of the coalescence of God, country, and democracy” (Van Gelder 1998:53), religious participation was seen as an integral part of good citizenship and a brand of conformity that would help to preserve democracy (Steinhorn 2006:5).

Fuelled in part by these trends, the 1950s would prove to be the “golden age” of American religion (Reeves 1996:45). This decade saw more Americans belonging to churches than ever before in history. While the US population grew at a rate of nineteen percent during this decade, the total number of attendees in churches or synagogues grew by more than thirty percent. As a result, the proportion of the population that was affiliated with a religious institution grew from fifty-nine to sixty-five percent in only ten years (Hudnut-Beumler 1994:31, 33), while actual church attendance figures included nearly half of all Americans (Miller 1997:17). The baby boom of this period propelled this growth, as church nurseries overflowed with new life (Elwood 2000:x). Even the Silent generation, though regarded by many as “anti-religious”, “over-materialistic” (Esler 1971: 217-218, 224), and a generation within which no religious revival had taken place, demonstrated an increase in church attendance (Elwood 2000:221).

As the population shifted in location from rural to urban and suburban areas, the common experience of local congregations in these areas entailed aggressive building projects, budgetary increases, and increased enrolment in religious education

programs (Wuthnow 1988:35-37). New churches “were rising and expanding into vast parish halls alive with classes, parties, concerts, and innumerable meetings planning ever greater works in the name of God” (Elwood 2000:1). Holifield (1994:44) explains that the churches of this era “tried to overcome the disorienting effects of residential mobility by involving its members in a network of interdependent activities and functions through which they would develop loyalty to the organization.” He adds, “It substituted committees for sacraments, bazaars for confession, and a collection of functions for community.” Thus, concludes Van Gelder (1998:66), many post-WWII churches tended to be characterized by bureaucracy, devotion to denominational identity, and a highly organized structure.

Despite the excitement surrounding such outward indicators of flourishing, many observers saw churches during this period as being plagued by a lack of imagination. Elwood (2000:6) suggests that, consistent with the *zeitgeist* of this era, the key religious term was “tradition.” As he explains, America “wanted only to recover the religion of times past, changing the trappings enough to suit a world of cars, TVs, and consumer culture” (:9). Many Americans, dislocated by the realities of suburbia and technological advancement, were looking for a church to be “doing what it had always done and doing it well, with all the advantages of modern methods and technology, but without radical innovation in the message or its liturgical medium” (:5). The prevailing notion was that the power and vision necessary to negotiate the complexities and challenges of modern existence was to be found within long-established traditions, rather than anything “newly minted.” Thus, the religion of this era was characterized by “old wine in old bottles newly brought up from the cellars, wiped clean of dust, sometimes given new labels” (:6). This approach appealed to the longing of suburbanites “for an imagined time somewhere in the past when faith could be simple and pure, when families were loving and together, and when emotions better than those evoked by war could be freely felt and expressed” (:7). With the recent past having been marked by such pronounced trauma, historical recollection remained focused upon reconnecting with more distant events, such as biblical accounts or romanticized memories of key moments in American spiritual history (Wuthnow 1988:31).

In this climate of renewed religious interest, congregations felt it necessary to engage in competition with one another for potential parishioners. Several observers pointed to the aggressive tactics being employed by churches as largely responsible for their success. “The sales approach,” a new concept for many churches within mainstream Protestantism, was proving quite effective (Elwood 2000:103). Observes Elwood (:100), “[T]he church now had to minister to the needs of new suburbs overflowing with young families, the husband and father perhaps an ‘organization man’ in a grey flannel suit and, at least for the moment, more interested in corporate conformity and reaching higher levels of Norman Vincent Peale ‘success’ than in reforming the world.”

As a result of this situation, many churches began to tailor their programs to address *felt needs*. In many congregations, this entailed a shift toward a “psychologizing” of the gospel message as a response to the realities of secularized modern society (Hudnut-Beumler 1994:40, 60). This movement from a focus on the church as a moral community toward a more individualistic preoccupation began to produce in congregations a “service agency” mindset (Roozen, Carroll, & Roof 1995:64), with churches functioning very much as though their mandate was to serve as vendors of religious goods and services (Hunsberger 1998:84-85). As McClay (1995:46-47) summarizes, “religion’s power came less from its creedal and doctrinal content than from its status as yet another desirable, shared consumer good... In the end, it seemed, the great juggernaut of Social Organization had made even the church bow its knee to the Social Ethic as Lord and Savior.” As a result, though churches were experiencing record attendance, this new focus eventually would prove to contribute to the breakdown of the church as a strong social entity (Wuthnow 1988:55-57; Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens 1994:194-195).

While this era was marked by apparent success, several leaders of the 1950s expressed concern over the apparent obsession with a concept of success measured in numerical growth; these leaders cautioned against confusing such growth with faithfulness (Hudnut-Beumler 1994:73). Hudnut-Beumler (:152) suggests that suburbia “had introduced its conception of success into every aspect of the church's being... The ‘criteria by which suburbia measures all things’—advancement in financial terms and numerical growth—had crowded out more traditional measures of

Christian success, such as salvation, redemption, care of the poor, and witness to the power of the cross.” Hudnut-Beumler (:134) further observes that “[t]he Protestant mainstream churches had staked their futures on a residential scheme of association by likeness...in terms of race, but also in terms of class, income, and lifestyle.”

While this provided visible success in the short term, many observers felt that it was rooted in a pragmatic capitulation to the prevailing cultural ethos and that it placed the church at risk of compromising the faithfulness of its witness. As Gibson Winter (1961:29) asked, “can an inclusive message be mediated through an exclusive group, when the principle of exclusiveness is social-class identity rather than a gift of faith which is open to all?” The undercurrents of uneasiness felt by many during this period would prove to be a foreshadowing of an unprecedented conflict to come in the next decade with the emergence of the Boomer generation, as well as a foretaste of questions that linger for the church even today.

3.5.2 The Boomer Generation and Radical Social Discontinuity

3.5.2.1 A Special Generation

This research project is purported to be concerned with the struggles faced by established churches in ministering within a fragmented generational context. As our attention now turns to the Boomer generation, we will begin to gain a fuller appreciation of how this context came to be marked by such complexity and why it has posed such challenges for many established congregations.

The optimism and affluence of the post-war era factored greatly in the formation of the Boomer generation. Born predominantly to G.I. parents, the 76 million children who arrived during this baby boom would constitute the largest generational group in American history, one the sheer demographic force of which caused post-War America to become a “child-centred nation” (Gillon 2004:19), and one that would come to “drive” national trends throughout its lifecycle (Russell 1993:8). Dunn (1993:10) suggests that Boomers were told they were the smartest and most special children ever. Those parents who had passed through their own childhood years amid the scarcity of the Great Depression sought to provide their children with the experiences and attention they wished they had enjoyed themselves (Laufer 1972:225). In fact, the number of American toy companies doubled between 1942

and 1947 (Gillon 2004:25). Within the framework of the “traditionalist” society being built by their parents, the number of the mothers of Boomers who worked outside the home, while growing gradually, remained modest (Holtz 1995:39). Thus, these mothers were able to devote a great deal of time and energy to nurturing this generation of “special” children.

Smith and Clurman (1997:45-46) offer the unflattering opinion that, within this socio-historical context, “Boomers grew up spoiled and pampered.” While employing somewhat more measured language, Roof (1993:43-44) states that, because of the “special” attention they received, for Boomers, the traditional American social ethic of self-denial would become replaced by one of self-fulfilment. Truly, add Smith and Clurman (1997:45-46), this rising generation came to be set apart from their predecessors by an individualistic “sense of privilege.” Russell (1993:19) suggests that the parents of Boomers “taught them to think for and of themselves,” adding that the financial freedoms of this period “allowed the parents of the baby boom to give in to their children's demands, indulging the younger generation as never before” (cf. Gillon 2004:20; Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:38). The members of this generation “were the first to be targeted as an identifiable market from the time they were children with distinct needs and wants, the first to be brought up so thoroughly on consumption as a way of life,” a reality that was facilitated by the fact that this was the first generation to be influenced by television from early childhood (Carroll & Roof 2002:34; cf. Gillon 2004:24). The housing boom of this era only further enabled this individualistic focus, as unprecedented numbers of young people were afforded the opportunity to enjoy privacy and freedom within their own bedrooms, consecrating them as bastions of youthful self-expression. As Rollin (1999:105) suggests, by the 1960s, teenager bedrooms would become “off-limits” spaces in which rebellion was flaunted.

3.5.2.2 Changes in the Adolescent Experience and the Orientation of Youth

As Boomer youth rose into their teen years, they were impacted in an even more pronounced manner by their passage through adolescence than their predecessors had been. While the period of adolescence previously had been structured with a view to encouraging the preparation of young people for assimilation into the adult world, this

emphasis largely was spurned by Boomer youth. According to Roof (1993:51), eighty-five percent of Boomers in one survey indicated that they had remained in high school long enough to graduate. As these Boomers passed through adolescence, it became apparent that many within their generation desired to take the establishment of a distinct lifestyle and youth culture to a new extent (Disque 1973:31-33). In the eyes of many observers, a new peer orientation was clearly emerging. In support of this conclusion, Esler (1971:299) reports that, in one survey conducted among young Boomers, forty-one percent expressed a strong sense of identification with their fellow countrymen, forty-two percent with members of their own religion, fifty-one percent with people of their own race, and sixty percent with the middle class. However, all of these figures paled in comparison to the seventy-one percent expressing strong identification with “other people of my own generation.”

Rollin (1999:213) suggests that, during the Boomer teen years, American society experienced the “infantilizing of adolescence,” a rejection of responsibility in favour of freedom from obligation. Russell (1993:16) explains that movement toward “maturity”, the principle that had guided the parents of the baby boom, was not a goal embraced by young Boomers. In spurning the objective of maturity and embracing a peer orientation, this generation was enervated by the now widespread influence of television (Roof 1993:36; Miller 1996:31; Gillon 2004:24) and aided by the many corporations that were eager to benefit from the sheer size of this cohort by outfitting them with “the tools of rebellion—cars, clothes, and music” (Russell 1993:16). Their shared exposure to the same radio and TV programs and their participation in the same fads were key forces by which the members of this generation were bound together (Gillon 2004:39).

As these changes became increasingly evident among the youth of America, many social observers criticized “amoral” marketers and “unconcerned” parents as partners in what they saw taking place. Palladino (1996:198) captures the essence of this concern:

The mission of the adult world is to help teenagers become adults by raising their standards and values,” these critics insisted, and “to make adolescence a step toward growing up, not a privilege to be exploited.” Instead, the demographic power of youth was lowering the standards of civilized society, since adults were now apparently willing to follow their children's lead. Unwilling to take on the

hard job of disciplining and educating the next generation, irresponsible adults were adopting the teenage preference for “self-indulgence over self-discipline.” If the adult world abdicated its duty and permitted teenagers to set the national pace, these critics warned, the fun ethic would soon replace the work ethic, and the very concept of responsible adulthood would be lost in the process.

Eisenstadt (1972:148) suggests that this shift taking place within society essentially resulted in the Boomers becoming “the first generation to largely reflect a reversal of the role relationship between the different age-spans.” Youth was no longer being viewed as a time of preparation for adulthood, but rather as a time in which to be “free” and creative.

For the majority of Boomers, the rite of passage into adulthood was further delayed by their participation in higher education (Gillon 2004:19, 35, 124). Roozen, Carroll, and Roof (1995:60) observe that this was the first generation in which a majority participated in some form of higher education. College enrolment rose dramatically from 3.6 million in 1960 to almost eight million in 1970 (Gillon 2004:19). Writing in the early 1990s, Roof (1993:36, 51) indicated that, at that time, more than sixty percent of Boomers had attended college, while thirty-eight percent had remained long enough to earn degrees. This was in large part motivated by the need to gain credentials enabling Boomers to find their place within an increasingly complex adult world (Gillon 2004:90). In addition to this, however, the sheer size of this generational cohort made the pursuit of higher education necessary because competition for employment within its ranks would require its members to gain marketable training (Dunn 1993:10). However, the experience of delayed assimilation into the adult population caused by this widespread participation in higher education would, in part, serve to extend the incubation period for Boomer youth culture to develop in distinction from the adult world (Steinhorn 2006:25). Furthermore, as Rainer (1997:12) observes, “the higher educational attainment of the boomers compared to that of their less-educated builder parents” would prove to contribute to the emergence of a widening gap between these generations. The exposure that this environment provided them to new “ism’s” eventually would cause them to become unmoored from the worldview and value system of their elders (Esler 1971:35-36).

3.5.2.3 The Roots of Revolt

While many of the parents of Boomers had struggled to enjoy a private social life or to gain the opportunity to go to high school during their own teenage years, the majority of Boomers knew no such barriers. Palladino (1996:194) suggests that, “As far as they were concerned, prosperity was a fact of life and material comfort a birthright.” This being so, the individualistic orientation and affluence to which this generation was accustomed “led to greater inwardness and a quest for meaning” (Roof 1993:43-44). As Smith and Clurman (1997:45-46) observe, “With the belief that their future was secure, there were few economic worries to distract them, so Boomers felt free to focus instead on themselves, on experimentation, on fulfillment.” Thus, many Boomers commenced a “voyage to the interior” (Twenge 2006:46).

In turn, this gave rise to a “cult of feeling” (Lifton 1972:189). For older generations, “feelings” were seen as a potential source of embarrassment to be kept in check, resisted, or even denied. For Boomers, however, they were something that had to be embraced and given expression (Friedenberg 1971:2-3; Steinhorn 2001:85). Within this generation, the tension between the values of modernity and the progressive influence of modernism was preparing to reach a climax. As a result, posits Lifton (1972:189), many Boomers seemed to reflect a disdain for restraint and reason. Within the Boomer youth culture, this was displayed in numerous ways, including attire, music, sexuality, and experimentation with drugs (Oppenheimer 2003:1-2). Gillon (2004:83) describes the music of this era, “the language of the Boomer generation,” as expressing “the pent-up frustration and utopian idealism... in a language that most adults could not understand,” thereby “establishing [Boomer] identity and distinguishing it from its elders.”

As they participated in this liberatory youth culture and gained exposure to non-conventional patterns of thought through their participation in higher education, many Boomers came to feel “hemmed in” by the legacies of the past and the technological vision of the future by which modern society was captivated (Lifton 1972:185). This restlessness was fuelled by the unresolved tension between the emphasis of modernity on personal freedom and its claim upon the allegiance and civic responsibility of citizens (Van Gelder 1998:26; Gillon 2004:27). As Best and Kellner (1997:7) note,

“the depersonalizing forces creating a standardized mass society” gave rise to a “struggle for an authentic and genuine life.” Growing up in the 1950s, young Boomers tended to idealize their national leaders (Owen 1997:89). However, claims Skolnick (1971:132), as they rose through adolescence, and particularly with the emergence of the Vietnam War, many Boomers came to see the major institutions of society as “a non-positive force.” This change in perspective began to foster among Boomers an idealistic social consciousness that challenged the sense of “manifest destiny” by which the nation was guided (:130).

As the members of this generation awoke to the existence of injustices and inconsistencies within their own society surrounding issues such as race, gender, and military policy, many responded with the determination to participate in creating a better world (Esler 1971:262; Steinhorn 2006:13). As Smith and Clurman (1997:49) observe,

They recognized that they were growing up in a pretty good system with a lot of exciting promise, but they believed it still needed fixing—not, however, the significant rebuilding from the ground up that [G.I.’s] had faced during their formative years. Boomers felt the system was perfectible if they could just locate the evil within it and root it out.

The economic optimism to which Boomers were accustomed, “their rosy outlook, their certainty that there would be a slice of pie for everyone” (:48), emboldened them with the sense of freedom to challenge the system, while the self-confidence of this “special” generation provided them with certainty of their destiny as agents of social transformation (cf. Gillon 2004:103). As the 1960s advanced, these Boomers openly expressed their deeply felt desire for a society of peace, love, and freedom. Thus, initially, the hope of this generation was not that they might topple the system, but that they might rid it of corruption (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:84)

3.5.2.4 Intergenerational Tension Intensifies

In little time, it became evident that the adult institutions of society were not willing to listen to or understand the alienated youth of the Boomer generation (Bengston 1972:203). As this idealistic generation sought to challenge the norms of the conformist culture of their elders, observes Milson (1972:112), intergenerational relations within the emerging “generational gap” clearly lacked the dynamics of

“expect and respect” that previously had characterized the relationship between generations within society (cf. Steinhorn 2006:82-83). The unrest this produced among the participants of the countercultural movement fuelled their resentment toward their elders and precipitated a rapid degeneration of intergenerational relations.

As the “gap” between the generations became more pronounced, the “establishment” came to be viewed as “a devil-image,” while “youth” and “confrontation” came to be seen as “God-images” (Lifton 1972:191). The language of peace and love previously employed by Boomers came to be replaced by the rhetoric of outrage and protest. The mantra of “Don’t trust anyone over thirty” expressed the spirit of this period (Twenge 2006:48). In essence, posits Esler (1971:235), the Boomer challenge to the system become an increasingly dark, “unprecedented youth revolt.” Eisenstadt (1972:150-151) explains precisely why this movement was so “unprecedented”:

Unlike the older, classical movements of protest of early modernity—the major social and national movements, which tended to assume that the framework and centers of the nation-state constituted the major cultural and social reference points of personal identity and that the major task before modern societies was to facilitate the access of broader strata of the society to these centers—the new movements of protest are characterized by their skepticism toward the new modern centers, by their lack of commitment to them, and by their tendency toward a lack of responsibility to the institutional and organizational frameworks of these centers.

Indeed, it seemed as though the members of this generation had lost faith in the primary institutions of society (Ward 2005:41).

In the eyes of some observers, the proper focus in all of this was not the “generation gap,” but rather the “credibility gap” of parents (Rollin 1999:206). Skolnick (1971:131) argues that Boomers were not so much rebelling against the values of their parents as much as trying to implement them through action. Bengston (1972:208) similarly suggests that there is a great deal of research to support the notion that the original intent of Boomers had been to attempt to carry the values of their parents to their logical conclusion. Because the parents of Boomers belonged to a generation that strongly emphasized conformity, while they may have expressed certain dissenting opinions at home, they would not have felt free to act upon them or voice

them in the public arena. As Laufer (1972:226-227) observed during this period, this created a problem for the idealistic Boomers:

The parents seek to liberate their children from institutional constraints they themselves find injurious, but which they respect because they provide security. The older generation tells the young that they are free to question institutional demands but not to challenge the institutions. Although the older generation has mechanisms which enable them to cope with these contradictions, the young do not. The young have not undergone the historical experience that would force them to accept contradictions between values and actions; instead, they reject the style of thought and the life style of their parents.

Along these same lines, Skolnick (1971:133) attributes “adult apathy” with being a key problem propelling the intergenerational crisis, “perhaps reflecting that the experiences of older generations had induced an incapacity to assess the true character of world events.”

As the drama of the Boomer challenge to the system unfolded within society at large, observes Bengston (1972:226), it produced a “this isn’t what I wanted” reaction from parents. Friedenburg (1971:5, 6-7) submits that the characteristic of young Boomers that provided the greatest source of frustration was “not the specific content of their moral ideology or nature of their impulse-life, but the depth of their conviction that their conduct should be guided by their moral ideology and illuminated by their impulse-life;” in contrast to this, Friedenburg further explains, “The dominant ideology of the older generation... [was] that it is wrong to antagonize people if you can avoid it, or to be arrogant and uncompromising, or to make a divisive display of one’s personal views or idiosyncrasies, or to spoil a good team play by acting out on your own.”

In rejecting this framework and insisting upon being guided by their own impulses, the Boomers were seen as audaciously attempting to reverse the roles of teacher and student within society; they essentially seemed to their elders to be asserting their moral superiority. This merely intensified the resentment and tensions between the generations (Skolnick 1971:130). By the conclusion of the 1960s, Esler (1971:19, 284) suggests, adult America had grown increasingly angry with challenges to the system and was “sick of its kids.” At this same time, the youth movement came to be characterized largely by despair. With the “Age of Aquarius” seemingly bent on destruction, the naivety of the articulations of idealism by which the earlier stages of

this movement had been guided was exposed (:286-287). For many young people, events like the Kent State tragedy profoundly personalized this youth revolution (:13).

Amid the chaotic confusion of this period, some observers maintained that the cultural upheaval taking place was not fundamentally an *intergenerational* crisis. Some saw the supposed “gap” as existing more between sectors *within* generations than between them (Bennett, Craig, & Rademacher 1997:9). However, while it is true that many within the Boomer generation did not participate in the Boomer counter-culture, Yankelovich (1974:23) found “the gap between college and noncollege youth” closing through “an astonishingly swift transmission of values formerly confined to a minority of college youth and now spread throughout this generation.” Meanwhile, a compelling chorus of social commentators insisted that the intra-generational differences evident at the time were less pronounced than the differences *between* generations and asserted that what was occurring truly was “stressing intergenerational discontinuity and conflict to an unprecedented extent” (Eisenstadt 1972:139-140). Strommen et al (1972:220-221), for example, asserted that, while there has always been tension between generations, the tension evident by the early 1970s was accentuated by unprecedented social upheaval. While Strommen and his associates did not see this as a complete break between the generations, they insisted that it definitely constituted a major “cleavage.” As Best and Kellner (1997:5) posit, the counterculture “produced a rupture with mainstream or ‘establishment,’ society.”

This “cleavage” between the generations was evidenced in a number of studies conducted during this period. Bengston (1972:205) observed that a comparison of Boomers and their parents did reveal a tendency on the part of Boomers toward “selective continuity” of values; the members of this generation suggested that their parents continued to exert key influence over them. As Sussman (1991:5) suggests, numerous studies conducted throughout this period revealed continued evidence of “the structural properties of kinship.” Such evidence led Milson (1972:35-36) to characterize the extent of the emerging gap in the following manner:

[I]n many places there has been an unusual strain on old-young relationships and some widening of the generation gap...[T]here are indications that communications between adolescents and adults have deteriorated and that we are witnessing more than the historic tensions between the generations. Young

people often feel that they cannot talk over with their parents the things that are worrying them. “They would not understand.”

Thus, by the mid-1960s, a University of Michigan study revealed few actual points of agreement between Boomers and their elders on a number of key moral and social issues (Roof 1993:54).

There is little question that this generation and the social struggle of this period would prove to change irreversibly the shape of American culture. Schaller (1999:32-22) expresses this reality well in the following comments:

Before [the 1960s], it was widely assumed that younger people should be socialized into the culture by older people. The children born in the 1920s were socialized into the American culture by their parents, by other respected older adults, by the Great Depression of the 1930s, and by WWII. A new pattern emerged with the babies born in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Partly because of their numbers, but largely because of changes in our society, these young people were greatly influenced by their peers in the 1960s and 1970s. Most of them threw away the rule book prepared for them by their parents and other older adults. They wrote their own rule book.

