



**INTERGENERATIONAL RECONCILIATION  
AND JUSTICE  
AS ESSENTIAL DIMENSIONS  
OF MISSIONAL RENEWAL  
IN THE POST-MODERN TRANSITION**

**by**

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**Submitted in fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**in the Faculty of Theology,**

**University of Pretoria**

**April 2009**

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## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis, which I hereby submit for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Practical Theology at the University of Pretoria, is my own work and has not previously been submitted by me for a degree at this or any other tertiary institution.

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Dated:** \_\_\_\_\_

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The process of completing this thesis has been long and arduous, yet richly rewarding. I would like to thank Professor Malan Nel for his encouragement, wise counsel, expert feedback, and enduring patience. My times of meeting with this exceptional scholar and Christian leader on the Princeton Theological Seminary campus were truly beneficial. I am grateful for his availability to me during these times.

I also would like to thank Dr. Edwin Simanton of the University of South Dakota School of Medicine for his assistance with the survey process that provided the basis for chapter eight, the empirical portion of this study. It was reassuring and rewarding to be aided by someone possessing such expertise and passion toward statistical research.

I also would like to express my gratitude to the academic community at Spurgeon's College in London, England, where I completed my MTh studies. The benefit that I received from my affiliation with this excellent academic community lives on in my life daily. My Spurgeon's studies challenged, shaped, and enriched me in ways that have enabled me to continue my academic journey at the doctoral level. I would especially like to honor Dr. Peter Stevenson, whose supervision of my master's dissertation contributed in a very significant way to my academic formation. Interestingly, this doctoral project was inspired in large part by feedback that I received on my very first assignment as a Spurgeon's student.

I am grateful for my church families at Grace Baptist Church in Grand Forks, ND, and Christ Community Church in Sioux Falls, SD. Dr. Ken Ruit, Dr. Paul Wright, Dr. Sonia Zimmerman, Prof. Lloyd Omdahl, Rev. Rod Anderson, and Mrs. Bonita Shambaugh have offered support through their words of encouragement and prayers. Many of these same individuals have inspired me through their example of balancing the life of faith with a passionate commitment to scholarly inquiry and academic excellence.

The community at Sioux Falls Seminary also played an important role in making it possible for me to complete this project. Dr. Jay Moon, Dr. Terence Mournet, Dr. Richard Reitsma, and Dr. Gary Strickland have been especially valuable conversation partners along the way as I have sought to develop, articulate, and refine my thoughts. I am grateful for the wealth of resources that have been made available to me through SFS's excellent library. I also appreciate the opportunities my students have provided me to experiment with these ideas, most notably in the course *Congregational Mission and the Post-modern Generations*. Their thoughts and questions have been most helpful.

Last, and most importantly, I would like to express my deep appreciation for my wife, Teresa, and my four-year-old daughter, Savannah. They have had to endure the significant investment of time that this project has required of me. At times, they have had to endure sharing their home with a grumpy and frustrated doctoral student.

## SUMMARY

This research is guided by the assertion that, as American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches are struggling to respond adequately to cultural change within a fragmented generational context. It further is argued that the resulting ineffectiveness of many of these churches in transmitting the Christian tradition to Gen Xers, the first post-modern generation, threatens the ability of these churches to sustain their witness through this period.

This project advances the hypothesis that, if established churches are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, they must engage in a process of missional renewal that encompasses Generation X. When considered from both a sociological and a theological perspective, this process must be seen as entailing a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice.

**Chapter one** provides an introduction to this study and explains how it is situated within the discipline of Practical Theology. Following Heitink (1999:6), Practical Theology is defined as “the mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of modern society.”

**Chapter two** offers additional theoretical foundations through an exploration of the *intergenerational* praxis of the church within the *intergenerational* praxis of society.

In **chapter three**, essential historical background is provided through an exploration of the influence of modernity in shaping the praxis of American society, as well as the influence of the Christendom paradigm in guiding the church’s praxis. This chapter also explores the emergence of institutional structures that have fostered distance between the generations, as well as the impact of these changes upon the intergenerational praxis of the church.

**Chapter four** examines the complexities associated with the post-modern paradigm shift. Generation X is introduced as a generation whose formative years most closely

approximate this period. Generation X is shown to be a misunderstood and maligned generation possessing discontinuous cultural values.

In **chapter five**, the “marriage” of Christendom and modernity is shown to limit the ability of established churches to respond faithfully to the post-modern turn. The intergenerational dynamics of these churches also are shown to hinder their response. This chapter demonstrates that the resulting absence of the first post-modern generation from these churches places their continued viability at risk.

**Chapter six** explores the need for these churches to experience missional renewal. A case is made for the participation of Generation X as a crucial consideration in this pursuit. The issue of “process” is shown to be important in helping churches negotiate the challenges of missional renewal.

**Chapter seven** advances the assertion that, from both theological and sociological perspectives, intergenerational reconciliation and justice must be seen as integral dimensions of the missional renewal process.

In **chapter eight**, the argument developed in the preceding chapters is subjected to empirical evaluation. The results of a survey conducted among churches from five denominations lend credibility to this study’s hypothesis.

The final chapter (**nine**) introduces the “Missional Change Model” as one strategic framework through which established churches might be guided in pursuing missional renewal. This chapter also demonstrates how this model might help to facilitate intergenerational reconciliation and justice.



## **KEY WORDS**

Missional Church  
Church Renewal  
Generations  
Generation X  
Tradition  
Intergenerational Ministry  
Post-modernism  
Post-Christendom  
Intergenerational Reconciliation  
Intergenerational Justice  
Change Processes

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## 1. INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH PROJECT

### 1.1 The Research Problem

This study is born out of a concern toward the issue of why many established churches today are proving ineffective in reaching the members of Generation X, the first post-modern generation. Furthermore, it is rooted in a desire to discover how these churches might improve upon this situation. I am motivated to undertake this study in part by my own experiences within churches facing this struggle.

Throughout my high school and university years, and again during my first several years of pastoral ministry, I found myself in churches that had enjoyed rich histories of vital ministry, but that now struggled in the face of this new dispensation. In each of these congregations, the percentage of the church body composed of members of the post-modern generations was unflatteringly disproportionate to that of the surrounding community. Unless this trend is reversed, each of these churches eventually will be forced to close its doors. Through my experiences of reading, travel, and dialoguing with pastors and laypeople from other churches, I am convinced that this crisis is widespread and worthy of considerable attention. Perhaps most significantly, as both lover of the church and Gen Xer, I possess a deep drive to work as a member of both groups in promoting a better future.

In recent years, I have come to be introduced to the idea of sustainable community as a theological category (Hendriks 2004:19-34). This means in part that, in light of the belief that the local church has been constituted as an eschatological community, it should recognize the challenge of enduring faithfully in the power of the Spirit “until he comes” (I Cor. 11:26) as integral to its identity. However, in order for this to occur, a congregation must strive to perpetuate its witness throughout each succeeding generation. Historically rooted in the intergenerational imperatives of the Hebrew tradition, Christians have demonstrated a keen awareness of this responsibility and the challenges that often accompany it.

This sense of duty has been given expression in a variety of published manuscripts released throughout the last 250 years. For example, Alexander Moncrieff published *Christ’s Call to the Rising Generation in 1759*, which was followed by Eli Forbes’s *The Importance of the Rising Generation in 1795*. Within two decades of this came

George Clayton's *A Pious Regard to the Interests of the Rising Generation* (1807) and James Bennett's *The Duties of the Churches Toward the Rising Generation* (1813). A century later, during the period between world wars, came Harris Elliott Kirk's *One Generation to Another* (1924), Francis James Grimke's *The Church Faces the College Generation* (1930), Edwin Edward Aubrey's *Religion and the Next Generation* (1931), and William Cameron's *Jesus and the Rising Generation* (1932). Since the late 1960s, books of this nature have been produced at an unprecedented rate. The fundamental reason for this lies in the fact that, as our society has experienced dramatic change at an accelerated rate, the church has struggled as never before to fulfil its intergenerational calling.

Most recently, much attention has been lent to the reality that, as our society journeys through the *post-modern shift*, many churches steeped in the culture of modernity are experiencing crisis. While major paradigm changes naturally come to bear on all sectors of society, such *shifts* impact the various generations who live through them differently. This is so by virtue of the fact that each generation experiences the movement of time through its own distinct "age location in history" (Strauss and Howe 1992:48). Thus, as the church endeavours to sustain its witness through any period of major societal change, the impact of this change will tend to manifest itself along generational lines to a certain degree. In the present era, Generation X provides a clear example of the impact of "age location in history." As Long (1997:2) has convincingly demonstrated, the "peer personality" of this generation is so closely linked with the influence of post-modernity that it must be described as the first fully "post-modern generation." Thus, while many churches fail to respond creatively to the challenges of post-modernism, the impact of this change in society is being manifested along generational lines through the increasing absence of Gen Xers from their pews.

Furthermore, the specific legacy of social upheaval that has been visited upon Western society during the last forty years has posed particular challenges for the cause of intergenerational community. Lecturing in New York in 1969, Margaret Mead (1970:79) observed on the basis of her vast knowledge of human culture that, while generational gaps had occurred throughout human history, the divide that was developing between the Boomer generation and their elders represented "a deep, new

unprecedented, worldwide generation gap.” As the idealistic and notoriously self-focused Boomer generation challenged virtually every institution of society, considerable conflict arose. This tension extended to vast numbers of churches, which struggled to understand how to reach and retain the members of this generation.

As a by-product of the social upheaval that was taking place throughout their childhood years, Gen Xers, the next rising generation, fell victim to *kinderfeindlichkeit*, a society-wide hostility toward children. While the adults around them remained preoccupied with their own pursuits, many of these “latchkey kids” were essentially ignored. As they reached their teen years, Xers were dubbed “slackers” and viewed with suspicion. Even as the members of this generation have advanced into full adulthood, many continue to perceive that they are misunderstood and ignored, and that their full inclusion within social structures, including the church, is resisted. Indeed, Mahedy and Bernardi (1994:25-26) insist that the experiences of this generation have been so difficult that many of its members have come to exhibit signs of “post-traumatic stress” worthy of comparison to that evident in many Vietnam veterans. Thus, largely as a result of the upheaval that has been visited upon society and the resulting social fragmentation, the generations have arrived in the present in a state of considerable alienation from one another. Generation X has suffered the impact of this intergenerational fragmentation at least as much as any other generation.

This being the case, many churches have come through this time in a desperate situation. Now, having devoted so much time and energy to the preoccupation of assimilating the Boomers and having all-too-uncritically adopted the negative view of Xers prevalent within society at large, as many churches weigh the implications of post-modernity, they also grapple with the concomitant implications of the absence of post-modern young adults from within their ranks and the prospect that their capacity to sustain their witness through this transitional period is in jeopardy. Thus, the core problem that this study is intended to address is the following:

**As American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches are struggling to respond faithfully to culture change within a complex generational context. The resulting ineffectiveness of these churches in transmitting their faith traditions to**



**Generation X, the first post-modern generation, threatens the capacity of these churches to sustain their witness through this transitional period.**

## **1.2 Surveying Prior Research**

In response to the challenges posed by the post-modern generations, an abundance of books and articles have been written describing how the church might go about reaching these generations. These materials are of great value to churches that, like those described above, are struggling with the problem of ineffectiveness in reaching the first post-modern generation. If we take the theological vision of sustainable community seriously, then we should resolutely desire and seek ways to aid them in being restored as flourishing centres of multigenerational life. At the very least, if we are to uphold the perpetuation of the Christian witness through the post-modern generations as being a priority, then from a purely utilitarian perspective we must strive to maximize the involvement of established churches, for their facilities, members, and legacies are invaluable resources. Thus, the materials that have been made available to address this challenge must be seen as providing an important service.

Generally speaking, the vast majority of these books and articles have been written from one of two perspectives. In the period between the early 1990's and 2000, authors seemed to be concerned with studying Generation X and proposing strategies for engaging in ministry among them. Selected examples of this include helpful resources such as the following: *Baby Busters* (1994) and *Generation Next* (1995) by Barna; *Inside the Soul of a New Generation* by Celek and Zander (1996); *The Bridger Generation* by Rainer (1996); *Virtual Faith* by Beaudoin (1998); *Reckless Hope* (1996) and *Gen Xers after God* (1998) by Hahn and Verhaagen; and *Crossing the Bridge* by Roxburgh (2000).

Since 2000, however, an increasing number of authors have begun to produce resources reflecting a new character. Whereas the previous group was devoted to *prescribing* action, this new crop is devoted to *describing* that which is proving effective in ministry among the post-modern generations. Thus, these studies reflect a progression from a purely hermeneutical basis for strategic action to one that is

founded in empirical evidence. Sources worthy of note in this category include Rabey's *In Search of Authentic Faith* (2001), Webber's *The Younger Evangelicals* (2002), and *Gen X Religion*, edited by Flory and Miller (2000). More recently, studies by Flory and Miller (2007) and Wuthnow (2007) have continued to enrich this body of research.

While each of these resources offers something of value to this discussion, a few critical shortcomings are apparent. First, while this literature is devoted to aiding the church in reaching the post-modern generations, all too much of it is rooted in modernistic assumptions. For example, apart from some notable exceptions (e.g., Roxburgh and Webber) many of these authors seem to assume, either explicitly or implicitly, that the Homogeneous Unit Principle provides the matrix through which to arrive at the best ways of reaching the postmodern generations. This viewpoint is manifested in these authors' advocacy of the creation of *monogenerational* congregations. It is understandable that this path would be adopted, as it reflects the given-ness of the differentiation embedded in our society and as, in such an environment, it is pragmatically convenient. However, some critics of this approach insist that terms such as "Gen X church" are inherently contradictory. The church must not be the property of any one generation, they argue, but must always exist equally for the next generation. As another example of the influence of modernistic assumptions in this discussion, some of the existing literature tends to reflect a program-driven understanding of the church. Such thinking demonstrates a lack of penetrating perception of what is truly appropriate and relevant in reaching the post-modern generations.

Second, many of these authors treat ministry among the post-modern generations as though it is something to be carried out in isolation from the other living generations. Some authors, such as Hahn and Verhaagen (1996, 1998), give considerable attention to developing theological themes that support the cause of reaching the post-modern generations. However, few of those mentioned above actually acknowledge, or attempt to develop, any theological agenda that would call for an intergenerational initiative. Thus, the implementation of their proposals become problematic within the normal congregation composed of parishioners from across the spectrum of ages. Indeed, Moore (2001:15), while providing a very helpful practical resource,

unapologetically claims in his introduction that it would have to be left to someone else to clearly articulate the “how-to’s” of implementation.

Third, this lack of proper attention to the process of implementation only stands to fuel fear and anxiety and the multiplication of misunderstandings in congregations in which a divide exists between the generations.

Fourth, many of these authors seem to view new church development as the key to reaching the emerging generations. Indeed, some proponents of the “emerging church” have at times seemed almost to view the “death” of local established congregations as a welcome and inevitable reality. While new church development does play an important role, I am troubled by the lack of concern that some of these authors seem to have demonstrated toward the impending death of many established churches.

Fortunately, several other authors have recognized the need to address the inherently intergenerational nature of the problem facing many local congregations. This is reflected in McIntosh’s *Three Generations* (1995), *Make Room for the Boom...or Bust* (1997), and *One Church, Four Generations* (2002); Loper’s (1999) *Building an Intergenerational Church*; *The Multigenerational Congregation* by Rendle (2002); *Bridging Divided Worlds* by Carroll and Roof (2002); *God and the Generations* by Hilborn and Bird (2002); and *Generations of Faith* by Eeman (2002). In addition to this, several dissertations and theses have been written that lend attention to this issue. One example of this is Codrington’s dissertation at UNISA, *Multi-generational Ministries in the Context of a Local Church* (M.Diac., 2001). Other selected examples include the following D.Min. dissertations: R. J. Bales’s *Four Generations and Visionary Change* (Asbury Theological Seminary, 1999); W. R. Shettler’s *Generational Ministry in the Twenty-First Century* (Drew University, 2000); D. G. Vinzant’s *Building Community among Adults of Different Generations* (Abilene Christian University, 1997); and T. L. Mann’s *Preparing a Traditional Church for Ministry to a Non-Traditional Generation* (Northern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1999).

Each of these authors makes a worthwhile contribution to this discussion. Each one seems to be concerned fundamentally with promoting understanding between the generations, with the domains of change (e.g., preaching, worship style, etc.), or with models of ministry (e.g., blended worship or 2-service format). While they may offer many positive insights to this discussion, I would argue that none of these deals adequately with the problem of the apparent ineffectiveness of many churches in reaching the post-modern generations.

### 1.3 The Research Gap

While strategies and programs are vitally important, the present research project is guided by the assertion that all of the resources surveyed above are plagued by a fundamental oversight: none of them deals substantively with the place that intergenerational alienation and conflict holds in this equation. This oversight is particularly astonishing when considered in light of the reality that several secular authors examining generational dynamics within organisational life have lent central focus to the problem of intergenerational conflict (e.g., Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak 2000; Lancaster & Stillman 2002).

Several of the authors surveyed above do draw attention to this problem. McIntosh acknowledges this issue briefly, while Carroll and Roof address it at greater length, albeit largely from an empirically descriptive perspective. Rendle's *The Multigenerational Congregation* (2002) and Regele's *Death of the Church* (1995) both constitute substantive contributions that strike closest to my own aim. However, whereas Rendle deals explicitly with the tense relationships and frequent misunderstandings that often arise between generations in the local church, he does not frame this issue in terms of the bearing of such relationships up the renewal of the church's mission in the post-modern transition. Conversely, whereas Regele explores the significance of generational differentiation in missional renewal, he demonstrates little concern to address the implications of intergenerational conflict and alienation for the pursuit of such renewal. Whitesel and Hunter (2000) and Kew (2001) also provide important contributions to this subject. Yet their central objectives also differ from my own. Recently, practical and insightful contributions by Hammett and

Pierce (2007) and Howard Merritt (2007) have come closest to addressing the core issues with which this thesis is concerned.

My hypothesis is that, if churches are to regain their missional identity in the post-modern transition, this must come about in part through a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice as integral components of the process of renewal. By focusing upon programs and procedures, the authors surveyed above seem either to presume the existence of the conditions that promote change in a local congregation or to fail in addressing this consideration at all. My assertion is that the conditions for change must be cultivated in order for processes of change to be implemented successfully. Thus, if the intergenerational alienation and discord present in society is reflected in the church, and if the cultural impact of post-modernity is being manifested along generational lines, then authentic missional renewal in the post-modern context must be seen as coming, in part, through the generations opening their hearts to one another. This requires a more penetrating socio-ecclesial critique than commonly is offered in the sources cited above.

Underlying its programmatic and organizational dimensions, the church must be recognized as fundamentally relational and systemic. When viewed in light of present intergenerational dynamics, renewed attention to the relational and systemic dimensions of the church's life should give rise to a corresponding concern with intergenerational reconciliation and justice. Any transitional strategies for the missional renewal of established churches in the post-modern transition must address these two perspectives and must recognize their interrelatedness.

The members of Gen X must be viewed as playing a critical role in this process of renewal; having reached full adulthood, this bridging generation has much to teach local churches about how to minister in the post-modern era. Yet, because of their particular generational experience, many Xers may never fully entrust themselves to established churches until a commitment to the path of reconciliation and justice is exhibited. Such reconciliation between the generations, as an initiative grounded in theological convictions, can be seen as a legitimate and significant form of congregational renewal in and of itself. However, the collaboration it enables holds great promise for generating further missional renewal, as well. Thus, as has been posited above, intergenerational reconciliation and justice must be recognized as

integral components of the process of renewal as churches endeavour to regain their missional identity in the post-modern transition.

In summary, then, the hypothesis being advanced here is the following:

**If established churches are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, they must engage in a process of missional renewal that encompasses Generation X. When considered from both a sociological and a theological perspective, this process must be seen as entailing a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice.**

#### 1.4 The Epistemological Base

Once again, the central problem addressed in this study is that many churches today are proving ineffective in reaching the members of the post-modern generations. In response to this problem, I have hypothesized that, if churches are to regain their missional identity in the postmodern era, this must come about in part through a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice as integral components of the process of renewal. Given the aim of this study, several key concepts must be defined with greater precision. Toward this end, I have found it necessary to engage in descriptive research drawing upon a range of theological, socio-scientific, historical, and philosophical sources.

First, this study focuses upon a limited category of established churches. In exploring the contour of this category, I have drawn upon numerous resources that provide insight into their socio-historical situation, such as *The Empty Church* by Reeves (1996), *Discontinuity and Hope* by Schaller (1999), Hall's *The End of Christendom and the Future of Christianity* (1997), Murray's *Church after Christendom* (2004) and *Post-Christendom* (2004), and *The Churching of America, 1776-2005* by Finke and Stark (2005).