As a result, asserts Twenge (2006:42-43), the Boomer generation essentially instituted youthful rebellion as a normative social value. Perhaps even more significantly, the basic assumption that each rising generation of youth will assimilate into the status quo of adult society was irreversibly shattered. The members of this generation not only developed their own generational style, but insisted upon continuing to exert it as they passed into adulthood (Roof 1993:42).

Furthermore, the Boomer “backlash” changed not only the conventional assumptions about the relationship of the rising generation to the adult world, but also the approach taken by the adult world in its relationship to its youth. Disque (1973:31-33) reflects upon this reality:

[T]he changes to which this generation has given its allegiance have also touched many adults in the community. Hardly a church, school, college, social agency, or business where both generations work together have remained the same as they were a decade ago. Indeed, some of these institutions, such as churches and colleges, have radically changed the image of religion and education...In socio-linguistic terms, adults have developed new communication channels with youth that provide both generations with conduits for the transmission of culture.

The impact of these dramatic changes was as readily evident in the church as in any of the institutions of society. This would have important implications for the theme being developed in this study. We will turn now to a brief exploration of this reality.

3.5.2.5 Intergenerational Discontinuity and the Church

In this chapter, we have chronicled profound changes occurring with the intergenerational praxis of American society with the advance of the twentieth century. However, the present study is concerned not only with understanding American society as an increasingly complex generational context, but also with exploring the impact of this reality upon established congregations. As we will see, amid the cultural ferment of the Boomer youth era, the intergenerational praxis of the church was impacted profoundly.

Roof (1993:58) suggests that traditional religion was among the “soft” social institutions first targeted by the Boomer backlash. By the mid-1960s, the growing attendance trend enjoyed by churches throughout the previous two decades, which had been evident in all age groups, was shattered by an obvious “downturn” (Roozen, Carroll, & Roof 1995:60). During the 1960s, levels of participation in organized religion passed back below the population growth rate (Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens 1994:4-5). While some observers of this trend posited that it merely represented a return to the “normalcy” of pre-1950s patterns, a detailed study by Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1994:3) demonstrates vividly that it represented something more. This study reveals that changes in participation were most evident in young adults. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1994:176) point to the social changes being ushered in by the 1960s counterculture as being at least partly responsible for this decrease in church involvement. Studies conducted during this period did reveal a great deal of continuity in traditional Boomer religion, with more than one-third still attending weekly worship (Roozen, Carroll, & Roof 1995:67). However, while ninety-six percent of Boomers were raised in a religious tradition, approximately sixty percent of them abandoned that religion for two years or more as young adults (Russell 1993:208; Roozen, Carroll, & Roof 1995:61).

As religious leaders sought to make sense of these trends, the suggestion was advanced that the Boomer postponement of marriage and child-rearing, a product of their extended participation in a flourishing youth culture, was contributing to the decline of local congregations. It was understood that the delay in marriage also resulted in the postponement of their involvement in religious institutions (Roof 1999:147-148). As one observer commented, “Generally it is expected that as members of a generation age, religious belief and religious involvement will rise. Even rebellious youth, once they married, had children, and settled down—so the old cultural script had it—would once again reaffirm their childhood faiths and reconnect with religious institutions” (:53). Those who applied this theory to the Boomers voiced their confidence that the decline in institutionalized religious activity evident among this generation would eventually be reversed. However, such predictions never seemed to materialize. In fact, precisely the opposite appeared to take place. In the period between 1965 and 1975, there occurred a ten percent decline in adult memberships and a thirty percent decline in baptisms (Roozen, Carroll, & Roof 1995:68), while a comparison of 1957 and 1976 demonstrated that the greatest decline in mainline church membership was among the thirty-year-old population (Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens 1994:7).

Something unprecedented clearly was occurring among the members of this generation. Roozen, Carroll, and Roof (1995:65) observe that Boomer participation “was not only lower than older cohorts, but also lower than pre-boomers when they were younger.” Indeed, Roof (1993:229) explains that, among those not so highly exposed to the values of the 1960s, thirty-nine percent were still regular attendees in their early twenties, while forty-four percent were irregular attendees and seventeen percent did not attend church. At the same time, among those more exposed to the values of the counter-culture, only seventeen percent were regular attendees, while fifty-three percent were irregular attendees and thirty did not attend church. In essence, suggests Brown (2001:1), “The cycle of intergenerational renewal of Christian affiliation, a cycle which had for so many centuries tied the people however closely or loosely to the church, and to Christian moral benchmarks, was permanently disrupted.” Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1994:199) cite two key trends as having contributed to this situation: (a) growth in “isms”; and (b) the weakening of churches. Each of these is worthy of brief exploration here.

a. A Shifting Worldview

The primary issue contributing to the decline in Boomer religious participation, insist Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1994:178), was a “spiritual” one resulting from changes in belief. Roof (1993:1) cautions that, given the immense size and diversity of this generation, it is difficult and dangerous to offer generalizations about their religious beliefs and practices. At the same time, the assessment reflected in the following observations resonates with that of Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens: “It might be said that demography collided with religious and cultural changes to make this sector of the population the principal carrier of an emerging spiritual quest culture” (Roof 1999:49). The issue of precisely what factors contributed to the changes in spiritual belief within this generation has been much debated. However, Wuthnow (1988:170) suggests, it seems that their passage through higher education contributed significantly to such changes, as it provided widespread exposure to new philosophies that challenged traditional presuppositions and values. Some analyses of this generation suggest that Boomers are “collaborators with modernity,” who, as they were exposed to new definitions of the world and how it operated, developed a growing preoccupation with the “new” (Roof 1999:49). In addition, it has been suggested, the individualistic pursuit of self-fulfilment, feeling, and freedom in which the members of this generation had been encouraged since childhood also gave rise to these changes. The maintenance of the “self” had become a burden to some and, thus, the source of a psychological crisis (Roof 1999:40). This, some suggest, helped to foster the spiritual quest on which many Boomers embarked.

Perhaps fuelled by these social dynamics, the emerging “quest” culture promoted a fixation upon “spiritual” experience, which stood in striking distinction from the doctrinal and institutional “standardization” embrace by their elders (Roof 1999:33-34, 46). Rainer (1997:32) submits that, within many denominations, “the failure to challenge young people biblically was a major factor” contributing to the changes in spiritual values among the Boomers. Drawing upon the observations of Wuthnow and Tipton, Roof (1993:121) suggests that these changes “resulted in fragmentation of meaning systems and moral orders,” giving rise to two competing meaning systems or “styles”: (a) the traditional theistic system entailing an authority structure based on faith in the absolute truth of scripture and (b) the mystical system and expressive style

rooted in counterculture. As a result, many Boomers came to place importance upon the distinction between “spirit” and “institution;” personal faith became disconnected from established institutional religious forms (Roof 1993:30; Miller 1997:182). In light of this, Roof (1993:119) suggests, no religious issue would be more significant in understanding the development of Boomer religiosity than that of the locus of authority: “Is it internal or external?”

b. The Irrelevance of the Church

In addition to these critical changes in belief, Boomer religious attitudes also were impacted by the reality that so many churches seemed to the members of this generation to be spiritually anaemic and captive to lifeless tradition. Several authors suggest that Boomer anti-institutionalism and anti-hierarchicalism did not so much reflect an open hostility to institutional forms, as much as an attitude of ambivalence (Roof 1995:252). While the explanations that were posited at the time to account for the decline of congregations could be categorized as being either “national” or “local” in focus, a Presbyterian special committee of the mid-1970s found local institutional and contextual issues to be most significant (Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens 1994:10). The research of Roof (1995:253) supports this notion that the institutional forms that came to bear most significantly on Boomer religiosity were local. Thus, while many Boomers were active in challenging their denominational structures (Oppenheimer 2003), their criticisms most commonly were directed at the hypocrisy and boredom they felt they encountered in local congregations (Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens 1994:178).

A study by Strommen et al (1972:255-256) provided vivid affirmation of the religious attitudes that emerged among the members of this generation toward their local church experience. In an extensive exploration of youth within the Lutheran tradition, Strommen et al (:256) discovered the following: “The strongest predictor of youth’s attitude toward his church is how well he fits in with groups in his congregation. The acceptance that he feels is the best indicator of how he will evaluate his congregation.” However, this study also revealed that the normal pattern of congregational life seemed to isolate youth from the centre of concern and decision-making (:255). For many youth there was a sense of being on the outside of the

interest and life of their congregations. Strommen and his associates note that over half of Boomers studied felt that older people in the congregation were suspicious of them. They also felt that they had no influence on the decisions being made. The institutional life of the congregation seemed to have evolved in such a way that leadership and influence lay rather exclusively in the hands of people over thirty.

This study also revealed that a significant distinction existed between youth whose cultural identity was chiefly “peer-oriented” and those who possessed a more “broadly-oriented,” intergenerational sense of cultural identity. While those youth that were “broadly-oriented” tended to take signals from people of all ages, peer-oriented youth felt more alienated and critical of their churches (Strommen et al 1972:229). A sense of distrust toward adults fostered distrust of the church, because youth saw it as being run by adults (:240). The tensions this produced tended to centre on issues of belief and values (:258). In particular, the areas of greatest difference between youth and adults included the following: “priorities given to different expressions of piety; trust of adults; willingness or ability to delay gratification...openness to change in congregational life and ministry with emphasis on understanding of mission, the role of clergy, and appropriateness of worship practices” (:260).

For many within this generation, a growing sense of the irrelevancy of institutional religion grew out of the perceived lack of congruity between their need to express their inner feelings and the institutional settings in which they had been raised. Many Boomers saw their churches as “monuments of rites and organizational structures” (Miller 1997:17). Roof (1993:78) describes this perception:

If the religious institutions—that is, worship services and religious activities—lack vitality and seem removed from their everyday lives, boomers are inclined to judge them to be empty and irrelevant. Worse still, just going through the motions of religious involvement can easily smack of hypocrisy to a generation that has felt estranged from social institutions and insists authenticity and credibility as prerequisites for commitment.

For many young Boomers, even the youth fellowship groups they encountered within their churches “had almost become irrelevant” (Wolfe 2004); indeed, “Even young people whose fellowship groups focussed on societal injustice soon recognized their groups were too institutional and limited” (www.youthspecialties.com).

Furthermore, many Boomers saw the church as simply irrelevant to the larger social struggles with which they were concerned (Roof 1993:55; Thompson 2003:29). As the plausibility structures upon which American society was based were weakened, the complicity of the church in these structures caused its credibility to be weakened as well (Hoge 1994:199). As Rollin (1999:245) observes, the perception that the established church had sold out to political powers resulted in great religious fragmentation among teens. A communication from a student group addressed to the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1970 expressed the mindset of many young Boomers: “We demand the church change, or it will be buried in future decades by all youth who have completely given up on the church” (in Hoge, Johnson, & Luidens 1994:17). Roof (1993:55) posits that, as a result of such perceptions, even many of those who were not directly impacted by the change in worldview that was occurring among those with a college education chose to drop out.

c. A Changing Religious Landscape

The challenge presented by these Boomer religious attitudes would alter the life of American churches irreversibly. Roof (1993:27-28) suggests that the prevalence of individualism and consumerism among Boomers undermined their loyalty to religious institutions. Roozen, Carroll, and Roof (1995:82) posit that, in actuality, because Boomers possessed an individualistic commitment to a redefinition of freedom as “freedom of choice,” the individualism of this generation “[did] not so much erode a person’s institutional commitments as clarify them.” As one observer suggested, “Baby boomers think of churches like they think of supermarkets” (in Gillon 2004:111). This caused their loyalties to be “voluntary and instrumental (i.e., ‘if it helps you’)” (Roof 1995:253). In turn, this posed a significant challenge to many churches, for as Miller (1997:17) notes, denominational “brand loyalty” was not a value to this generation. As a result, “many progressive churches responded with entertainment as a means to reach this consumer/seeker” (Wright & Kinser 2006; www.youthspecialties.com).

With the advent of the Jesus Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, “these developments became supercharged” (Ward 2005; www.youthspecialties.com). This

movement essentially was birthed as a product of the collision between the spiritual awakening of the Boomer counterculture and the established church. As participants in the Boomer counterculture “turned on to Jesus, they brought with them a new, hip style. So while they advocated a theologically conservative Christianity, the new young Christians retained the clothes, hairstyles, language, and above all, the music of the counterculture” (Ward 2005). Perhaps it comes as no surprise that this movement was almost categorically rejected by traditional churches. As a result, many Boomers simply chose to leave existing institutions in order to participate in an entirely new category of charismatic and “Jesus Freak” fellowships, to the chagrin of established churches (Rollin 1999:245). Miller (1997:11), thus, chooses to characterize this movement as an expression of “rebellion against intolerant establishment religion.” This trend would give rise to the emergence of entities like Chuck Smith’s Calvary Chapel, the Vineyard Movement, and, ultimately, Willow Creek Community Church, each of which sought to respond to the changes occurring within society by altering “many of the attributes of establishment religion” (:1). Ward (2005) insists that this profound altering of the religious landscape “was generated by the way young people used [their] products as part of their identity and social world...A media-generated Christian subculture was starting to take shape” (www.youthspecialties.com).

At the same time, many disillusioned Boomers chose to look elsewhere for a spiritual home (Miller 1997:5; Roof 1999:182). As a result, several “new religions” arose in the 1960s and 1970s, all of which tended to emphasize self-help (Wuthnow 1988:151-153). These new religions, many of which were rooted in eastern mysticism, tended to focus upon mystical, nonrational, and ecstatic experience, often incorporating the aid of drugs (Esler 1971:275). While the number of Boomers involved in these new religions was quite modest, nonetheless these groups would present new competition for traditional Christian denominations (Roozen, Carroll, & Roof 1995:65). Alternatively, some Boomers merely turned toward an internalized, individualistic spiritual quest (e.g., the “Sheilaism” depicted by Bellah et al 1985:221, 235). As a result of these trends, many churches and denominations became preoccupied with finding strategies for reconnecting with this “lead cohort” and re-assimilating them back into the life of the institutional Church. A wealth of books and resources would come to be written with precisely this objective in mind. As a result, things would never be the same for established congregations. In the following chapters, we will

return to an exploration of the continued impact of these changes upon the life of established churches.

3.5.2.6 A Silent Transformation

While the cultural upheaval brought about during this period clearly required a response from the parents of Boomers, it also significantly affected their immediate elders, the Silent generation. Strauss and Howe (1992:281) suggest that, by the mid-1960s, the Silent found themselves “grown up just as the world’s gone teen-age.” Martin and Tulgan (2002:2) provide similar observations: “Always one step out of sync with the times, Silents were young adults when it was hip to be teenagers. They were in their thirties when you couldn’t trust anyone over thirty. They were in their forties when flower children proclaimed, ‘Make love, not war.’” One member of the Silent generation provides the poignant suggestion that, “During the ferment of the ‘60s, a period of the famous Generation Gap, we occupied, unnoticed as usual, the gap itself” (quoted in Strauss & Howe 1997a:185-186). Strauss and Howe (1992:289) suggest that, having found themselves in their customary place within the generational mix, “While still craving respect from G.I. elders for their manliness and seriousness of purpose, the Silent were eager to convince Boomers that they understood them, were with them, and could maybe help then channel their anger.” Because of the skill of this generation in serving as arbitrators, mediating arguments between others, the members of the Silent generation “lent flexibility to a G.I.-built world that otherwise might have split to pieces under Boom attack” and “helped mollify and cool the Boom’s coming-of-age passions” (Strauss & Howe 1992:282, 293). Within the life of the church, suggest Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:240), it was the “structured and programme-driven Silents” who “devised methods to draw the Boomers back,” many of which would appear to be effective.

In addition to this, however, many of the members of this generation that so readily had capitulated to the conformist norms of G.I. dominated society experienced a change in their own values as a result of the countercultural revolution. William Styron (in Strauss & Howe 1992:289), a member of the Silent generation, noted in the late 1960s, “I think that the best of my generation—those in their late thirties or early forties—have reversed the customary rules of the game and have grown more radical

as they have gotten older—a disconcerting but healthy sign.” As evidence of this, suggest Martin and Tulgan (2002:2), some members of the Silent generation experimented with “free love” and found it was not so “free.” As a result, the divorce rate among their cohort began to soar in the 1970s. Strauss and Howe (1992:281) reflect upon this trend by characterizing the 1970s as a decade “of jealousies and role reversals” among the members of this generation. These changes are significant for this study. They help to frame an understanding of the angst and tension of this era and, thus, set the stage for the pivotal cohort under consideration in this study, Generation X. It is to this cohort that we will turn our attention in the chapter that follows.

3.6 Conclusion

Throughout this study, it being argued that, as American society journeys through the postmodern transition, many established churches struggle to respond faithfully to cultural change within a fragmented generational context. Furthermore, it is being argued that the resulting ineffectiveness of these churches in transmitting the Christian tradition to Generation X, the first post-modern generation, threatens their ability to sustain their witness. The present chapter has supported the development of this theme by providing a historical backdrop including the following key strands of inquiry:

1. The pervasive influence of the paradigm of modernity in shaping the praxis of American society, as well as the influence of the Christendom paradigm in guiding the church’s praxis within modern society.
2. The evolutionary growth of modern institutional structures that fostered increasing social distance and cultural differentiation between the generations, as well as the impact of these changes upon the intergenerational praxis of the church within society.
3. The manifestation of the social legacies of modernity and Christendom within the ranks of the G.I., Silent, and Boomer cohorts.
4. The emergence of an intergenerational crisis involving the members of these three generations.

As will become evident over the next two chapters, the intergenerational crisis described in this chapter actually contributed to what has come to be recognized as “the post-modern shift” and the utter disestablishment of Christendom, as well as the challenge that this intergenerational crisis has posed for the church’s praxis within society. In chapters four and five, we will explore these changes further. We will begin in chapter four by exploring the impact of the post-modern shift upon Gen-X, which we will describe as the “bridging” generation within the post-modern transition. In chapter five, we will explore the way in which post-modernity and the condition of post-Christendom has impacted the praxis of the church, particularly in its relationship to Gen X.

4. POST-MODERNISM AND GENERATION X

4.1 Introduction

This study is concerned with the reality that, as American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches struggle to respond faithfully to cultural change within a complex intergenerational context. Furthermore, it is being posited here that the resulting ineffectiveness of these churches in transmitting their faith traditions to Generation X, the first post-modern generation, threatens their ability to sustain their witness through this transitional period. In the previous chapter, we explored the historical backdrop against which this problem has arisen. In this chapter, we will continue to develop the central problem further by exploring the following themes:

1. We will consider the profound complexity of the transformational cultural changes occurring in recent decades, as well as the emergence of the post-modern paradigm shift as a core facet of these changes.
2. We will introduce Generation X as a generation whose formative years most closely approximate this period of complexity and change. Thus, this cohort will be described as the “first post-modern generation.” In addition, as we will see, the same social institutions that were operative in previous generations, each of which has borne the imprint of cultural change, have been party to Generation X’s experience of being well-acquainted with fragmentation and marginalization.
3. We will find that, as a result of these formative dynamics, Generation X has arrived fully in adulthood with significantly discontinuous cultural mores and values, a reality that has contributed further complexity to the intergenerational praxis of society. Furthermore, we will find that the members of this generation have continued to experience marginalization even into their adult years.
4. Finally, we will note that the experience of all living generations has been shaped by a common matrix of social institutions and structures. While the *peer personality* of each generation has been formed in distinct ways, all now participate together in a society that is ordered in a manner that promotes distance and tension between the generations. The changes brought about

through the post-modern transition have only added further complexity to this intergenerational context.

Following this chapter, in chapter five, we will turn our attention to an exploration of the challenges faced by many established congregations as they endeavour to grapple with cultural change within an increasingly complex generational context. As will become evident, the praxis-oriented choices of many of these congregations have caused them to be ineffective in reaching Generation X, a reality that now threatens the capacity of these congregations to sustain their witness through this transitional period.

4.2 A Context of Change

Throughout this study, we are asserting that the church and the broader society in which it exists have come to be impacted by significant cultural changes. As we suggested in chapter three, the period beginning in the 1960s was characterized by profound changes. Westerhoff (1974:74), attempting to temper more dramatic characterizations of the state of American society in the early 1970s, wrote of “the consistency and orderliness that underlies even our modern change-conscious world.” He explains further,

Both change and persistence are built into the unfolding order of life. Too easily we forget the conserving, persistent strength and pull of tradition. Cultural change is at best gradual. Continuity dominates history. Typically, humans strive to retain a continuous orderly tradition which will support their lives and which they can pass on to their children. Most often they succeed.

Thus, he was compelled to conclude, while change is a historical reality, continuity is most normal (:76).

However, in the more than thirty years since Westerhoff wrote these words, numerous observers have posited that *change* has not only been a reality, but has indeed become very much the norm. Regele (1995:47) employs the term “chaotic change” to describe the changes taking place in recent decades, adding that such change is “deeply discomfoting” and driven by an underlying dynamic of “discontinuity.” Miller (1996:14) similarly chooses “chaos” as a fitting word to describe this post-1965 era. Other authors have employed equally vivid images such as “tsunamis” of

change (Sweet 1999:17) or the “tectonic plates” of our society shifting (McLaren 2000:11; Smith 2001:12) to describe this period. All of these terms elicit a sense of the extent and profundity of the changes occurring within the landscape of American society. As Drane (2000:1) has suggested, recent changes have been traumatic and immediate. Roxburgh (2005:34) similarly suggests that, while our society “has been moving through a period of radical transition for the last fifty years,” the speed at which our experience of transition is occurring continues to “pick up speed.”

Regele (1995:47) suggests that it is normal for such “discontinuous change” to emerge during periods of social transition. “Transitional periods,” he explains, “occur when significant new movements emerge on the historical landscape and a culture goes through a transition that leaves a permanent imprint.” The impact of these times can be so extensive and fundamental that the basic structures of life are irreversibly altered. Specifically, such periods produce a sense of lack of control and a breakdown in the assumptions by which we have been guided. “Our ability to predict and set forth clear courses often fails. Our discomfort peaks as we feel a profound threat to our values, lifestyles, and at times even our core belief systems” (:48). Having stated this, Regele proceeds by positing that our society is passing through “a very special and rare kind of transitional period: a transformational period.” Such periods, he argues, are all the more profound and potentially troublesome.

4.3 The Emergence of Post-modernism

4.3.1 The Post-modern Turn

In this study, we are operating under the assumption that the “transformation” being described here actually has entailed a movement from modernity to an emerging post-modern conception of the world. Indeed, amid the ferment of profound social discontinuity described in the last chapter, it became increasingly evident to many observers that the uncontested hold of modernity upon society was being profoundly, even irreversibly, altered. As Miller (1996:11) suggests, perhaps overstating the case somewhat, “Sometime in the late 1960’s the modern era died.” Citing a similar declaration by Peter Drucker to the effect that “[s]ome time between 1965 and 1973 we passed over such a divide and entered ‘the next century’,” Roxburgh (1998:8) describes “a period of fundamental change in terms of values, spiritual consciousness

and worldview.” Oppenheimer (2004:1) similarly considers this period as one in which American society experienced “the birthing pains of a new cultural model.” While it would be difficult to pinpoint precisely *when* this occurred, it seems clear *why* this took place: “The underlying belief system of the modern era had lost its credibility” (Miller 1996:11).

It is not the intent of this thesis to suggest that this climate of change was brought about solely by the Boomer generation, despite the fact that this cohort has been cited in the previous chapter as direct participants in such changes (Gillon 2004:20). Rather, the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, the women’s movement, and the black power movement are just a few of the “host of interrelated movements that swept through society at that time” (Van Gelder 1998:54). Furthermore, undercurrents of change were emerging within a variety of academic and cultural arenas, including architecture, art, theatre, and literature (Grenz 1996:12; Gillon 2004:28). The influence of these disparate movements upon the Boomers, as well as the participation of Boomers in them, has contributed in a lasting way to the peer personality of this generation (Gillon 2004:20). Furthermore, it seems unlikely that some of these movements would have succeeded in reordering the foundations of modern society had it not been for the sheer demographic force provided by the Boomers. However, this cannot be reduced simply to the story of how the Boomers changed America (Benke & Benke 2002:12-13).

Many of the changes occurring during this period were actually the tremors of what has been described as a paradigm or worldview shift. The concept of paradigm or worldview was already addressed in section 2.2 above. We also have already explored “discontinuous change” as a cultural phenomenon. The concept of paradigm shift provides us with a more precise framework for describing these aspects of our experience. The concept of the paradigm shift was advanced by Thomas Kuhn in his groundbreaking study, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962, 1996), and since then has been employed broadly in a range of disciplines. Roxburgh (1998:77) summarizes that such a shift has two fundamental dimensions: “a rejection of values long held as basic truths in our culture, and a search for alternative values to transform society.” In reality, explains Kuhn (1996:1-9), a paradigm shift transpires by means of a far more complex transformational path:

1. The process begins with a well-established paradigm that dominates the thinking or consciousness, scientific philosophy, and cosmology of a period. Though dominant, the pre-existent paradigm should encourage a sense of expectation and searching, and so the quest for answers continues.
2. An increasing sense of anomaly develops from within the paradigm, that is, a feeling that something is wrong with the paradigm.
3. A slow-growing (but inexorable) recognition of the above occurs. The trickle becomes a flood. A group of dissenters emerge followed by a flurry of new theories in search of an alternative understanding of things.
4. A new paradigm begins to emerge, most often with opposition by those who still hold strongly to the established paradigm.

As is evident in this description, a paradigm shift entails a movement from one prevailing worldview to another. Thus, amidst the rubble of the crumbling modern worldview, the post-modern paradigm began to emerge (Havel 1995:230). In reality, though we have chosen here to focus upon specific trends and dynamics within society, we must acknowledge that the emergence of the post-modern paradigm was initiated from diverse directions (Anderson 1990:233). Many authors assert that the roots of post-modernism reach back as far as the counter-Enlightenment influences of existentialism and the Romantics (Kvale 1995:19; Best & Kellner 1997:29), which we introduced briefly in the previous chapter. Best and Kellner (1991:9) note that the term “post-modern” was used occasionally in the 1940s and 1950s to describe new forms of architecture and poetry. By the 1960s, partly in reaction to the orthodoxies and internal problems of various academic fields, and partly in response to the economic and technological changes occurring in the post-World War II era, post-modern concepts had been growing in influence in a number of arenas (Best & Kellner 1997:18). Thus, as Mills (2005) summarizes, “Whatever epistemological shifts we have experienced within the last 40 years, they have been as much symptoms as they have been causes of broader cultural changes... To appreciate fully the nature and significance of recent epistemological shifts, one must view them within this broader context” (people.cedarville.edu).

Against this backdrop, the term “post-modernism” began to be used more widely during the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, many cultural commentators identify the

emergence of post-modernism with the 1960s counter-culture (Best & Kellner 1991:13; Veith 1994:40). Anderson (1990:44), for example, suggests that the 1960s marked the true beginning of the post-modern “era”. The upheaval of this decade, he explains, brought forth “audacious” critiques of the modern worldview. While acknowledging the profundity of this upheaval, Veith (1994:40) suggests that the 1960s counter-culture is better understood “as simply a revival of romanticism, an infantile regression made possible by the affluence and permissiveness of the society they were rebelling against.” Thus, as Best and Kellner (1997:4) suggest, the post-modern discourse could be seen as really more of a 1970s phenomenon born out of the political and social experience of the 1960s. Many post-modern theorists were influenced by this pivotal decade (:8). The rupture created by the upheaval of the 1960s helped to produce a readiness and openness “to the discourse of historical breaks and discontinuities” (:5). However, suggest Best and Kellner (1997:8-9), the defeat of the 1960s revolution was actually a major impetus influencing the shape and tone of the post-modern discourse. Prior to that period, while Europe had already begun to turn toward nihilism in the wake of World War II, the United States had maintained a positivistic course (:7). However, the experiences of the 1960s and the discourse that emerged from this period would begin gradually to change this.

In recent years, post-modernism has been characterized as a “major” (Best & Kellner 1997:253), “massive” (Drane 2000:vii) paradigm shift. Jencks (1995:29) suggests that, in the 1980s, this paradigm “was finally accepted by the professions, academies and society at large.” More recently, Best and Kellner (1997:15) have asserted that the post-modern “discourse” has come to extend throughout the entire world. That being said, it must be noted that there is no exact agreement about the meaning of post-modernism, except perhaps that it represents a reaction to, or departure from, modernity (Harvey 1990:7). Perhaps this should come as no surprise; if the meaning of modernity is not altogether clear (section 3.2.2.1), the reaction or departure from it can be expected to be all the more so. As Best and Kellner (1991:2) note, there is no unified post-modern theory, or even a coherent set of positions. Rather, diversities and divergences between theories often are “lumped together” under the banner of “post-modern.” Thus, amid this confusing lack of clarity, it becomes especially critical to the development of this study that we seek to be as precise as possible about the sense in which we intend to use to the term “post-modern.”

Toward this end, it is helpful first to qualify this discussion by noting the differences of opinion that have been expressed regarding post-modernism's relationship to contemporary society. It is common for authors today to characterize the post-modern as an "epochal" or "periodizing" term (Best & Kellner 1991:2), one intended to signify a historical sequence, a movement beyond modernity in society, culture, and thought (Best & Kellner 1991:29; Best & Kellner 1997:3). *Post*-modern, then, is understood quite simply as implying that which comes after or follows modernity (Oden 2001:25; Sweet, McLaren & Haselmayer 2003:241). However, as Moore (1996) suggests, it might be more appropriate to speak in terms of a post-modern "turn", rather than an epoch or era, for we are still in the midst of this transition (www.hope.edu).

Carroll (2000:9) cautions that one must avoid a "bipolar" understanding of the significance of the "post-" descriptor, as though "there was once one kind of society, but now we have moved beyond it." Rather, this term must be understood "as denoting not a finished state but a process that involves major social and cultural shifts" (:10). When employed in this light, the implication is "that something has occurred or is occurring in Western—and in many cases global—society that is transforming previously taken-for-granted social and cultural patterns." Thus, while post-modern cultural patterns have come to challenge nearly every domain of society, it would not be fair to suggest that our society has moved fully into a new post-modern era (Best & Kellner 1991:280; Best & Kellner 1997:19).

A second point of clarification also is worthy of mention here. This has to do with the contrasting ways in which the extent of the changes occurring within our society has been characterized. As has already been mentioned above, many cultural commentators throughout recent decades have chosen to characterize our society as passing through a chaotic period of "discontinuity" and "contradiction" (Drane 2000:vii). Best and Kellner (1997:3) characterize this perspective: "The discourse of the post is sometimes connected with an apocalyptic sense of rupture, of the passing of the old and the advent of the new...Leading postmodern theorists declare that we are at the end of modernity itself, that the modern era is over, and that we have entered a new postmodern world." Thus, the post-modern is seen as those "artistic,

cultural, or theoretical perspectives which renounce modern discourses and practices” (Best & Kellner 1991:29). This mindset seems evident in Bosch’s (1995:1) suggestion that “We have truly entered into an epoch fundamentally at variance with anything we have experienced to date.”

However, some theorists take issue with such extreme claims of rupture. They question whether post-modernism is a movement “beyond” modernism, or merely “within” it (Kvale 1995:19; Penner 2005:18). Such observers express concern that radical descriptions of post-modernity do violence to our appreciation of the enduring continuities within society (Best & Kellner 1997:31). Best and Kellner (1991:277), for example, argue that many post-modern social theorists “greatly exaggerate the alleged break or rupture in history,” while failing to theorize adequately “what is involved in a break or rupture between the modern and the postmodern.” In contrast to this, these critics would prefer to characterize the post-modern as a “radicalization” of the modern (:26). When seen in this light, *post*-modern can be seen as a synonym for *ultra*-modern (Oden 2001:26) or *hyper*-modern (Best & Kellner 1991:29-30). As Best and Kellner (1997:31) posit, it is precisely because the intensification of the modern has occurred to such an extent that some have come to see it as a post-modern break. In responding to this criticism, Sweet, McLaren and Haselmayer (2003:241) attempt to temper their own “discontinuous” description of post-modernism by insisting that “post-” should not be taken to mean “anti-” or “non”, but rather “coming after and through.”

While the present study is being written from a perspective that is sympathetic to the reports of “discontinuity”, we also must be willing to entertain the ambiguity between these two accounts of the post-modern. In many respects, post-modernism does represent a radicalized continuation of the spirit of modernity, while in others it constitutes a profound rupture of it (Best & Kellner 1991:29-30). Thus, as Best and Kellner (1991:277-278) advocate, a dialectic of continuity and discontinuity is in order. It entails a mutating mixture of losses and gains resulting from the destruction of the old and the creation of the new (Best & Kellner 1997:16). Jencks (1995:30) expresses this by describing post-modernism as a “paradoxical dualism” entailing both “the continuation of Modernism and its transcendence.” As this study continues to unfold, this dialectic will prove to have significant intergenerational implications.

As we will see, it provides some basis for the exploration of shared values among the contemporary generational cohorts, even as they have been impacted differently by American society's passage through this paradigm shift.

4.3.2 Implications of Post-Modern Thought

We already have acknowledged the reality that the landscape of post-modern thought is characterized by diversity and divergences. Thus, as we endeavour to explore the impact of post-modern thought upon the praxis of society, we must avoid the danger of “essentializing” post-modernism, as though the “post-modern mind” can be described in concrete terms. As Kvale (1995:19) notes, the term “post-modern” designates “diverse diagnoses and interpretations of the current culture.” It is emergent and characterized by conflicting tendencies, not unanimous or finalized (Best & Kellner 1997:19). This being said, we also must avoid the temptation to dismiss post-modernism on the grounds that it is incoherent (Best & Kellner 1997:21). While post-modern thought encompasses a complex set of perspectives, it is genuinely a discursive construct containing certain “family resemblances” (:254).

Thus, Penner (2005:17) advocates an understanding of post-modernism as an ethos, attitude, or frame of mind, much as we saw with reference to modernity. Eco (1995:31-32) suggests that post-modernity is less easily defined as a chronological trend than as “an ideal category...a way of operating.” In short, post-modernism constitutes the emerging zeitgeist (Anderson 1990:253). While the emerging status of post-modernism causes it to be “a moving target” (Sacks 1996:116), in the pages that follow, we will turn to a brief examination of some of the common themes that are prominent within the post-modern discourse. It is important to note that the post-modern is only intelligible by virtue of its relation to modernity (Penner 2005:19). Thus, in surveying the post-modern paradigm, we also must chronicle some of the “failures” that contributed to the “breakdown” or “demise” of modernity's dominance. As Eco (1995:32) suggests, “The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently.”

At the heart of the post-modern turn lies a rejection of modernity's claims to the accessibility of absolute knowledge. Developments such as the rise of relativity theory, quantum mechanics, complementarity in physics, the incompleteness principle in mathematics, and new forms of indeterminacy in the sciences laid bare the incredibility of modern claims regarding the existence of absolute foundations of knowledge and a well-ordered universe (Best & Kellner 1997:7; Webber 1999:21-23). Furthermore, these revolutions within the world of science infused our experience of reality with a renewed sense of mystery (Webber 1999:21-23). As Hunter (1996:22-23) explains, "Scientists have discovered more mystery and surprise, especially at the most microscopic and macroscopic (outer space) levels, than the Newtonian clockwork paradigm accommodates, and more people now experience the supramundane and the supernatural more frequently than they did a generation ago."

Furthermore, at the heart of the post-modern critique lies an indictment of modernity's claims regarding the objective knower. Webber (1999:21-23) insists that post-modern philosophy has helped to bring about "a shift away from the distinction between the subject and the object," while Grenz (1996:8) notes a post-modern rejection of "the Enlightenment ideal of the dispassionate, autonomous knower." A major factor giving rise to this critique is what has been described as the "linguistic turn," which entails a deepened appreciation of the power of language in defining reality (Best & Kellner 1997:258; Webber 1999:21-23). As Greer (2003:225) explains, "truth" is understood as grounded in language and culture. All thought is mediated by language; because languages differ, the identification and organization of thoughts will differ, as well. Thus, language is prior to knowledge and, because language is the product of culture, "truth" must be relativized to individual cultures (cf. Kvale 1995:19, 20). Rather than referring to objects, then, language is seen as referring to other language (Dockery 2001:15). Language, knowledge, and one's experience of reality "become co-implicated" (Penner 2005:24). It therefore is impossible for one to "empty" his or her mind (Greer 2003:225).

This awareness has led to the abandonment of the "naïve realist" belief that theory mirrors "objective" reality (Best & Kellner 1991:4). As Best and Kellner (1997:7) suggest, naïve realism has come to be seen as "a grossly inadequate position that fails to acknowledge the dark side of reason, its repressed and passionate dimensions, as

well as its limitations and sociohistorical rootedness.” The “split” of facts and values can no longer be seen as axiomatic; rather, even science is a “value-constituted and value constituting enterprise” (Kvale 1995:22). Thus, post-modernism entails a departure from the notion of *one* objective reality (:19). As Smith (1995:206) posits, the “window” through which modern people looked “turned out to be stunted.” Modernity, he asserts, was less “scientific” than “scientistic” (:205).

The post-modern sensitivity to this point was heightened by the countless atrocities of twentieth-century purveyors of “truth” and by the perceived “social repercussions” of modern worldviews (Smith 1995:209). The post-modern mind has been chastened by a “deeply ingrained cynicism” (Dockery 2001:13; cf. Penner 2005:75). As Grenz (1996:7) asserts, “In the postmodern world, people are no longer convinced that knowledge is inherently good.” Thus, notions of unmediated objectivity and truth have been cast aside, as have any illusions of the existence of irrefutable foundations of truth (Veith 1994:50; Best & Kellner 1997:257; Dockery 2001:15). This view of the world, suggests Havel (1995:233), “appears to have exhausted its potential.” Thus, these modern tenets have been replaced by the post-modern concept of reflexivity, or “thinking about thinking” (Anderson 1990:254), which seeks to give proper attention to the perspectival, contextual, and contingent nature of all truth claims (Best & Kellner 1991:4; Best & Kellner 1997:258). As one consequence of this, many fields of inquiry have experienced a shift from a preoccupation with epistemology to a concern for hermeneutics and intertextuality (Best & Kellner 1997:257; Van Gelder 1998:40).

This rejection of “absolute” and “objective” knowledge assaults the modern pursuit of meta-narratives, for these narratives endeavoured to legitimate their own discourses by claiming universality and a “God’s eye” view (Penner 2005:27). All meta-narratives, then, “whether metaphysical or historical,” are deemed impossible (Erickson 1998:18). No single meta-narrative can be shown to exist from which all other truths are organized or that serves as the final arbiter of right and wrong (Grenz 1996:6-8; Greer 2003:225). As post-modern critics have reflected upon the legacy of the modern era, these all-inclusive explanatory frameworks have come to be viewed not only as theoretically untenable, but furthermore as instruments of control and oppression. Thus, rather than being about the replacing of one framework with

another, post-modernism entails the rejection of such meta-narratives (Harvey 1990:49). With this in view, Jean-François Lyotard (1984:xxiv) has asserted that “incredulity toward metanarratives” constitutes a central theme of postmodernism. Schlesinger (1995:225) implies that this relativism should be feared far less than absolutism, for “the damage done to humanity by the relativist is far less than the damage done by the absolutist.”

This relativizing of truth causes post-modernism to privilege the significance of local or cultural narratives (Best & Kellner 1997:256), which serve to “uphold the values and the social order” of a particular community (Kvale 1995:21). Because post-modernity entails the understanding that truth is socially constructed, relational groups are understood as providing the context in and for which values are formed (Erickson 1998:19). As Grenz (1996:8) explains, “The postmodern worldview operates within a community-based understanding of truth. It affirms that whatever we accept as truth and even the way we envision truth are dependent on the community in which we participate.” In essence, notes Anderson (1995:15), post-modernism is dependent upon the concept of culture: “There wouldn’t be any discussions of the postmodern world—in fact there wouldn’t be a post-modern world—without the idea of culture... It is inseparable from the idea that there are lots of cultures—cultures, subcultures, countercultures.”

In addition, the relativizing dynamic of post-modernism has contributed to “the dethroning of reason and the rise of feeling and desire” (Van Gelder 1998:39). Notes Hudson (2004:9), there has arisen a “new appreciation for the mysterious, that which cannot be measured, contained, or quantified, which encourages the integration of rationality with imagination, intuition, and faith.” As a result, intuition has come to function as a key basis by which one gains personal knowledge (Van Gelder 1998:39). This shift has precipitated the breakdown of linear rationality and has birthed a capacity to hold contradictory beliefs in tension (Hudson 2004:9). In light of the assumed relativity of all narrative structures, suggests Van Gelder (1996:30), “it is preferable to experience life in terms of eclecticism or as a collage of narratives.”

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this ethos of relativism causes difference, plurality, fragmentation, and complexity to become key dimensions of post-modern life (Best &

Kellner 1997:255). Anderson (1995:240) suggests that this pluralism is evident even at the level of “the individual mind... all by itself.” Post-modernism actually privileges heterogeneity and difference as liberative forces in the redefinition of cultural discourse (Harvey 1990:9; Best & Kellner 1997:14). Thus, proponents of post-modernism are prone to favour “play, indeterminacy, incompleteness, uncertainty, ambiguity, contingency, and chaos” (Best & Kellner 1997:256; cf. Schlesinger 1995:229). Harvey (1990:44) suggests that, rather than trying to transcend ephemerality and ambiguity, “Postmodernism swims, even wallows” in such an environment. Miller (1996:55) employs a similar metaphor in characterizing post-modernity as “the condition of living in a sea of ‘truths,’ each with its own reality and set of beliefs.” In this multicultural atmosphere, “an amalgamation of cultures is taking place” (Havel 1995:233). Thus, suggests Anderson (1990:6), the post-modern environment constitutes an “unregulated marketplace of realities.”

The rejection of meta-narratives and the elevation of the significance of *experience* has led the post-modern environment to become characterized by a collapse of the modern notion of history. The rejection of history is, in part, a symptom of the dissolution of the notion of objectivity, which makes the attainability of “objective historical facts” implausible (Veith 1994:50). The abandonment of meta-narratives causes there to be no overarching, unifying account for how we are to locate ourselves within the flow of time. Experience becomes fragmented, represented in the collage as “a key artistic technique of our time” (Kvale 1995:23). Truly, “with no underlying common frame of reference”, notes Kvale (:21), a post-modern world becomes characterized by “a manifold of changing horizons.” As a result, the attention of post-modern persons remains fixed upon an endless succession of “nows” (Van Gelder 1996:62). Explains Harvey (1990:54), “The reduction of experience to ‘a series of pure and unrelated presents’ further implies that the ‘experience of the present becomes powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid and material.’” In this context, change and flux have come to be understood as normative and continuous (Van Gelder 1996:62). The modern narrative of progress and development is replaced by “a liberating nihilism, a living with the here and now, a weariness and a playful irony.”

This post-modern ethos has come to be characterized by a “loss of depth” (Harvey 1990:58). Many observers have described what they see as the emergence of an

“image culture.” According to Van Gelder (1998:39), the hermeneutical concept that signs merely represent real things has significant implications: “It is proposed that these signs and the simulation process are increasingly divorced from real things, producing a condition of virtual reality.” Furthermore, the collapse of time horizons and the preoccupation with instantaneity fuel the post-modern emphasis on events, spectacles, happenings, and media images (Harvey 1990:59). Veith (1994:85) suggests that style is stressed over substance, with the surface being deemed of greater significance than the interior.

A conception of the world like the one being described here poses something of a crisis for the individual. Havel (1995:234) asserts that, while contemporary people enjoy the comforts and benefits provided by the achievements of modern civilization,

[W]e do not know exactly what to do with ourselves, where to turn. The world of our experience seems chaotic, disconnected, confusing. There appear to be no integrating forces, no unified meaning, no true inner understanding. ...Experts can explain anything in the objective world to us, yet we understand our own lives less and live. ...[E]verything is possible and almost nothing is certain.

The rejection of “absolutes” extends even to the notion of “an absolute identity” (Veith 1994:85). Thus, as Lifton (1995:130) suggests, drawing upon the work of Erik Erikson, the post-modern individual suffers “identity diffusion” or “identity confusion”, which “is characterized by an interminable series of experiments and explorations, some shallow, some profound, each of which can readily be abandoned in favour of still new, psychological questions.” With the loss of any sense of historical location, there is an incessant opportunity, even a need, for individuals to “recreate” themselves (Van Gelder 1998:45; cf. Kvale 1995:25). Thus, post-modernism encourages the individual to “play” roles (Veith 1994:84).

The post-modern tendencies being described here inherently contribute to the undermining of traditional authority structures (Smith 2001:31-32). Kvale (1995:20) suggests that this is tied to “a general loss of faith in tradition and authority.” Thus, the post-modern world entails an exchange of “the traditional framework of intergenerational cultural transmission for one in which morals, ethics, and values are created and re-created out of personal experience” (Hudson 2004:9). The post-modern individual is afforded the prerogative “to choose and combine traditions

selectively, to *eclect*...those aspects from the past and present which appear most relevant for the job at hand” (Jencks 1995:27). This means that ideological systems can be “embraced, modified, let go of and reembraced, all with a new ease that stands in sharp contrast to the inner struggle we have in the past associated with these shifts” (Lifton 1995:131-132). The result of this is an eclectic approach to life based on individual preferences and the need for tolerance (Dockery 2001:12). In the world of post-modernism, notes Anderson (1990:7-8), the individual must make choices about reality and is welcome to experiment while “shopping in the bazaar of culture and subculture.”