Second, I have employed the assistance of the writings of Guder (1998, 2000), Hunsberger (1996), Van Gelder (1996, 1998a, 1998b, 2000, 2007a, 2007b), and Wright (2006) in defining what is meant by "missional." The Gospel and Our Culture Network's *StormFront* (Brownson et al 2003) and *Treasures in Clay Jars* (Barrett et al 2004) provide key assistance in this regard. The contributions of Roxburgh (1997,

1998, 2005, 2006) and Shenk (1995, 1996, 2001, 2005) also prove to be valuable to the development of this theme. Works by Bosch (1995), Riddell (1998), Gibbs (2000a), Snyder and Runion (2002), Frost and Hirsch (2003), McNeal (2003), Conder (2006), and Frost (2006) also are important in exploring the missional church.

Third, in endeavouring to define the phenomenon of post-modernity, I have drawn upon a wide range of philosophical, theological, and sociological resources.

Anderson (1990, 1995), Best and Kellner (1991, 1997), Dockery (2001), Erickson (1998, 2001), Greer (2003), Grenz (1996), Harvey (1990), Middleton and Walsh (1995), Penner (2005), Smith (2006), and Veith (1994) have proven to be richly valuable sources in exploring this theme.

Fourth, I have sought to ground this study in the existing literature on generational theory. Perhaps most notable within this category is the definitive work of Strauss and Howe (1992, 1997, and 2000). However, as I note in Appendix B, their work also is the most controversial and thus is employed here in a measured way. This being so, insight is appropriated from a wide range of reputable anthropological and sociological sources. These include Altbach and Laufer (1972), Mead (1970), Milson (1972), Pfeifer and Sussman (1991), Pillemer, Keeton, and Sutor (2000), and Strommen et al (1972). Socio-historical examinations of the contemporary generations also make a crucial contribution to this study. For example, studies by Cohen (1993), Dunn (1993), Barna (1994), Côté and Allehar (1995), Craig and Bennett (1997), Bagby (1998), Beaudoin (1998), Hersch (1998), Flory and Miller (2000, 2007), Carroll (2002), Lynch (2002) and numerous others provide valuable insight into the shared experiences and central tendencies of Generation X, the generation with which this study is primarily concerned.

Fifth, I have made a point to draw upon sources that specifically examine the intergenerational dynamics faced by many local congregations. *Bridging Divided Worlds* by Carroll and Roof (2002), Gambone's *All Are Welcome* (1998), *God and the Generations* by Hilborn and Bird (2002), Loper's *Building an Intergenerational Church* (1999), Rendle's *The Multigenerational Congregation* (2002), Vanderwell's *The Church for All Ages* (2008), Whitesel and Hunter's *A House Divided* (2000), and works by McIntosh (1997, 2002) are notable examples within this category.

Sixth, the concepts of reconciliation and justice are explored with the assistance of two categories of sources: (1) those that examine these terms as theological themes, and (2) those providing insights from systems theory and other theoretical perspectives. Theological resources that have contributed significantly to this project include Birch's *Let Justice Roll Down* (1991), *Reconciliation* by DeGruchy (2002), DeYoung's *Coming Together* (1995) and *Reconciliation* (1997), *Proclaim Jubilee* by Harris (1996), Schmiechen's *Christ the Reconciler* (1996), and Wright's *The Mission of God* (2006). In addition, the writings of Schreier (1992, 1998, 2005), Law (1993, 2000, 2002), and Volf (1996, 2005) factor prominently in the theological framework articulated within this study. Resources reflecting a systems perspective include Robinson's *Creating a Healthier Church* (1996), as well as *How Your Church Family Works* (1993) and *Healthy Congregations* (1996) by Steinke.

Seventh, the idea of *processes of renewal* is considered in light of several resources devoted to the theoretical foundations of congregational revitalization and change. This study is particularly indebted to the insights of Nel (2003), Butler Bass (2004), Hadaway (2001), Kew (2001), Kitchens (2003), Mead (1991), Regele (1995), Snyder (1989, 1996), and Visser't Hooft (1956).

While endeavouring to develop the central hypothesis through this descriptive research, I also have engaged in quantitative research as a means of testing this hypothesis. This involved a survey conducted among 150 churches, thirty from each of five different denominations, the results of which are summarized in chapter eight of this study.

## **1.5 Practical-Theological Methodology**

In the pages that follow, the theme introduced above is explored within the parameters of the discipline of practical theology. This being the case, it is essential at this point to attempt to provide some sense of the understanding of the discipline that will guide this study. Practical theology is a discipline concerned with action. This is a central assertion of Gerben Heitink in his text, *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains: Manual* (1999). He begins this text by observing that, in recent decades,



practical theology has come to be seen as “a theological theory of action, with a methodology that is closely linked to the social sciences” (:1); it is a “crisis discipline” that entails problem-based research and offers proposals for restoration and renewal (:3).

As a foundation stone to his discussion of practical theology, Heitink (:6) submits the following definition of this discipline as a theory of action: “practical theology as a theory of action is the empirically oriented theological theory of the mediation of the Christian faith (praxis 1) in the praxis of modern society (praxis 2).” While this definition certainly offers much that could guide and sustain a discussion of the nature of practical theology, Heitink (:104) actually chooses to employ a definition developed by Mette in outlining his own position: “Practical theology must be conceived of as a theory of action within a theology that is understood as a practice-oriented science.” This definition provides the conceptual parameters within which Heitink chooses to unfold his survey.

There are many notable texts devoted to practical-theological method (e.g., Browning 1996). However, in this study we will employ the practical-theological framework developed by Heitink. Before proceeding with an application of this model to the exploration of intergenerational reconciliation and justice as essential dimension of missional renewal, however, we will devote the remainder of this chapter to an overview of practical theology as outlined in Heitink’s text. This being the case, I will follow closely the logical progression he employs and will join him in adopting Mette’s definition as my point of departure. Toward the conclusion of this chapter, I will return briefly to Heitink’s definition in order to lend consideration to its implications for the shape of this discipline and, finally, for the study contained in the chapters that lie ahead.

### **1.5.1 Practical Theology: A Theological Discipline**

In exploring practical theology as a theological theory of action, we must give focused attention to the first portion of Mette’s definition: “Practical Theology must be conceived of as a theological theory of action.” With this affirmation in view, we may wish to ask, “In what respect is practical theology a *theological* discipline?”

Heitink (:104) suggests that, in light of the original objective of theology, all theology must be seen as practical. Hence, the aim of practical theology is by no means foreign to that of the overall theological enterprise. Theology can be described as a systematic reflection upon the Christian faith for the purpose of helping others to believe. Thus, faith requires thoughtful reflection and articulation.

Indeed, while it is common for us to affirm that practical theology is oriented toward the life of the “whole people of God,” this discipline would likely never have grown into its present form apart from the need generated by the existence of faculties devoted to training theological students who possess the motivation to explore the practical implications of their faith for themselves and others. This reality is just one example pointing to the fact that, as Heitink (:105) suggests, “all learning is based on prior, nonscientific experience, and usually has a practical purpose.” Theology has its origins in experiential knowledge and has an inherently practical orientation toward faith and action (Heitink :105).

### **1.5.1.1 A Hermeneutical Approach**

While it is appropriate for us to affirm this practical aim as fundamental to all theology, at the same time we must recognize that practical theology has developed into a separate practice-oriented discipline that offers its own distinct contribution. Yet, as Heitink (:110) cautions, it “must not be allowed to function independently.” He continues, “Theology is about the unity of knowledge, faith, and action.” This gives rise to the question of how practical theology can contribute, as a *theological discipline*, to this overall aim. Heitink advocates a hermeneutical approach as the answer to this question. He suggests that “the anthropological shift that is apparent in theology since the days of Schleiermacher” should serve as our point of departure in undertaking this hermeneutical approach. He adds, “Not God himself, but the human experience of God, the Christian faith, now takes central stage as the object of inquiry.” Thus faith, rather than God, is the direct object of theology. God, while the direct object of faith, can only serve as the indirect object of theological inquiry.

By adopting this hermeneutical approach, we can recognize the object of theology as “the Christian faith, as we know it through its (1) sources, (2) traditions, and (3) in its

past and (4) present manifestations of belief (:111). Hence, (1) biblical, (2) systematic, (3) historical, and (4) practical theology, while retaining their distinctiveness, must be seen as “hermeneutically tied together” (:111). “After all,” observes Heitink, “hermeneutics is a matter of ‘saying,’ ‘explaining,’ ‘translating’ (R. E. Palmer 1969, 12ff.), of ‘knowing,’ ‘interpreting,’ and ‘acting.’” This approach can be illustrated with a hermeneutical circle, which moves from understanding (discernment) to explaining (definition) to interpretation (internalization). As Heitink (:111) suggests:

Comprehending the Word demands thought interpretation of that Word in contemporary language, through exegesis, so that people will grasp what it says, in the context of their own world....[T]his understanding presupposes in its turn the experience and presuppositions of the subject, who tries to understand, interpret, and communicate the Word on the basis of her or his own experience.

This hermeneutical point of departure is crucial to any exercise in practical theology, for “the hermeneutical and the agogic moment in practical theology” are unified (:111). The word has the power to clarify, by which understanding emerges; and the power to influence, by which change is initiated.

### **1.5.2 Practical Theology as a Theory of Action**

If we continue in following Mette’s definition, having briefly considered practical theology as a theological discipline, we must also consider this discipline as a theological *theory of action*. This term, “theory of action,” was first introduced by Shelsky in 1963 and adopted into the practical theology discussion around 1970. By 1980, Furet was suggesting that this term clarified nothing about its theological content or its academic status (Heitink :124). Seeking to respond to this shortcoming, Heitink insists that a practical-theological theory of action must encompass two key perspectives: (1) the aim of describing and explaining reality, and (2) the aim of influencing and changing that reality. An action is an intervention in the course of events, controlled by the one who acts. To act, furthermore, is to work toward an intentional and active realization of a certain goal, by employing specific means in a particular situation. Action always occurs within a social context. Any action, then, must be described within the framework of a theory of social action and be recognized as an intersubjective event (:126).

It is important to note that many theologians have been critical toward affording the concept of a theory of action a central place in practical theology. Many of these critics seem to fear that placing emphasis upon a theory of action will detract from the importance of the divine praxis and cause practical theology to become empirically self-contained. In answer to such reservations, however, Heitink (:127) clarifies that “those who want to develop practical theology as an empirical theory of action do not want to cut all ties with dogmatics....But they do want to free the discipline from its image of an applied science, and to intend, from an empirical perspective, to build a separate, independent approach to the object of theology.” Thus, those desiring to promote practical theology as a theory of action are not endeavouring to reinvent the whole theological enterprise, but rather to provide a unique contribution that compliments and further strengthens it.

#### **1.5.2.1 Action as the Object of Practical Theology**

If indeed practical theology is concerned with being a theological theory of action, then the question must be raised of precisely what sort of action serves as its object. As Heitink (:129) observes, “Over the years, a consensus has developed that the object of practical theology is broader than that of earlier pastoral theology. It is generally felt that this action should not be restricted to the activities of church and ministers.” In light of this, how can the object of practical theology be defined more precisely? Heitink turns to Furet and van der Ven as two authors providing distinct and valuable answers to this question.

Furet insists that practical theology does not deal with human action in general, nor necessarily with the action of the believer or religious servant, “but specifically with action that has to do with the actualization and the maintenance of the relationship between God and humanity, and humanity and God.” In developing this position, Furet seems to be concerned to uphold a clear distinction between action and behaviour. He argues that sociologists have done us a disservice by describing *action* as a central sociological category. In using this term, they really seem to mean human *behaviour* to which the actor assigns subjective meaning (Heitink :129).

Firet has identified the “disciplinary matrix” of practical theology as being “communicative action in the service of the gospel.” This description limits the scope of practical theology and “refers to a normative and critical element” in practical-theological theory. Firet further explicates this position by suggesting that such communicative action encompasses “all efforts to ensure that the gospel of the kingdom of God reveals its power in the human situation in general, or in the concrete situation of a specific individual or some individuals.” Firet thus concludes that a “theory of action” is useful only if it contains the following components: (1) it deals with concrete domains of action; (2) it analyzes the context of the actions and the actions themselves in the present situation and with regard to their potentiality; (3) it does this on the basis of an empiricism-transcending critical theory with the purpose of developing action models and strategies for the various domains of action (Heitink :129-130).

Van der Ven also grants a central place to mediative action in his view of practical theology. He describes practical theology as “the theological discipline of religious-communicative action, which is the focus of pastoral activity” (in Heitink :130). Van der Ven distinguishes between the formal object of practical theology in a broad and a more narrow sense. Broadly speaking, it concerns “factors, processes and structures that determine and foster today’s personal and social life from the perspective of the kingdom of God.” In a more narrow sense, however, it addresses pastoral practice: “to foster religious communicative action in the personal and social life of today through pastors, other professionals, and volunteers.” Van der Ven understands the uniqueness of practical theology to lie in its empirical-theological approach.

### **1.5.2.2 The Communicative Action Theory of Jürgen Habermas**

Since the 1970’s, practical theology has been influenced by the work of the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas. This influence is attributable in part to the fact that, as Heitink (:133) notes, “Habermas’s philosophy establishes a link between the metaphor of conversion and the perspective of time.” Habermas’s way of dealing with time reflects the influence of Heidegger, whose view of temporality emphasizes that decisively anticipating the future is necessary to enable us to return to the past and to be free to shape the present as we desire. As Heitink (:134) suggests, “This is

not a matter of building on the past but of anticipating the future, and from there critically remembering the past.” This dialectical bond between *anticipation* and *anamnesis* is characteristic of Habermas’s work. Habermas draws this motif of anticipation from Bloch’s “principle of hope,” the utopian dream of a society free from controversy, in which the vehicle of language has given shape to a whole new world (Heitink 1999:134).

According to Heitink (1999:134-135), the metaphor of turning around and this dialectic of anticipation and anamnesis lead to two components that constitute the core of Habermas’s theory of communicative action: the ideal context for dialogue and the colonizing thesis. Habermas distinguishes between instrumentary action (based on technical knowledge), communicative action (based on practical knowledge), and emancipatory action (based on a critical knowledge). The central question in Habermas’s theory of action is, “How do societies continue to exist?” Chiefly, Habermas insists, they must be able to link action and the consequences of action in a way that enables a stable network to emerge. This is achieved through the use of language.

This leads to Habermas’s central concept of communicative action. As Heitink (:135-136) explains,

This is the tool the actors use as they negotiate their aims and the circumstances in which they find themselves. Through negotiation they coordinate their actions into networks. As they negotiate, the situation is categorized into existing facts, norms to be followed, and feelings of the actors. Through language, Habermas thus partitions communication into three worlds: facts, norms, and feelings. In this context one must accept three validity claims: that the alleged facts are true, that the norms are correct and fair, and that the feelings are genuine. The actors want truth, fairness, and genuineness. They must reach a preliminary consensus on this. Then a discourse begins, in which the validity claims with regard to truth (theoretical discourse), fairness (practical discourse), and genuineness (esthetic-expressive discourse) are successively tested on the basis of arguments. When this does not occur, the actors embark on strategic action, using mere power to exert influence.

Habermas insists that, to the fullest extent possible, a social order should be established through democratic negotiations. He argues that an order dependent upon strategic action lacks solidarity.

It is important to note, despite all that has been said here, that the distinction between communicative and strategic action is not one of absolute contrast. Practical theology aims to develop action strategies for various forms of communication “in the service of the nurture of the church” (:140). Hence, it cannot operate apart from certain forms of strategic action. “However,” cautions Heitink (:140), “strategic action must be permeated by communicative action, by taking human beings seriously as subjects. If that does not happen, strategy will be lost in a type of action that is merely technical or utilitarian.”

### **1.5.2.3 The Interpretive Theory of Paul Ricoeur**

A second philosopher whose theoretical contribution has had significant bearing on the shape of modern practical theology as a theory of action is Paul Ricoeur. Heitink (1999:141) introduces Ricoeur’s work as an effort to build a bridge between the interpretation of texts and the interpretation of social reality. He hypothesized that, if certain problems are raised by the interpretation of texts because they are texts and not spoken language, and if these problems are what constitute hermeneutics, then the human sciences may be said to be hermeneutical “(1) inasmuch as their object displays some features constitutive of a text as text, and (2) inasmuch as their methodology develops the same kind of procedures as those of *Auslegung* or text interpretation” (Ricoeur 1991:144-145). In reflecting upon this assertion, Heitink (:141) posits that “The confirmation of this hypothesis is of great importance for practical theology as a theological theory of action, since it attempts to bridge the gulf between text (Scripture and tradition) and action (the praxis of mediation).”

Ricoeur’s theory rests upon an examination of the usage of language, which Ricoeur differentiates from a language system or code. Language usage, he argues, is an event. Hence, this usage of language differs from a language system in four key ways: (1) it is realized in time. Explains Heitink (:141), “The spoken word is a fleeting event that demands to be recorded. What is recorded is not, however, the language event as an event, but the content of what has been said, the meaning of that event (the noema).” The usage of language entails three levels: locutionary (propositional) action, illocutionary power, and perlocutionary effect. (2) It requires a subject. Who is communicating? (3) It deals with something in a referential sense

and, thus, possesses a symbolic function. (4) It is directed toward the other, the one who is addressed (:141).

How is this framework to aid the student of social phenomena in determining what constitutes meaningful action? Ricoeur (1991:151) identifies four criteria issuing from the paradigm of the text. First, through comparison, we discover that meaningful action can become the object of scientific inquiry only if it can be objectified. *Understanding* differs from *interpretation*. Essentially, the *meaning* of an action can be separated from the *event* of this action. We must be able to clarify the *who, what, where, when* and *how*: the structure of an event. Second, very much as a text becomes detached from its author, so an action also becomes detached from its actor. Essentially, actions gain an independent status. Third, then, this status provides a link to the concept of meaningful action, “the kind of action with a significance that transcends the original situation” (Heitink :144). Finally, human action is accessible to others and, as a result, is open to interpretation.

This dialectic between action and interpretation has important methodological implications for the human sciences. Ricoeur suggests that there is a dialectical relationship between explanation and understanding, similar to that between writing and reading. The path from understanding to explanation can be seen as similar to that from guessing to validation. In the interpretation of a text, guesswork is “divination;” one sometimes experiences a “sudden flash of insight” (Hetink :144). Through guessing, one strives to arrive at a construction of the meaning of a text. Validation, however, represents the grammatical moment of examining the context to determine whether the statement makes sense. While a given text could be read and interpreted in any of a number of ways, validation gives rise to arguments that make one interpretation emerge as most plausible.

Similarly, the significance of human action often is expressed through different voices and, therefore, must be constructed. As Heitink (:145) observes, “Before one can interpret any action, one must understand the intention and motivation underlying the action. One is here dealing with the relation between the *what* and the *why* of an action.” For action to be deemed meaningful, a motive must exist that serves as a *reason for*, not merely as *cause of*. This motivational dimension demonstrates the



presence of intentionality in the action. This way of viewing action, which must be accompanied by a certain distancing on the part of the subject, is comparable to the interpretation of a text.

### 1.5.3 A Practical-Theological Theory of Action

The two previous sections have been devoted to exploring practical theology as a “theological theory of action” from two different perspectives: as a theological discipline and as a theory of action. In this section, I will follow the logic of Heitink’s approach by exploring how these two elements interrelate to constitute the core of the practical-theological enterprise.

#### 1.5.3.1 The Relation between Theory and Praxis

In the modern era, theory and praxis have ordered the world of Western society. However, the opposite was true in ancient times. As Heitink (:149) observes, “[T]hought and action were the human answers to a predetermined world order.” In the classical era, the formation of critical theory was considered as the highest human achievement, enabling humans to see things in their essence. Aristotle distinguished this contemplative knowledge from practical action, which he divided into the categories of *poiesis* and *praxis*. *Poiesis* is action that brings results based on skills. Conversely, in the case of *praxis*, one acts on the basis of life experience. The action itself serves as a goal. *Poiesis* is reduced to technology when severed from *praxis*. Similarly, observes Heitink (:150), “When we speak of the practice of faith, in the sense of ‘*praxis pietas*’ or ‘*orthopraxis*,’ we think of a faith that lives through experience and manifests itself spontaneously...For that reason *poiesis* may not detach itself from *praxis* as we develop our practical-theological theory.”