The inherent tension between the emphases of individual experience and the communal construction of truth gives rise to the need within the post-modern ethos to re-conceptualize the relationship between individual personhood and community (Hempelmann 2003:46). While post-modernity is “searching for an individuality beyond the empty construct of Western individualism and for a community greater than the social forces that influence it” (Van Gelder 1998:42), the abandonment of narrative structures has complicated the search for a basis around which to establish shared identity and belonging. This contributes to the tendency for community to be found within small enclaves, which in turn fosters a culture of fragmentation. However, it also leads to a lack of stability in group identity. Notes Anderson (1990:7-8), the range of choices that the post-modern individual has at his or her disposal are enormous. Thus, in the contemporary scene, “belonging” is characterized by impermanence (Veith 1994:86).

In addition to impacting the relationship between individual and community, the post-modern world also profoundly impacts the relationship *between* cultural groups. As was mentioned above, post-modernism is greatly reliant upon the concept of “culture.” Veith (1994:144) indicates that post-modernism both “levels” cultures and exaggerates the differences between them. This contributes to the fragmentation of society into contending and mutually unintelligible cultures and subcultures. Havel (1995:234-235) reflects upon this challenge:

[I]ndividual cultures, increasingly lumped together by contemporary civilization, are realizing with new urgency their own inner autonomy and the inner differences of others. Cultural conflicts are increasing and are

understandably more dangerous today than at any other time in history...[T]he members of various tribal cults are at war with one another.

In such an environment, the modern optimism regarding rational consensus as a basis for a just society is deemed “outmoded” (Harvey 1990:52).

Thus, *special interest groups* have become an integral part of post-modern society. Because groups lack a common language and philosophy by which to persuade one another, the exertion of power becomes a necessary means for any group to achieve its desired ends. Unsurprisingly, however, this segmentation tends to cause those separated by difference to become “hostile camps” (Veith 1994:147). As a result, post-modern society has become dominated by “identity politics,” in which a group’s unique identity is constructed and its specific interests are singled out (Best & Kellner 1997:275). Thus, “some versions of identity politics fetishize given facets of identity, as if one of our multiple identity markers were our deep and true self, around which all of our life and politics resolve.” The purpose in this is “to advance the interests of a single specific group.” One key outcome is that group identity “tends to be insular” (:274). These new social movements became prevalent in the 1970s. Within the present study, we will consider whether this tendency may in fact have come to influence the relationship between the generations. If so, we also will be faced with the need to consider the difficulties this poses for the church as it endeavours to carry out its intergenerational praxis within the praxis of society.

4.4 Gen X and A Context of Chaos

4.4.1 The Legacy of a Society Adrift

The present study is concerned not only with the emergence of a new paradigm, but also with the emergence of a new generation. Into a culture experiencing vast social changes amid the transition from the world of modernity to that of post-modernity, a new generation was born. Much of the formative years of the cohort that would come to be referred to as Generation X were characterized by exposure to a society that was, in virtually all respects, becoming unmoored from its traditional values. Miller (1996:59) suggests that the members of this generation “have seen only a steady breakdown of social norms and values since they came into the world in 1965.” Roxburgh (1998:94) exposes his perception of the extent to which chaos has been at

work in the North American context by describing the 1980s, a critical passage in the formation of many Gen Xers, as the “worst” decade.

During the Gen X childhood years, things truly were bad. Child abuse and abduction became prominent public concerns (Reifschneider 1999:24). Children were urged to avoid and distrust “strangers.” The insecurities of the Cold War era and public ignorance in the early stages of the AIDS “scare” fostered fear and distrust in the hearts of many Gen Xers (Hicks & Hicks 1999:180, 183). Xers were raised amid the disillusioning images of the Vietnam War, Watergate, the S & L scandal, and Iran-Contra (Ford 1995:20; Zustiak 1996:80). The world known by this generation as they passed through their formative years was one in which the torrents of change being experienced within society dramatically impacted traditional family structures and dynamics, the faltering and failure of institutions at varying levels, and an experience of adolescence characterized by increasing ambiguity and alienation from the adult world. These developments would profoundly impact the formation of the peer personality of Generation X.

Miller (1996:21) suggests that the chaos that arises as complex systems undergo the process of adapting to social change often produces unexpected results that, themselves, issue in even greater change. Miller explains this further: “Chaos dictates that when we introduce what seems to be miniscule change into an adaptive complex system, widespread variations ensue that lead to even greater changes down the line.” The formative experiences of Gen Xers, and the values and priorities they adopted in response to their passage through this tumultuous period in American history, seem to evidence the very claim advanced by Miller. As was demonstrated in chapter three, the social struggle of the 1960s and 1970s featured Boomers and their elders as the primary actors. However, it is perhaps among Gen Xers that the most “widespread variations” and greatest changes are evident. Truly, as we will see in the pages that follow, during the Gen X formative years, cultural crises emerged with increasing severity and frequency and posed increasingly sophisticated and dramatic problems for the members of this rising generation (Ford 1995:18).

4.4.1.1 Childhood Adrift

This generation was parented predominantly by two generations, the Silents and older Boomers, who were swept up in the tide of the dramatic social changes surveyed in the previous chapter. Miller (1996:13, 14) suggests that, in stark contrast to the trends of the optimistic baby boom years, the “ideological wars and social changes that marked [the Gen X] birth years” caused many young couples to adopt a “wait and see” approach regarding the prospect of bringing more children into the world. Miller (:13) explains further that, because “the country was experiencing profound doubt about itself, potential parents of [Xers] questioned the advisability of raising children in an unstable world in which values and beliefs were undergoing remarkable cultural shifts.” Thus, the number of young couples who remained childless during these years reached 75 percent, while changing attitudes toward parenting were evident in developments such as the common descriptor for those without children mutating from “childless” to “child-free” (Zustiak 1999:30). A number of new books actually promoted the benefits of childlessness (Holtz 1995:16), while publications like *Parents Magazine* experienced a dramatic drop in circulation (Zustiak 1999:36-37). As Holtz (1995:13) suggests, in the nation’s attitude about children, the pendulum definitely had swung since the Boomer formative years.

In striking contradistinction from their “special” predecessors, Dunn (1993:2-3) suggests that the children born into this tumultuous period of social change comprised a largely “unwanted” generation. In support of this claim, Dunn (:2-3) points to the fact that, beginning in 1965, there was a marked decline in births in the US. By 1973, there were 1.1 million fewer births than the “baby boom” peak year of 1957 (:7). Dunn (:16) cites several factors that may have contributed to this downturn in births, or “baby bust”:

1. The introduction of birth control in the 1960s, which gave women power to make choices and plans related to reproduction.
2. The advances in equal rights for women encouraged them to go to college, not chiefly for the purpose of finding husbands, but rather to establish careers.
3. The feminism of this era also fostered a consensus among both men and women that women should be afforded career options other than homemaking and childrearing.

4. The federal legalization of abortion in 1973 also surely was a significant factor. While 587,000 abortions took place in 1972, this number doubled within five years and surpassed 1.5 million a year in 1980.
5. The economic expansion of the 1960s and early 1970s provided women with opportunities to work, while the recession of the 1970s seemed to necessitate that they work.

Strauss and Howe (1992:317-329) also provide a wealth of evidence to support the claim that this was an “unwanted” generation; these authors actually employ the term *kinderfeindlichkeit*, a German word referring to a societal hostility toward children, to describe the cultural climate encountered by young Xers. This hostility is reflected in the reality that, as Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:21) claim, this would prove to be “the most aborted, neglected, and abused generation in history” (cf. Holtz 1995:62). Zustiak (1999:14) similarly asserts that this generation “seems to be the most unwanted, uncared for, maligned, abused and rejected generation to come down the pike.” Evidence of this societal hostility toward children became evident in arenas such as housing laws, politics, and movies (:30; cf. Reifschneider 1999:22-23). As a poignant example of this, one 1979 study found that seven American apartment complexes out of ten excluded children (Holtz 1995:10-11; Zustiak 1999:35). Children had come to be absorbed into the “national malaise” of this period (Holtz 1995:24).

Some have pointed to the relatively small size of this generation to account for why, throughout their formative year, Gen Xers would seem to be so ignored and neglected. However, while the factors outlined above by Dunn may have resulted in a pronounced decrease in births in comparison to the Boomer years, Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:19) clarify that the “commonly accepted notion” that Generation X is “small in size...is a myth.” In fact, prior to the advent of the Millennial generation, this was the second largest cohort in US history. Menking (1999:153-155) asserts that, even if one chooses the briefest span of years in defining the birth-year parameters of this generation, it would still rank as the twenty-fourth largest nation in the world. In reality, as society passed through this period of dramatic change, causes beyond mere demographics were responsible for the difficulties weathered by this generation. We will consider these factors in greater detail in the pages that follow.

4.4.1.2 The Family Adrift

a. The Acceleration of Divorce

Perhaps few factors were as significant in shaping the formative experience of this generation as the profound changes taking place within the household. As American society experienced dramatic changes in values, vast numbers of Gen Xers saw their homes devastated by divorce. During the 1970s, largely due to the widespread liberalization of divorce law, the US attained the dubious distinction of possessing the highest divorce rate in the world, with about forty percent of marriages ending in divorce (Dunn 1993:16). Beginning with 1972, more than one million children each year saw their parents divorce, a threefold increase over 1950 figures (:28). By 1980, the divorce rate had risen to fifty percent (Hicks & Hicks 1999:179). Dunn (1993:28) notes that, while in the 1950s only six out of every 1,000 children experienced parental divorce in a given year, by the 1980s this rate varied between seventeen and nineteen per 1,000. Writing in the early 1990s, Hamburg (1992:33) chronicled the continuation of this trend, noting that, by age sixteen, half of the children of married parents would come to see their parents divorce. When viewed *en toto*, the period of 1965 to 1985 produced 17,915,000 divorces, while an additional five million divorces occurred during the years of 1986 through 1990. Throughout this period, approximately twenty-seven million children under the age of eighteen were impacted by the divorce of their parents (Miller 1996:94). This means that at least forty percent of Xers were children of divorce (Zustiak 1999:14).

Understandably, this had a profound impact on the family configurations to which many Gen Xers were accustomed. In the year 1960, ninety percent of Boomer children knew the security of living with both of their biological parents (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:31). By 1980, while eighty-one percent of children lived in two-parent homes, only fifty-six percent of these children lived with both biological parents (Zustiak 1999:42). By 1988, the number of children living with two parents had decreased to seventy-three percent, with roughly sixty percent living with both biological parents (Dunn 1993:28). Five years later, seventy percent of young people lived with two parents, including the vastly growing numbers of those from within blended families (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:31). Long (1997:43) suggests that Xers faced “a better than 50-50 chance” of spending at least one year in a single-

parent household before the age of eighteen. For half of those young people who experienced the divorce of their parents, it would be five years or more before their mothers remarried, while half of the children whose parents remarried would see this second marriage dissolve during their adolescent years (Hamburg 1992:33). Further, two-thirds of children in step-families would have a combination of full siblings and either half or step siblings, as well as multiple sets of grandparents. Meanwhile, perhaps understandably, those children who grew up in single parent homes would be exposed to notably fewer active family relationships. As one 1980s University of Pennsylvania study found, forty-two percent of the children of divorce studied had not seen their fathers in the prior year (Holtz 1995:32).

b. The Absence of Parental Influence

The formative family experiences of Gen Xers also were shaped significantly by changes in the work patterns of their parents. Hine (1999:282) insists that, in the face of the economic downturn of the 1970s and 1980s, for most families, “long work hours and parental absence from the home [were seen as being] not an option but a necessity.” However, the choice of mothers to undertake full-time employment also reflected the impact of changing societal views regarding the role of women, largely the result of the feminist liberalization of this period. According to Hamburg (1992:31), once the baby boom years peaked, women re-entered the labour force “at a rapid rate.” Whereas in 1950 the husband was the sole wage earner in well more than one-half of all families, by 1975 this had changed considerably. States Hamburg (:31), “In opinion polls in the seventies, broad support for these changes was evident. In the younger age groups in particular, the approval of this pattern was overwhelming.” By the late 1970s and early 1980s, thirty-nine percent of mothers with infants under the age of one were working (Zustiak 1999:34). Howe and Strauss report that, by 1985, the overall percentage of mothers who were employed had grown to sixty-two percent (Howe & Strauss 2000:127). With the rise of the divorce rate, this became increasingly necessary. By 1990, about two-thirds of mothers worked outside of the home (Hamburg 1992:32-33).

Hicks and Hicks (1999:185) insist that, in the face of the changes brought about by a pervasive individualism, the rise in divorce, and an unstable economic climate, many

of the parents of Gen Xers were “self-absorbed and distracted by making a living and finding their own fulfilment.” One 1970s survey revealed that two-thirds of adults with children felt that parents should be free to live their own lives, even if it meant spending less time with their children. One-half expressed that parents should not sacrifice in order to give their children the best, a stark contrast from the Boomer formative years (Holtz 1995:20-21). In one 1975 survey conducted among 50,000 parents, an astounding seventy percent of respondents indicated that, if they were presented with the opportunity again, they would not make the same choice to have their children (:20). As a result of this shift in values, whereas children were rated as the number one priority by parents in the early 1960s, by the early 1980s, they had dropped to number four, right after automobiles (:21). A decade later, Hamburg (1992:34) found that, despite the fact that parental involvement and support are keys to the development of realistic expectations about what is required for assimilation into the adult world, two-thirds of parents reported that they were less willing to make such investments in their children than their own parents had been. Such data, conclude Schneider and Stevenson (1999:141-151), exposed a disconcerting trend among some parents toward holding a rather limited view of their role in encouraging their adolescents toward “adult-like” formation (cf. Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:88-89).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this pervasive mindset profoundly impacted the amount of time and attention parents chose to invest in their children. Writing from the vantage point of the early 1980s, Elkind (1984:3-4) suggests that the parents of Gen Xers were “so involved in reordering their own lives, managing careers, marriage, parenting, and leisure, that they [had] no time to give their teenagers.” While the average parents of the early 1960s spent thirty hours with their children each week, among parents in the early 1980s, that average dropped to a mere seventeen hours per week (Holtz 1995:52); outside of mealtimes, teenagers spent an average of ten minutes a day alone with their fathers, with five of those minutes taking place in front of the television (Zustiak 1996:49). Nearly a decade later, Hamburg (1992:35) indicated that mothers were increasingly absent from the home, while little evidence existed to suggest that fathers were spending any more time at home to compensate. That this lack of quality “family time” was felt by young Xers was poignantly demonstrated by a 1987 Nickelodeon study that found more time with family to be the top desire among

respondents (Holtz 1995:53). Perhaps an even more troubling expression of this lack of family connectedness is noted by Hine (1999:282), who suggests that many young people were left with the compelling impression that their elders simply could not afford the “inconvenience” of being “bothered” with them.

As a result of this changing social situation, the nuclear family that one generation earlier had become the focus of American culture now was becoming atomized. Even among the members of the same household, observes Gibbs (2000b:172), life tended to be divided “into numerous autonomous spheres.” Russell (1993:39) explains the practical outworking of such changes within the life of the household:

Since both parents work in most of today’s two-parent families, each family member’s day has become unique. Children begin in infancy to live apart from their parents. They sleep at home at night, but during the day they live a separate existence...Now entire families spend most of the day apart from one another and away from home. Mothers and fathers race to the office, and very young children head to the local day-care center or baby-sitter. Homes have been replaced by centers, mothers have been replaced by providers.

The distance at which extended family members commonly lived, a reality that began with the suburbanization of the 1950s, prevented these relatives from compensating for the impact of this fragmentation within the nuclear family. Whitesel and Hunter (2000:10) describe this as the “dispersion of the family,” characterized by “a lack of extended families living together in the same household or even in the same town, city or state.” As a result of this trend, observes Hamburg (1992:35), only five percent of the children of this era had frequent contact with a grandparent. Families had come to “exist in free-standing isolation, changing dramatically the relationship among generations and the way we raise children” (Loper 1999:3-4). As one consequence of this, as one 1993 survey reveals, fifty-two percent of Xer children from dual-income households and forty-three percent of those from single-parent and blended-family homes reported spending their pre-school years under the care of non-relatives. Miller (1996:106) suggests that this posed a challenge to family life in the sense that these childcare providers did not necessarily share the values or the “deep personal interest in the welfare of the child” that would normally be possessed by parents.

With the family being divided in so many directions, by 1978, three out of four parents placed “independence” at the top of the list of values they sought to impart to their children, while “teaching children to be obedient” was viewed as of primary importance by only seventeen percent of parents. This represented an astounding decrease when compared to the sixty-four percent of parents who indicated giving priority to obedience in 1890 and the forty-five percent who claimed to prioritize this value at the beginning of the Boomer era (Russell 1993:35). The high value being placed upon independence was reflected in the day-to-day experience of many Xers. As parents remained preoccupied with personal and professional concerns, among Xers, the “latchkey kid” became commonplace (Verhaagen 2005:2). According to a 1986 study, thirty percent of kindergarteners through third graders went home to a situation with no adult supervision (Hicks & Hicks 1999:182). A similar study published in 1987 revealed that thirty percent of junior high, and thirty-eight percent of high school students were left in isolation “almost every day” (Hahn & Verhaagen 1998:133). Many were even left along prior to the beginning of the school day (Holtz 1995:53). Zustiak (1999:33) asserts, based upon his work among Xers, that one-fourth of these latchkey kids “lived in constant fear;” he adds, “They were not just a little scared, but were petrified—terrorized.”

4.4.1.3 Adolescence Adrift

On the heels of the social marginalization and brokenness they experienced as children, as they rose into their teen years, Gen Xers faced a perplexing passage through adolescence. Peter L. Benson (quoted in Hersch 1998:12), reflecting upon the results of research conducted among some 250,000 students, concluded that America simply had “forgotten how to raise healthy kids.” While modern health standards and nutrition had fostered “conditions under which many individuals experience puberty four years earlier than they did in the [nineteenth] century” (Côté & Allahaar 1995:30), at the same time young people were faced with a lengthening wait between the attainment of physical maturity and the point at which they were considered to be socially mature, or “adult” (:xv). As Hamburg (1992:35) observes in reflecting upon this trend, “Adolescence, the time between childhood and adulthood, has emerged as a distinctive status in its own right...They are held in a lengthy limbo—no longer children, yet not quite adults, either.”

As a result of this extended experience of “limbo,” says Hamburg (1992:35), young Xer adolescents were presented with less and less opportunities for meaningful participation in the adult world. Côté and Allahaar (1995:31) similarly observe that young people were “marginalized in the labor force and also excluded from mainstream adult society and therefore from sources of power.” Writing in the early 1980s, Elkind (1984:3) employed even starker terms in suggesting that “[t]here is no place for teenagers in American society today—not in our homes, not in our schools, and not in society at large.” Elkind (:5) adds,

Perhaps the best word to describe the predicament of today's teenagers is “unplaced.” Teenagers are not displaced in the sense of having been put in a position they did not choose to be in...Nor are they misplaced in the sense of having been put in the wrong place (a state sometimes called alienation). Rather, they are unplaced in the sense that there is no place for a young person who needs a measured and controlled introduction to adulthood.

Reflecting upon this removal of youth from meaningful involvement in society, Palladino (1996:xv) suggests that one can trace a discernable movement from young people being viewed as maturing adolescents in the 1940s to being viewed as a distinct population of “teens” during the Gen X years.

During these years, the ghettoizing of teens into youth subcultures, which had become the *norm* within American society, now contributed adversely to relationships between Xers and their elders. As Hersch (1998:14) suggests, the notion of youth as “a generation apart” came to be so commonplace that it was difficult to know whether it originated from young people or from adults; regardless, this “netherworld of adolescence” had become “a self-fulfilling prophecy of estrangement.” Adds Hersch, “The individual child feels lost to a world of teens, viewed mostly in the aggregate, notorious for what they do wrong, judged for their inadequacies, known by labels and statistics that frighten and put off adults.” Thus, though adults had come to pay less attention to individual teenagers during the Gen X teen years, the degree to which adults feared these teens collectively had “unquestionably increased” (Hine 1999:283).

Being viewed in this negative light, the members of this generation received the brunt of the scorn of a society struggling to adjust to change. The descriptor of “Gen X”

was largely one employed by adults who felt justified in characterizing this generation in such terms. Similar to what had taken place in the 1960s, during the Gen X teen years the media tended to depict young people as if they were a cohesive whole, all the while downplaying the distinctions that existed within their ranks (Bennett, Craig, & Rademacher 1997:8). Central to this was the adoption of the “slacker image,” which, suggests Bagby (1998:10), was contrived to correspond to the “Gen X” label. Bagby (:2) explains that this caricature was consistently negative, portraying Xers as slacker-ish Beavis and Butthead types. As a result of this negative portrayal, a 1990s survey conducted by the Public Agenda Group found that seven out of ten parents had a negative view of Gen X teenagers (:2). By a margin of five to one, adult respondents in one Gallup poll identified Xers as more reckless than Boomers (Holtz 1995:75).

From an empirical perspective, these common perceptions of Xer teens largely were not borne out by statistics (Smith & Clurman 1997:78; Rollin 1999:275). Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:36-37) insist that the notion that this generation was composed of “whiners” is mostly a “myth,” while Bagby (1998:6) cautions that this generation could not be dismissed generally as apathetic or “slackers,” as was often assumed. In reality, within a complex post-industrial economy, most young Gen Xers felt pressure to select a career path by the age of seventeen in order to succeed (Bagby 1998:156-162). However, the disadvantage of this generation is reflected in one late 1990s study by Schneider and Stevenson (1999:81, 85), which revealed that only 43.7 percent of teens felt they had received adequate guidance to enable them to know what would be required of them in order to assume their desired roles within the adult workforce. This marginalized generation simply was not provided a very supportive environment within which to discover its place within the larger society. Rather, its members were left to cope with having the residual effects of the adult weariness toward teens precipitated by the Boomer revolt projected onto them (Males 1996:1-10). The psychosocial weight of this marginalization of the adolescent experience was felt by Gen Xers on a number of fronts, including their education, employment, and peer culture.

a. Education

The gradual changes in the socializing role of education among the generations of the twentieth century have already been chronicled above. However, during the Gen X formative years, the impact of the school years among adolescents only became more central. Reflecting upon the formative experiences of this generation, Hamburg (1992:34) observes, “Children are now more likely to be in school than any previous generation in American history.” As a result, high school would serve as a major dimension in the lives of almost all Gen Xers. By 1980, only three percent of teens were not in school; by the 1990s, this number had been reduced to two percent. Regarding the significance of this shared experience in the formation of the Xer peer personality, Hine (1999:139) provides these observations:

Now young people who wish to succeed in any sort of legitimate enterprise must make it through high school. To reject your family is one thing; there may be very good reasons. To reject high school is to reject the society as a whole. High school is the threshold through which every young American must pass...It brings young people together, providing a fertile ground for the development of youth culture... We have become so accustomed to the idea that high school should be the universal experience of our youth that we don't even consider other possibilities.

Thus, enrolment in high school became the key by which Xer adolescents were evaluated by society.

However, while the pressures placed upon Xers to progress through the educational system were greater than those experienced by any previous generation, the period of experimentation within American education to which they were subjected also set their experience apart from that of their predecessors and, as a result, seriously jeopardized the value of this passage in their lives. According to Zustiak (1999:66), the “anti-establishment agenda” of this era came to bear significantly upon the traditional educational system. Zustiak (:64) further explains the impact of the emerging post-modern ethos upon this system:

American education embraced the concepts of post-modern philosophy which proposed that there was no such thing as absolute truth... There was no body of knowledge or truths to be learned which would be considered essential for all people to know... The only thing that was left was opinion and personal preference.

While Zustiak may overstate the case, it does seem fair to conclude that, within the emerging post-modern framework, the goal was “to ‘free’ America’s children from all of the rules and restraints of the old authoritative system which ‘stifled’ their creativity and innate desire to learn” (:66). Therefore, the emphasis within education became “person-centred” and “experience-centred” rather than “fact-centred” or “skill-centred” (:67). As a result of this shift in emphasis from “performance” to “self-esteem,” says Zustiak (:68), students “did not learn the fundamental skills needed to compete and perform in a satisfactory manner in today’s job market.”

In contrast to the G.I. and Silent adolescent years, in which a high school education was still strongly oriented toward helping students to prepare for an adult vocation, by the Gen X school years, this was no longer the case. During the 1990s, only twelve percent of high school students were enrolled in vocational education courses (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:114). This is attributable in large part to the reality that, during the Xer years, high school no longer was recognized as providing an adequate foundation for adulthood in a technologically complex economy. As Zustiak (1999:86) explains,

Because they know that if they are going to have even the remotest chance of obtaining a decent paying job in today’s society, the minimum requirement for entry level in that job market is a college degree. Since moving to an information and service oriented society, the number of good paying factory and industrial jobs which do not require a high degree of educational skills have become almost nonexistent.

As a consequence of this, however, Xers were forced to cope with the frustration of striving to prepare for adult roles in school contexts that largely hindered, rather than facilitating, this objective (Elkind 1984:6).

b. Work

As teens, Gen Xers were far more likely to work throughout the calendar year than the members of previous generations had been. By 1983, part-time employment among high-school students had increased to thirty-six percent for both males and females (Côté & Allahar 1995:134). This meant that the number of teenagers who held part-time jobs was fifty percent higher in the early 1980s than it had been in 1960 (Holtz 1995:144). A 1981 survey revealed that the average high school sophomore boy

spent fifteen hours per week at work, while the average girl spent 10.5 hours. By their senior year of high school, both added another six to seven hours to their work schedule. As the decade progressed, two-thirds to three-quarters of high school-aged teens maintained employment (Zustiak 1999:89). A decade later, work was a common experience for Gen X teenagers. More than eighty percent of 1990s teens worked during their high school years, spending on average between fifteen and twenty hours a week at their jobs (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:170).

Rather than promoting the preparation of Gen X young people for integration into the adult population, these jobs often merely reinforced the experience of marginalization and isolation from the adult world. Normal jobs for these young Gen Xers included bussing tables at restaurants, serving as cashiers at retail establishments, providing child care services, and cleaning houses. Within such jobs, Gen X youth generally were provided few adult role models; those who supervised teenage employees often were of similar age or merely a few years older, while opportunities for interacting with adult managers were limited (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:173, 175). Schneider and Stevenson (:175) posit that, faced with these limitations, a majority of teens failed to see their jobs as directly related to preparing for their futures. Many Xer teens actually felt exploited by these jobs (:179). Rather than fostering respect for work, these experiences actually engendered cynicism among many Xers (Holtz 1995:146).

Some observers might assume that the trend toward more widespread employment among Gen X teens would have served to promote their growth toward maturity in that it at least would have provided them with increased financial independence. However, Côté and Allahar (1995:134) respond to this suggestion by observing that, in reality, most Gen X students seemed to “fritter away” their earnings. Of the 49.8 billion dollars American teenagers earned at their part-time jobs in 1986, one-third of this total was spent on clothes and jewellery, while most of what remained was spent on entertainment (fast food, movies, and music) and electronic equipment (Zustiak 1999:90).

c. Youth and Pop Culture

Clearly, the resources available to Gen X teens through employment and the freedoms afforded them by the relative absence of their parents provided Gen Xers an open door of opportunity for constructing their own cultural identity. Palladino (1996:xii) observes that, by the mid-1990s, teens constituted “a red-hot consumer market worth \$89 billion—almost ten times what the market was reportedly worth in 1957, when Elvis Presley was riding high.” In addition to having more money than any previous generation, the majority of wage-earning Xers had free rein in spending their incomes with little supervision from their parents (Holtz 1995:144). Gen X teens were more likely than their Boomer predecessors to own cars, stereos, TV sets, and telephones and were presented with greater freedoms than any previous generation in their use of such tools (Russell 1993:41; Ford 1995:62).

Hersch (1998:22) suggests that parents had come to assume that the adolescent desire for “space” simply was part of the “natural order of growing up.” The 1960s had “cemented” this as a broadly assumed notion. Thus, Gen Xers largely were extended the “privilege” of being left to themselves and thereby provided “unequalled freedom of determination in many areas of their lives” (:21); as parents encouraged their teenagers to buy cars so that they would not have to “chauffeur them around,” teens gained greater mobility, thereby “widening their circle of friends, job opportunities, and shopping alternatives,” all of which fostered greater independence. As a result of the freedoms and resources with which they were presented, Gen Xers were empowered to gain their cultural identity primarily from two closely inter-related sources: their peers and pop culture, both of which, as Hamburg (1992:35) observes, often lacked “adult leadership, mentorship, and support.”

Concerning the role of peers in shaping cultural identity among these post-modern youth, Hine (1999:282) indicates that, despite continued evidence that parental interest and involvement had a positive impact in the lives of adolescents, “In a society like ours, where change is rapid and teenagers spend most of their time with others exactly their age, the young have more authority than adults have.” In the face of the marginality experienced by Gen Xers on nearly all levels within society, in this “vacuum where traditional behavioral expectations for young people used to exist”

(Hersch 1998:21), these youth developed their own sub-cultural communities. Hersch (:21) offers the following description of these adolescent communities:

[A]n amorphous grouping of young people that constitutes the world in which adolescents spend their time. Their dependence on each other fulfills the universal human longing for community, and inadvertently cements the notion of a tribe apart. More than a group of peers, it becomes in isolation a society with its own values, ethics, rules, worldview, rites of passage, worries, joys, and momentum. It becomes teacher, adviser, entertainer, challenger, nurturer, inspirer, and sometimes destroyer.

Holtz (1995:53-54) suggests that the bonds developed through these communities encompassed roughly half of the adolescent's day. As young people "depended on each other for much of the support and advice that had traditionally been supplied by parents," this "provided a complete network of strength, comfort, and guidance, virtually free of adult influence." Within these groups, the individual was protected and shown concern, albeit in a peer dominated context.

In a world characterized by diversity and fragmentation, as Smith and Clurman (1997:104-105) note, there was considerable appeal in belonging to such a group:

With more independence and more diversity, it's harder for any one person to find others "like me." While Xers diversity involves picking from a variety of sources to find one's unique and singular style, it is also about finding connection with others. Xers find this connection amidst diversity through their enclaves... Diversity and enclaving are a response to life not only as Xers find it, but also as they would prefer it.

These small, restricted sub-cultural enclaves of friends and peers tended to be bound together by common interests and values (Smith & Clurman 1997:104; Long 1997:125). Ritchie (1995:132) suggests that, within these groups, a sense of belonging often was achieved in large part through material and stylistic conformity. As McClay (1995:44) explains, consumerism provided a means of constituting and maintaining community and relatedness, while consumer preferences served as agents and products of socialization. Thus, the cultural expression and identity of a group's members were influenced greatly by the social norms embraced by that group.

Several authors have chosen to describe these social groups as "tribes" (e.g., Hine 1999). Many also note that Xers tended to be cautious, even sceptical, toward those from outside their own "tribal" groups. Often, the closer bonds achieved within their enclaves were deemed the only relationships they could truly trust (Smith & Clurman

1997:104; Long 1997:144). That being said, an almost contradictory reality is that, over time, the composition of these groups and the place of the individual within them were subject to periodic change. As Schneider and Stevenson (1999:198) observe, during the formative teen years of this generation, relationships among Xers “tended to be very fluid, changing even from year to year.” From this, we can conclude that despite the value they claimed to place on authentic community, and despite the scepticism that Xers voiced toward the forces of consumerism at work in their midst, Xer attitudes were by no means immune from the pervasiveness of the American consumption ethic (Flory & Miller 2000:243). As Dunn (1993:35) suggests, the fact that so many Xers “shopped around” for the group that seemed best to fit their lifestyle preferences and sense of identity reveals, in part, that these were “ravenous consumers.”

Hersch (1998:23) observes that the cultural milieu created by this peer orientation was one that adults struggled greatly to understand, largely because their absence was the very cause of it. However, in contrast to the Boomer youth culture, which fostered an “us versus them” reaction to adult society, the “gap” which arose between Xers and their elders was not one characterized by outright conflict, but rather by a thorough lack of intergenerational engagement. This distance between young people and their elders would comprise ripe conditions for teens to immerse themselves in a distinct pop cultural experience.

In considering the significance of pop culture in shaping the cultural identity of Gen Xer youth, Elkind (1984:110, 112) points to TV, music, and other media as key contributors (cf. Ford 1995:59). Rushkoff (1994:4) suggests that “kids growing up in the 1970s learned to appreciate this landscape of iconography as a postmodern playground.” When compared to that of their predecessors, the pop cultural experience of this generation was unique. For example, as Ritchie (1995:86) observes, for the first time ever, young people and their families did not generally view TV together. Boomers had been influenced by the emerging prominence of television during their formative years and were accustomed to treating their private bedrooms as spaces within which to give expression to their distinct cultural identity. However, unlike their predecessors, for the latchkey kids of Gen X, television viewing was something that commonly occurred in isolation from parental oversight,

often within the confines of their own private bedrooms (Beaudoin 1998:5). In fact, one 1990 study found that forty-five percent of Xers spent more time with their television each day than with their parents (Holtz 1995:52). The emergence of cable technology and the programming of channels like MTV fortified the cultural influence of this time with the television.

Xer Tom Beaudoin (1998:21-22) observes that, for a generation struggling to grasp hold of a unifying framework for meaning, the “shared generational experience of popular culture ‘events’ produced an actively and potentially shared constellation of cultural meanings...Pop culture provides the matrix that contains much of what counts as ‘meaning’ for our generation.” During the Gen X formative years, media like television had come to provide the basis for the creation of “a worldwide teen culture” (Miller 1996:128).

In addition to this, during the Gen X formative years, rapid advances in electronic and information technology seriously affected traditional patterns of cultural transmission. Miller (1996:51) observes that, in times past, “Parents and adults were respected because they were the ones who controlled access to information about the world.” The framework upon which authority was based was rooted, in part, in the reality that adults possessed more knowledge than children. Miller adds that, in the past, parents had served as “filters” through which all outside information would come to a child and as “buffers” between the world and the child. With the advance of cable, computer, and internet technology, however, Gen Xer young people increasingly gained access within their own homes to vast reservoirs of information and were, thereby, empowered to gather whatever information they wished to receive and to tailor it to their own needs (:29-30; 43). As a result, says Miller (:51), these young people had “no barriers—no filter except themselves.” As a consequence of this, Gen X youth were provided resources for constructing their own sense of identity and values apart from the influence or guidance of their parents. Young people basically were empowered with access to the same information as adults (Matthews-Green 2005:10). Thus, adult authority was further undermined (cf. Flory & Miller 2007:201; Wuthnow 2008:45).

Despite the wealth of freedom and resources afforded Gen Xers as young people, it was evident to many that all was not well. Many adults criticized young Gen Xers for the sense of “disenfranchisement” that seemed to be exhibited within their youth culture, even in the face of such unprecedented freedoms and material resources (Côté & Allahar 1995:150). The reason for this disenfranchisement, assert Côté and Allahar (:150), lay in the fact that the youth culture of Xers was deeply influenced and shaped by the matrix of *complementary behaviour*, “the result of a systemic effort to control while giving the illusion of freedom and choice.” Côté and Allahar (:148) describe this further:

[T]he mass media share a vested interest in creating and maintaining a certain consciousness among the young. Some of these media do so as a concession to other economic interests, such as advertisers, while others do it directly for themselves... What lies at the heart of all this activity, however, is the fact that these media can sell young people some element of an identity that they have been taught to crave. This can happen because the possibility for a more meaningful identity has been denied young people through a series of laws, customs, and industrial practices. Consequently, leisure industries such as music, fashion, and cosmetics now have a largely uncritical army of consumers awaiting the next craze or fad.

Côté and Allahar (:134) explain that, within this system, “young people are encouraged to narrow their thinking to focus on issues of personal materialism and consumerism.” In light of the exposition provided in the previous chapter, it is clear that the Silent and Boomer generations also were subject to this system; however, as a consequence of the evolutionary dynamic of youth culture, by the time of the Xer formative years, this system had come to promote an unprecedented preoccupation with the self-centred pursuit of immediate gratification (Reifschneider 1999:26).

Within this framework, Gen X young people essentially were targeted as “consumers” rather than as “producers” by “leisure industries” (e.g., media and music) and “identity industries” (e.g., fashion and education) (Côté & Allahar 1995:xvi). Schneider and Stevenson (1999:31) observe that, compared with youth of the 1950s, the consumer culture in which Gen Xers were raised presented them with the opportunity to select from a vastly greater number of options. As Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:110) suggest, having passed through this formative period, Gen Xers constitute “a generation that has been marketed to death and [that] is all too aware when it is being manipulated.” This being said, Gen Xer youth culture came to

reflect the paradox of being held captive to, while at the same time reacting against, the system of “complementary behaviour.” Consumerism was firmly established in the cultural identity of this generation. As we will see, this too will prove to be of immense significance in the development of the Gen Xer peer identity and the shape of the contemporary intergenerational context in which the church is engaged in its intergenerational praxis.

4.4.1.4 Personal and Interpersonal Wholeness Adrift

In chapter three, we recounted the significant impact that a cultural *zeitgeist* of optimism had upon the formation of the highly esteemed GI and Boomer generations. In the case of Xers, however, as they passed through a tumultuous formative period, many struggled to achieve emotional, psychological and relational well-being. Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:25) identify Generation X as “the therapeutic generation;” these authors explain that, “While growing up, young Busters were often hauled off to therapy and counseling sessions. Yet despite this therapeutic culture, there seems to have never been a group so out of touch with itself—and with others.” At a very basic level, suggests Elkind (1984:6), Xer youth experienced a loss “to their basic sense of security and expectations for the future,” something not known to the same degree by earlier generations.

As the 1980s advanced, 5,000 young people were committing suicide each year, while an estimated one hundred times that many had made an unsuccessful attempt (Holtz 1995:78). By 1989, the teen suicide rate had tripled in comparison to that of thirty years earlier (Holtz 1995:77; Ford 1995:107; Rollin 1999:273). Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:21-23) suggest that such trends reflected the reality that the members of this generation were “in many ways, nearly without hope.” This lack of hope, these authors claim, was the “hallmark” of young Gen Xers (cf. Long 1997). They describe this hopelessness not so much as one that saw life as not worth living but, rather, as “a sense that despite one’s best efforts, the world may not get much better.” All other negative characteristics that would come to be commonly attributed to this generation, suggest Hahn and Verhaagen, such as “living for the immediate thrill, feeling disconnected from others, the cynical attitude, the anger,” seemed to arise from this core issue.

The root of the inner struggles of Xers has been attributed by many to the reality that, as Miller (2000:4) summarizes, Gen Xers were “the experimental project of a society testing the effects of changes in family structure and dynamics.” This generation was subject to both the “sins of omission” and the “sins of commission” of their parents (Ford 1995:158). Many were “ticked” at their parents for divorcing and not considering the impact of this decision upon them (:47). As their families went through changing configurations, many Xers experienced loneliness throughout their childhood years, while as teens they spent an average of 3.5 hours alone each day (Schneider & Stevenson 1999:192). Many of these young people were subjected to the trauma of multiple crises following divorce (changing homes, schools, etc.) (Holtz 1995:30).

It was widely assumed at that time that the children of divorce would simply “bounce back” from the experience (Holtz 1995:28). However, as Hahn and Verhaagen (1998:133) observe, “Many studies have demonstrated that children of divorce are much more likely to have a deep sense of rejection and loneliness that often persists into adulthood.” Furthermore, Hahn and Verhaagen point to specific data indicating that twenty-five percent of the children of divorce failed to complete high school, while forty percent received psychological help, and sixty-five percent had strained relationships with their parents. These children of divorce were twice as likely as their peers from two-parent homes to have such problems. Considering the vast numbers of Xers who shared this life experience, we can appreciate how widespread these issues were among the members of this generation.

For many Xers, these formative years were profoundly stressful. An annual survey of student problems conducted at Colby College in Maine persistently revealed that more than ninety percent of Xer students saw stress as their number-one problem (Long 1997:48). Those who conducted this survey expressed amazement at the pain these students had encountered through explicit exposure to divorce and other harsh social realities early in life. David Cannon (quoted in Long 1997:48) provides similar observations: “no other generation in the past has had so many vivid images brought to them by the brutality of the world...They have lived through bitter divorces that left

them feeling abandoned. They've built walls because they are human beings...but inside the wall is a little house of bricks.”

As a result of this stressful existence, conclude Celek and Zander (1996:57), a high percentage of Xers “never had the sense of support needed, never had the chance to develop a self-image—because most of your concept of who you are is developed by your family.” Ford (1995:161) similarly explains that the diminished sense of safety and security native to this generation resulted in a lack of identity and self-definition. This is compellingly demonstrated in the 1979 Coppersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, which found the average child scoring lower than 81 percent of Boomer children did in the mid-1960s (Twenge 2006:52). Essentially, as Elkind (1984:9) suggests, in the midst of the stress posed by family life, Xers faced a “lack of pressure-free time to construct a theory of self,” as well as a lack of the proper ingredients for doing so. Because the family is so central to the healthy development and understanding of emotions, many within this generation became disconnected from themselves and others (Hahn & Verhaagen 1996:26).

In turn, the psychosocial weight of the fragmented and broken Gen X formative years seriously harmed the capacity of many Gen Xers to develop and enjoy healthy relationships (Ford 1995:161). In fact, this generation has been heralded as having been plagued with relational dysfunction to a degree foreign to any previous generation (Putnam 2000:260-261). Hahn and Verhaagen (1998:95) hint at the depth of this reality:

Xers do not theorize about relational brokenness; they live in it day after day. Xer literature and music describe the feelings of being a stranger in a strange land, of being homesick for a home we never had, and of despairing of finding real relationships. We cap this with a cynical spin (“It’s the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine,” sang REM’s Michael Stipe in a generational anthem) but beneath the irony and denial our loneliness and alienation hurt us deeply.

Schroeder (2002:59) offers similar reflections:

I see the fallout in my generation. People perpetually unattached, living through a series of disconnecting half-relationships, or attached in hollow relationships. Or, sadder still, opting out altogether, somehow just too tight, too fearful to connect. Those who cannot let go of judgment or guilt. Those who run away, over and over. Those who pretend they can make a clean break. Those who slide into dissipation and dissolution. Drug abuse. Alcoholism. Sex addiction.

In essence, in the face of the ambiguity and uncertainty that plagued their own self-concept, many Xers experienced trouble relating meaningfully to others (Hahn & Verhaagen 1998:19). As Haan and Verhaagen note, “They [had] difficulty in family relationships, dating relationships, and friendships.” As they struggled with feelings of loneliness, abandonment, and alienation, many felt disconnected from any sense of belonging or community (Mahedi & Bernardi 1994:19, 31; Celek & Zander 1996:25). Thus, one early 1990s survey found nearly one-half of Gen Xers expressing the desire for more friends (Barna 1994:112).

In turn, the level of distrust and defensiveness exhibited by Gen Xers was seen by many as higher than in past generations (Tapia 1994:2; Hicks & Hicks 1999:285; Putnam 2000:260-261). Mahedi and Bernardi (1994:21) suggest that the “survival technique” of distrust actually sets Gen X apart from all other generations. The fundamental relational question of Xers, according to Beaudoin (1998:140), came to be “Will you be there for me?” Hahn and Verhaagen (1998:142) provide further insight into the impact of this pervasive distrust: “Because of their early experiences, they are often insecure in relationships, fearing negative evaluation and rejection. Often they desire intimacy yet fear it at the same time. Many cope by creating emotional distance. They become self-reliant.” Many of these Gen Xers mastered the survival technique of drawing as little attention as possible to what they were feeling. As Strauss and Howe (1992:330) observed, “they know how to keep others from knowing what they’re hearing, watching, or thinking.” Furthermore, many Xers learned to survive by adapting their personalities in various settings in “chameleon-like” fashion (Rosen 2001:13-46). All the while, however, as Celek and Zander (1996:36) discovered through many years of working with Xers, many were “groping around for support, validation, and nurturing.” As we will see in the pages that follow, even in adulthood these struggles have continued to factor prominently in the lives of Gen Xers.

4.5 Drifting toward Adulthood

In chapter three, we explored the revolutionary efforts of the Boomer generation to transform the core institutions of society. In contrast to the Boomer era, however, during the Xer emergence into young adulthood, no such revolutionary attempts to

transform society have taken place. As they emerged from a formative passage permeated with brokenness and marginalization, Xers too had little tolerance for “the system” (Ford 1995:74). However, the manner in which they have chosen to express this distaste is profoundly different from that of their predecessors.

Writing in the early days of Xer young adulthood, Rushkoff (1994:3, 5) chose to describe the Xer reaction to the “unrealistic expectations” of a Boomer dominated world as an apathetic “distancing” from the system. More recently, Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:51-52) have observed that, while Xers have not rebelled against authority in the same way as Boomers, they have chosen instead to “buck the system” by being non-traditional and by forging new opportunities. In the end, this reaction has had a deeply profound impact on the system. Suggest Mahedy and Bernardi (1994:118), “Xers are radical in the original meaning of that word, which translates roughly as ‘people who go to the root.’ They are quietly beginning to uproot the present system by creating an alternative.” Indeed, suggests Miller (2000:6), Gen Xers actually are yearning to see something more arise from relationships and the exercise of authority than they have known in the past (Miller 2000:6). Why have Xers chosen this path of “quiet revolution” and what does it entail? What impact has this contribution of Generation X had upon the American intergenerational landscape? If the church is to discover ways to engage in effective and faithful intergenerational praxis amid its current intergenerational context, it is essential that these questions be entertained seriously.