While over time this Aristotelian conception of the relationship between theory and praxis has been usurped by a modern view, the nature of this relationship has continued to hold a central place in philosophy. Practical theologians share the concern over the interaction between theory and praxis. However, for the practical theologian, these terms must be “defined from a theological perspective and directed toward the praxis of mediation, as the specific practical-theological focus” (Heitink

:151). Hence praxis must be understood as action inspired by the Christian tradition and the missional vocation of all Christians. Theory must be seen as “a comprehensive hermeneutical-theological statement that relates Christian tradition to experience, to the life and actions of modern humans” (:151).

In exploring the relationship between theory and praxis, Heitink (:152) sees the principles of Greinmacher as being instructive: (1) There is no pure theory of praxis. Theory always bears the influence of history and is conditioned by society. True acknowledgement of this reality demands that we call into question the possibility and desirability of a truly deductive Word theology. Even the best and most teachable listener is always a child of his or her own time. (2) Praxis always has an underlying theory. (3) The primacy of theory over praxis, long defended by practical theologians, must be rejected. (4) Similarly, however, the primacy of praxis over theory must also be rejected. The argument that theory is totally defined by praxis is a form of determinism. This view relieves people of their responsibility to think critically about their situation and to challenge unacceptable praxes. One must simply accept traditional forms, as though it would be useless to renew one’s praxis through a new theory. (5) The relationship between theological theory and ecclesiastical praxis must not be seen as entailing either a complete separation or identification of the two, but rather “a bipolar tension-filled combination.” Practical-theological theory must always be critical theory (:151).

These principles can help us recognize the wisdom in the following comments by Heitink (:153): “[I]n our various actions we will more than ever have to depend on an intersubjectivity, in which people, on the basis of a shared commitment, become the veritable subjects of their own experience. This requires a constant interaction between text and context, theory and praxis.” Thus, this relationship can be envisioned as a cyclical series of movements, in which an experience of praxis becomes the object of theological reflection. In turn, critical questions lead to an examination of the original theory, which can bring about a rereading of Scripture, and, subsequently, a revision of the theory. This new theoretical insight then asks crucial questions regarding the current praxis, thus giving rise to further questions about theory. Any resulting answers can prompt those concerned to initiate change,

making possible a renewal of the praxis. In turn, this can prompt questions that will lead further into a circular process of reflection.

### 1.5.3.2 A Paradigm for a Practical-Theological Theory of Action

Having considered the relationship between theory and praxis, we must also give consideration to the specific elements that constitute the *paradigm* of practical theology, the generally accepted theoretical basis for this discipline (Heitink :155). A paradigm provides a “disciplinary matrix,” and thus must not be confused with methodology. Heitink (:156) points to the phrase introduced by Firet, “Communicative action in the service of the gospel,” as providing a widely accepted paradigm for this discipline. Such communicative action concerns the mediation of God’s kingdom in time and space. It “forms the basis for forms of mediation...that want to change the reality in such a way that it answers to a greater degree to the perspective given us through faith and in the hope of the coming of God’s kingdom.”

In considering communicative action, it is appropriate to return to a consideration of Ricoeur’s model of text interpretation, which provides a paradigm for the study of meaningful action. Most statements about action are complex. As Heitink (:157) observes, “To understand fully the structure of an action, one must ask: *Who* does *what* (in relation to *whom*), *where*, *when*, *why*, and *how*?” This question acknowledges that meaningful action entails (1) the actor, (2) the kind of action, (3) the modality (how the actor did it), (4) context (where, under what circumstances), and (5) the reason for the action. This description helps to reveal “not only the structure of an action but also its implications as a social phenomenon” (:157). An action system may be examined in much the same way that a document or a language system is interpreted through structural analysis.

Within a complex action statement, one can recognize the three levels Ricoeur previously was shown to have distinguished. First, the circumstances or context may be referred to as the locutionary level of the action. Simply stated, an action has to do with concrete reality. Something of the noematic (meaning) structure of the action can be made apparent through mere description of it. Second, through the specific activity, such as a sermon, the uniqueness of a theological action is revealed. The

present circumstance may be interpreted in light of a faith reality that is mediated by a text. This represents the illocutionary level of the action. Third, there is a realization: that which is achieved through the action or which the actor hopes to achieve. Reality can come to be assigned a symbolic character (e.g., the identification of ecclesial praxis with christopraxis or the call for individuals to be “crucified with Christ” in the face of suffering). This is the perlocutionary level. As a result of this interpretive process entailing the dialectic of event and meaning, “the clear distinction between interpretation and text is no longer there” (Heitink :158). This gives practical-theological interpretation its own character. Yet, it also necessitates that this interpretation entail a critical perspective, taking “prejudice” into account.”

If we endeavour to employ this interpretation model in a penetrating manner, we must acknowledge the central question asked of the structure of any action to be, “Who does what (in relation to whom)?” This question leads to three, somewhat distinct, perspectives. These correspond to the hermeneutical, empirical, and strategic perspectives of an action (Heitink :159). First, one must ask, “Who does what: why/about what?” The “why” dimension addresses the intentional and motivational aspects of an action. Furthermore, the connection between the “what” and “why” also impacts the “about what.” This is the referential dimension of an action. It can be described as the movement from “sense” to referral, from that which is said to that about which it is saying something. Again, this calls for a critical approach. One must consider whose interests certain action structures and processes may serve. This reveals the moral dimension of the question “why?” In summary, the link between “what” and “why” relates to the hermeneutical meaning of an action. As Heitink (:160) suggests, “It is a matter of interpretation with a view toward arriving at understanding.”

The second question is “Who does what: where/when?” This question addresses the situational aspect. Every specific action entails a number of variables that, when placed within a broader theoretical framework, can enable one to compare this event with other events. This, in turn, makes possible the formation of hypotheses that “may lead toward knowledge with a more general validity” with regard to a given phenomenon (Heitink :161). Rooted in empirical methodology, this process entails personal distancing and, thus, enables one to develop greater insight regarding

underlying and external action structures. Explanation commands a central place in this process.

The third question is “Who does what: how/with what intent?” This refers to the instrumental aspect of an action. The “how” must serve the “what.” As Heitink (:161) observes, “[A]ny form of mediative action must always serve the intended communicative goal...What goal sanctions what means? The ‘how’ thus receives a depth of content by linking it to the ‘for what purpose.’” In short, any mediative action has a strategic meaning; it “is an intervention in the surrounding world and is directed toward change.” All three of the perspectives surveyed here are closely related by virtue of their relationship to the core question of “who does what?” Thus, a perspective can be said to belong *chiefly* to one of these categories, but not *wholly* so.

### **1.5.3.3 The Methodology of a Theological Theory of Action**

Having been introduced to the relationship between the hermeneutical, empirical, and strategic perspectives, we must extend this discussion by lending consideration to three corresponding concepts: understanding, explanation, and change. As has already been mentioned, understanding and explanation may be regarded as the two poles of the hermeneutical circle. In addition, as we have already seen, change is understood as inherent to any action; indeed, it is the direct object of mediative action. Recognizing the importance of these concepts, we must give consideration to the methodological relationship between them. Each of these three perspectives offers a circular process by which its own methodology is carried out. This also is worthy of some exploration here.

#### **a. The Perspective of Understanding: The Hermeneutical Cycle**

The perspective of understanding is central to the hermeneutical theory of interpretation. Ricoeur (1991:159) characterizes the reconstruction of an action structure as a circular movement from guessing to testing (or verification). Through “guessing,” one strives to gain understanding of a unique action as an individual and incidental reality. This interpretation can lead to possible understandings, which can

be sorted through on the basis of the logic of subjective probability. In the pursuit of understanding, practical theology is greatly indebted to theoretical contributions from philosophy and the social sciences (Heitink :163).

Heitink (:184-185) affirms Hans-Georg Gadamer as one who offers some helpful observations with reference to this theme of “understanding”. Gadamer (2005:233) insists that, in our attempts to understand texts or reality, we all have biases determined in large degree by historical, sociological, and historical factors. Essentially, understanding is always conditioned by context. Thus, for Gadamer, historicity is assigned the value of a hermeneutical principle. Our prejudgment of a given situation raises questions that help us to understand a text from the past better. As Heitink (:184-185) comments, “This anticipation of its meaning, which guides us in our acquisition of knowledge, opens up the meaning of a text to us. It is the task of hermeneutics to clarify the conditions that facilitate such understanding.”

Within this understanding of the hermeneutical task, the distance between the present-day reader and the historical context is viewed as positive (Gadamer 1989:265). It helps the reader to discover the historical nature of his biases. One’s situation is hermeneutically determined by her particular horizon of understanding. If one wishes to place himself in another’s position, he must begin this movement from his own. Allowing the tension between past and present to become explicit may lead to a “fusion of these horizons.” Genuine understanding is rendered possible when the historical horizon is fused with our own horizon. Present and past enter into a relationship of dialogue as authentic “I-Thou” partners. Thus, hermeneutics involves nurturing conditions that make genuine understanding possible.

#### **b. The Perspective of Explanation: The Empirical Cycle**

At the other pole of the hermeneutical circle lies the perspective of explanation, which is central to the empirical method. The term, “empiricism” is derived from the Greek, *empeiria*, which bears the meaning of “experience.” This term represents an epistemological approach that sees all scientific knowledge as based on experience and deducible through sense perceptions. It demands a testing process for the purposes of establishing validity and veracity. In doing so, it aims at providing

explanation oriented toward the general and universal. In the specific case of formulating a theory of action, it helps to provide a scientific basis for academic inquiry into the meaning or effectiveness of action (Heitink :221). Heitink delineates an empirical cycle that follows the path of “observation”—“experiencing”—“choosing”—and “evaluating.” The explanatory knowledge gained through this process brings the cycle to conclusion, while also presenting new opportunities for observation.

The practical theologian may draw upon several currents in empirical research while engaging in his or her craft. For example, both qualitative and quantitative research offer great benefit as the practical theologian engages in the testing process. However, these must be used in compliment with one another in order to counteract the weaknesses inherent in each (Heitink :223). Clearly, because “improvement of the situation toward the desired praxis is the underlying interest of practical-theological research,” practical-theological research must be seen as belonging to the category of *action research* (:225). Within a given study, one may employ research aimed at systematic description, provisional exploration, or the testing of hypotheses (:228). However, these are rarely employed in isolation from one another; rather, it is common for a study to use them in combination with one another.

### **c. The Perspective of Change: The Regulative Cycle**

The third perspective, focused upon change, differs from these two other perspectives in that it entails *practical* thinking leading to actions informed by knowledge. All practical theology inevitably takes change as its object. Such change is envisioned as being undertaken through a process of management and steering, of methodical action guided by a plan. Heitink (:212) finds Van Strien’s three characteristics of such praxis-oriented thinking to be instructive: (1) It is not generalizing but particularizing in nature and focuses on a specific situation. (2) Its ultimate product is not academic statements, but rather actions based on academic considerations. (3) Its interventions are guided by standards, since it endeavours to correct or improve what is not good. According to Heitink, Van Strien refers to the resulting action cycle as “the regulative cycle”, which moves according to the basic pattern of (1) definition of the problem, (2) diagnosis, (3) plan, (4) intervention, and (5) evaluation.

#### **d. The Relationship between the Three Perspectives**

One distinct characteristic of practical theology as a discipline of mediative action is the way in which these three perspectives interrelate. As Heitink (:165) comments, these three perspectives form

a distinct circulation system or ‘circuit’ of theory formation. The three circles correspond to the distinctive goals of the discipline: the interpretation of human action in the light of the Christian tradition (the hermeneutical perspective), the analysis of human action with regard to its factuality and potentiality (the empirical perspective), and the development of action models and action strategies for the various domains of action (the strategic perspective).

The first of these perspectives is focused upon providing meaning, the second upon testing action, and the third upon systematic action. Heitink suggests that they interrelate in a conceptual triad that moves along the path of “understanding—explanation—change” (:235). He further expands this by encouraging one to engage in a course of practical theological research along a “hermeneutical path”: observation—description—analysis—reflection—suggestions for action (:238).

#### **1.5.3.4 The Relation between Praxis 1 and Praxis 2**

We now are able to return briefly to Heitink’s definition of practical theology and make several observations regarding the relationship between praxis 1 (the mediation of the Christian faith) and praxis 2 (the praxis of modern society). First, we can see that praxis 2 clearly provides the context for praxis 1. The praxis of the church cannot be detached from its context. While the church, in its praxis, is shaped by its social setting, it also is able to exert a corrective influence on the praxis of society. Second, we would do well to give attention to what is meant by “mediation of the Christian faith.” Speaking in generalities, Heitink (:168) indicates that the relationship between any theory and its praxis “requires” mediation. Thus, people and institutions assume mediative roles.

This is true also for the mediation of the Christian faith, although in this case the role of the Holy Spirit must be seen as crucial. This mediation occurs within three primary domains that share a common practical-theological theoretical base, yet must be



differentiated from one another: the private life, social establishments, and the public sector. This being said, as Heitink (:169) argues, “It is clear that this mediation, this communicative action in the service of the gospel, demands a form of church life as an organizing umbrella and an integrating force. This leads to a dynamic ecclesiology.” In other words, the church is not a static reality. Because this is true of the church’s nature, the effectiveness of its praxis is dependent in part upon the degree of its attentiveness to praxis 2. As Christians strive to formulate methods for mediation, the world must be seen as a subject from which it can learn much and to which it must respond.

#### **1.5.4 The Present Study as Practical-Theological Endeavour**

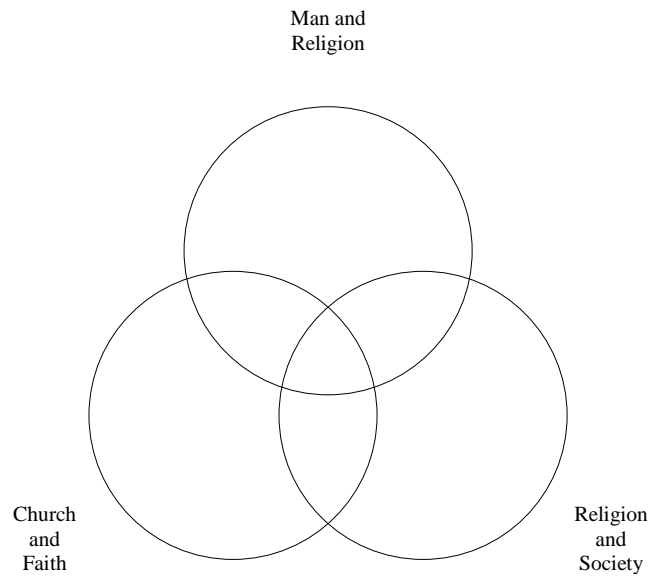
Before proceeding with our study, it will be helpful to explain briefly how Heitink’s approach will influence the contour of this project. Within the present study, we will employ the approach outlined by Heitink. Chapters two through seven will be devoted to the hermeneutical cycle. Chapter two will contribute to this interpretive exercise by outlining a body of foundational theoretical concepts. Chapters three through five will be devoted to fostering an interpretation of the problem introduced above in section 1.1. Then, in chapters six and seven, we will turn our attention toward providing a hermeneutical account of the hypothesis being advanced in this study. Chapter eight will be devoted to the empirical cycle. This chapter will provide a summary of quantitative survey results employed in testing the interpretation articulated in the preceding portions of the thesis. Our study will conclude in chapter nine by lending attention briefly to the regulative cycle. This chapter will provide strategic insights into how the concepts outlined in the previous chapters might be translated into action.

In addition, before advancing to the next chapter, it will be helpful to clarify more precisely where this study fits within the broad discipline of practical theology. Heitink (:241) suggests that practical theology is concerned with three “domains of action” that are distinct, yet interrelated (diagram 1):

1. **Man and religion:** this is concerned with issues of theological anthropology, the meaning of life, religious development, and religious experience (:260-268).

2. **Church and faith:** this addresses the ecclesiastical implications of the faith (:275-285).
3. **Religion and society:** the church's witness and service within the world is of central concern (:292-303).

**Figure 1.1: Heitink's Domains of Action**



Within each of these categories, several sub-disciplines can be identified:

1. **Man and religion:** (1) *Poimenics* encompasses theories regarding the pastorate; (2) *Religious pedagogics* is concerned with religious education and training, particularly as it relates to the faith development of the young; and (3) *Spirituality* addresses religious experience and those practices by which it is fostered (:269-273).
2. **Church and faith:** (1) Church development (*oikodomics*) explores processes for the building-up of the church in accordance with its true purposes and potential; (2) *Catechetics* is devoted to studying the church as a learning community; (3) *Liturgics* focuses upon the corporate worship life of the congregation; and (4) *Homiletics* addresses the proclamation of the Christian faith (:285-291).
3. **Religion and society:** (1) *Evangelism* is concerned with the communication of the good news to the world; (2) *Diaconics* explores the

church's service for the sake of God's reign within society; (3) *Equipping the laity* addresses the training of the God's priestly people for ministry.

**Table 1.1: Sub-disciplines of the three domains of action**

Man and Religion	Church and Faith	Religion and Society
Poimenics	Oikodomics	Evangelism
Religious pedagogics	Catechetics	Diaconics
Spirituality	Liturgics	Equipping the laity
	Homiletics	

The problem and hypothesis being advanced within this study relate closely to several of these sub-disciplines. The objectives of *oikodomics* factor most prominently in the pages that follow. However, as will become evident, the intergenerational focus of this study causes *pedagogics* to be of considerable importance, as well. The concern for a missional understanding of the church will cause evangelism and *diaconics* to be brought into this discussion. The desire for renewal will cause us to lend attention to *spirituality*. Finally, the challenges associated with change will cause us to delve into the realms of *catechetics* and *equipping the laity*. In the pages that follow, it will become clear that, as Heitink (:258) asserts, while there is need to treat these disciplines in a differentiated fashion, they also “overlap” and are linked in the way that their relationship emerges throughout the practical-theological research process.

## 1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have introduced the central problem and hypothesis to be explored throughout the remainder of this study. As we have seen, we are endeavouring to address the following problem:

As American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches are struggling to respond faithfully to culture change within a complex generational context. The resulting ineffectiveness of these churches in transmitting their faith traditions to Generation X, the first post-modern generation, threatens the capacity of these churches to sustain their witness through this transitional period.

In response to this problem, the following hypothesis is being proposed:

If established churches are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, they must engage in a process of missional renewal that encompasses Generation X. When considered from both a sociological and a theological perspective, this process must be seen as entailing a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice.

In the preceding pages, we have given a brief account of the rationale for this study by pointing to a gap that exists within in much of the existing literature. We have highlighted the specific body of literature that will be employed in developing our position throughout the pages that lie ahead. Furthermore, through an appropriation of the work of Heitink (1999), we have defined and described our understanding of what it means for this study to be located within the discipline of practical theology. We have explained specifically how Heitink's practical-theological model will guide the structure of this study. Finally, we have located this study more specifically within the sub-disciplines of practical theology and have referenced how these sub-disciplines will prove to be of significance to this project. Having provided this introductory material, we now will proceed to chapter two, which will be devoted to articulating several core theoretical concepts of importance to this study.

## 2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

### 2.1 Introduction

The present thesis is guided by the assertion that, as American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches are struggling to respond adequately to cultural change within a fragmented generational context. It further is being argued that the resulting ineffectiveness of many of these churches in transmitting the Christian tradition to Gen Xers, the first post-modern generation, threatens the ability of these churches to sustain their witness through this transitional period. As we saw in chapter one, this study is rooted in an understanding of practical theology as “the mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of modern society” (Heitink 1999:6). Furthermore, this study is rooted in an awareness of the reality that the witness of the church is not something that can be achieved in its fullness at any one particular moment; rather, if the church is to sustain a vital witness across time, this requires a dynamic and ongoing process, one that is inherently intergenerational in nature. Thus, in the present chapter, we will provide further theoretical foundations for this study by exploring the *intergenerational* praxis of the church within the *intergenerational* praxis of society. As we shall see, the story of how societies and individual congregations located within them sustain their existence through time is inextricably linked to the intergenerational dynamics that emerge among the generations of which they are composed.

Thus, the present chapter will serve as a prelude to the heart of the study that follows. Toward this end, this chapter will be devoted to providing a sound theoretical foundation for the rest of this project by exploring the following themes:

1. Section 2.2 will introduce the preservation and perpetuation of any cultural tradition, whether that of a society or any group within society, as entailing an intergenerational dynamic requiring the participation of successive generations. This will provide a helpful basis for exploring the intergenerational objectives and challenges that can arise both within society at large and within the church specifically.
2. In section 2.3, we will give attention to the role of the generation within the praxis of society by endeavouring to define the “generation” as a socio-historical phenomenon. Consideration will be given to how we might speak

meaningfully about generational identity, as well as the limitations and cautions to be kept in view as we endeavour to do so.