4.5.1 A Post-modern Generation

Thus far in this study, we have been advocating for a progressive evolutionary understanding of the development of generational culture. Certainly, we have seen evidence of this in the above description of social institutions and forces that shaped the Gen X formative years. Nonetheless, with the emergence of Gen X into young adulthood, some observers began to take note of profoundly discontinuous values evident among the members of this cohort. While several factors contributed to these discontinuous values, none has been more significant than the fact that Generation X has held a pivotal place in history as the first post-modern generation.

As Generation X emerged from its formative years, a compelling chorus of observers began to draw attention to this intimate relationship between Gen X and post-modernity. Best and Kellner (1997:34), for example, while seeing post-modernism manifested among intellectual Boomers on university campuses, saw it most broadly evident among Gen Xers. Many other scholars through the years have chosen to affirm this characterization of Gen X as the first “*fully* post-modern” generation (Tapia 1994; Ford 1995:113; Long 1997:7; Van Gelder 1998:44; Miller 1996; Rabey 2001; Smith 2001:144; Benke & Benke 2002:31; Carroll & Roof 2002:77; Hudson 2004). As Grenz (1996:13) noted in the mid-1990s, post-modernism “pervades the consciousness of the emerging generation” and “constitutes a radical break with the assumptions of the past.”

Several authors have made a point to note that Gen X’s relationship to post-modernism is largely the result of this generation’s “age location within history.” For example, Miller (1996:7) asserts that, “While all of us have felt the effects of these changes, no one has felt them more than those born from 1965 to 1981...The term ‘postmodern’ captures the mood and reality of a generation caught between the modern age and the future yet to be born.” Sacks (1996:110) describes Gen Xers as “a product of their culture and of their place in history...the progeny of the very same transformation of society toward the postmodern that has changed not just young people, but virtually the entire culture.” This being the case, asserts Sacks (:109), Xers should not be blamed for their post-modern worldview, “But neither are parents, latchkeys, and generation gaps to blame.” Rather, he insists, “There seemed to be something larger at work,” by which he means the post-modern paradigm shift.

While this may be true, Xers have not merely been shaped passively by post-modernism. Rather, there is a sense in which this generation actively “took” the post-modern turn during the 1980s and 1990s (Best & Kellner 1997:4). Best and Kellner (:11, 25) explain that, while the generation of the 1960s initiated the post-modern discourse, it was primarily younger individuals and groups who picked it up during the 1980s and 1990s, often in more extreme and aggressive forms, rejecting modern theory *en toto*. For the members of this generation, post-modernism became a sign of identity and a weapon against their elders (:12). Thus, we find authors like Dockery (2001:13) choosing to characterize Generation X as a “disillusioned” cohort that has

brought post-modern assumptions to all aspects of life. The result, he suggests, is a new generation facing life with new presuppositions. The prevalence of the post-modern worldview within its ranks, asserts Ford (1995:113), causes this to be a generation that thinks and perceives differently than their predecessors. As “avid producers and consumers of postmodern culture,” Gen Xers are aggressively promoting the post-modern, suggest Best and Kellner (1997:12).

At this point, two closely related points of clarification must be advanced. First, as Conder (2006:99) cautions, “Generational demographics and the emerging culture transition are often two very different issues.” Thus, it would be inappropriate to attempt somehow to correlate “Gen X” and “post-modernism” as one and the same issue. Second, numerous authors have offered the caution that it is unwise and inaccurate to characterize post-modernism as though it is purely an epistemological matter (Raschke 2004:11). Riddell (1998:102), for example, expresses that “[t]he words ‘postmodernism’ and ‘emerging culture’ are substantially interchangeable.” Moore (1994:127) describes post-modernism as “first and foremost a global cultural phenomenon.” Drane (2000:94-95) posits that the “pop cultural” facet of post-modernism is grounded less in adopting its philosophical vision than reacting against the deficiencies of the Enlightenment worldview. In contemplating the way in which post-modernism manifests itself culturally, Van Gelder (1998:38) suggests that the extent and implications of this shift are not yet altogether clear. Nonetheless, while we must be careful to maintain that “Gen X” and “post-modernism” are not synonymous concepts, we can acknowledge that, at this point in history, Generation X provides our first wide-spread glimpse at the cultural manifestation of the praxis of post-modernism.

Whereas previous generations have been guided by absolute visions of reality rooted in modern assumptions, the influence of post-modernism has led massive numbers of Gen Xers to reject such a notion. Miller (2000:8) expresses that, for many Gen Xers,

reality is simply not that neat and simple. The possibility of universal principles is rejected, abandoned because they too often reflect someone's narrow self-interest. Xers tend to believe that values and metaphysical affirmations are conditioned by people in positions of power, with a desire to control others. Hence, the task of the critical thinker is to deconstruct all claims to supposed absolute truth.

In short, the concept of objective or absolute truth is largely absent among the members of this generation. In the view of many members of this generation, *truth* is completely subjective, even perhaps belonging within the realm of opinion. As Hahn and Verhaagen (1998:16) explain, “Something is ‘true’ only insofar as it is ‘true’ for each individual.” This is evidenced rather compellingly by one mid-1990s survey in which more than seventy percent of the members of Generation X affirmed the assertion that there is no such thing as absolute truth (Zustiak 1999:73-74).

Miller (1996:16) suggests that the influence of post-modernism has engendered in Xers a tendency toward “constant questioning” that “rattles” their elders. Post-modernism seems to have fostered within the ranks of Generation X an attitude of scepticism and suspicion. In an early 1990s survey, Barna (1994:22) found fifty-seven percent of Gen Xers choosing to describe themselves as sceptical. As Sacks (1996:124) notes from his experience among Gen X college students, the impact of post-modernism has caused the members of this generation to tend to question authority and truth claims. Thus, it often is more fashionable for Xers to remain sceptical than to commit to a concept. Moore (2001:1850) explains that, “In their minds, any new idea is wrong until proven right.”

Many Xers have found the reasonableness of this sceptical disposition to be confirmed by their own experience. As Xers Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:29) observe, this generation has developed a “realistic” view of the world as a place in which “there are no easy answers.” Smith and Clurman (1997:82) suggest that this realism is attributable in part to the fact that, “In their formative years, Xers discovered that no one was who they believed they were.” As they watched the unfolding of scandals that compromised the credibility of numerous institutions and the dignity of various positions of authority, this profoundly informed this generation’s view of the world (cf. Holtz 1995:206). In addition, the uncertainty of the members of this generation has been fuelled by its immersion in the pluralistic “information age” and “global village”, as exposure to a multiplicity of ideas has rendered belief in absolutes difficult. As Ford (1995:60) suggests, this led to “information overload.” Furthermore, the virtual “reality” and commercialism to which they were exposed throughout their formative years taught Xers to be sceptical toward much of what they see and hear.

Amid this post-modern ethos, Xers have adopted an experiential, internal approach to knowledge that sets them apart from the generations that preceded them (Lynch 2002:119-120). This assertion is supported by the research of Barna (1994:69), who found two-thirds of young Xers lending assent to the statement “nothing can be known for certain except the things that you experience in your own life.” This shift toward experiential knowledge has been reinforced by “the ascendancy of images over printed words” (Flory 2000:234). As Miller (2000:9) suggests, “What is distinctive about Xers is that subjective knowing is valued above propositional truth...The quest for higher forms of knowing is not abandoned entirely, but such truths are better embodied in stories and myth than in dogma and doctrine.” Thus, most Xers do not attempt to establish truth rationally, but trust their experience to determine whether something is worthy of attention (Celek & Zander 1996:48). Feeling and relationships supersede logic and reason (Ford 1995:115). “Unused to linear thought,” says Moore (2001:185), in their quest for knowledge, Xers “can hold onto several thoughts at once” (cf. Ford 1995:129).

Unfortunately, however, their formation amid the post-modern abandonment of meta-narratives caused Gen Xers to reach adulthood, in the words of Beaudoin (1998:10), “in the absence of a theme, and even with a theme of absence” (cf. Ford 1995:25). Miller (1996:61) has suggested that “the society at large provides little in the way of a value system to which Postmoderns can move.” Many Xers are conscious that they lack a satisfactory values system. For many Xers, values end up amounting to little more than that which brings personal satisfaction (Miller 1996:61). However, many within this generation are aware that the lack of a common story has left them disconnected and inwardly focused. While their formative experiences have taught them “to give others their space,” Xers find themselves struggling to find a meaningful basis on which to build community (Miller 2000:9).

4.5.2 A Fragmented Generation

In chapter three, we saw how previous generations appropriated their collective energies and convictions toward impacting the shape of broader society. In the case of Xers, however, a fundamental sense of shared identity and ideology has been

notably missing. Reifschneider (1999:19) expresses that, “If there is one thing to know about this generation, it is that we do not like labels. To overgeneralize, lump all of us into a single category, and stick on a label is insulting.” This is evident in a 1990s *American Demographic* study that revealed only fifteen percent of those who could be classified as Gen Xers as being willing to associate themselves with a generation at all (Bagby 1998:6) and an MTV survey that found less than ten percent of Gen Xers willing to acknowledge that “Generation X” even existed (:222). Perhaps this can be understood in large part as a reaction to the reality that, as has already been mentioned, the “Gen X” label largely was assigned to this generation by their elders and the generational caricature attached to this title was an unflattering one (:8). As Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:50) suggest, the tendency of the members of this generation to reject the Xer label may reflect their awareness that, in being defined by “what they are not”, this implies an unfavourable comparison to their Boomer elders. Furthermore, posits Cunningham (2006:51), perhaps this aversion to labelling reflects that young adults “don’t want to be known for who we are now”, but for “who we are becoming.”

However, these statistics might also be understood as indicative of the fragmentary condition of this generation. Ford (1995:24-25) questions whether Gen X may actually constitute an “anti-culture”; if so, he notes, this likely has profound implications for the degree to which an identifiable outlook and shared values can be recognized among the members of this generation. Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:18), both Xers, suggest that “[w]e are certainly a generation without any cohesive identity.” In fact, these authors insist, because the post-modern reality has left this generation with no shared moral or spiritual system of belief, this has produced among its members a sense of disconnectedness, fragmentation, and alienation from one another (:37-38, 39). It is interesting to note that some empirical studies conducted among Gen Xers have revealed an intriguingly contradictory insistence that they do not share common characteristics and a willingness to discuss such characteristics (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:145).

The fragmentation by which this generation is characterized stands in stark contrast from the experiences of the generations surveyed above. Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:42-43) explain the distinguishing significance of this fragmentary experience:

In generations past, young people gladly affiliated with and felt an affinity toward each other. Other generations were made up of a diverse group of individuals too but ultimately they sensed a kinship with each other. To say that a group of young people represented a “generation” was accepted as conventional wisdom...Most [Xers] seem almost to wince at being grouped together...Each member has come to see him- or herself as intensely different from others.

Strauss and Howe (1997a:234) offer a similar perspective:

Compared to any other generation born this century, theirs is less cohesive, its experiences wider, its ethnicity more polyglot, and its culture more splintery. Yet all this is central to their collective persona. From music to politics to academics to income, today’s young adults define themselves by sheer divergence, a generation less knowable for its core than by its bits and pieces.

In light of these realities, it is understandable that Gen Xers lack a sense of identification with others of similar age. As an outside observer to this generation, Wuthnow (2007:5) actually questions whether it actually possesses the shared experience and distinctive characteristics to warrant being considered as a true generational cohort. However, though this may appear as something of a paradoxical claim, it seems fair to assert, as Strauss and Howe have done, that this experience of fragmentation has come to be one of the most “unifying” aspects of the Gen Xer peer personality.

4.5.3 The Barriers to Adulthood

Throughout chapters three and four, we have chronicled how the period of “adolescence” has become increasingly separated from its original purpose of preparing young people to assume adult roles within society. In section 3.5.2.2, we took note of the tendency among young Boomers to “delay” the transition into adulthood. Among Xers, however, the extension of adolescence reached unprecedented proportions. The rejection of the objective of maturity within the Boomer generation, and the regressive reaction of many Silents, was followed by the widespread lack of familiarity with the marks of maturity among many Xers. Miller (1996:161), drawing upon the influential work of Robert Bly (1977, 1996), characterized young Gen Xers as living in “a society of siblings.” He provides this explanation: “Rather than venerate our elders and care for our children, we all seem to stay in adolescence. We have all become half-adults. We want to play but we don’t want to lead.”

In this sibling society, one saturated with the trappings of pop culture, Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:24) observe, “fun is often the operative word.” Thus, as Dunn (1993:105) suggested at a time when many Xers were just beginning to come of age, many within this generations expressed their resistance toward embracing the full responsibilities of adulthood by continuing to surround themselves with the props of childhood (video game, adventure equipment, toys, etc.). As vast numbers of Xers continued beyond high school with university training, this provided a context for the continuing cultivation of a distinct youth culture (Wuthnow 2007:36). Schneider and Stevenson (1999:5-6) characterize the experience common to many members of this generation: “Most young people do not take on full-time jobs after high school. Instead, they enroll in college, where many of them will remain for more than four years. They are likely to leave school later, marry later, and have children later.” Wuthnow (2007:10-11) suggests that this is a statistical reality:

Comparing statistics in 2000 with statistics in 1960...completing all the major transitions (leaving home, finishing school, becoming financially independent, getting married, and having a child) was achieved by only 46 percent of women and 31 percent of men age 30 in 2000, compared with 77 percent of women and 65 percent of men of the same age in 1960...[M]ore Americans are coming of age at forty than ever before.

For this generation, changes in educational norms certainly contributed to this lengthening of the adolescent incubation period and reinforced a distinct youth culture.

However, while social structures like university training may have played a significant role in enabling the Xer delay of adulthood, there was more at work below the surface. In part, the pain and anxiety that had characterized the Xer formative years also hindered their readiness to assume roles within adult society. Xers were formed by a world that in some respects withheld from them the option of growing up, while in other ways forced them to grow up too quickly (Reifschneider 1999:25). For example, one study conducted among nineteen to twenty-nine year old Xers who had experienced the divorce of their parents found that one-third had “little or no ambition” ten years later (Long 1997:43). Furthermore, as Miller and Miller (2000:7) explain, many Xers were “rushed by socially aggressive, upwardly mobile parents from one activity to another. No time to relax, to take it easy, to seek out a higher

good and more authentic way of being” (cf. Ford 1995:25-26). As a result, Miller and Miller (2000:7) found new priorities emerging among the young members of this generation: “Being mellow is a great virtue for many Xers. Perhaps in response to the workaholism of their parents, Xers take a different view of time...Goals are okay, but everything will happen in its own time and in its own way.”

Furthermore, the Xer hesitancy to embrace adulthood was impacted by the lack of clear signposts available to the members of this generation. Miller (1996:8) observes that the young members of this fragmented generation were “a diverse group united by a single theme: ‘How do I make it in a world with no rules and no blueprint for the future?’” Simply stated, many Xers adopted a “survivor” mentality. This determination for survival motivated Xers to take a pragmatic approach to life; while their Boomer predecessors exemplified a pragmatism motivated by ideological conviction and a sense of mission, among Xers such pragmatism was rooted in the need to be “modular” within an unpredictable and often inhospitable world (Smith & Clurman 1997:100-101). In part, this survivor mentality reinforced this generation’s sceptical disposition (Long 1997:45). However, it also fostered as a key skill, “not innovation, but adaptation” (:39, 41). Notes Ford (1995:26), young Xers proved less serious and philosophical than their Boomer elders.

Lacking a larger sense of purpose, this generation steeped in a world of anxiety, fragmentation, and marginalization demonstrated a tendency to “live for the moment” (Hahn & Verhaagen 1996:24; Long 1997:138). While on the surface this appeared similar to the Boomer preoccupation with “living for today,” in reality it was distinct in that it did not arise from Xers feeling assured about the future, but rather because of their sense that they could not count on it. As Smith and Clurman (1997:84) observed, “They do what they can today while the opportunity still exists.” Thus, in one late 1990s survey, seventy-nine percent of Xers described themselves as preferring to do things on the spur of the moment, a figure that far outnumbers the members of elder generations expressing affinity for this preference (:87). Hence, perhaps we should find it unsurprising that many young Xers struggled to identify and implement personal goals (Twenge 2006:138).

This lack of purpose stands in stark contrast to that of the young Boomers whose experience of economic prosperity presented them with the freedom to pursue the meaning of life. As they emerged into young adulthood, many Xers were preoccupied with more pragmatic matters. When Xer freshman entered college in 1987 (identified by some as the heart of the Xer college years), this marked a twenty-year low in the identification of a “meaningful philosophy of life” as the most important goal among freshman survey respondents, with only thirty-nine percent selecting it. That same year also marked a twenty-year high in “being well-off financially” as the value rated highest among freshman and was the peak year for interest in majoring in business. Such trends, concludes Beaudoin (1998:140), “suggest that securing a future (forging one’s own answer to ‘Will you be there for me?’) had prime interest.” One Xer student explained the reason for this trend: “As it seems that we cannot depend on love or acceptance, this generation has turned to the two things that we can depend on, material goods and ourselves” (quoted in Bagby 1998:31).

The struggles native to this generation also were manifested in the reality that, to an even greater extent than was true for the Boomers, Xers tended to lengthen the delay of their entrance into marriage (Ritchie 1995:144-145; Wuthnow 2007:22-23). By 1997, the median age of first marriage had risen to twenty-seven years old, a considerable increase from twenty-three in 1974 (Crouch 2001:83). However, unlike Boomers, who largely delayed marriage and parenthood for the sake of individual freedom, many Xers expressed a desire to experience an intimate family life. The delay they experienced in embracing marriage and parenthood was largely the residual effect of the fear and brokenness arising out of their own formative experience (Dunn 1993:97; Reifschneider 1999:30; Cunningham 2006:50). As Miller (2000:4) suggests, as Gen Xers emerged into their young adult years, the inadequacy of their formative experiences left many in a state of confusion regarding the meaning of love. Many simply lacked familiarity with good models of healthy relationships (Ford 1995:79).

As a result, for many young adult Xers, “hanging out” continued to be an important aspect of life (Miller 2000:4). Watters (2003:1-12) demonstrates that the Xer delay of marriage actually gave rise to a new social configuration: “urban tribes” of unmarried young adults who increasingly were waiting until their late-twenties and thirties to

become married and who continued to share a cultural identity largely dominated by pop culture. This is significant, for Long (1997:142) insists that the “tribal group” has served as the primary arena in which the members of this post-modern generation have constructed their understanding of the world. Watters (2003:204-213) notes that, as we might expect, increasing numbers of Gen Xers have found their way into marriage with the passage of years (cf. Dunn 1993:97). However, the delay experienced by these Xers not only has affected their marital status, but also has contributed to their sustained experience of a cultural framework that is distinct in many respects from that of their elders.

Though unprecedented numbers of Gen Xers attended college in their young adult years, their professional and economic prospects were somewhat limited. As these Gen Xers progressed into their adult years, the theme of marginalization followed them into the workforce. As Smith and Clurman (1997:81, 82) suggest, Xers have never been able to presume success or to take anything for granted. With job prospects being limited in a workforce dominated by Boomers, many young Gen Xers found themselves stranded in “McJobs,” doing whatever necessary to make ends meet. Some found it necessary to maintain multiple jobs (Ford 1995:46). Such limited job prospects caused many Xers to adopt a pessimistic perspective regarding their opportunities for advancement (Holtz 1995:150; Twenge 2006:138). In turn, many social analysts have predicted that this would be the first in many American generations of young adults not to inherit a quality of life superior to that of their parents. Furthermore, as Holtz (1995:116) suggests, this is the first time in 300 years that the rising generation has not shared the optimism enjoyed by its parents.

In addition, the Xer advance into adulthood was hindered by the uneasiness of the members of this generation toward the traditional institutions of society. Whereas previous generations invested vigorously in the life of America’s traditional institutions, the disappointments Xers encountered throughout their formative years engendered within them a distinct lack of confidence in these institutions (Tapia 1994:2). Cohen (1993:307) asserts that this generation “grew up in an age in which the traditional social institutions were seen as corrupt, and in which scandal was the norm.” As a result, as Hine (1999:280) comments, “Most believe that just about every institution they come in contact with is stupid.” Xers have not been alone in

possessing this lack of confidence, note Smith and Clurman (1997:102-103): “In this respect, they mirror everyone else, but while [GI’s and Silents] lived most of their lives with confidence in these institutions and Boomers started out with confidence, Xers have lived their entire lives believing no institution can be trusted.” Having grown up in an era in which distrust of all large institutions became rampant, Xers never knew anything other than institutional decline (Strauss & Howe 1997a:174, 238-239).

In addition, many young Xers found institutional involvement to be difficult simply because they found the very act of making commitments to be difficult. As Hahn and Verhaagen (1998:39) express, “We have been burned in relationships and by institutions, which means that we are slow to join or commit.” Richard Peace (quoted in Rabey 2001:127) offers a similar perspective in suggesting that the members of this generation could not make commitments “because they’ve never had much experience with commitments working out. Whenever they’ve made commitments in the past—to family, school, employers, relationships—they’ve gotten burned and bruised” (cf. Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:52). Furthermore, the concept of commitment was particularly difficult because many Xers “were never called to commitment by their parents because their parents never made any commitments to their children.” Thus, for these Xers, “commitment is a foreign concept” (Long 1997:147). However, as one Xer who gives presentations to older generations about the myths and realities surrounding Generation X has summarized, the members of this generation “are not disloyal and uncommitted, as so many people claim, but rather they are cautious investors in a world which has taught them to expect little from institutional relationship” (quoted in Rabey 2001:130).

This lack of confidence toward the institutions of society seems to have contributed profoundly to the fragmentary character of this generation. Suggests Cohen (1993:300), “There does not seem to be any institutional ‘we’ that [Xers] want to join, no ‘us’ to which they can proudly belong.” Cohen (1993:302) continues by assessing this lack of institutional commitment in light of the post-modern condition: “The reluctance of people in their twenties to commit their loyalty to the nation’s traditional social institutions would not be so worrisome if there were something else to unite us...And even if they were inclined to join—which most are not—no widespread

social movement currently exists that could rally the twentysomething generation.” Some observers suspect that this cynicism toward institutions was, in actuality, youthful idealism that had never been given the luxury of being expressed. As Reifschneider (1999:27) explains, “Our indifferent attitude, which many of our elders note, is a way for us to mask our anger and frustration about the world we live in. The very institutions and leaders that helped our parents and the generations before them are the things we don’t trust.” As a result, notes Cohen (1993:307) in assessing the situation common among Gen Xer young adults, the members of this generation “seem to be waiting—not only for a hero, but also for a mission.”