3. In section 2.4, this focus upon the praxis of society will be developed further as we explore a theoretical understanding of the inherently *intergenerational* processes by which all generations are formed in relation to, and in distinction from, their cultural forebears. Particular attention will be given to common causes of the intergenerational “problem” within societies experiencing significant cultural change.
4. Section 2.5 will translate the implications of the intergenerational “problem” into the intergenerational praxis of “small world” settings. A “small world” context, explain Gubrium and Rittman (1991:94), is “an interpersonal domain of understanding,” a particular setting with “experiential boundaries.”
5. Section 2.6 will give attention to the intergenerational implications of the church’s praxis within society. We will explore the responsibility of the church toward each rising generation and the individuals of which it is composed. In addition, we will examine some of the challenges that churches may encounter as “small world” contexts as they seek to fulfil their intergenerational praxis within a changing society.

## **2.2 Introducing the Intergenerational Dynamic**

Over time, the existence and vitality of any group depends in large part upon the ability of its members to sustain a consensus regarding the meaning of life and what are appropriate ways of thinking, feeling and acting (Westerhoff 1974:38-39). Indeed, it can be asserted that, in the case of society at large, the church, or any other community within society, if a group’s identity is to be sustained across time, its members must “actually identify themselves as members of that people” (Kennedy Neville 1974:54-55). This essentially necessitates that the members of a given group strive to preserve and perpetuate the *cultural tradition* reflected in its symbols, practices, and institutions (Bass 1994:172; Kraft 2005:38). In seeking to understand this claim, it will be helpful for us to be clear regarding what we mean by *culture*. Newbigin (1986:3) suggests that culture consists of “the sum total of ways of living developed by a group of human beings.” Thus, it is an integrated system of learned behaviours (Angrosino 2001:7; Kraft 2005:38).

Hiebert (1985:31) explains that any culture can be dissected into three layers, which he views as addressing “ideas, feelings, and values,” respectively. The uppermost stratum, which is most readily available to conscious and critical reflection, consists of the cognitive dimension (knowledge, logic and wisdom) of a cultural framework; the middle stratum involves the affective dimensions (feelings, aesthetics) native to a culture, while the deepest layer, that which is often least subject to the conscious faculties of a society, is composed of the evaluative dimension (values, allegiances). On the “surface,” a particular culture can be distinguished from other communities by the behaviours (thinking and acting) and products (art, law, custom, roles, etc.) it generates (Westerhoff 1974:37-38; Hiebert 1985:35-36). Roxburgh (2005:133) suggests that “society”, which entails “the relationships and products we develop to express and give life to our culture,” occurs at this surface level. As he explains, “The primary relationship moves from culture out toward society; the former generates and shapes the latter. Our social interactions are the rich variety of ways we respond to the cultural forces shaping our collective lives.”

As the above description attests, within any cultural context, there is much more at work than what readily meets the eye. The “deeper” layers of culture constitute the “worldview” that a group of people or society create and share, and through which the members of that group see, cope with, and understand the world (Bosch 1995:49; Roxburgh 1998:14; Taber 2000:57). Kraft (2005:43) offers a helpful description of this concept of worldview:

The worldview of a cultural entity is seen as both the repository and the patterning in terms of which people generate the conceptual models through which they perceive of and interact with reality... The worldview of any given people presumably began with a series of agreements by the members of the original group concerning their perception of reality and how they should regard and react toward that reality.

Kraft (2005:44-46) further explains that, as the “central control box” of a culture, worldview guides the organization and behaviour of that culture. However, the members of a society may not even be conscious of the various ways in which their worldview impacts them. As Sire (1988:17) asserts, the presuppositions inherent within a given worldview are “generally unquestioned” by their adherents.

Tradition provides an integral dimension of culture (Kraft 2005:38). Carroll (2000:10) explains that the term *tradition*, derived “from the Latin root *tradere* (to hand over or entrust), refers generally to the collective memory of a particular group through which it passes on its accrued wisdom...from generation to generation.” A given tradition, Pelikan (1984:6, 20) suggests, actually provides the “social glue” within a given group and, over time, provides social continuity involving a partnership of past, present, and future generations. As the observations of Carroll and Pelikan suggest, the long-term capacity of a society or group to perpetuate a consensus surrounding its accumulated cultural tradition has inherently *intergenerational* implications. Mannheim (1972:107) explains that, because, through birth, (1) “new participants in the cultural process are emerging,” (2) it is “necessary continually to transmit the accumulated cultural heritage;” thus, (3) “the transition from generation to generation is a continuous process.” This being the case, the elders within a group must employ a “formal and informal, conscious and unconscious” process of “socialization” or “enculturation” as a means of transmitting their social attitudes, norms, and expectations from one generation to another (Westerhoff 1974:37-39; cf. Taber 2000:57).

Westerhoff (1974:45) insists that the family, as “[t]he first and most important socializing agency,” has a particularly critical role in this process (cf. Loper 1999:5). Indeed, as Mead (1970:2) has attested, the coexistence of three generations (grandparents, parents, and children) is necessary for the transmission of a cultural tradition to occur. Beyond this, however, the entire community contributes to the formative process through its shared institutions, social networks, ceremonies, and rituals (Kennedy Neville 1974:54-55). The envisioned outcome is that members of the rising generation might come to identify and conduct themselves as “self-regulating” participants in that tradition (Mogey 1991:55). By this intergenerational process, says White (1988:125), “we make and keep life human.”

Understanding that the long-term viability of both church and society is dependent upon this “intergenerational” dynamic, it will be helpful to clarify briefly the significance of this term, “intergenerational.” Newman and Smith (1997:4) offer the following explanation: “At the foundation of the intergenerational concept is a relationship that is as old as the institutions of family and community. Its roots can be



seen in the connections that link specific generations within families—the elder and younger members” (cf. Moge 1991:48). Pillemer, Keeton, and Suito (2000:1386) suggest that those who have studied these relations from a historical perspective “have identified changing patterns of relationships between the old and the young” over time.

According to sociologists, these intergenerational patterns can be studied on two levels (Pillemer, Keeton, & Suito 2000:1388). First, the *macrosociological* approach is concerned with a generalized analysis of the relations between generational cohorts on a societal scale. Second, the *microsociological* approach involves an examination of intergenerational relationships within the family or within particular social groupings of society. In essence, this perspective is concerned with what Gubrium and Rittman (1991:94) have termed “small worlds.” These authors describe a “small world” as “an interpersonal domain of understanding,” a particular setting with “experiential boundaries.”

A fundamental assertion of this thesis is that the *microsociological* and *macrosociological* facets of the term “intergenerational” are dynamically interrelated. Relational patterns emerging through the former category of inquiry do impact the latter, albeit only to the extent that the widespread existence of such patterns contributes to the development of phenomena arising within the latter category of inquiry (Zimmerman 1995:43). At the same time, developments occurring within the latter category prove to have a significant impact upon intergenerational patterns within the *microsociological* context. In fact, in examining such small worlds, one is able to gain an appreciation of the concrete impact of “global” (i.e., *macrosociological*) intergenerational trends upon what people think, feel, and do in these specific social situations. Recognizing this, we will endeavour throughout this study to explore the interplay of these two senses of the word *intergenerational*.

While this study is concerned ultimately with the life of the church, the approach being employed here is founded upon the conviction that analysis of the praxis of the church must occur with reference to the praxis of society; thus, if we are to understand the praxis of society, we must grasp that the historical development of the praxis of a given culture occurs through time in conjunction with the ongoing emergence of a

series of successive generations. In appropriating this *macrosociological* perspective, we are able to explore matters such as how the relational structures, modes of interaction, and attitudes that exist between the members of two or more generations within a society develop across time. In turn, this enables us to consider the praxis of the church, the household of faith, as a *microsociological* “small world” entity, with a view to understanding the way in which its intergenerational objectives come to be impacted by broader social trends.

As we consider the impact of intergenerational relations upon the successful perpetuation of cultural traditions within church and society, the issue of intergenerational “solidarity” proves to be of central significance. Social scientists have advanced this concept of “solidarity” to describe the “glue” by which “group cohesiveness” is maintained within a given society or community (Roberts, Richards, & Bengston 1991:12). Roberts, Richards, and Bengston (:15) cite one study that identifies four key dynamics of interaction contributing to the level of solidarity within a group:

1. **Interaction:** the degree of contact and interconnectedness between the actions of one group member and another.
2. **Activity:** the breadth of activities in which group members engage together.
3. **Sentiment:** the degree of mutual affection between group members.
4. **Norms:** shared standards regarding membership and interaction.

This study found that more cohesive groups were those in which frequent interaction, shared fondness, and commonly held normative commitments were present. Another study referenced by these authors similarly found that, when high levels of both “contact” and “similarity” are present within a group, a stronger “sentiment” of solidarity will exist than in those groups that interact regularly, but share few common interests (:16). As we progress through this exploration of society-wide and “small world” intergenerational dynamics, the degree of solidarity among the generations will prove to be a primary factor impacting the degree to which a group’s cultural tradition is passed successfully from one generation to the next.

### 2.3 The Generation within the Praxis of Society

The ultimate aim of the present study is to address challenges that have emerged within and between the contemporary generations amid the post-modern transition. This being so, if our desire is to respond to these challenges by exploring the intergenerational praxis of the church within the praxis of society, it will be helpful at this point to proceed by lending more precise definition in response to a fundamental question: What do we mean when we speak of a *generation*? Indeed, this question is crucial to the integrity of this thesis. It must be acknowledged that some influential Christian leaders within the ranks of the generations most directly influenced by this transitional period (Gen Xers in particular) are inherently sceptical of the notion that one can even speak meaningfully about generational identity on a *macrosociological* level and, thus, question whether the concept of the generation should influence the way in which the church conceives its praxis. For example, Gen Xer Andy Crouch (2001:83) maintains that, apart from the Boomer generation, which he views as an undeniably cohesive group, the notion of generational identity in American history is a “myth.”

Those advancing such an opinion generally insist that generational identity is purely an artificial construct created and advanced by marketing and media specialists. As one Gen Xer author articulates, “Using a ‘divide and conquer’ methodology, marketers drew somewhat arbitrary lines around us in order to have a defined target at which they could shoot their products in order to make money. The generational divisions resulted in what we now know as Gen X” (Cox 1998:20-21). On this basis, some of these critics may wish to invalidate the exercise being undertaken here. In light of the media saturation and post-modern fragmentation to which they have been subjected throughout their lifetime, one can understand how Gen Xers could hold such an opinion. However, while it may be true that media and marketing experts are responsible for promoting reductionistic generational stereotypes, the members of the Yankelovich group, perhaps the foremost proponents of a generational approach to marketing, adamantly insist that their adoption of this framework actually came about in *response* to generational trends that became perceptible to them in 1968 (Smith & Clurman 1997:xi-xiii). Could it be that Gen X critics have chosen to respond to reductionist stereotypes by employing reductionist arguments as the basis for

dismissing the significance of generations within church and society? Might it not be fair to enquire as to whether some measure of discernable distinctions in generational identity were evident on a *macrosociological* scale prior to, and independent of, the particular cultural influences often cited by these Gen Xers?

### 2.3.1 Establishing a Historical Precedent for the Study of Generations

Several millennia prior to the advent of the post-modern generations or the media forces to which some sceptics attribute responsibility for the existence of generational consciousness, the presence and significance of generations within society was being recognized. Generational theorists Strauss and Howe (1996) provide the following observations:

There is nothing either recent or arbitrary about generations. In cultures all over the world, archaic myths and epics originally relied on the generations—not years—as the standard unit for tracking the rise and fall of empires and religions. Some of the most renowned pioneers of the western study of history...pondered obsessively over how generational changes regulate the ebb and flow of events.  
([www.fourthturning.com](http://www.fourthturning.com))

It would be an “etymological fallacy” to superimpose a contemporary definition of “generation” upon the manner in which this term was used within ancient civilizations or to suggest uniformity in the meaning that has been applied to it throughout history (Hilborn & Bird 2002:13). However, it is worthwhile to note that the concept of the generation was being recognized, if even primitively, in the earliest epochs of recorded history as an important social reality.

Within the modern Western context, interest in the significance of generations first arose among propagandists of the French Revolution in the 1780s and 1790s. They sought to understand how political generations of like-aged leaders influence the formation and establishment of new rules for society. Many of these theorists, observe Strauss and Howe (1992:438), “took great care to define generations and locate them in history.”

Beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, a growing number of scientists and philosophers began to develop a serious interest in the study of generations. However, their attention extended beyond mere political impact to the influence of

generations upon social progress in general. One school of thought, represented in the work of August Comte, asserted that, within the modern world, generations had become the causal dynamic of the pace of all social change. Another tradition was nurtured by scholars such as Dilthey who, in their search for a means of identifying the unique *gestalt* of specific historical periods, concluded that this “inner totality” could be found in the specific historical experience of a generation (Kohli 1996:1-2). Later, following World War I, Karl Mannheim, José Ortega, François Mentré, and numerous other scholars, “produced perhaps the most cogent body of generations writing ever” (Strauss & Howe 1997a:63). In addition to this academic exploration of the subject, on a popular level, “Europeans were becoming acutely aware of generational differences in their cultural and political life;” as a result, “By the end of the nineteenth century, the European elite chattered incessantly of generations.” Clearly, in spite of the claims to the contrary cited above, there is a compelling historical precedent for recognizing generations as a valid social reality.

### **2.3.2 Establishing a Theoretical Framework for the Study of Generations**

As this thesis unfolds, it will become evident that, in direct contradiction to the claims of the critics cited above, it now is possible to speak more intelligibly of generational identity than perhaps at any previous point in modern history. This being the case, attention must still be lent to the fundamental question of “What is a generation?” As may already be apparent, this term has several different applications, each of which bears a distinct meaning. For example, one can use the term *generation* to refer to those possessing a parallel location within the genealogy of an individual family or to refer to the actual process of *begetting* by which a family line is propagated (Mogey 1991:48). As has already been suggested above, such intra-familial dynamics do come to bear on the subject being considered here. However, in this context, we are concerned centrally with the broader concept of what sociologists commonly refer to as the *social generation* or *generational cohort*.

#### **2.3.2.1 The Generation: A Historical and Sociological Phenomenon**

As we consider this concept of the generational cohort, we can note that biology provides the most basic dimension by which it might be defined (Mogey 1991:48-49).

Simply stated, a generation is composed of a wide variety of persons who, by virtue of having been born at approximately the same point in history, are involuntarily and permanently bound together by a “common age location in history” (Strauss & Howe 1992:48). Thus, the members of a generation move together across time, journeying “upward in age” from birth to death (Riley 2000:342).

While this similarity in age is fundamental to the definition of a generational cohort, this alone cannot account for the formation of such cohorts. In addition to this, as Mannheim (1972:106, 113) asserts, the members of a generational cohort must share a common *social* location. According to Mannheim, shared social location entails participation as an integrated group in common experiences that engender a collective predisposition to certain characteristics, modes of thought, and historically relevant action. In essence, shared experience of social institutions and social circumstances provides a generational cohort with common “sociological conditioning” (Esler 1971:30). As a cohort moves through time together, such experiences cause each generation to develop “a distinct biography and a distinct lifecycle” (Strauss & Howe 1992:48; cf. Twenge 2006:2). In other words, as Riley (2000:342) observes, “As they age, the people in each cohort are changing socially and psychologically as well as biologically; they are actively participating with other people; and they are accumulating knowledge, attitudes, and experiences.” Through this process, each generation forms its own *weltanschauung*, a unique “peer personality” or “generational style” composed of similar patterns of belief, values, behaviour, and ways of expressing social identity, or “central tendencies” (Smith & Clurman 1997:xv; Williams & Nussbaum 2001:8; Carroll & Roof 2002:6; Lancaster & Stillman 2003:13-14); Mannheim (1972:125) has described this as a generational *entelechy*.

### **2.3.2.2 Common Age Location: Clarifying the Perimeters**

With consideration having been lent here to the roles of common age location and shared social location in the formation of generational cohorts, two further issues arising from this discussion are worthy of brief consideration. First, if common age location is part of that which shapes a generational cohort, the question of how one defines the span of the birth years of a generation logically follows. In order to

engage in any empirical analysis of generational groups, as we shall attempt to do in this study, it is essential to assign fixed birth-year parameters to each cohort. However, as Strauss and Howe (1992:60) observe, “Although social philosophers over the last two centuries have often (like ourselves) defined a generation as a cohort-group, they have had difficulty explaining how long it should be.” Some scholars have simply chosen to assign fairly arbitrary lengths ranging from ten to thirty-three years (Zimmerman 1995:43; Williams & Nussbaum 2001:144). Some theorists, seeking to provide a more reasoned theoretic basis for addressing this question, suggest that the length of a generation should be seen as corresponding to the average number of years that span between being born and entering parenthood. However, insist Strauss and Howe (1992:60), this “family time” perspective does not produce any single thread of “social time.” Rather, they argue, the length of generational cohorts is best understood as corresponding to the length of a phase of life (e.g., “youth,” “rising adulthood,” “midlife,” “elderhood”), which does provide a common basis of shared experience. Within the modern American context, they suggest, generations have ranged in length from 18 to 25 years, with approximately 22 years constituting the norm (Strauss & Howe 1996; [www.fourthturning.com](http://www.fourthturning.com)).

This assertion by Strauss and Howe is consistent with the claims advanced by the bulk of literature examining recent American generations. This being said, it is significant to note that considerable diversity exists between generational theorists regarding the precise birth-year parameters of specific generational cohorts. In some cases, this reflects differences in the value that theorists assign to key formative events in shaping rising generations. For example, most theorists insist that the transition from the Silent to the Boomer generation effectively began with the conclusion of World War II. Dunn (1993:8), for example, suggests that the baby boom began nine months after VE day and “kicked into high gear” nine months after VJ day. In contrast to this, however, Strauss and Howe (1992:299) identify the Boomer generation as commencing in 1943. The counsel of Altbach (1972:7) is instructive in explaining how such diversity can arise: “There is no neat break which defines the different generations...Many people fall into a transitional category, but generally ally themselves with either the younger or older generational perspective rather than forming a separate generational consciousness.”

Marías (1970:102) has suggested that the succession of generations is best pictured as a series of mountain ridges, with those born in the “watershed” basin between two ridges as constituting a generation (Zimmerman 1995:44). When understood in this light, however, the study of generations becomes dependent upon identifying the precise “pinnacle” moments that divide the generations. While in some cases the transition between two generations may be precisely this “pointed,” in others it simply is not. As Codrington and Grant (2004:18) note, “icon moments” producing an immediate shift in culture are rare. This being so, it is wise to heed the advice of Lancaster and Stillman (2003:13-14); while observing that “[t]here really is no magic birth date that makes you a part of a particular generation” and that “[g]enerational personalities go much deeper,” these authors caution that the age ranges used by scholars to define the members of the generations must be viewed as “just guidelines.” Perhaps Williams and Nussbaum (2001:144) capture this best in suggesting that the “perceptual boundaries” separating generations are “fuzzy.”

### **2.3.2.3 Common Social Location: Considering the Parameters**

A second issue that arises out of the explanation of generational cohort formation provided above is the question of whether it truly is possible for the members of a society who possess common age location to share enough common social experience to result in the formation of a unified peer personality. Writing in the 1920s, Mannheim (1972:101, 119) expressed caution regarding the degree to which one could speak of a monolithic generational culture on a broad scale within a given society. From the present vantage point of fragmented post-modern culture, it is good to revisit this consideration. Chapters two through four have been written with a view to providing a thorough response to this question. At this point, however, it is helpful to submit that, at the very time in which Mannheim was writing, social conditions were beginning to take form that would make the examination of generational peer personality on a societal scale a more meaningful endeavour than ever before. Indeed, Williams and Nussbaum (2001:44) express “little doubt that common experiences can unite a cohort.”



This being said, a balanced study of this subject must be rooted in the acknowledgement that no generation is marked by absolute uniformity of belief and practice. Because every generational cohort is composed of members representing a range of other demographic variables, one must exercise great care in employing generalizations. It seems unlikely that we should attempt to attribute to each cohort a generational “group mind,” that “singular harmony of outlook” of which Esler (1971:32) wrote. At the same time, the acknowledgement of diversity within a generation does not necessarily imply rejection of the concept of a unified peer personality. Strauss and Howe (1992:64) observe that “[i]ndividual divergences from peer personality, and how those divergences are perceived, can explain much about a generation.” In addition, as Mannheim (1972:130) suggests, “polar opposites within an epoch always interpret their world in terms of one another, and constitute attempts to address the same problems and issues of destiny.”