4.5.4 The Redefinition of Adult Priorities

In light of the profound challenges that characterized the formative years of this generation, the influence of post-modernism in their ranks, and the continued struggles with which they have been faced in adulthood, it perhaps is not surprising that many Xers have adopted markedly distinct values regarding the meaning of “growing up” (Mays 2001:70). As we suggested above, this generation is challenging the “system” in its own way and is going back to the “roots” of society. Having learned from the career-driven errors of their parents, many prefer to prioritize friends and family. They are making extraordinary efforts to create balance between work and home (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:54, 163). In essence, they have adopted a “kick back and chill” mentality, valuing relationships over results (Celek & Zander 1996:32). They work to live, rather than living to work, as some of their predecessors have seemed to do. As Barna (1994:103) has observed, many Xers “gain stability and energy from non-occupational pursuits. Leisure, flexibility, independence and recreation are of the utmost importance.” Suggests Moore (2001:137), “they prize control of their time.”

The priority Xers place on relationships factors prominently in the values they espouse. As Hahn and Verhaagen (1998:21) suggest, in many ways the “hunger and thirst” of this generation for authentic relationships and community “are more salient, more obvious than they were in past generations” (cf. Twenge 2006:110). Xers have evidenced a yearning to find a context in which they can know the security of a family, one in which they can experience love and lasting, authentic relationships that

extend beyond mutual gratification (Celek & Zander 1996:58-59; McIntosh 1997:42-44; Hahn & Verhaagen 1998:120). Early research by Barna (1994:49) supported this conclusion, revealing “having close friendships” to be deemed considerably more desirable by this generation than by older adults; in fact, a majority of Gen Xers were shown to consider friends to be more important than “religion” (:61). Similarly, Smith and Clurman (1997:104) found that, in responding to a survey question about which areas of life need to see the restoration of more traditional standards, Xers were less likely than their elders to cite any category, with only two exceptions: sexual relationships and social relationships. These authors conclude that, because of their formative experiences, Xers have come to view these matters as needing “more conservative caretaking.” Realizing that they cannot survive alone, Xers have elevated the importance of community in their lives.

Celek and Zander (1996:76) insist that Gen Xers are “putting relationships at the top of their redefinition of the American dream.” As Barna (1994:38) observes, they have “outrightly rejected the impersonal, short-term, fluid relational character of their parents” and have “veered more toward traditional, longer term relationships.” Hahn and Verhaagen (1998:135) suggest that this means that “community—open, safe, inclusive relationships in which people help each other rather than compete—is the highest value of this generation.” Furthermore, “Authenticity is championed among the members of this generation as a key relational value”, suggests Cunningham (2006:75-76). For the many Gen Xers who grew up in broken homes, references to friends as “family” are not mere “sentimental, idle chatter.” For some, friends serve as a “surrogate” family and provide a more stable sense of belonging than did their parents or siblings (Ford 1995:79; Hahn & Verhaagen 1998:135, 172-173; Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:89; Cunningham 2006:33).

While deeply held by Xers, the painful reality is that these relational values are imperfectly embodied. While Xers desire to be loyal to those they permit to enter their lives (Long 1997:97), at the same time many are proving ill-equipped to attain the relational objectives they value so highly. As Hahn and Verhaagen (1998:172-173) observe, “The great irony is that we are less well equipped to connect and live in community than almost any other generation.” These authors suggest that, for a generation so fully immersed in a context of relational fragmentation and consumerist

individualism, there often is little substance behind the rhetoric of community (Hahn & Verhaagen 1996:120-121). Rabey (2001:71) shares this perspective, offering the observation that “there are indications that the brokenness and alienation that many young people have experienced makes them more hungry for community but also may make them less able to create and sustain it.” Furthermore, the reality of transience within contemporary life makes the development and sustaining of meaningful friendships difficult. Hence, many Xers have yet to achieve a more satisfying approach to relationships, a reality that for many has only been the source of added frustration. Nonetheless, they remain determined in their pursuit of this crowning value.

In addition, while Xers have been characterized as a generation lacking a clear mission and one concerned with matters of survival, they do desire to make a difference in the world. As we have suggested above, Xers are endeavouring to impact the “system” in their own way. Many Xers insist that, in the face of dramatic social changes, they are not concerned with “changing things,” but rather with “fixing things” (Long 1997:39-41). Miller (1996:8) explains that Xers “are ready to have their say about the world we are now creating...They too want a better future for themselves and their children” (cf. Reifschneider 1999:31).

However, suggests Miller (2000:6), in contrasting this generation with their idealistic Boomer elders, Xers cannot be fooled into thinking that they can change the world: “They have by and large given up on large-scale utopian schemes.” Douglas Rushkoff (quoted in Bagby 1998:30) asserts that, “Unlike the Boomers, who need to feel they are working to promote a positive system or to dismantle a negative one...[Xers] don’t need causes to rally behind;” rather, for this generation, “The real issues, ones that agendas only mask, are quite plain to us already.” Thus, Miller (2000:6) concludes, Xers “are working for practical change in their own lives, those of a few close friends, and, when feeling expansive, that of their neighborhood.” This was evident in the early Xer adult years as Barna (1994:49) found “exerting influence in the lives of others” to be considered more desirable by Xers than by older adults. Serving others has come to be viewed as a “way of restoring their world and bringing some wholeness to themselves as well” (Cepek & Zander 1996:139).

Despite the “slacker” image that has followed this generation throughout its life course, evidence has suggested that Xers have been “more personally active in making a difference in the world than earlier generations” (Rabey 2001:132). For example, a survey conducted by the Josephson Institute in the late 1990s revealed that Gen Xers engaged in voluntary action more than any of the generations by which they were preceded (Bagby 1998:16). Bagby (:30) clarifies that the realism of this generation causes them to address problems “head on.” Hence, Xers tend to focus upon tangible projects. Strauss and Howe (1992:333) capture the reason for this preference: “when you do something real...you do something that matters.” However, in contrast to the highly visible contributions of the generations by which they were preceded, the practical focus of this generation means that the “battles” faced by its members as they work toward a better world are taking place largely “without a headline” (Bagby 1998:35, 37). Their commitment is to doing good on a smaller, more localized scale (Ford 1995:38-39, 75).

While Xers may not be engaged in a grand program to transform their world, their approach to life does pose a challenge to the institutions of society. Xers bring to their assessment of contemporary institutions a strong emphasis on matters of justice and fairness. They are keenly sensitive to injustice (Bourne 1997:103). Ritchie (1995:39) provides valuable insight by noting that this sensitivity is rooted in the reality that “Xers experienced, and were required to assume, an independence in household responsibility unmatched by any previous generation.” Essentially, because the members of this “latchkey” generation grew up accustomed to making independent decisions, many came into adulthood expecting to be able to have a say in the projects with which they are involved (Celek & Zander 1996:32). Moore (2001:160) provides a similar perspective: “Largely self-reared, they learned to make their own decisions at an early age. They had to produce or be left out. They expect control over their environment from the first day on the job. They arrive as peers to the veterans.”

In addition, Xer attitudes toward institutional structures have been influenced by the post-modern “flattening” of authority. As Long (1997:156) suggests, once they are “in the door,” they want to be empowered to become a meaningful part of the community. As a result, “paying your dues” is not native to the Xer vocabulary, nor

does the concept of “chain of command” garner unquestioning Xer allegiance (Long 1997:45). As Martin and Tulgan (2002:32) suggest, “not only do they want to participate in decision making like Silents and Boomers, they want instant access to the people making those decisions.” Thus, Xers possess a strong reaction to the culture of control (Staub 2003; www.christianitytoday.com).

Where they sense that their contribution is not welcomed or appreciated, suggests Long (1997:154), “While not attacking hierarchy directly, they just ignore authority or work around it because as a group they learned to survive in their youth by avoiding conflict.” Long adds that Xers “want to be appreciated for what they have to offer.” Furthermore, because of their struggles with insecurity and distrust, if Gen Xers sense that they will not receive adequate support, they may withhold or withdraw their participation. Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:128) suggest that, as Xers engage in group process, the value assigned each individual participant “overrides the concern for broad goals and plans;” however, these authors are quick to clarify that the Xer desire to view individuals within the context of community “is an important nuance here that sets this value [on the individual] apart from the rampant individualism of American Boomer culture.” Beneath the “bottom line” lies a concern for how goals and actions affect people and their relationships to one another (Miller 1996:16). The challenges posed by these values for institutional life have been felt throughout American society, as is reflected in several books devoted to helping members of elder generations understand how to attract, retain, and work with Xers in a variety of professional and non-profit contexts.

Unfortunately, on many fronts, the institutional conditions that Xers have encountered in adulthood have not tended to inspire their long-term commitment and participation (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:52). In response to this, consistent with what was affirmed above regarding Xers “bucking the system,” many within this generation have shown a propensity for entrepreneurialism. Smith and Clurman (1997:102) suggest that the experiences of Xers have led them to conclude that they must fend for themselves because “no one’s going to give me anything.” Thus, they have developed “resourceful,” “cunning,” “initiative,” and “finesse” that make them well suited to pioneer their own entrepreneurial endeavours. As evidence of this, many authors point to the fact that Gen Xers are starting more businesses than any of

their forebears. Reifschneider (1999:30) reflects upon this trend: “Overall interest in corporate careers is at an all-time low. No one wants to put their time into a company sitting in a cubicle waiting for a big opportunity that may never come...A University of Michigan study concluded that 25- to 34 year olds are trying to start their own businesses at three times the rate of 35- to 55-year-olds” (cf. Bagby 1998:20).

Because, from the perspective of this generation, traditional institutions “just haven’t appeared to work,” entrepreneurially minded Gen Xers have embraced control of their own “destiny” as a main goal (Bagby 1998:173). McIntosh (1997:41) expands why this is so:

They believe they can control their own destiny; make themselves do whatever is possible; make themselves become whatever they long to be. They want to serve in organizations that tolerate a broader personal style...They want to serve where they can get satisfaction from their involvement. You might say they are ‘constructively rebellious.’ They get things done but not necessarily the way others expect them to. They would rather be where the action is than climb the traditional ladder of success. Adaptability and energy are their strong points. They are frustrated by predictability and lack of continual progress. They thrive in a creative, dynamic environment where they enjoy work and are evaluated on what they actually accomplish rather than the style of their dress.

In light of these realities, concludes Bagby (1998:176), it is fair to characterize “[being] in control as opposed to being controlled” as “the *raison d’être*” of Gen X entrepreneurs; “Control of one’s ideas, working with the people you care about and want around you...these are the hallmarks of Generation X.” Hornblower (1997:62) expresses these values from a Gen Xer perspective: “We certainly don’t want to be chained to a desk for forty hours or more a week until we turn 65. We crave independence and autonomy. Xers want the flexibility to make our own schedules. We don’t want to miss out on a personal or family life in lieu of a career.”

This generation, formed in a world of discontinuous values, clearly has come to pose some interesting challenges for the system of society. As we will see in chapter five, the values and priorities of this rising generation also are posing significant challenges to many established churches. How are these churches choosing to respond to the challenges presented by this generation? We will address this question at length in chapter five. However, it will be helpful for us to consider this question against the backdrop of a more full-fledged understanding of the place that has been established

for this generation the within society at large. It is to precisely such a consideration that we will turn now.

4.5.5 Intergenerational Marginalization Persists

As Xers have struggled to find their way and construct their own values within a complex world, the disdain directed toward them at the hand of other generations has followed them into their adult years. As Miller (1996:115) notes, during the Gen X young adult years, older generations came to view this generation as “a struggling, unsuccessful group who are not making it as their elders did.” Rushkoff (1994:3) suggests that young Xers were seen by their elders as a despondent, hopeless generation, the “mutant children of a society temporarily gone awry...Most people from outside Generation X condemn the twentysomethings.” At the time of his writing, he posited that most analysts characterized Gen X, at best, as a market segment and, at worst, the destruction of Western society (:4). Zustiak (1999:162) suggests that some members of the older generations found the cultural differences evident among Xers “repugnant.” As a result, he notes, older adults tended “to either avoid [Xers] or criticize them. This has only contributed to the widening of the gap between the generations. A ‘me versus them’ mentality threatens to further polarize Xers from previous generations” (:192)

In more recent years, Lynch (2002:24) has noted that the use of the “X” is evidence of an intergenerational struggle. He insists that this is a weaponized term often used to paint Xers in a negative light. He reflects critically upon what he describes as a tendency toward talking about “Generalization X” (:23). Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:34) suggest that Generation X continues to be the most markedly misunderstood of all the contemporary generations. Xers, they add, are not seen as a source of much hope for older generations (:51). Many Xers are keenly aware of these generalized perceptions. In one study, when members of the various generations were asked to respond to the statement, “My generation is viewed positively by the other generations,” thirty percent of Baby Boomers and twenty-four percent of pre-Boomers answered, “No.” Among Gen Xers, however, over sixty percent said they feel that they are not seen in a positive light (Lancaster & Stillman 2003:12).

Bennett, Craig, and Rademacher (1997:17) note that societal perceptions of Xers have tended to be exaggerated. While Xers do have clearly distinct traits and values as a generation, researchers also have found that many similarities exist between them and older age groups across a range of behavioural and attitudinal categories. As Cohen (1993:290-292) observed in the early 1990s,

It turns out that most Gen Xers want the same basic things—a family and a “comfortable” life...Many of these same people said that being part of a nuclear family, safely ensconced in a middle-class suburb, was just the life they were seeking...many said they seek only to be “comfortable.” By “comfort,” they did not just mean owning nice things. For most of these people, comfort also has a psychological component...“anxiety-free, happy life”...In their pursuit of comfort, people in their twenties are simply upholding a national tradition.

Several studies examining the values and beliefs of the contemporary generations have found that Xers and Boomers, in particular, share much in common across a range of categories of inquiry (Hill 1997:112-118; Carroll & Roof 2002:2-4). These studies reveal that the most marked fault lines in terms of beliefs and values actually exist between Boomers and their predecessors.

Nonetheless, the relationship between Boomers and Xers has proven to be quite complex. As the preceding pages have demonstrated, significant differences exist between these two cohorts. Perhaps mirroring the negativity toward Xers at work within society, Whitesel and Hunter (2000:23) predict that, if a conflict emerged between these two generations, it would come as the result of an Xer unwillingness to capitulate to the preferences of Boomers. However, noting that “the Boomer looks to a youth culture for fashion, trends, and artistic expression,” these authors also suggest that Boomers actually have a positive view of Gen Xers. As a result of the Boomer preoccupation with youth, they predict, the gap between Boomers and Xers should not prove to be as pronounced as that between Boomers and their elders (:66). In reality, however, because Boomers have always known only a “youth culture,” many have struggled to come to grips with the reality that they are growing older (Roof 1993:248-249). Some observers suggest that the Boomer preoccupation with youth may actually heighten the potential for conflict with Xers. Kinsley (1997:20), for example, asserts that Boomer complaints about Gen Xers may actually be based to a large degree on resentment. Explains Kinsley, “No one was ever supposed to be

younger than we are. Every generation feels that way; but probably none ever milked The Young Idea as successfully as the boomers did in our time.”

Anderson (1990:81) suggests that Boomers think of themselves as “different” and expect to be treated as such. This is consistent with the “special” status that has followed them throughout their life course. In addition, Boomers are still relishing the gains they acquired through their lengthy struggle with their G.I. elders (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:152). Thus, Boomers have tended to possess “a peculiar blindness to Generation X” (Ritchie 1995:21). As Ritchie summarizes, “This oversight has arisen partly from a natural desire to think of themselves as young, and from an instinct to preserve their own hard-won base of power.” The Boomer assumption that they have plenty more good years ahead poses a great challenge for Xers who have grown up in their shadow (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:44).

As a result of the perpetual struggle that comes with being the generation to follow Boomers, many Xers have grown frustrated. Many see their Boomer predecessors as a self-absorbed generation, one refusing to pass the mantle of youth, and one destined “to choke all other generations with glorified images of its own” (Steinhorn 2006:51-52). Bourne (1997:95) explains this perception:

[T]he world in which we find ourselves is in no way of our own making so that if our reactions to it are unsatisfactory, or our rebellious attitude toward it distressing, it is at least a plausible assumption that the world itself, despite the responsible care which the passing generation bestowed upon it, may be partly to blame...[The members of the preceding generation] frankly do not understand their children, and their lack of understanding and control over them means a lack of the moral guidance which, it has always been assumed, young people need until they are safely launched in the world.

Dychtwald (1999:214-215) strikes a similar tone in noting that many Xers

feel bitter over the social messes that the boomers have left in their wake. Forget what the idealistic boomers proclaimed, Xers say, and look at what they've actually accomplished: Divorce. Homelessness. Holes in the ozone layer. Drug addiction. Downsizing and layoffs. Soaring debt. Urban gangs. Senseless violence.

Miller (1996:18) suggests that because many Xers “wonder if they are being left to pay the bill” for the changes within society, they question whether they will ever truly attain their version of the American dream. This frustration is rooted not only in the

perception that Boomers have imparted this destructive legacy, but in the fact that they “now blame Xers, the victims!” (Ritchie 1995:29).

This has stretched the patience of Generation X toward being told “all its existence that it is stupid (test scores have fallen consistently), unruly, and racist...in relation to the Boomers who preceded [them], the ‘perfect’ generation that defined (and continues to define) what are the proper, ‘correct’ ways to act, speak, sing, and dance” (George 1997:28). Indeed, Ford (1995:44-45) writes of an Xer revulsion toward the Boomer worldview, while Holtz (1995:203) suggests that some Xers have been plagued by hatred toward Boomers themselves. However, as Mahedy and Bernardi (1994:126) note, the tension between these two generations is in part a function of their respective relationships to the post-modern transition and the resulting differences in their approach to language and life. Interestingly, Staub (2003) notes that Xers actually tend to get along better with the generations of their grandparents than with their Boomer predecessors (www.christianitytoday.com).

The outcome of this disillusionment among Xers, predicted Dychtwald (1999:214-215) at the turn of the millennium, is likely to be a rebellion against the newly elder Boomers, “even though most of these serious problems and injustices [were] instituted by earlier generations.” At about this same time, Robert George (1997:27), a congressional official, reflected upon the state of relations between these two generations in the following light: “Yes, it’s on. Undeclared though it is, a new Cold War exists. This one is generational. It has the most spoiled and self-indulgent generation in history on the one side and their dissed and deprived successors on the other.” Raines and Hunt (2000:23) reflect upon this claim by asserting that the next great generation gap is indeed taking form and promises to feature “righteous” middle-aged Boomers and alienated Xers. Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:212) share this assessment and express, contrary to the opinion of Whitesel and Hunter cited above, that this gap between Xers and Boomers will prove to be “the biggest generation gap in history.”

Ritchie (1995:11) predicts that, over time, this tension will be likely to produce a positive outcome: “It won’t be an easy relationship for either of us— Boomers or Xers—but we will manage, I think, mostly because we have no choice.” However, he

is quick to clarify that “we should not underestimate the real generation gap that exists between us, for seldom have two successive generations had such basic differences.” Raines and Hunt (2000:25) caution that, because the relationship between these two generations is likely to influence the success and productivity of the institutions of society over the next three decades, “If these problems are to be solved—and they must—we’re going to have to bring them to the surface and develop our awareness about the issues. The rumblings that today characterize the adversarial relationship between the two generations cannot be allowed to develop into a full-scale battle.”

The marginalization of Generation X among the adult generations is not limited exclusively to their relationship with Boomers. This reality is perhaps most markedly illustrated in the societal issue that has come to be referred to as “generational equity.” Writing roughly two decades ago, Dychtwald (1989:86) asserted, “Without a doubt, there are unmistakable strains and serious fault lines emerging in our dated intergenerational social programs...[G]laring inequities can be seen in the ways in which resources are shared and distributed among the generations.” Several years later, Miller (1996:57) suggested that spending on the elderly had come to constitute a “new generation gap”; the elderly, who at that time made up about 12.5 percent of the population, received sixty percent of federal social spending. This equated to four times more than was being spent on American children and distinguished the US as the world leader in spending for those over sixty-five.

Bagby (1998:67, 68) expresses perplexity and concern over this new gap in generational equity:

If this kind of inequality existed between the races or the sexes we would hear a great public outcry. We would see protests, riots, marches on Washington. But this subtle discrimination gets only a footnote in the political debate. Our concerns are overshadowed by those of the more powerful, the older, the more entrenched.

Dychtwald (1999:212-213) also strikes a cautionary tone in reflecting upon this situation:

During the past 20 years, government investments in infrastructure, education, and research and development have fallen from 24 percent to 15 percent of the federal budget. During that same period, government spending on entitlements for the elderly has grown by 253 percent in real dollars. If a

government cannot cut benefits that go to a disproportionately powerful segment of its voters, it is destined for a serious crisis.

Palmore (2005:8) notes that some characterizations of the impact of this issue of generational equity upon intergenerational relations in the US have been grossly overstated. Nonetheless, some telling evidence does exist to suggest that American society has been willing to sacrifice investment in its future in the name of benefiting its elderly. The impact of this has been felt most significantly by Xers and their families.

In recent years, this issue has come into greater prominence within the American political discourse through rising concerns about the long-term viability of the Social Security system. Some observers insist that the supposed intergenerational tension regarding federal social spending does not exist in reality and has been fabricated by right-wing politicians for the purposes of advancing their agenda (Palmore 2005:159). However, there genuinely seems to be something to what Bennett, Craig, and Rademacher (1997:11) describe as “a growing recognition and resentment among young that, while paying as much as 20 times more than previous generations (adjusting for inflation) in Social Security taxes, their return may be as low as 1.5 or 2%.” This is reflected in a broad range of publications expressing concern over federal funding from an intergenerational perspective (e.g., Beale & Abdalla 2003; Thau & Heflin 1997).

The aging of the Boomer generation assures that this situation will only grow more critical. Kew (2001:72) observes that, “by 2030, the number of older adults will increase to roughly 70 million,” which will amount to roughly a fifth to a quarter of the US population. Projecting ten years further into the future, Bagby (1998:75-76) asserts that, “In the worst case scenario, in 2040, one in four Americans may be over 65.” In light of this prospect, suggests Freedman (1999:13), an “entitlement ethic’...threatens to condemn our posterity.” Adds Freedman, the magnitude of this demographic transformation is perceived by many as “a source of impending strife...a ‘shipwreck.’” Thus, a call for “a more equitable distribution of resources among the generations” has been raised from some quarters (Lyon 1995:88).

With this potential crisis in view, “The fact that Xers will have to provide SS support to Boomers, and potentially not have the security it provides for themselves, is a source of intergenerational tension” (Dunn 1993:185). Dychtwald (1989:78) asserts that, “As more young Americans find themselves paying an increasing share of their limited incomes into a questionable Social Security system while they see growing numbers of elders doing well, there is likely to be a generational rebellion.”

Dychtwald (:3) goes so far as to predict “a new intergenerational struggle that will dwarf the generation gap of the sixties,” one in which each generation, “with its own powers and interests, will be competing for limited resources.” The manner in which this conflict is addressed, asserts Russell (1993:52), “will decide the future direction of America as a nation.” However, Xers cannot be confident that this will be resolved in a manner that is favourable to them.

While Gen X has been disillusioned by its struggles with finding its place within adult society alongside its elders, perhaps the final assurance of this generation’s marginalized place within society has come as result of the generation that follows it. This generation, most frequently referred to as Millennials, and alternatively described as the “Echo Boomers”, “Generation Y”, or “Generation Next” (Lancaster and Stillman 2003:27), has enjoyed a formative experience that, in many respects, has contrasted starkly with that of their Xer predecessors. In a manner reflecting the early experiences of their Boomer parents, these young Millennials have been described as “special” and “valued.” During their formative years, there has arisen a society-wide *love of children* (Howe & Strauss 2000:124; Beale & Abdalla 2003:15). The emergence of Boomers into parenthood is largely to be credited for this. Howe and Strauss (2000:33) explain: “For the Millennial generation, the ascendant Boomer cultural elite rewrote the rules. Starting as babies, kids were now to be desperately desired, to be in need of endless love and sacrifice and care—and to be regarded by parents as the highest form of self-discovery.” This new-found interest in childbearing among Boomers was evidenced by a four-hundred percent increase in the number of infertility-related doctor visits between 1986 and 1988 (Howe & Strauss 2000:35).

Reflecting upon Strauss and Howe’s *Millennials Rising*, Murray Zoba (1999:61) suggests that, as Boomers have advanced into parenthood, the priorities of society

have shifted:

As one Gen Xer puts it, ‘According to the boomer law of cultural tyranny, if the boomers are having families, then we must all turn our attention to the problems of families.’ Parents and society at large have reached the point, says Strauss, when they recognize that ‘the problems of youth today and the conditions of their childhoods have reached the point where they are unacceptable.’

These changes in parental and societal attitudes toward children, while certainly beneficial to Millennials, have fostered an inevitable distinction between Millennials and their Xer predecessors. As Howe and Strauss (2000:37) explain,

America’s most vexing social problems invited leaders to start drawing a triage line between the two generations then cohabiting the preadult age brackets: older Gen-X teens, who were beyond hope, and younger Millennial children, who were redeemable. “I’m sorry to say it,” federal judge Vincent Femia observed in 1989, “but we’ve lost a generation of youth to the war on drugs. We have to start with the younger group, concentrate on the kindergartners.” The “only way” to stop the cycle of poverty, dependency, and crime, said Ohio governor George Voinovich, “is to pick one generation of children, draw a line in the sand, and say ‘This is where it stops.’”

Howe and Strauss note that this distinction in societal attitudes toward Millennials and Xers is evidenced by the numerous public policies that were crafted to provide for the protection and care of young Millennials to the exclusion of Xers.

A full exploration of the emerging Millennial generation lies beyond the scope of this study. Passing references will be made to the central tendencies of this generation in the chapters that lie ahead. However, it is important to note at this point that, as with their Xer elders, the influence of post-modernism has played a pivotal role in the formation of this generation. Many observers of this generation treat the predominance of the post-modern worldview among its members as a point of fact (e.g., Rabey 2001; Overholt & Penner 2002; Murray Zoba 1999; Zustiak 1996; McIntosh 2002; Miller & Pierce Norton 2003). Sweet (1999:17), for example, suggests that Millennials “will be the first ones to really live the majority of their time in the new world”, while Benke and Benke (2002:84), describe this generation as “totally indoctrinated in postmodernist philosophy.” However, many observers insist that the Millennial generation is prepared to prove wrong those cynics and pessimists who anticipate continued “decline” among young people (Howe & Strauss 2000:4; Beale & Abdalla 2003:1). As Howe and Strauss (2000:7) express, “Across the board,

Millennial kids are challenging a long list of common assumptions about what ‘postmodern’ young people are supposed to become.”

Zustiak (1999:228) notes that the optimism surrounding this generation naturally gives rise to comparisons with their Xer predecessors:

For Generation X, the public’s view of youth culture has been one of negativity and suspicion. Some even see it as dangerous. The Millennial Generation will transform adult’s view of youth culture into something positive. There is already some optimism and pride in what young people are doing with their lives being manifested in families, schools, and communities.

This generation has been characterized as one destined to play a “corrective” role within society (Howe & Strauss 2000:190; Martin & Tulgan 2001:11) and one reflecting the civic tendencies of older generations (Howe & Strauss 2000:8, 67, 216; Beale & Abdalla 2003:23). Some observers even predict, with an intentional allusion to the legacy of the G.I. generation, that the Millennials will prove to constitute the next “Great Generation” (Verhaagen 2005:8).

It also is important to note the massive size of the Millennial generation. As Howe and Strauss (2000:14) indicate, by the end of 2000, this cohort consisted of seventy-six million members, “already out-numbering the Boomers.” By the end of 2002, Millennials constituted twenty-seven percent of the U.S population, with immigration causing their number to swell to nearly 76.5 million (McIntosh 2002:162). Because of the size of this generation and the cultural significance it seemingly is being assigned, posits Rainer (1997:6), it can be expected that its members “will shape the attitudes, values, economics, and lifestyles of America” and will constitute “the dominant adult population for at least the first half of the next century” as the twenty-first century advances. Rainer (:35) adds that Millennials can be expected to “replace the boomers as the generation upon which the nation gives its attention.” In essence, a nation has chosen to permit its affections and esteem to skip a generation. As we turn to an exploration of the church’s praxis in relation to this generation in chapter five, this will prove to be an important reality.

4.6 A Complex Generational Context

In this study, our central concern is with investigating the ineffectiveness of established churches in transmitting their faith traditions amid the post-modern transition, which we have identified as an inherently intergenerational task. In chapter five, we will lend direct attention to the intergenerational praxis of many established churches in relation to the first post-modern cohort, Generation X. However, before proceeding with that discussion, it will be helpful for us to summarize the ways in which the historical developments surveyed in chapters three and four have culminated in the current intergenerational praxis of society. The realities described in this section provide the very conditions in which the contemporary church endeavours to engage in its intergenerational praxis. As will become evident in chapter five, these broader facets of contemporary society's intergenerational praxis have come to pose significant challenges to the effectiveness of the church's intergenerational praxis amid the post-modern transition.

4.6.1 Diversity and Distance among the Generations

As has become apparent throughout chapters three and four, the immense complexity of the current generational climate is a result of profound changes that have occurred within the structure of society throughout recent decades. As Lyon (1995:94) notes, the current generational climate is a product of “the broader web” of the way we live our lives together. As we have seen, the changes occurring within the structure of family life, due in part to factors such as the mobility generated by an industrial society, the emergence of the nuclear family, the prominence of autonomous individualism, and a rising divorce rate, have weakened traditional intergenerational ties and contributed to traditional family functions being taken over by the institutions of society (Sussman 1991:3, 4).

In addition, as we have seen in the preceding pages, changes in the structure of society have been accompanied by the standardization of the “life course” (George & Gold 1991:71). Throughout the twentieth century, these dynamics have contributed to the evolving social construct of “adolescence” (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:30), which has developed not so much into a period for the intentional preparation of

young people for adult life, as much as into an extended incubation period for the formation of youth culture (Matthews-Green 2005:11; Twenge 2006:97). In turn, suggests Kraft (2005:294), rebelling against previous generations has emerged as a “taught phenomenon” and has become a “US tradition.” It is important to note, as chapters three and four have demonstrated, that all of the living generations have been shaped to a large degree by the “given-ness” of the life course being structured in this way. Despite the fact that our attitudes about the nature of *youth* have evolved across many years, the basic structures surveyed over chapters three and four provide the only version of *reality* that these generations have known.

Furthermore, the complexity of generational relations in the US has been heightened by the fact that all of these generations are actually living together at the same time, a result of the increased life expectancy of the nation’s population. Because throughout most of recorded human history only one in ten individuals could expect to live to the age of sixty-five (Dychtwald 1989:3), traditionally only three to four generations existed together in a particular point in time (McIntosh 2002:10). However, in recent decades, this picture has changed considerably. Wuthnow (2007:9) notes that recent life expectancy figures (In 2000, 74.3 for men and 79.7 for women) represent a significant lengthening of the life course relative to 1900 (46.3 for men and 48.3 for women), 1950 (65.5 for men and 71.1 for women), and 1970 (67.1 for men and 74.7 for women) figures.

The resultant “greying” of the American population has given rise to a significantly more diverse society. Bagby (1998:75) observes the following regarding the aging of our population: “Between 1960 and 1994 the percentage of the population age 65 and older doubled, compared to a 45 percent increase for the overall population. At the same time, the percentage of Americans age 18 years of age or younger declined from 36 to 26 percent.” In fact, the number of Americans over the age of sixty-five surpassed the number of teens in 1983 (Dychtwald 1989:8). This aging phenomenon, suggests Bagby (1998:76), results from increases in life expectancy and overall birthrate declines (cf. Kew 2001:72). As a result, the general population now is composed of significant numbers of representatives from five different generational cohorts (Sussman 1991:7; Gibbs 2000a:227-228).

Some social analysts view the richness of this situation in an optimistic light. Dychtwald (1989:236), for example, insists that “[r]elationships that combine, cross, and even skip generations become increasingly possible in our long-lived era.” He adds, “Extended life will allow people to reach beyond the boundaries of the nuclear family to form meaningful relationships with friends and relatives across two or three generations.” However, as several commentators note, the structures of contemporary society are not effectively promoting such potential connections (Loper 1999:3-4). Harkness (1998:5), for example, characterizes the lack of intergenerational interaction among the institutions of contemporary society as “almost a conspiracy.” Williams and Nussbaum (2001:36) note that “a move toward a peer-centered society means that there is increasingly minimal contact (in terms of both quantity and quality) between younger and older generations in our society.” They observe that this lack of interaction is particularly acute in “nonfamilial contexts” (:39). As a result, “younger and older people inhabit and move in different, rarely intersecting, social-psychological cultures” (cf. Howard Merritt 2007:20).

Many social analysts express concern over the impact of this lack of intergenerational interaction. Harkness (1998:5) describes this widespread disconnectedness as resulting in “social impoverishment,” while Loper (1999:36) cautions that “[t]he cultural failure of generations to interact...hurts all of us.” As Eggers and Hensley (2004:88) explain, the “isolation of age groups” causes our society to miss important aspects of human development “by failing to utilize the talents and wisdom of older adults, by shielding young children from the realities of aging, and by disconnecting children from their traditions.” Thus, as Hersch (1998:20) expresses, this is a cause for concern: “The effects go beyond issues of rules and discipline to the idea exchanges between generations that do not occur, the conversations not held, the guidance and role modeling not taking place, the wisdom and traditions no longer filtering down inevitably...The generational threads that used to weave their way into the fabric of growing up are missing.” In essence, the disconnectedness among the generations threatens to produce a shortage of intergenerational empathy (Howard Merritt 2007:22). Furthermore, it threatens to foster a “crisis of generativity” (Lyon 1995:92), the function that Erikson describes as enabling the elderly to complete their life cycle by contributing the wisdom and knowledge that he or she has gained for the sake of future generations (Dychtwald 1999:218-219; Eggers & Hensley 2004:89).

As chapters three and four have demonstrated, one key factor that has complicated intergenerational relations in the US has been the growth of the culture of *choice*.

Schaller (1999:137) reflects upon the profound significance of this culture of choice:

For the first 340 years of American history, the top priority for most people was survival. After World War II, questions about identity and role moved ahead of survival goals, including questions about the conduct of American foreign policy. The generations born after World War II have been reared in a culture that has taught them that the world offers many choices and that no one can respond affirmatively to all of them. It also should not be a surprise that these younger generations expect choices.

As has been demonstrated over the last two chapters, this emphasis has played a progressively greater role in the shaping the generational culture of recent cohorts.

Furthermore, as has been demonstrated in the preceding pages, this championing of choice has been closely linked with the growing dominance of a consumerist approach to life. Best and Kellner (1991:259) suggest that the forces of capitalism have come to structure ever more domains of American social existence. A consumer mentality has pervaded every part of daily life and has come to shape our expectations and our choices, whether regarding relationships or religion (Chase 2005:1). Twenge (2006:100, 101) observes that this has caused recent generations to be shaped by a “straightforward” focus on self and the pursuit of things that appeal to the tastes of the individual. Consumerism has become so much a way of life that Americans no longer recognize it as an option, but rather have come to view it as an integral dimension of existence (Wuthnow 1995:15; Griffin & Waller 2004:103). Sacks (1996:159) posits that being a consumer and being human have become indistinguishable. Following the argument of Baudrillard, he suggests that we have actually become “superconsumers” engaged in “hyperconsumerism”. Consumerism, thus, has come to provide the cognitive and moral force of life, the integrative bond of society. Suggests Sacks (:160), “Consumption is an absolutely egalitarian act...an act of individual empowerment...They call it ‘consumer sovereignty.’”

Smith and Clurman (1997:294) insist that the culture of consumerist choice has come to impact pre-Boomers, Boomers, and the post-modern generations in distinct ways:

The generations born before 1935 grew up in a world that placed a premium on the sense of community...The generations born after 1955 have grown up in

a culture that is organized around choices, competition, quality, large-scale institutions, rapid change, innovations, convenient parking, surprises, a nongeographical basis for creating social networks, anonymity, complexity, discontinuity with the past, and the drive of the new consumerism... Duty, individuality, and diversity. These fundamental values define the marketplace perspectives of America's three consumer generations, respectively.

These authors insist that “each of these core values unifies a generation, not because consumers of that age are simply resigned to being stuck in a certain generation,” but all the more because “they actually prefer them.” Thus, the dominance of consumerism has profoundly altered long-standing patterns of the intergenerational perpetuation of cultural traditions within American society. As Schaller (1999:81) notes, “The competitive marketplace [has] prevailed over nostalgia for the past.” In turn, suggest Griffin and Walker (2004:103), our communal identity is coming apart.

This climate of diversity causes us to be surrounded by those who think, dress, talk, and act differently than we are prone to do, a reality that can be deeply challenging. As Westerhoff (1974:166) observes in reflecting upon the growing diversity and divergences evident among the generations, “Human communities in earlier times were easily distinguishable because ‘a culture’ and ‘a community’ were synonymous among primitive peoples and among peasant societies... It is much more difficult to identify the boundaries of ‘a culture’ or ‘a community’ within a highly complex industrial society.”

As a result of these profound changes within society, the potential for confusion and distance among the generations is greatly heightened. Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2000:12) observe that contemporary society faces a generation gap that is “new and different” in that it is “tripartite and soon to be a four-way divide.” The recent study by Twenge (2006:9), the most substantial longitudinal examination of American generational differences in recent decades, explicitly confirms the assertion that such differences are very real, and fairly profound (cf. Hammett & Pierce 2007:36). As one way of expressing this reality, Miller (2004:93) offers the fascinating observation that, for the first time in history, our society has generational groups “raised under the influence of three different dominant communication tools [print for pre-Boomers, broadcast media for Boomers, and electronic communication for post-moderns].” He adds, “Each of us sees and experiences the world in such different ways that it’s a

miracle we can communicate at all!” Truly, as Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2000:12) note, “Life for every generation has become increasingly nonlinear, unpredictable, and unchartable.”

Part of the challenge inherent in such diversity is the tendency for misinformation and misunderstanding between the generations to arise in many contexts. As we explored in section 2.5.1, this fosters stereotyped evaluations, which tend to have a negative effect on how the members of each generation view and relate to one another (Angrosino 2001:vii; Lancaster & Stillman 2003:17). As Whitesel and Hunter (2000:60) observe, “Opinions formed while gazing across a generation gap are usually distorted and stereotypical.” In essence, the contemporary generational context has been characterized by some observers as rife with “chronological snobbery,” the tendency of a generation to think that preceding generations did not “get it” (Bolinger 1999:105), and “clique maintenance,” the tendency of a generation to bolster its own collective ego by viewing the generations that follow it as deficient (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:239).

These differences in generational perception tend to have great weight in impacting relations between the generations (Gubrium & Rittman 1991:91). Particularly in light of the social distance that exists between the generations, this is a serious matter. As Lancaster and Stillman (2003:12) note, “These types of generational misunderstandings...can be extremely painful.” Often, television ends up being the primary source of perceptions of generational “outgroups”; however, this medium frequently tends merely to reproduce existing stereotypes (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:40). Thus, conclude Williams and Nussbaum (:37), concerns that intergenerational segregation is potentially divisive are valid.

Lancaster and Stillman (2003:42) advance the provocative suggestion that this generational stereotyping is actually one of the only remaining forms of prejudice still considered acceptable within our culture. Williams and Nussbaum (2001:55-56) appropriate the term “agism” to describe this prejudice; agism, they explain, entails negative attitudes or discrimination being directed against a particular group on the basis of age. These authors assert that, while an often neglected topic, agism should be acknowledged along with sexism and racism as the “third great ‘ism’” of the

twentieth century. They draw upon the results of extensive research to demonstrate how perceptions of the “redundant and superfluous” elderly members of society have grown increasingly negative with the advance of the twentieth century (:53).

Furthermore, while they acknowledge that agism toward youth has been a comparatively neglected subject, it is a very real issue impacting the lives of the younger members of society (:60). While this clearly is a grave matter, Lancaster and Stillman (2003:42) suggest that this situation does have some redeeming potential: “The good news is that at least there’s a form of diversity we can all talk openly about and not worry that the political correctness police will slap us with a violation.”

Nonetheless, the current context is a complex and challenging one. Williams and Nussbaum (2001:241) insist that intergenerational tensions are widespread within contemporary society. Depending upon future trends, they insist, these tensions have the potential of growing in intensity. Lancaster and Stillman (2003:35, 46) note that “generational collisions” are occurring in a variety of contexts. These authors urge their readers to contemplate the tremendous cost of these generational conflicts for the institutions of our society: “From the public to the private sector...a conflict of earth-shattering proportions is unfolding right before our eyes” (2003:12). The Anglican theologian Graham Cray’s (1996:69) assessment of contemporary generational dynamics is that Western nations are suffering “a ‘crisis in mutual society.’” In fact, some cultural commentators assert, we should not be surprised by the lack of responsibility toward one another across the generations in light of how much responsibility we have chosen to leave to the state. Self-interest has become a driving force among the generations (Klay & Steen 1995:989). As the issues of “generational equity” surveyed above reflect, the intergenerational tensions present in post-modern society threaten to reduce intergenerational co-existence to a matter of cohort-based identity politics.

4.6.2 The Transition between Paradigms and the Generations

As has been demonstrated in this chapter, a major factor that adds complexity to the current intergenerational climate is the transition of American society from the world of modernism to the new world of post-modernism. Dockery (2001:12) notes that we are in an “in-between time” in which the influence of both paradigms remains evident

within society. Best and Kellner (1997:31) similarly argue that we are in the “borderlands” between the modern era and the emerging post-modern future. These authors suggest that this “parenthetical” period gives rise to a dynamic interplay of old and new. The sense of threat this evokes among the adherents of “modern orthodoxy” produces anxiety and fosters uncertainty (:15, 19). In turn, this fuels tension and strife, conflicting discourses, and the emergence of “culture wars” (:31).

Mead (1991:31) suggests that this is to be expected: “Changes of paradigm,” he suggests, “are, by definition, matters of perception, feeling, world view, consciousness...As a result, one of the most difficult realities we deal with is the fact that two people, living side by side, may face the same phenomenon, yet their perceptions may differ radically.” Mead (:32) further observes that paradigms shifts tend to produce confusing battles, because those who are impacted by these shifts “do not realize that they are standing in different paradigms.” The members of a society may use the same words, he suggests, yet fail entirely to understand one another.

Thus, the manifestation of the new post-modern worldview within the emerging generations has added complexity to the American generational landscape. As Hudson (2004:8) suggests, the contemporary world is composed of a blend of those who have never known anything other than a post-modern reality and those who are situated in both eras. Best and Kellner (1997:12) posit that the older generations “cannot really make a radical break with [their] past.” Thus, these older segments of the population have tended to be resistant to post-modernism, while the younger generations are dominated by its influence (Benke & Benke 2002:34; Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:209). The tension this plurality of competing paradigms creates is not merely a conflict between beliefs, but *about* beliefs (Anderson 1990:3). For now, we must live with the challenges of the co-existence of these paradigms (Anderson 1995:239). Some observers express concern that the debate between the modern and post-modern paradigms is intensifying and that this debate will remain for some time (Best & Kellner 1997:261). Thus, the generations are faced with journeying together through a painful, protracted, and contradictory transition between eras (:31). As we will see in chapter five, this poses a great challenge for many established churches as they endeavour to undertake their intergenerational praxis within the praxis of a complex, changing society.

4.7 Conclusion

In this study, we have been asserting that, as American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches are struggling to respond faithfully to cultural change within a complex generational context. Furthermore, we are arguing that the resulting failure among many established churches to transmit their faith traditions to Gen X, the first post-modern generation, threatens the ability of these churches to sustain their witness through this transitional period. In chapter three, we began to develop this theme by examining the unfolding history of intergenerational relations within modern American society. We demonstrated the growing complexity in intergenerational relations that emerged with the advance of the twentieth century. We also demonstrated the ways in which local churches sought to respond to the growing complexity within the intergenerational landscape.

In this present chapter, we have further developed the problem under consideration in this study by exploring the following themes:

1. We have examined the profound complexity of the transformational cultural changes that have occurred in recent decades. In particular, we have lent consideration to the emergence of the post-modern paradigm shift as a core facet of these changes.
2. We introduced Generation X as a generation whose formative years most closely approximate this period of complexity and change. Thus, this cohort has been described as the “first post-modern generation.” In addition, we have demonstrated that, amid these vast cultural changes, the same social institutions that were operative in previous generations have contributed to Generation X’s experience of fragmentation and marginalization.
3. We have explored the reality that, as a result of their formative experiences, this post-modern generation has arrived into adulthood with significantly discontinuous cultural mores and values. In turn, we have noted that Xers have continued to experience social marginalization even into their adult years.
4. Finally, we have summarized the impact of the historical period surveyed in chapters three and four by noting that the experience of all living generations has been shaped by similar social institutions and structures. Indeed, while the

peer personality of each generation has been formed in distinct ways, all now participate together in complex social structures that promote distance and tension between the generations. The changes brought about through the post-modern transition have only added further complexity to this intergenerational context.

It is against the backdrop of these realities that established churches must engage in intergenerational praxis. In chapter five, we will proceed by demonstrating that many established churches are failing to respond effectively to post-modern culture change within this complex generational context. We also will consider the resulting failure of many of these churches to transmit their faith traditions to Gen Xers and the potential threat that this poses to their ability to sustain their witness through this transitional period.