Thus, what both Strauss and Howe and Mannheim seem to be suggesting is that diversity evident among the members of a generation will prove to centre and cohere around, and be subject to the judgement of, certain core elements of a unified peer personality. Hicks and Hicks (1999:49) choose to employ a bell curve to demonstrate the reality that, even while “deviations” of one sort or another may exist within a cohort, the majority shares a commitment to common values. This being said, it is important to note the clarification of Raines (2003:11) to the effect that, when speaking of generational cohorts, one must be careful to draw a distinction between “generalizations,” which are flexible and helpful guidelines for understanding one another, and “stereotypes,” which are rigidly and inflexibly applied to all members of a group.

As chapters three and four will demonstrate, as the generations born since the early twentieth century have advanced along their respective life cycles, they have experienced critical “generational markers,” collective experiences that have shaped their values and attitudes (Smith & Clurman 1997:7). From a socio-psychological perspective, it can be suggested that the individual stories belonging to the members of each generation have interrelated and “meshed” with the cultural narratives that have shaped, and have been shaped by, their respective generations (Roof 1993:28-30). Thus, while this affirmation is not intended to diminish the status of the

individual within society or to deny the cultural diversity represented within a given cohort, it is difficult to divorce the experience of the individual from that of his or her generation. In fact, acknowledging this interrelationship is essential; as Strauss and Howe (1997:68) observe:

Ortega wrote that the generational experience is a “dynamic compromise between the mass and the individual.” To refuse this compromise is not easy; indeed, total refusal forces a person to become painfully aware of outsider status. The German sociologist Julius Peterson observed that any generation includes what he called “directive,” “directed,” and “suppressed” members. The directive members set the overall tone; the directed follow cues (and thereby legitimize the tone); and the suppressed either withdraw from that tone or, more rarely, battle against it.

Having laid this theoretical foundation for understanding the nature of the generation, we now are positioned well to consider more closely how this concept factors into the intergenerational praxis of society, as well as that of the church in its relation to society.

## **2.4 The Intergenerational Praxis of Society**

### **2.4.1 The Intergenerational Problem**

The present study is guided by the recognition that many established churches, as *small world* contexts, are struggling to respond faithfully to an increasingly complex generational context. Indeed, it will be argued here, the *macrosociological* intergenerational situation within which the church is called to carry out its witness today is one fraught with a lack of solidarity. The experience of intergenerational problems certainly is not unique to recent decades. Eisenstadt (1972:139) suggests that tensions between generations have been evident in various forms throughout recorded history. Bengston (1972:198) illustrates this point by sharing the following brief survey:

Egyptian and Hebrew sages defined wisdom in terms that implied dire consequences for youth who forsook the way of their elders. The Maxims of Ptahhotep—the first document on ethics of which there is record—was...already concerned with the problem of generations. Plato and Aristotle incorporated generational struggle in their theories of political change. Aristotle suggested the cause of political struggle could be found in the conflict of fathers and sons.

While intergenerational tension has been a reality throughout many eras and in many cultures, as has already been mentioned, Margaret Mead (1970:79) suggests that the

conflict between Boomers and their elders that emerged in the 1960s amounted to “a deep, new unprecedented, worldwide generation gap.”

In contrast to the gap of which Mead wrote, Hersch (1998:20) suggests that the crisis that has arisen in the contemporary generational context “has nothing to do with [affecting] social change, with intellectual questioning or opposition to causes.” Rather, Hersch (:20, 23) insists that the generations of today actually have come to experience a state of virtual “separation” and that, as a result, our society is faced with “a gaping hole that severs the continuity of generations.” Other authors describe “a great division among the generations” (Loper 1999:36), one that has “increased in potency” (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:10), that is “wider than ever,” and “of greater strategic importance” than ever before (Lancaster & Stillman 2003:5). Gambone (1998:17) assesses the condition of recent intergenerational relations by concluding that “[m]ore people are living longer and more people feel further apart from each other than at any other time in history.” This contemporary situation is rendered more complex by the fact that, not only are there several generations existing together, but also several distinct, generationally based sets of value systems at work within society, “each with its perceived needs and perspectives” (McIntosh 2002:10). The existence of ancient antagonisms hardly accounts for such unprecedented discord and complexity. Thus, further consideration must be lent to the particular history that has given rise to this situation. Chapters three and four will be devoted to this task.

In recent years, a multitude of attempts to gauge the unfolding struggles between the generations has been conducted from the perspectives of disciplines as diverse as church growth, sociology, political science, economics, educational leadership, marketing, and organizational management. The considerable diversity of opinion represented among those who have engaged in these investigations illustrates the reality that, just as one must avoid the tendency of adopting caricatures of individual generations, one also must avoid simplistic caricatures of the *gaps* between generations. As Strommen et al (1972:230) caution, such gaps are never simple. Bengston (1972:195) even suggests that it may not be appropriate to view a generation gap merely as a gap. Rather, the relationships between generations must be seen as complex, involving points of agreement and tension in varying combinations. However, while the nature of recent intergenerational discord may be

difficult to define in precise terms, there seems to be little doubt among those who have addressed this subject within their respective fields of inquiry that it is a very real and very pressing issue. Indeed, As the recent volume *Linking Lifetimes* (Kaplan et al 2002) compellingly demonstrates, at the beginning of a new millennium, generational alienation has become a global phenomenon.

Once again, it is helpful to keep in focus the aim of this study, which is concerned with the meditative action of the church within the praxis of society. Specifically, we are concerned with the intergenerational bearing of tradition within both society and church and the generationally-borne praxes that either promote or prevent this central concern. If the context of the society in which the church endeavours to carry out its mission is one marked by a lack of shared activity, affection, and values among the generations, it seems fitting to explore how this has come about. Bearing in mind the explanation of cohort “peer personality” formation provided above, one might expect to encounter evidence of intergenerational differences between the contemporary generational cohorts. However, this theoretical framework does not explain sufficiently how differences between generational cohorts have come to be perceived as being so pronounced, or why the relationships between these generations are subject to such discord. Thus, in service to our concern for locating the praxis of the church within the praxis of society, we will do well to outline a hermeneutical framework for understanding how such a disruption might occur within the intergenerational praxis of society.

#### **2.4.2 The Significance of Formative Experiences**

As the focus of this investigation turns to a theoretical consideration of the breakdown of intergenerational solidarity and the disruption of the intergenerational perpetuation of tradition, it will become evident that all generations contribute to such discord. However, it must be acknowledged that primary responsibility for this phenomenon tends generally to be attributed to the *rising* or youth generation. As Milson (1972:39) wrote in the early 1970s, “All over the contemporary world people seem to be talking about the ‘youth problem’.” This tendency to attribute blame to the young makes sense when the theory of generational cohort formation provided above is considered from an intergenerational perspective.

As the influential works of Erickson (1959) and others (e.g., Kohlberg 1973) have demonstrated, the potential for development persists throughout the human life span (cf. White 1988:128). However, the pre-adult years have long been acknowledged as a crucial passage in human development (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:13). As Hamburg (1992:19-20) notes, these years “provide the fundamental opportunity for learning the basic elements of what we need to know—about ourselves, about each other, about the world around us, about ways to cope and to solve the problems of living.” As a result of this learning process, suggests Westerhoff (1974:165, 166), “By the time a person has reached adulthood, he or she has internalized a whole package of cultural meanings, signals, and symbols which indicate ‘right’ ways of doing things and ‘appropriate’ ways to behave.”

Westerhoff (1974:166) adds to this the vital clarification that these cultural norms “are always learned within the context of a human group.” Because we are embedded in relationships, the influence of relationships is of central significance in our development (White 1988:91, 94; Williams & Nussbaum 2001:6; Ramirez 2005:70). Thus, human development can only be understood properly against the backdrop of what has been articulated above regarding the perpetuation of cultural traditions as a process rooted in particular communities. As Smith (2006:131) notes, “To be human is to be temporal; to be temporal is to be traditioned, which is simply to say that we are always and only temporal in a social or communal manner.”

Whereas, in section 2.2, we entertained the concept of cultural tradition from the perspective of the community, it will be helpful here to explore this concept from the perspective of the rising generation. As the younger members of a society or group learn from and observe the behaviour of their parents and elders, the cultural tradition into which they are being inducted serves three primary functions: (1) it provides self-identity, or the ability to “locate oneself in the larger narrative of family, tribe, or community;” (2) it clarifies values, or “the basic frames or perspectives through which we view the world;” and (3) it defines roles, or “what is expected of us, in a general sense, both in day-to-day routines and in relationships with others” (Carroll 2000:10-13; cf. Westerhoff 1974:37-39; White 1988:98). In essence, as Kraft (2005:43) notes, “each youngster reared in a given society is conditioned to interpret

reality in terms of the conceptual system of that culture.” Because “socialization involves a process of enculturation”, individuals come to bear and transmit culture “because they have participated in some way *in* culture” (Thompson 2003:70).

While this process of cultural transmission is of critical importance in the formation of each generation, Inglehart (1990:4) suggests that the worldview of a generation “does not depend solely on what their elders teach them; rather, it is shaped by their entire life experience.” In other words, the *overall* formative experiences of each rising generation, including “historical and social change,” “the interrelationships among [life] transitions,” and “the intersections among life domains,” are of vital significance (Pfeifer & Sussman 1991:83). While critical formative events and conditions can arise at various points in the course of a generational life cycle, it is widely held that the most influential “generational markers” commonly occur during adolescence and young-adulthood (Bennett, Craig, & Rademacher 1997:5). During this stage in life, the members of a generation have gained enough maturity to comprehend the significance of critical events and conditions, yet remain young enough to be malleable or psychologically adaptable.

Hamburg (1992:15) asserts that, as a result of this formative stage, “What people experience early in life provides the basis for all the rest.” Westerhoff (1974:38-39) similarly refers to the “perhaps *irreversible* influences of early experience” (italics added for emphasis). As a generation advances through its life cycle, its members employ a “dialectic of consciousness,” by which early experiences provide the first critical stratum upon which all later consciousness is built (Mannheim 1972:113). Even if the perspective forged through this primary stratum is somehow later negated, it will still serve as the predominant influence and reference point for a generation.

This emphasis on the importance of enculturation and formative events is not intended to suggest that the process by which generational peer personality is developed is merely a passive one. Generations are not simply shaped *by* traditions, language, events, and conditions. Rather, they also play an *active* role in the formation of their own generational identity. Development involves a transactional dynamic by which we both produce and are produced by our environment (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:130). Thus, while cultural customs “shape” their participants, they cannot be

construed as *determining* the behaviour of these participants (Kraft 2005:56). This being the case, the emergence of new cohorts results in the continuous experience of “fresh contact” with the accumulated heritage of a society, a process that can be “potentially radical” because of changes in the attitudes of these rising generations toward that social heritage (Mannheim 1972:108-109). In exploring this encounter of each generation with its cultural heritage, Carroll (2000:10-11) suggests that it is helpful to draw a distinction between *traditum* and *tradio*: “The former term refers to the core ‘deposit’ of the collective memory, while the latter refers to the core’s various adaptations as it is handed down from generation to generation.” Essentially, in its actual *performance* of learned cultural patterns, each generation is faced with making choices in relation to its social heritage that impact the degree to which the process of cultural “accumulation” is perpetuated, adapted, or interrupted (Kraft 2005:38, 57; Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:73).

Howe and Strauss (2000:62) posit that this *active* process by which generational identities are forged must also be understood as entailing a *reactive* dynamic provoked by prevailing cultural conditions. They assert that a rising generation will tend to (a) solve a problem of the prior youth generation, whose style has become dysfunctional in the new era; (b) correct for the behavioural excess it perceives in the current midlife generation; or (c) fill the social role being vacated by the departing elder generation. Regardless of whether the reactive behaviour of generational cohorts can be reduced to these specific patterns identified by Howe and Strauss, the basic point these authors provide remains an important one. As consideration is lent to this *reactive* dynamic of the adolescent formative period, benefit can be drawn from the following words of counsel by Nel (2000:48): “The very fact of being reactionary is interwoven with the character of adolescent development. When you accept responsibility for your own life you experience times of intense emotional insecurity, accompanied by suspicion of reigning customs.” It is perhaps because of the experience of immersion in this active and reactive process of differentiation that, as Esler (1971:32) suggests, the self consciousness of a generation tends to be greatest when its members are young (cf. Williams & Nussbaum 2001:10).

It is important to clarify that, as has been implied above, the outcome of the *active* and *reactive* dimensions of generational identity formation will be restricted by the reality

that this process is inescapably *interactive* in nature. In other words, it is an *intergenerational* process. Thus, as Milson (1972:28-29) observes, because

[o]ne generation is obviously linked to another by cultural tradition...[c]omplete discontinuity between generations would be impossible...Thus one generation is bound to another: there is a communication of norms and the values which lie behind norms. To parody Donne, ‘no generation is an Island, entire of itself’.

Because their socialization is so thoroughly dependent upon the cultural inheritance transmitted to them by their elders, Mannheim (1972:115-116) insists that even the most pronounced expression of “revolution” among youth can only address the uppermost stratum of consciousness open to their reflection.

While our exploration of the impact of the post-modern cultural shift may lead us to question that assertion, we can affirm Mannheim’s (1972:130-131) claim that, far from inventing their own generational cultures *ex nihilo*, “Emerging generations superimpose their entelechies upon comprehensive entelechies.” Indeed, these generational styles can only be recognized as such because of the prior existence of the “trend” entelechy within society. Thus, while the development of new habits and patterns “is always with us,” says Kraft (2005:61), many aspects of the cultural experience of rising generations “are so unconsciously employed...that it never occurs to us to reevaluate or to change them.” Even when the differences between generations are perceived as being quite dramatic, there is a very meaningful sense in which the rising generation, as it “arrives at its own definition of reality...through some meaningful blending of past and present,” is “a carrier of culture” (Carroll & Roof 2002:7).

By viewing the formation of generational peer personalities from this intergenerational perspective, one can begin clearly to account for the existence of differences between the generations. Bengston (1972:200) outlines the following summary of factors that contribute to the reality of generational differentiation: (a) the birth cycle difference between generations; (b) the decreasing rate of socialization with the coming of maturity; (c) the resulting intrinsic differences between parents and children in the physiological, sociological, and psycho-social planes of their behaviour. In the face of such differences, it is understandable for the rising generation to be perceived as presenting a problem. As Nel (2000:41) explains,



“[W]hen yesterday's young people become today's adults, a strange thing happens. The new adults begin, perhaps in another way than their parents and the latter's contemporaries, to (re)define and protect the symbols of adulthood.” The new contribution of the rising cohort to the generational mix is always that which disturbs the status quo (Prevost 2000:1). Thus, in considering the process by which intergenerational differentiation emerges, Altbach and Laufer (1972:7) are compelled to conclude that “generational discontinuity is developed *over time* and expresses the *differing images of man and society* held by generations engaged in conflict” (italics added for emphasis).

### 2.4.3 The Significance of Social Change

The rate at which the process of discontinuity develops, and whether or not it actually entails the conflict to which Altbach alludes, certainly differs from society to society and even at different historical points within a given society. Kraft (2005:62) notes that change has been a reality within societies throughout history. However, as Roxburgh (2005:55) suggests, societies may experience “highly predictable” periods of stability, in which “[a]ssumed traditions and rituals guide actions and shape the perception of reality.” During such periods, changes tend to be “continuous” with the “prior understanding of the world” and, thus, are able to be assimilated or adapted into this understanding (:29). These changes tend to be small, gradual, and incremental, and usually are guided by the internal demands of the existing systems and practices (:57). In such contexts, certain aspects of the culture may even be designated as legitimate areas for innovation and creativity (e.g., fashion), while others are not open to such change (e.g., religion, politics) (Kraft 2005:62).

In contrast to this, however, some periods are characterized by “discontinuous change” (Roxburgh 2005:57). The transformative impact of such periods may penetrate far beyond “surface-level” social traits to “core” cultural traits (:134). Roxburgh (:29) explains the potential impact of such times:

It exhausts our physical, mental, and spiritual resources by its sheer magnitude. While we may find some success adapting to changes in one or two areas of our lives, pervasive, discontinuous change forces us to deal with changes on every front simultaneously. What's more, these changes build on

each other, making it even more difficult to know which to pay attention to and what to do next.

This experience of profound discontinuity can render the tradition that had been so crucial in “the stability phase” powerless in functioning as “the glue to hold the system together” (:61). The resulting process of “disembedding” tends to entail “the uprooting of deeply connected relationships, beliefs, practices, and values” (:62). Kraft (2005:46) notes that this “distortion” and “disequilibrium” can produce cognitive dissonance; in turn, as the members of a society endeavour to resolve this dissonance and to process the implications of how their perspective is changing, profound shifts may occur in the prevailing worldview (Kraft 2005:46, 59-60). Understandably, this often is the cause of much stress at both the individual and societal level.

Mannheim (1972:126) observes a relationship between the prevailing tempo of social change and patterns of generational differentiation. He insists that changes in generational style are dependent upon the trigger action of social and cultural processes (cf. George & Gold 1991:67). Milson (1972:28-29) mirrors this assertion in observing that “the links between generations are patently not equally strong. In some ages men are found stressing stability and authority; in others, their attention is caught by new ways and discontinuities.” Mead (1970:1) illustrates this point in her reflections upon the existence of *postfigurative* cultures, in which change is so gradual that little difference between the experience of grandparents and that of their grandchildren is perceptible, or even conceivable. She observes, “The past of the adults is the future of each new generation; their lives provide the ground plan” (cf. Gubrium & Rittman 1991:89-90). Clearly, Côté and Allahaar (1995:xi-xii) are correct to suggest that the coming of age often associated with conflict between “neophyte and adult members of societies...varies according to one’s culture, and within specific cultures, and tensions run higher during certain periods of history.”

While this may be so, this present study is purported to be concerned with a period in which social discontinuity has resulted in the contemporary American generations being marked by pronounced differentiation. The observation by de Tocqueville (1990:58-59) in the 1830s that, “in America, each generation is a new people”, while reflecting the reality that change has always been part of the American social

landscape, remains hyperbolic even today. Similarly, the claim by Esler (1971:31-32) that social change makes it possible for “a new world” to be forged by each generation also is certainly exaggerated. However, this does not dismiss or diminish the apparent relationship between rapid social change and the development of discontinuity between generational cohorts. Against the backdrop of her description of *postfigurative* cultures, Mead (1970:63) insists that societies experiencing rapid social change tend also to experience a radical departure from traditional models of intergenerational relations. Indeed, rapid rates of social change produce *heterogeneity*, rather than *homogeneity*, among the generations (George & Gold 1991:71-72). In these *prefigurative* contexts, suggests Mead (1970:63), young people can say to their elders, “You never have been young in the world I am young in, and you never can be.” Such situations illustrate the legitimacy of the observation by Mannheim (1972:116) that the generations grow up facing different adversaries.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, such changes within society can foster the erosion of solidarity among the generations. In the face of rapid change, the youth of society can grow impatient in listening to older members of the community. As Milson (1972:31) observes, “For a new situation, their longer time on earth is counted as irrelevant.” As a result, youth can become unwilling to view the adult “as one to be attended to and to learn from” (Elkind 1984:112). At the same time, Milson (1972:35-36) suggests, “The cultural discontinuities associated with rapid change press upon adults as they approach young people and try to build relationships with them....Adults can no longer assume that they know everything that the youngster needs to know in order to be fitted for adult life.” Thus, the reality that positive communication between the generations requires a mutual willingness to listen and learn can become intimidating to adults in such times. As a result, adults may be tempted to abdicate their positions of influence in the lives of young people. In turn, suggests Elkind (1984:14), the proper protection, guidance, and instruction of the young will tend to be neglected. The resulting breakdown of communication robs both older and younger members of society of opportunities to explore and strengthen commonalities that transcend obvious differences based in age (Milson 1972:109-110).

Furthermore, as Elkind (1984:112) explains, when communication between the generations breaks down, youth are prevented from engaging in “productive, if

painful, battles over ideas and actions.” Without trustworthy and concerned adults who are willing to serve as “healthy opponents against whom to test their own opinions and values,” youth lose “an important opportunity for growth by differentiation and integration.” In correlation with this, a process of cultural *detraditionalization* can ensue (Butler Bass 2004:28). In other words, the received traditions may come to be perceived by the young as no longer providing adequate meaning and authority in everyday life. Furthermore, the changes occurring within society may actually present these young people with multiple, even conflicting traditions (Carroll 2000:11). As a result, youth can come to lose their faith in the received tradition and adopt a critical disposition toward it; the resulting cultural shift from the univocality of the inherited tradition to multivocality can profoundly impact traditional authority structures (Butler Bass 2004:28, 30). Essentially, the “novelty” of the world created by the parents of the younger generations can come to be emphasized (Eisenstadt 1972:147-148; Kraft 2005:57), and the critical process of cultural transmission can be dramatically interrupted. The desire for change among the young is likely to be most urgent in relation to those facets of society where a lack of fit between conventional cultural patterns and their own experience “hurts” most (Kraft 2005:57).

The assertion that rapid social change fosters pronounced generational differentiation is widely held. Yet, in recent decades, two challenges to its validity commonly have been posed. These are important to address briefly because they also challenge the validity of the thesis being advanced here. First, some suggest that accounts of discontinuity between the generations fail to take into account *aging* or *life cycle effects*; those advancing this argument expect younger generations eventually to “grow up” and begin conforming to “established” cultural patterns and values. Second, contrary to the notion that social change fosters generational differentiation, some critics suggest that all generations are somewhat similarly impacted by *period effects*. Bennett, Craig, and Rademacher (1997:3) summarize the essence of these two criticisms:

Young people sometimes think and act differently from their elders simply because they are young and not because they have spent their “formative years” being influenced by the tides of history. In other instances, the attitudes and behavior of young and old alike will shift in a similar direction (and perhaps to a

similar degree) because both have been exposed to and affected by the same historical forces and events.

These criticisms do offer necessary cautions against the tendency to draw unfounded or extravagant conclusions. However, do they invalidate the theoretical position being advanced here?

The research of Inglehart (1990) essentially upholds the theoretical position being advanced in this chapter by providing compelling responses to both of these objections. Contrary to the second criticism mentioned, the results of quantitative research by Inglehart (1990:73) indicate that the impact of social change has been manifested differently among the generations, with the younger generations demonstrating greater variance from previous norms than older generations. Furthermore, in contradiction to the first objection caricatured by Bennett, Inglehart (:85) points to longitudinal studies that have revealed the differences evident between cohorts in 1970, widely recognized as a watershed moment in the development of generational conflict, to be truly long-term rather than merely attributable to age differences. Thus, this evidence seems to support the conclusion that, because they are not faced with overcoming the resistance caused by the experience of incongruous earlier learning, as are older members of society (:19), the young are genuinely influenced by periods of rapid social change in ways that are both distinct and enduring (Milson 1972:32; Roof 1995:xiii). As we will see, this poses significant challenges for the church as it engages in its praxis within society.

#### **2.4.4 The Significance of Youth**

While it is essential to discuss in broad terms the impact of social change upon the development of generational identity among rising cohorts, it must be acknowledged that changes in the culture-specific experience of *youth* also contribute significantly to this developmental process. Eisenstadt (1963:24) asserts that, while youth may be a universal phenomenon from a biological perspective, it is always defined culturally. He provides this explanation:

There are two major criteria that shape the social organization of the period of youth. One is the extent to which age in general and youth in particular form a criterion for the allocation of roles in a society...The second is the extent to which any society develops specific age groups, specific corporate organizations,

composed of members of the same “age,” such as youth movements or old men's clubs. If roles are allocated in a society according to age...youth becomes a definite and meaningful phase of transition in an individual's progress through life, and his budding self-identity acquires content and a relation to role models and cultural values. No less important to the concrete development of identity is the extent to which it is influenced, either by the common participation of different generations in the same group as in the family, or conversely by the organization of members of the same age groups into specific, distinct groups.

(:29)

Thus, the formative experiences of the members of a rising generation will be shaped both by the attitude society has toward them based upon their age and by the specific ways in which society either structures their passage through youth or fails to do so. Howe and Strauss (2000:33) claim that this consideration is so significant that “[t]he leading edge of every generation is accompanied by a shift in how children are perceived.”

This being said, the formative framework provided for young people depends to a large extent “on the stability and coherence of the culture in question” (Côté & Allahar 1995:71). To illustrate this point, Milson (1972:34) observes that “[s]ocieties of consensus—that is where the inherited value and normative systems are not seriously questioned—do not in fact emphasize age as a principle of social differentials;” such societies “are not notable for the development of a ‘youth subculture.’” Similarly, Mead (1970:19-20) cites examples of *postfigurative* cultures within which rebellion by each rising generation is evident, yet in which it simply constitutes a normative, traditional step toward eventual assimilation into the customs of a relatively unchanging society.

The situation is often quite different in societies marked by significant social discontinuity. As we have already considered above, the challenge of learning new roles in periods of rapid social change impacts all parties, including adults. Thus, as Milson (1972:34) suggests, social changes inevitably “affect the approaches which the adult population make to the young.” As Côté and Allahar (1995:71) observe,

If a culture is going through rapid change or is otherwise unstable, an ambivalence toward the young can develop. As the identity of adult members becomes ambiguous, they are less able to guide the young through the self-discovery process that is an integral part of forming an identity. Consequently, they may feel alienated from their juniors, and be less likely to welcome them into adult society.

In the face of such conditions, in addition to the breakdown of communication cited above, adults may choose to respond to the instabilities of social change by structuring the world of young people in such a way that they, in effect, become a marginalized sector of society. In turn, the passage of youth becomes a “liminal” phase (Carroll & Roof 2002:24). Concomitantly, these societal structures have the potential to foster and reinforce the further erosion of intergenerational solidarity.

Milson (1972:111) posits that what youth truly desire is “to be treated seriously as members of the community, junior partners of older people, with all that involves in terms of respect, expectation and affection.” Essentially, youth wish to play a meaningful *role* within society. Westerhoff (1974:45) sees the assigning of such roles, “the grooves in which behaviour is channelled,” as an essential dimension of socialization. However, when the prevailing conditions of a society withhold such opportunity from its young, resulting in “role diffuseness” rather than “role specificity,” this can have a pronounced effect on the formation of the rising generational cohort (Carroll & Roof 2002:24).

Eisenstadt (1963:24-42) hypothesizes that, in those societies in which inadequate provision has been made for the socialization of young people, “youth groups” tend to form. Nel (2000:48) offers a similar assertion in observing that the experience of marginalization commonly compels adolescents to form their own “subcultures.” Regarding such subcultures, he explains,

[T]he “growing one” grows in an almost artificial emotional and social vacuum...People and structures that were supposed to support and motivate change become a hostile opponent in the process of change. One still changes but no longer because of...It is almost changing ‘*against*’ the adult community and no longer in *fellowship* with them. In this subculture people who were supposed to be co-workers become ‘opponents’. The adolescent often experiences mature society as antagonistic.

(:32)

Milson (1972:31) suggests that this experience of marginalization may give rise to the emergence of a “cult of youth.” At the very least, it is likely to foster the conditions for the development of distinct cultural forms among youth.

Certainly, the shape and character of youth cultures is not the same in all times and places. Rather, teen culture is evolutionary in nature, involving a developmental progression (Palladino 1996:197). As Nel (2000:48) explains, this evolutionary process occurs along an intergenerational trajectory: “The youth subculture and the reigning culture of the parental community are inextricably linked. The one calls the other into being. It can be safely said that youth subculture in history has usually been a certain reaction to the culture of the parental community.” This reaction by the rising generation might not necessarily involve an “anti-cultural” rejection of, or rebellion against, adult standards. However, in forming their own subcultures, the members of the rising generation may simply respond to the experience of marginalization by adopting “their own style of living” (Milson 1972:42). As Westerhoff (1974:46) asserts, “the peer group often socializes persons into new emerging values, new understandings of life, and new actions...independent of parents and other adult authorities.” Nel (2000:28) provides the helpful clarification that, “Because the term ‘culture’ usually refers to a blueprint for the behaviour, norms and values in a given society, subculture often refers to the same kind of phenomenon, but then in a smaller group in society.” In the case of youth, the spirit of this sub-cultural reaction can be expressed in the following: “According to your rules we are not allowed this or that therefore, in the meantime, we do it like this: our language, our values, our fashions, our terms, our religion” (:33).

Youth subcultures tend to be fairly fluid in character. As Nel (2000:28) observes, “It seldom happens that certain trends last long enough to manifest themselves clearly and recognizably in subcultures.” The trends arising within youth subcultures may be fleeting and thus perhaps may have only limited long-term effect on the formation of generational peer personality. This being said, because, as Strauss and Howe (1992:61) suggest, a sharp contrast between the experiences of youths and adults can “fix important differences in peer personality that last a lifetime,” the broader experience of devoting their formative years to defining themselves in distinction from the adult population does contribute appreciably to the process by which the members of a generation develop an enduring sense of differentiated generational identity. Indeed, in light of the fact that Inglehart (1990:85) has shown the generational differences evident in 1970 to be of a lasting nature, it is significant that the research conducted by Strommen et al (1972:222-223) found the “peer-



orientation” of the youth of that time to be the most notable factor contributing to the emergence of these differences. As we will see in the chapters that follow, recent developments of this sort within American society have greatly complicated the experience of local congregations as they live and minister within society. Before proceeding with an examination of this particular socio-historical case, however, we will need to establish further a hermeneutical foundation for exploring the theme of the intergenerational praxis of the church.

## **2.5 Intergenerational Praxis in Small World Contexts**

In section 2.2, the theme of intergenerational solidarity was shown to be of vital significance to the life of any group desiring to perpetuate its tradition from generation to generation. It was explained that a stable sense of group solidarity is promoted by the presence of frequent interaction, shared fondness, and commonly held normative commitments. As one might anticipate, when changes occurring within the structures of any society alter the interaction, sentiment, and shared values among the generations, this can have a lasting, perhaps debilitating, impact upon the patterns of intergenerational relationship within that society. Once the members of generational groups develop distinct cultural forms or begin to define themselves over against one another, this has the potential to pose a hindrance to group solidarity. As a result, small world contexts can become faced with immense challenges as they endeavour to function intergenerationally within such a cultural climate.

In this study, we are concerned with one specific order of small world contexts, the local congregation. This investigation is being conducted against the backdrop of an awareness that the church is at all times both a spiritual *and* a sociological phenomenon (Van Gelder 2000:25). Thus, the church is not exempt from the sorts of intergenerational dynamics that emerge in other small world contexts. In fact, the reality that the church often grapples with the same intergenerational dynamics evident within the broader society merely serves to demonstrate the church’s solidarity with all human groupings. Furthermore, as it endeavours to carry out its prophetic mission as the community of the Spirit within the world, the church is faced with the challenge of doing so within the intricate web of small world contexts in which the intergenerational praxis of society is manifested. Thus, as we continue to

cultivate a foundation for understanding the praxis of the church within the praxis of society, it will be helpful for us to give attention briefly to some of the patterns that tend to emerge in small world settings in the midst of a changing culture.

### **2.5.1 The Emergence of Intergroup Dynamics**

Williams and Nussbaum (2001:7-8) point to “intergroup theory” as a means of helping us understand the complex dynamics that can arise in the interactions between generations within small world settings. This theory, born out of the European social-psychological tradition, “places a central importance on social identity and accounts for the way that people behave as members of different groups” (:7). These authors suggest that “we have an inherent tendency to divide our social world into groups and social categories” and that we “are aware of our own and other’s membership of particular social groups” (:8). They note that, as soon as we recognize ourselves and others as belonging to distinct groups, we tend to favour those that we see as being part of our own group, regardless of how trivial the perceived distinctions between groups happen to be. At times, this causes individuals to behave as stereotypical “ingroup” members, “emphasizing the attributes that we believe portray who we are and where we belong” (:8). As an example of this, Williams and Nussbaum refer to the practice among members of youth subcultures of using the way they dress as a means of communicating with one another. Furthermore, this tendency to think in terms of group identity causes individuals to categorize those we perceive as different in terms of their “outgroup” membership.

When thinking of ourselves as group members, we tend often to engage in social comparisons in an attempt to assess the standing of our group relative to others (Angrosino 2001:36). This might be motivated by the pursuit of self-esteem, by the desire for a coherent sense of identity, or by a need to establish the meaningfulness of one’s experience. The intent in comparing “us” and “them” is to draw conclusions and to achieve a sense of distinctiveness favourable to one’s own group; thus, this process tends to result in favouritism toward the ingroup and the denigration of the outgroup. It also can lead to the treatment of others in light of the stereotypes and prejudices associated with their social groups, which often results in negative evaluations, misunderstandings, and conflicts.

The tendency to be influenced by such stereotypes is especially strong when interactants have limited personal information about one another (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:10). Suggests DeYoung (1997:8),

When our perceptions do not intersect with those of others through dialogue and shared experiences, we are isolated. When we experience life from an isolated perspective, we have no real knowledge of others. A lack of dialogue and honest sharing with others can result in a de facto segregation. Often isolation is based on a simple lack of information about the lives of others, and this ignorance, if left unaddressed, can reinforce stereotypes and insensitivity.

As our perceptions of another group become reduced to the stereotypes we associate with that group, we can fail to view the members of that group in terms of their individuality. Angrosino (2001:35, 51) describes this as “essentialism”. Furthermore, we can employ controllable, oppressive categories based on these reductionist social stereotypes as a means of gate-keeping or punishing, a tendency described by Shults and Sandage (2003:72-73) as “totalizing.”

Angrosino (2001:35) cautions that almost all groups of people are capable of looking at others as “strangers.” In light of the material surveyed in the preceding sections of this chapter, the relevance of intergroup theory for understanding intergenerational interaction should not be difficult to recognize. Williams and Nussbaum (2001:10) observe that *age* is one “categorization device” that we might employ. When this occurs, we are prone to associate particular traits and stereotypes with different age categories and to amplify our perception of the differences between generational groups (:46). These age stereotypes tend to be “a simplified, undifferentiated portrayal of an age group that is often erroneous, unrepresentative of reality, and resistant to modification” (Cook 2001:45). Particularly in those contexts in which cultural distinctions have arisen between generational cohorts, many intergenerational interactions actually function as intergroup in nature and consequences. Thus, intergenerational interaction can sometimes seem very much like intercultural interaction.

Williams and Nussbaum (2001:11) note that, when differences between generational groups pose a threat to the members of a particular group, this actually may cause them to “shore up” the boundaries between themselves and competing groups “by

emphasizing differences.” It can motivate the members of a generational group to employ speech patterns that accentuate the differences (“divergence”) between themselves and the members of other generational groups (:11-12), thus rendering productive intergenerational interaction difficult. The stereotypes that exist between younger and older interactants can essentially come to constitute “depersonalized ‘thing’ categories” (Kraft 2005:295), which may cause “I-Thou” relations to be subverted by “I-It” dynamics.

According to structuration theorists, the habitual practices guiding interactions between generational groups within a small world context can actually be “self-fulfilling prophecies” (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:290). Such interactions are guided by structures entailing three key dimensions: 1) interpretation or understanding (signification); 2) a moral order dictating proper conduct (legitimation); and 3) a sense of power operative in the interaction (domination). Differences that emerge when the members of multiple generational groups interact “may feed back into the system and eventuate in unintended consequences, which were not anticipated or intended by the original action” (:21). Indeed, Williams and Nussbaum (:21-22) emphasize that it is possible for “actors” within the system to contribute to the transformation of behavioural norms, particularly when contradictions are found to be present within the system. However, quite frequently, the communication problem arising out of “the rules and resources employed by younger and older people in their interactions reproduce the very conditions that brought them about in the first place” (:22). Stereotypes provide one example of this principle. The stereotyping of young and old is guided by habitual practices that “are shared by all interactants.” Stereotypes are not merely imposed by one group and embraced or resisted by another, but rather involve a complex shared understanding and structure in which the actions of both young and old are guided by the same rules (:290).

## **2.5.2 The Escalation of Conflict**

In the midst of periods of pronounced social change, the breakdown of solidarity among the generations experienced within many small world institutional settings can rise to the level of conflict (Palmore 2005:8). Gangel and Canine (1992:131) note that conflicts arise when two or more human beings desire goals which they perceive

as being attainable by one or the other, but not by both. They further characterize conflict as involving a struggle over values or over claims to scarce status, power, or resources. Age conflict, then, is “an extreme form of ageism in which two or more age strata conflict with each other” (Palmore 2005:8). It involves a struggle over scarce resources or values and tends to occur when “the disadvantaged age group makes claims for more power or other scarce goods, and the more privileged group seeks to protect privilege.”

Williams and Nussbaum (2001:231) note that, among generational groups, “intergenerational conflicts may evolve around the management or mismanagement of a number of relational-dialectical tensions—between autonomy-connection or independence-interdependence, openness-closedness or expressiveness-protectiveness, and predictability-novelty.” The influence of stereotypes, role relationship expectations, and ingroup processes actually may serve an “intervening and mediating influence” in these intergenerational conflicts, and “may well exacerbate positive processes and outcomes, conflict resolution, satisfaction, and the like” (:233). Williams and Nussbaum assert that “conflict between relative strangers, acquaintances, neighbors, and even coworkers... may be most susceptible.” While intergenerational conflict in these small world settings may not be likely to express itself as “competition among organized interest groups,” it is more likely to be reflected “in individual perceptions and norms, analogous to racial tension and conflict” (:242). The impact of the prejudices born out of these differing norms upon intergenerational communication has the potential to cause intergenerational dissension to escalate in intensity.

### **2.5.3 The Impact of Subjectivity**

As we consider the stereotypes, miscommunications, and conflicts that can arise and persist among the generations within small world contexts, it is important to appreciate that interaction between the generations is not guided so much by objective reality as by the attitudes and beliefs influencing people’s subjective perceptions (Williams & Nussbaum 2001:26). For example, notions about the nature and existence of a “generation gap,” whether or not such a thing is empirically verifiable, may “preinteractionally” influence one’s perceptions of what is possible in interaction

across generational lines (cf. Gubrium & Rittman 1991:91). As Angrosino (2001:35) notes, the real issue is “perceived” differences. As an example of the significance of subjectivity, we can note that, because intergenerational knowledge can be gained through a number of sources, not only the frequency of interaction between generations, but also the “quality” of such interactions will contribute to how accurate or skewed one’s perceptions of generational “outgroups” and the individuals of which they are composed prove to be (:28-29).

In addition, groups’ subjective perceptions of their *vitality* relative to outgroups is another factor that can impact intergenerational solidarity within small world contexts (Giles & Johnson 1987). Perceptions of relative vitality can result from comparisons of groups’ institutional support, demographics, and status. As Williams and Nussbaum (2001:242) assert, “The concept of vitality for understanding the perceived relative strength of different age groups... may be an important way of understanding how young, middle-aged, and older adults perceive their respective groups.” They further explain that “[s]ubjective vitality is important because it can directly affect intergroup perceptions and intergroup communication regardless of any objective state of affairs.” Thus, the perception that a particular generational group is being threatened, marginalized, or subjected to inequality can foster competition or conflict that disrupts the solidarity between the generations.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the generations may not assign the same subjective value to the patterns emerging through intergenerational interaction. Bengston and Kuypers (1971:249-260) have introduced the concept of “generational stake” to describe the degree to which each generation has a vested interest in intergenerational solidarity. As Antonucci and Akiyama (:104-105) explain,

[T]he older generations have a greater stake in perceiving similarities across generations than younger generations. Older generations want to believe that they have contributed to younger generations in various ways, that they have socialized, transmitted, or in some other way provided the next generation with important characteristics, attitudes, or assets. On the other hand, the younger generations are more interested in making their own, separate and different contribution. Younger generations are more invested in perceiving dissimilarities across generations in order to maximize their own contribution to the family, community and society separately from past generations.

These thoughts echo what has been articulated above regarding the process of *differentiation* by which each new generation is formed. However, in those contexts in which pronounced cultural changes have caused the interactions, sentiments, and values evident among the generations to be marked by complexity and contention, the differences in generational stake can be the source of much pain and struggle. The efforts of small world groups such as the church to perpetuate their traditions intergenerationally can face considerable challenges. With this reality in view, we will turn now to a hermeneutical exploration of the intergenerational praxis of the church, the specific small world context with which this study is centrally concerned.

## **2.6 The Church and the Generations**

Thus far within this chapter, basic theoretical foundations have been provided for understanding several key concepts critical to the present study: 1) the importance of intergenerational solidarity for any group endeavouring to perpetuate its cultural tradition; 2) the social phenomenon of the development of generations across time; 3) the emergence of intergenerational discontinuity, particularly during periods of pronounced social change; 4) the dynamics by which this intergenerational discontinuity can come to be manifested within small world contexts. This study is purported to be concerned with recent challenges arising within these categories of inquiry within American society. More specifically, this study is intended to address the impact of these challenges upon the praxis of the church within society. Thus, having explored important aspects of the intergenerational praxis of society from a theoretical perspective, we now will undertake a similar exercise with reference to the intergenerational implications of the church's calling.

In section 2.2, we considered the reality that the intergenerational dynamic is critical to the perpetuation of the traditions of society, as well as every small world group within it. As we noted, this is true of the church as it is with any human community. Thus far in this chapter, we have sought to outline a compelling picture of the significance of intergenerational dynamics within the life of society. Recognizing this, what can we say further that might uniquely characterize the intergenerational praxis of the church within the praxis of society? As we will see, there is much to be considered. In the pages that follow, we begin by exploring the church's role and

responsibilities in relation to each rising generation. Following this, we will examine specific challenges with which the church may be faced as it endeavours to sustain its witness intergenerationally within the praxis of a changing society. This inquiry will provide a valuable hermeneutical framework for understanding the historical developments that will be surveyed in the chapters that follow.

## **2.6.1 Foundations of the Church's Intergenerational Praxis**

### **2.6.1.1 The Historical Basis of the Intergenerational Mandate**

In looking back upon the church's heritage, numerous authors have noted that, ever since the biblical era, the people of God have understood themselves to be a community that is intergenerational in nature (White 1988:70-71; Harkness 1998:431). In reflecting upon the narrative of scripture, Harkness (:433) explains that "intergenerationalism"

was a feature of the faith communities in both Old Testament and New Testament eras...From its Old Testament Jewish roots, the early Christian church maintained its intergenerational entity with persons of all ages considered to be integral parts of it...Given this context, the range of metaphors used by the New Testament writers to stress the corporate nature of the church...arguably have an inherent sense of intergenerationalism about them.

(cf. Glassford 2008:71)

Allen (2005:322) similarly observes that, "Emerging from its Jewish heritage, the early church was a multigenerational entity. All generations met together, worshiping, breaking bread, praying together, and ministering to one another." This emphasis clearly did not cease with the first generations of the Christian movement. Rather, as Harkness (1998:431) insists, "Ever since the development of Christian faith communities in the post-Pentecost era of Christianity, there has been a consciousness that such communities need to encourage and embody a genuine intergenerationalism" (cf. White 1988:75). Clearly, a compelling historical precedent exists for seeing the church as an inherently intergenerational entity.



### 2.6.1.2 The Eschatological Basis of the Intergenerational Mandate

The church's intergenerational responsibility is evident not only when we look back historically, but also as we look forward expectantly. The church is an eschatological community, one called to bear witness to the "already, but not yet" reign of God. We must acknowledge that, if taken seriously, the profound intergenerational implications of the church's eschatological identity must be considered. Frost and Hirsch (2003:216) point to the theme of "sustainability" as a key characteristic of any church that embraces fully its identity as a witness to God's reign, one that "ensures that the church keeps itself on task over the long haul." This objective of sustainability properly arises from the desire to provide a tangible expression of God's reign within a particular context. The church's self-concept as an eschatological entity, says Barrett (1998:124), motivates it to practice "what the New Testament often calls 'patient endurance' (Rom. 12:12; Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12; Rev. 1:9; 2:3; 3:10; 14:14)." This can be understood as entailing a commitment to cultivating a sustainable witness "until he comes" (I Cor. 11:26).

This challenge of enduring faithfully can be taken to mean that the church should strive to sustain its witness "throughout all generations" (Eph. 3:21). In reflecting upon the practical implications of the call to "patient endurance", Peterson (1989:47) suggests that, "If we are going to learn a life of holiness in the mess of history, we are going to have to prepare for something *intergenerational* and think in centuries" (italics added for emphasis). In other words, he suggests, the church is called to live according to "deep time." When viewed from a broad, catholic perspective, the oft cited aphorism that "the Church is always only one generation from extinction" is an absurdity; that "the gates of hell will not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18) is a certainty rooted in the covenantal promise of God. However, that the church in its local manifestation is always in jeopardy of nonexistence is an empirical reality that has been demonstrated far too many times throughout history (e.g., the church of North Africa). Thus, every local congregation that seeks to embody a commitment to eschatological sustainability must seek to perpetuate its witness intergenerationally. In other words, we must take seriously the intergenerational implications of the church's movement toward God's future.

## 2.6.2 The Traditioning of the Faith

The notion of the faith community being composed of multiple generations and being able to sustain its witness intergenerationally through time is appealing enough. However, if this vision is to be realized beyond the level of abstraction, within the concrete existence of local congregations, what does this require? To what sort of priorities and practices does this give rise? In section 2.2, we considered briefly the challenges inherent in the desire of any group to perpetuate its cultural tradition intergenerationally. However, within the context of the church, this task entails some unique considerations.

The tradition with which the church understands itself to have been entrusted is one concerned with the biblically faithful, culturally relevant mediation of the message of the gospel. Essentially, it is rooted in “the deposit of the faith.” The concept of tradition, note Griffin and Walker (2004:70-71), was of considerable importance within the Christian movement even before the New Testament was written:

In I Corinthians, St. Paul writes about right belief and practice around the Lord’s Supper: “For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...” (11:23). At the very center of the church’s worship is something handed over, or “traditioned”... Tradition in the New Testament, then, is much more than human invention. The sure word is handed over, or “traditioned.”

Thus, from the earliest era of the Christian movement, the Christian tradition has continued to be shaped by the “amalgamation” of authorities that “take their cues from the central assumption of the tradition, namely, that Jesus is Lord and Savior” (:73-74). Leith (1990:27), in reflecting upon the place of tradition within the Christian faith, suggests that every generation must “be reminded of the same unchanged body of knowledge whose binding force exists in its going back in origin to a divine message as its source.” However, in the face of a changing culture, how does the church promote the *enculturation* or *socialization* of new generations not only into established forms, but into a living faith and a life rooted in the reign of God?

Leith (1990:34, 36) describes the local congregation as being involved in a process of “traditioning,” which he sees as entailing the incorporation of “each new person and

generation” into the community of faith. At its core, he suggests, this process is fundamentally the work of the Holy Spirit:

The church lives, not by organization and techniques, but by the passionate conviction that Jesus Christ is the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, that in his death on the cross our sins are forgiven, that God raised him from the dead for our salvation. No technique, skill, or wisdom can substitute for this passionate conviction. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit, who cannot be programmed by any technique or ritual, confirms faith in the heart. The faith is therefore traditioned on a level beyond observation and beyond the power of techniques.

It is fair to acknowledge with Leith that the process of incorporating new adherents into the gospel tradition cannot be achieved apart from the sovereign work of God, for living faith is God’s gracious gift. However, because the church is both a spiritual *and* sociological phenomenon, such an acknowledgement does not relieve the church of active responsibility in the traditioning process. On “a human level,” Leith (1990:34, 36) characterizes traditioning the faith as “an awesome responsibility.” He suggests that this process involves three key dimensions: the faith community, the individual, and successive generations. We shall consider the role of each of these in turn here.

### **2.6.2.1 The Congregation as the Bearer of Faith Tradition**

First, the faith tradition, notes Leith (1990:34), “is always handed on...in community, in the fellowship of believing, worshiping people.” Congregations, as Bass (1994:173) suggests, function as “bearers of tradition.” This commitment to the Christian tradition is reflected in the way in which the Bible and other revered texts are held up as authoritative and of central importance to the congregation’s life. Furthermore, through its ritual practices, corporate worship, and shared way of life, the congregation also seeks to be a faithful, living social embodiment of a vital Christian tradition. The church endeavours to provide a setting in which families might be nurtured, individuals might gain a vital experience of faith and an authentic sense of identity, and in which successive generations might be incorporated into the Christian tradition (Leith 1990:36; Bass 1994:174, 175, 180). As Griffin and Walker (2004:74) note, the concept of “tradition” involves “the whole of the church’s life as it works, in the Spirit of Christ, to bring everyone, everything, and every situation under the rule of Christ. The tradition is the specific, thick life of the church.”

This being so, the congregation must not be understood merely as relating to its tradition as preserver and participant, but also as actively influencing the shape of that tradition as it appropriates and expresses it within a particular time and place (Bass 1994:185; Fowler 1995:9). As has already been asserted above, the elements of which a tradition is composed are not merely fixed phenomena. McIntyre (1984:222) has argued that, inherent within any *living* tradition is the continuous presence of an argument internal to that tradition regarding the “goods” with which it is concerned. If we apply this principle to the life of the Christian community, we can see that, as a particular expression of the Christian tradition is transmitted through time and into the particularities of various specific contexts, it is normative for this tradition to be subject to dialogue and debate regarding its essence. Such continuous dialogue and reflection helps to prevent homogeneity within a faith tradition (Bass 1994:177-178, 181-182).

Thus, the process of traditioning should be understood as dynamic, with change as an inherent characteristic and asset (Butler Bass 2004:40-41, 47, 50). The congregation belongs in the centre of a reflexive cultural task of “fluid traditioning”, which necessitates that its members see themselves not only as “receivers” of tradition, but as makers of future tradition. This should inspire corporate vision and vitality as congregations “intentionally participate in both claiming the past and creating a better future” (:52). Rendle (2008:60) suggests that this process of “allowing new forms and practices that are fully embedded in ancient truth” to reshape the congregation’s life “in a way that is sensitive to the eyes, ears, and hearts of those to whom the faith is to be given....is a missionary task—holding the unchanging truth but shaping it to be understood in the present and changing culture.”

### **2.6.2.2 The Individual as Participant in Faith Tradition**

#### **a. Faith Formation a Choice and a Process**

Second, the traditioning of the faith concerns the individual. As bearer of tradition, the congregation endeavours to see the lives of individuals transformed through faith in Christ. Indeed, Wright and Creasy Dean (2004:154) explain that, in the face of the numerous distortions of personhood promoted within human cultures, God’s design is

to see individuals be provided the opportunity to experience the recovery of the *imago Dei*. This is made available by means of a response of faith in the gospel of Christ. As Leith (1990:36) expresses, faith “cannot be inherited as lands and houses are...[B]iological processes cannot transmit the faith. Culture may shape our lives and influence the idiom of our religious expressions and practices. Faith, however, involves decision, and Christian faith comes from hearing the Word.”

Fowler (1995:9) suggests that living traditions have a powerful way of evoking this response of faith within the lives of individuals and groups:

Like a dynamic gallery of art, a living cumulative tradition in its many forms addresses contemporary people and becomes what Smith calls ‘the mundane cause’ that awakens present faith. Faith, at once deeper and more personal than religion, is the person’s or group’s way of responding to transcendent value and power as perceived and grasped through the forms of the cumulative tradition.

Recognizing that this potential is powerfully resident within a tradition, we must acknowledge that Leith’s basic point stands: the transmission of a living Christian tradition cannot occur apart from the necessity of individuals embracing, rather than rejecting, the expression of the Christian faith that it seeks to mediate. While this observation is not meant to be construed as a theological assertion about the nature of human will or divine election, from a sociological perspective, it is an empirical reality that some faith communities cease to exist by virtue of their failure to impact the lives of individuals. In the chapters that follow, we will encounter vivid evidence of precisely this point.

White (1988:30) notes that “religion is human concern for ‘meaning and motivation’ in life” as well as for one’s “‘movement’ or behaviour in the world.” Thus, as we contemplate the outcomes that faith communities desire to see accomplished in the lives of individuals, we would do well to take note of Pelikan’s (1984:53-54) observation that neither an “infantile” and “blind” acceptance nor an “adolescent” disdain and rejection of tradition is adequate. “Maturity,” he insists, entails “knowledge of the content of those traditions” and an understanding of “our origins in our tradition.” This understanding of tradition should challenge us to make choices regarding “whether to be conscious participants” and to what degree we will adopt or reject the implications of “the tradition from which we are derived.” Tradition should

entail “an active preservation,” rather than a “mindless repetition” (Beaudoin 1998:153). As Beaudoin suggests, tradition should engage us “intimately and personally.” This being the case, the congregation must concern itself with cultivating effective structures and processes by which to promote the faith formation of the individuals with which it comes into contact. As White (1988:31) notes, congregations are faced with the objective of facilitating “the movement of persons in holistic lifestyle toward the fulfilment of God, the world, and themselves.”

The work of Fowler (1995:122-211) provides an important point of reference in helping us to understand the church’s task of promoting the faith formation of each person. Fowler suggests that the faith development of individuals occurs along a six-stage path involving progressive ownership and integration of one’s tradition. It is important to note that Fowler’s theory has been challenged and critiqued by numerous parties within the fields of developmental psychology and theology. Furthermore, some critics of this theory suggest that Fowler’s characterization of desirable advances in spiritual maturity is coloured by the prejudices inherent in his own particular theological *view-from-here*. Nonetheless, Fowler’s concepts call attention to the reality that faith formation is a developmental process within which one’s advancement in personal ownership and maturity cannot be deemed inevitable and in which one’s formative years factor prominently. Thus, the development of faith is a matter to which intentional thought and attention must be lent.

Lytch (2004:10-11) observes that, even in the face of the congregation’s best efforts to promote faith formation, the stances taken by individuals toward their faith traditions can fall into one of three camps:

1. Those who wholly adopt their religious tradition, some of whom do so only after wrestling deeply with this tradition or following a period of rejecting it.
2. Those who have rejected their religious tradition or who were not well enough socialized into it to have a basis on which to accept or reject it.
3. Those who participate in their religious tradition, yet for whom it does not constitute an important part of their lives.

Understanding this, if the church adopts as a goal in relation to each succeeding generation that the individuals of which it is composed will be empowered and equipped to develop toward maturity as followers of Christ, rather than toward

nominalism, what must this require? As she examines a range of “theoretical models of faith transmission,” Lytch (2004:58-59, 211) concludes that at least two factors consistently prove to be prominent in solidifying the loyalty of young people to a particular religious tradition: consistent religious socialization and meaningful religious experience. While Lytch insists that these two factors function as interrelated dynamics, each is worthy of consideration in its own right.

#### **b. Faith Formation Promoted by Religious Socialization**

Religious socialization, explains Westerhoff (1974:41), “is a process consisting of lifelong formal and informal mechanisms, through which persons sustain and transmit their faith (world view, value system) and life-style.” In an observation that echoes the comments in section 2.2 regarding the primary role of family in the process of transmitting any tradition, Lytch (2004:58) observes that one critical facet of religious socialization is “the consistency of [young people’s] religious socialization in church and at home.” Indeed, this interplay of family and faith community is shown in scripture to be integral to the process by which individuals come to know God (Allen 2005:322).

Within this framework, suggests Nel (2000:19-20), the home must be seen as occupying a place of primacy in laying the foundations of faith formation:

In the Bible the family has a unique hermeneutic function. One could say that the child needs parents in order to gain understanding...When the story of God’s dealings with his people come from the people whom you (are supposed to) hear first, and whom you can trust as to the veracity of the story, it makes so much more sense...What parents once heard as children from their parents, they recount, almost like children who have heard and now understand, to their own children. They tell the upcoming generation of the “praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power” (Ps 78:3, 4). In this sense the “home rules” of the New Testament should also be understood. They are about the handing down of this knowledge from generation to generation.

When parents connect their children to the church from a young age and teach them “the stories, symbols, and practices of their faith,” observes Lytch (2004:200), this “is the source for many of the enduring traits of identity, religious experience, and patterns of thought and action.”

In partnership with the family, the local congregation functions as an “extended family” in providing a “support system” in the process of faith formation (Nel 2000:21). Allen (2005:322) notes that, “In the religion of Israel, children were not just included, they were drawn in, assimilated, and absorbed into the whole community with a deep sense of belonging.” As it endeavours to promote faith commitment, the tradition-bearing congregation reflects this ancient legacy of religious socialization (Westerhoff 1974:41), which Lytch (2004:58) describes in our contemporary context as

the larger process that builds knowledge of the symbols, rituals, narratives, and texts, and it includes the habits—such as church attendance, praying, and Bible reading—that comprise the Christian life. Socialization occurs through the example and mentoring of others, instruction in the sacred texts, and in worship using the music, art, and drama of the Christian tradition. Socialization is social—it happens as a person lives in the religious community...[and] occurs in the regular, ongoing life of the church...It provides the context for interpreting and acting on their own religious experience, as well as for conducting and participating in religious ritual.  
(cf. Westerhoff 1974:44; White 1988:119)

According to Lytch (2004:59), young people with the most consistent exposure to the environment of the church are the most likely to remain in a particular tradition. While several studies call into question any strong correlation between high levels of adolescent religious experience and high levels of religious participation in adulthood, “it can be concluded that...low levels of youth religious activity and counterreligious influence does predict low adult religious participation” (:219-220).

### **c. Faith Formation Promoted by Religious Experience**

In addition to consistent socialization, religious “experience” is a crucial factor contributing to the establishment of religious commitment or “mature faith” (Lytch 2004:59). As Wright and Creasy Dean (2004:157) note, such experience provides a connection with “transcendent reality.” Such experience is integral to the distinction that William James (2009:153-154) has drawn between what he described as first-hand and second-hand religion; while second-hand religion is that which has been passed along by one’s forebears or through institutional forms, first-hand religion is direct, immediate, and truly the individual’s own. Elkind (1984:42-43) suggests that the adolescent years constitute a particularly significant period for the individual in



distinguishing between institutional religion, which generally goes unquestioned during childhood, and personal religion.

Lytch (2004:62) suggests that “[h]aving an intense, personal encounter with God is a normative expectation of the Christian tradition. It transforms the ‘acquired faith’ that is socialized into the ‘experienced faith’ that is personally appropriated by the individual.” Truly, the goal of the formative process is the person “in the power of the Spirit” (Wright & Creasy Dean 2004:178). This aim entails “a liberated identity grounded in Christ’s passionate enfolding of it,” rather than one “being divided by unconverted and domesticated passions managed by socialization, or conquered by uncontrolled passions in rebellion against socialization” (:165). However, this is more than simply a matter of human faith, doctrinal formulae, rituals, or patterns of moral behaviour. It issues from one’s experience of the presence and work of God, and is thus “a trinitarian achievement.”

Far from this being exclusively a matter of *personal* experience, religious institutions are meant to provide an important context for the mediation of such religious experiences. Notes White (1988:134), the “accidental and planned happenings/incidents/events” that occur “in the context of the community of believers, have a threefold effect for the person: They establish a *perceptive system* in relation to a worldview, form a *conscience* according to a value system, and create a *self-identification* out of personal relations within a social group.” Thus, the impact of socialization and religious experience essentially functions in a circular fashion. As Lytch (2004:62) notes, “Socialization in the religious tradition conditions persons to have religious experiences because they have readily available the symbols and models to use for interpreting experiences as religious. Those having a religious experience will seek to be more deeply involved in their religious community as a result.”

This interrelationship between belonging and experience highlights the necessity of the church being an intergenerational community. Summarizing the insights of numerous authors who have contributed to an understanding of this issue, Allen (2005:321) notes the importance of children, teenagers, and adults of all ages sharing together in intergenerational religious experiences; she suggests that the generations

“can participate actively in prayer and worship, and, in some settings, share spiritual insights, read Scripture, and minister to one another.” These experiences have the potential to benefit the faith formation of all participants (Harkness 1998:431-447; Allen 2005:331). However, this interaction is particularly important for the newest members of the community. As Allen (2005:328) suggests, in an intergenerational setting, children and new believers participate with and learn from “more experienced members of the culture,” and, as a result of “doing ‘Christian’ things” with those of more advanced maturity, come to identify more fully with the Christian community. Thus, intergenerational religious experience, she argues, promotes “optimal spiritual growth and development” (:320). Along the way, individuals may be afforded opportunity to express “where they stand in relation to the group” through “rites of incorporation” and “rites of consolidation,” which “regularly reinforce the feeling of group solidarity” (Kraft 2005:259).

### **2.6.2.3 The Generations as Shapers of Faith Tradition**

Third, Leith (1994:35) indicates that the process of traditioning is “generational” in nature. As he explains, “In the decision of faith we decide for a generational history, a faith community with a common ethos, a history that continues to enrich our faith and the community of faith. The generations of faith play a significant role in biblical history and they, as well as succeeding generations, shape our lives today.” In making such observations, Leith (:37) means in part to remind us that the faith tradition is itself “the tested wisdom of generations.” However, he also highlights the reality that the faith tradition cannot be perpetuated apart from the readiness of the next generation to carry it forward. Thus, the faith community is reminded of its continued responsibility to pass its tradition to each succeeding generation (Everist & Nesson 2008:77). As Nel (2000:55) asserts through his loose translation of Dijk, the church has a direct duty “towards young people...so that young people do not drop out of the line of generations, but live by the gospel.” This requires at least two things of the congregation: 1) that it rise to the challenge of expressing its witness in a manner that communicates and connects effectively with the individuals embedded within the cultural particularities of each rising generation; 2) that it be prepared to allow the rising generation the opportunity to make its own mark upon the shape of the faith tradition that it is asked to carry forward.

First, if the tradition at work within the life of a congregation is truly to be sustained with vitality through time, the relevance of the church's mission and message must be rediscovered and re-appropriated in cultural forms that speak to the members of each new generation (Miller 1997:18; White 2001:177; Kraft 2005:224). As Kraft (2005:67) expresses, the faith embraced by each new generation "has to be faith as understood by and expressed in terms of their particular subculture." In other words, the interplay of socialization and experience outlined above must connect with the cultural reality of the rising generation. Thus, asserts Howard Merritt (2007:84), "As new generations gather in a church, vital congregations learn to adapt their customs while keeping their traditions." In light of what was articulated in sections 2.3 and 2.4 regarding generations and cultural change, this objective must be deemed particularly essential for those contexts in which significant cultural discontinuity has occurred among generational cohorts.

Bolinger (1999:105) insists that the biblical world-view is "transgenerational." To illustrate this point, he appropriates the testimony of Psalm 145: "no one can fully fathom the greatness of the Lord,...one generation can commend the Lord's works to another, speaking of his mighty acts." In other words, posits Bolinger, no one generation is able to achieve the full and final expression of the faith. This recognition enables us to join Guder (2000:61) in asserting that it is both possible and necessary for the message of scripture to be adapted faithfully to the cultural situation of each new generation:

What is true of the original witnesses, preserved in the canonical record, continues true of witness thereafter from generation to generation. God's people are called to carry forward this unique witness, to translate it into every new situation of history, so that the Word happened continues to be the Word witnessed, heard, responded to, and obeyed.

In essence, in contexts of rapid cultural change, such intergenerational situations can amount to the cross-cultural communication of the gospel.

In addition, if the congregation truly endeavours to preserve a vital tradition across time, it must be prepared not only to find fresh ways of expressing the gospel to each new generation, but also must be willing to empower rising generations with the freedom to make their mark upon the shape of that tradition (Everist & Nessian

2008:1). As Kraft (2005: 247) expresses, “it is crucial that each new generation and people experience the process of producing in its own cultural forms an appropriate church vehicle for the transmission of God’s meaning.” In essence, the ongoing process of “renegotiation” and “retraditioning” native to a living faith tradition must be seen as having an intergenerational trajectory (Carroll & Roof 2002:213). The “internal argument” that McIntyre (1984:222) identifies as being essential to the well-being of a *living* tradition must be one in which each succeeding generation is empowered to participate. Thus, concludes Thompson (2003:162) in reflecting upon this intergenerational challenge, if a congregation “intends to survive beyond the life span of its current members,” and if “the members truly regard the Christian testimony of its congregation as of primary value, then they must be willing to set their own personal preferences about church aside enough to allow a new ethos to be born.” In other words, notes Rendle (2008:60), the “tools” of bearing the faith tradition intergenerationally must be understood as both argument *and* accommodation.

### **2.6.3 Challenges to the Traditioning of the Faith**

The picture of the church’s intergenerational praxis being developed here, it must be acknowledged, is an ideal one. In reality, as the church endeavours to exist faithfully as an intergenerational community within the context of the praxis of society, this aim can be fraught with difficulty. This is particularly so in those cases in which the intergenerational dynamics of the broader society have come to be characterized by cultural distance and differentiation. In such contexts, the church may be impacted by the presence of intergroup dynamics and intergenerational tensions that compellingly illustrate the church’s human solidarity with all other sociological groupings. Amid these realities, the attitude of the church toward the cultural expression of its faith tradition will impact its effectiveness in transmitting that tradition intergenerationally. Because the present project is intended to address purportedly such a scenario, it will be helpful to explore briefly the hindrances that can arise within the life of any church endeavouring to sustain its witness intergenerationally amid complex cultural changes.

Above, we explored the importance of a *lived* tradition to the traditioning process. Sadly, it is all too possible for the vitality of the tradition borne by the church to wane. Pelikan (1984:65) illustrates this point by drawing a distinction between *tradition* and *traditionalism*. The former, he argues, is “the living faith of the dead”, while the latter is “the dead faith of the living.” In other words, when tradition becomes a statically fixed matter, it is destined to lose its vitality. Pelikan (:55) further draws a distinction between tradition as “icon”, a perspective he endorses, and tradition as “idol”, a notion against which he cautions. In referring to tradition as icon, he suggests that the matrix of symbols, practices, and institutions of which a religious tradition is composed are meant to point to a reality beyond the things themselves. They are merely representational in nature. However, there always exists the potential for a tradition to become an idol, an end unto itself, rather than a means for pointing toward a transcendent reality. As Carroll and Roof (2002:213) suggest, churches are faced with the ever present temptation to allow “tradition” to become “Tradition”.

Rendle (2002:2) suggests that it is not uncommon for this tendency to be evident when the life of the church is viewed from an intergenerational perspective. Drawing upon the work of several influential sociologists, he notes that religion is by nature “highly resistant to change.” Thus, as was explored above, as churches pass their traditions from generation to generation, “rituals, ceremonies, and religious texts represent a tie to the past, a connection to a transcendent history.” This being the case, efforts to respond in an innovative manner to generationally-borne changes in the church’s cultural context are understood to “put at risk the ‘plausibility’ that confers upon them the legitimacy in the eyes of adherents.” Many times, as Kraft (2005:258, 259) observes, the “pillars” of the church are suspicious of attempts to alter the status quo because they are “satisfied with certain symbolic gestures which identify the in-group.” In part, this is due to the fact that certain customs “are important because relationships blossomed around those tasks” (Howard Merritt 2007:2). Furthermore, long-time members tend to identify the church’s values and experiences closely, almost unconsciously, with their own. As a result, notes Thompson (2003:161-162), “Change appears as a threat to the ‘old guard’—it feels like something into which the old guard is being talked or forced.” In many cases, members genuinely view the plausibility of their religious organization as being

inextricably tied to its ability to embody faithfully what they believe to be an “ancient” tradition.

In fact, it often is precisely a concern for faithfulness to the gospel that provides the very reason that some churches adopt and appropriate an errant understanding of the concept of tradition. This is evident in the exploration by Guder (2000:100) of the historic tendency toward *reductionism* within the church. Guder explains that, as the gospel is introduced within a given culture, over time the faith communities formed within that culture tend to *reduce* their understanding of the gospel to that which has resulted from the particular contextual interface of gospel and culture in that context. Guder (:100) suggests that this is “a necessary aspect of our humanness,” and “thus not necessarily a problem for biblical faithfulness.” Riddell (1998:37, 67) similarly posits that the tendency of “the community formed by the Spirit” to gather around itself “certain religious and institutional accretions” is “probably unavoidable.”

The impact of this tendency changes, however, when “the sinful human desire to control begins to do its work” (Guder 2000:100). Explains Guder (:100), “We are constantly tempted to assert that our way of understanding the Christian faith is a final version of Christian truth,” and thereby “enshrine one cultural articulation of the gospel as the normative statement for all cultures.” Guder (1998:229) equates this with a desire to “control God;” that is to say, the voices of authority within the church strive to exercise control in the name of preserving or protecting a particular institutional expression of the Christian tradition. This tendency often is motivated by noble intentions, such as a desire to be faithful guardians and stewards of what they understand to be the essence of their respective faith tradition. Nonetheless, this formula of reduction and control, which Guder (:230-231) describes as *reductionism*, poses great risk to the integrity of the church’s true calling.

In section 2.6.1.2 above, we emphasized the need for the church to sustain a sense of its identity as a witness to God’s reign through time. However, when the church becomes bound by a reductionistic understanding of its tradition, its missionary impulse can be compromised. Notes Shenk (1995:48), “The church is most at risk where it has been present in a culture for a long period of time so that it no longer conceives its relation to culture in terms of missionary encounter. The church remains

socially and salvifically relevant only so long as it is in redemptive tension with culture.” Essentially, when reductionism occurs, a concern for living within the tension of faithfulness and relevance becomes abdicated in favour of a “settled” expression of the church’s calling. Snyder (1996:136) explains that, when the church becomes “wedded and embedded in its particular culture” in this way, “the culturally determined nature of much of its life and structure is overlooked.” The church thus becomes culture-bound.

Furthermore, as a reductionistic expression of the Christian tradition comes to assume the status of *idol* within the life of a faith community, this can have a profoundly negative impact upon the experiential vitality of that tradition. As Kraft (2005:297) notes, “whenever and wherever the church has turned from being venturesome and retreated into static forms of expression it has lost its dynamic.” Roof (1993:78-79) similarly cautions that, as institutional expressions of the faith become “fixed, objective entities...there is real danger that they will get cut off from the inner meanings and feelings that gave them life to begin with. Religion risks losing its subjective and experiential qualities, thus becoming ritually dry and unmoving.” This loss of subjective dynamism, in turn, significantly hinders the ability of the church to touch the lives of people. “Rulebooks” become attached to every facet of church life (Howard Merritt 2007:82), and boundaries begin to define the congregation’s culture (Van Gelder 2007:145). In turn, suggests Riddell (1998:37), the accumulation of religious “encrustations” can cause the work and love of God to be masked to such a degree as to be made “unattainable to either participants or outsiders.”

Snyder (1996:136) notes that this reductionistic tendency is especially prone to create problems for the church “when cultures change or when cross-cultural witness is attempted.” Thompson (2003:72) reflects upon this reality:

[W]hen the macroculture changes, what happens to the organizational culture of the congregation? If there are no subcultures in that congregation with elements that are sympathetic to the macro-changes, the congregation will not respond. No contests will emerge in the congregation’s own public arena, and the perceived threat that accompanies change will not appear. As a consequence, the congregation could lose an opportunity to adjust its Christian witness in a way that would speak freshly to a new situation.

A lack of awareness of the church’s own cultural embeddedness threatens to be a hindrance in reaching neighbours who do not share its cultural perspective (Foster

1997:27). Clearly, in times of pronounced social change, that which was understood as a means of preserving the faith actually has the potential to precipitate its very demise.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this reductionistic tendency poses significant challenges to the integrity of the church's intergenerational praxis. As a result of this sort of mindset, Kraft (2005:224) notes, "Most often the forms of the group in power have simply been imposed upon any new receiving group (whether the children of the group in power or the members of a different society or subsociety)." He adds, "Faith alone is not enough for [the group in power]. It has to be faith as understood by and expressed in terms of their particular subculture" (:267). As we might expect, this prevents the members of the rising generation from responding to God directly "in terms of their own subcultural structures" (:265), a reality that fails to provide adequately for the experiential dimension of the traditioning process described above. Instead, members of the rising generation are expected to convert to a cultural form in which previous generations are comfortable.

This requires "a kind of 'horizontal' conversion" from one culture to another (Kraft 2005:266). While such an approach may result in a genuine faith commitment on the part of some members of the rising generation, it also threatens to produce nominalism among those who have embraced the cultural forms of the church without developing a vital "faith-allegiance" to "essential Christianity" (:266). Others may choose simply to abandon this expression of "domesticated" Christianity by leaving the church altogether (Wright & Creasy Dean 2004:158). Thus, cautions Ammerman (1998:119), even that which was "the strength in one generation may be barrier to adaptation in the next."

Furthermore, the presence of this reductionistic impulse is likely to make it difficult for the rising generation to be empowered to contribute meaningfully to the shape of the tradition. Change frequently produces discomfort and some level of conflict. However, when the interaction, sentiment, and values represented among the generations within the church reflect the complex, discontinuous trends evident within society at large, the intergroup dynamics that are likely to emerge amid such conditions have the potential to cause the escalation of conflict. As Carroll and Roof



(2002:10) suggest, when churches become “thick gatherings” in which the generational mix produces “cross-pressuring” expectations and a complex set of cultural undercurrents, “overlapping” generational expectations can cause the congregation to become a “staging ground for conflict.” Butler Bass (2004:54) suggests that this should come as no surprise to us:

Historians and sociologists have long noted that in the ‘boundary areas’ where rival traditions ‘intermingle,’ conflict is the likely result...When traditions are uprooted and remoored, tension and conflict between traditions and cross-generations are inevitable...Local traditions are being uprooted; younger generations are challenging old patterns and trying to remoor the congregation to different traditions. Communal and personal conflict are the result.

In this context, the desire of the younger members of the congregation to promote innovation is particularly likely to produce tension. At the same time, as McManus (2001:91) suggests, the notion that the older generations of the church can project their preferences onto others in an attempt to keep younger people in their “time-place” also has the potential to be a source of conflict (cf. Whitesel & Hunter 2000:85).

Butler Bass (2004:21) notes that, while competing generational factions can become fixated upon the conflict they are experiencing within the life of the church, they may fail to recognize that changes, conflicts, and tensions do not always arise solely from factors within religious communities themselves. Rather, these often are simply a small world manifestation of the struggle the church faces as it endeavours to respond to larger cultural trends. Thus, the fear and anxiety caused by large-scale social change often is embedded within these congregational conflicts (cf. Gibbs 2000a:19, 227). Parishioners, while tending to focus on what is at hand, forget the stress of these larger changes and direct blame at one another. As a result, however, differences between the generations become interpreted as problems to be solved rather than as opportunities to learn and to grow as a Christian community.

In the chapters that follow, it will become evident that precisely such a struggle is occurring in many churches today. As we examine the praxis of many established churches in relation to the praxis of society, we will find evidence of reductionistic tendencies. As will become evident, the particular interface of church and culture within the period of Modernity has caused these reductionistic tendencies to be

manifested in some very specific and identifiable ways. As will also become evident, this presently poses a significant risk for the capacity of many established churches to perpetuate their traditions intergenerationally.

### 2.3 Conclusion

In this study, we are advancing the assertion that, as American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches are struggling to respond adequately to cultural change within a fragmented generational context. It further is being argued that the resulting ineffectiveness of many of these churches in transmitting the Christian tradition to Gen Xers, the first post-modern generation, threatens the ability of these churches to sustain their witness through this transitional period. In this chapter, we have provided a hermeneutical framework that will aid us in further exploring this problem statement in the chapters that follow. More specifically, we have sketched out the following theoretical framework:

1. Section 2.2 introduced the preservation and perpetuation of any cultural tradition, whether that of a society or any group within society, as entailing an intergenerational dynamic requiring the participation of successive generations. This was intended to provide a basis for exploring the intergenerational objectives and challenges that can arise both within society at large and within the church specifically.
2. In section 2.3, attention was given to the role of the generation within the praxis of society as we defined the “generation” as a socio-historical phenomenon. Consideration was given to a meaningful understanding of generational identity, as well as to the limitations and cautions that must inform such an understanding.
3. In section 2.4, this focus upon the praxis of society was developed further as we explored a theoretical understanding of the inherently *intergenerational* processes by which all generations are formed in relation to, and in distinction from, their cultural forebears. Particular attention was given to common causes of the intergenerational “problem” within societies experiencing significant cultural change.
4. Section 2.5 translated the implications of the intergenerational *problem* into the intergenerational praxis of *small world* settings.

5. Section 2.6 gave attention to the intergenerational implications of the church's praxis within society. We explored the responsibility of the church toward each rising generation and the individuals of which it is composed. In addition, we examined some of the challenges that churches may encounter as "small world" contexts as they seek to fulfil their intergenerational praxis within a changing society.

Having provided this theoretical foundation, we will devote chapters three through five to an exploration of the specific historical developments that have contributed to the intergenerational praxis of American society becoming characterized by complexity and fragmentation. In addition, we will chronicle those factors that have caused many established churches to experience a crisis in their intergenerational praxis. However, the purpose of this study is not merely to describe a problem and thereby fall prey to *analysis paralysis*. Indeed, if a real problem is being described here, we must grapple with the question of what help can be extended to churches in crisis. Is there any hope for such congregations? Chapters six through nine will be devoted to addressing this question.

### **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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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](http://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 Allahar (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](http://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](http://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.

## **5. THE ESTABLISHED CHURCH AND THE POST-MODERN TRANSITION**

### **5.1 Introduction**

In the preceding chapters, we have woven together several strands of exploration that are crucial to the theme under consideration here. The central problem being addressed in this thesis is the following:

As American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches struggle to respond faithfully to cultural change within a fragmented generational context. 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 chapters three and four, we examined American society's journey from the age of Enlightenment to that of an emerging post-modern culture. Along the way, it has been demonstrated that the cultural changes accompanying the shift from modernity to post-modernity have been manifested intergenerationally. Furthermore, we have noted the way in which all contemporary generations have been shaped by the assumptions of the age-segmented culture that evolved under the influence of modernity. Amid the significant cultural changes that have occurred in recent decades, this age-segmented social framework has fostered an astounding complexity within the American generational landscape and, thus, has served as an incubator for fragmentation and conflict among the generations. As we saw in chapter four, Generation X is a cohort that most directly bears the influence of both the post-modern transition and the complex patterns of relationship existing among the generations.

Throughout these chapters, we have been concerned with exploring the praxis of the church as it has lived and ministered in the midst of this complex, changing cultural context. In chapter three, we gained some sense of the struggle that the church has faced and the ways in which its praxis, so greatly influenced by the assumptions of Christendom, has developed in response to the modern era. In this chapter, we will examine more closely the life of the contemporary church. How is it dealing with the cultural changes associated with the post-modern transition? Recognizing that the perpetuation of the church's witness through this period of transition is an inherently

intergenerational task, how is the church doing at transmitting its faith tradition to the members of Generation X, the first post-modern generation, within a complex intergenerational context? Has the church chosen a course different from that of society at large, or has it merely chosen to mimic and reinforce the marginalization that Xers have experienced in so many other contexts?

In this thesis, we are arguing that the church has established something of a poor record in responding to these realities, one that now places many churches in a state of a crisis. More specifically, we are arguing that the inadequacy of the church's response has contributed to its ineffectiveness in transmitting the Christian faith to Generation X and, as a result, that the continued existence of many churches is in jeopardy. In this chapter, we will explore these claims further and will contemplate the implications of these realities for the future of the church's life and mission.

## 5.2 The Church Amid Change

Throughout chapters three and four, considerable attention was given to the unfolding story of the dramatic changes that have taken place within our society. These changes, and their generational manifestation, have been explored under the broad heading of the *post-modern shift*. As we now turn our attention to the life of the church, it will become readily apparent that these changes have had a profound impact upon its life. While this cultural shift has posed significant challenges for the broader society, we will see that it also poses tremendous challenges for the church as it seeks to perpetuate its faith tradition faithfully through this transitional period.

Amid the profound changes that have occurred within society, the world to which the church long has been accustomed, by which its life and message have been shaped, and to which it has striven to respond throughout many generations, to a large extent no longer exists. Miller (2004:1) speaks in bold terms in reflecting upon this reality: "The future is now. Our world has changed. Even the dynamics of change have changed—and like it or not, we are all along for the ride." This experience of change poses significant challenges for how the church understands its life and witness. Butler Bass (2004:33) suggests that a sense of transition "is part and parcel of being alive at this moment in human history. It is just the way it is.... a natural and normal

response to living in a time of rapid social transformation.” The changes impacting the lives of local churches, asserts Mead (1991:85), are “connected to equally radical changes of paradigms going on throughout the world. Our evolution is part of a cosmic evolution of nations and of consciousness, one that is reshaping evolution of East and West, of humanity and environment.”

So, how has the church chosen to respond to these profound changes? Two realities introduced in chapter three have proven to serve as significant hindrances to the church’s capacity to respond to these changes in a way that promotes its continued effectiveness. The first is the Christendom paradigm, which has had significant bearing on the way in which the church contextualized the gospel within the world of modernity. The second is the decision of the church to adopt an approach to its intergenerational life that largely mirrors the praxis of the broader society in an uncritical and uncreative fashion, which has fostered distance and division among the generations of which these local churches are composed. We will consider each of these in turn in the pages that follow.

### **5.2.1 The Marriage of Christendom and Modernity**

In this thesis, we are asserting that many established churches are struggling to respond faithfully to the cultural changes associated with the post-modern transition. We can recognize that this is the case in part because, in their efforts to adjust to a new world, established churches are starting from something of a “deficit” position. This is so because of the influence of the Christendom paradigm upon the life of the church. As we explored in section 3.2.1, for many centuries the Christendom paradigm has guided the church’s understanding of its place in relation to society. Truly, as a result of its extended, stable relationship with the world of Christendom, the church came to be shaped by the core stories, values, and habits that were native to it (Roxburgh 2005:92).

As we noted in section 3.2.1, one particularly unfortunate facet of Christendom’s legacy has been the divorce of church and mission (Murray 2004:130). The church’s institutional character was emphasized rather than its relation to the *missio Dei* (Shenk 2001:8). These “deep roots” from several centuries in the past gave rise to a “flawed

vision” of the church’s mission within modern society (Mead 1991:84). Shenk (2001:41) asserts that, “Had the church understood itself as having a mission to culture, it would perforce have engaged modern culture in light of the reign of God.” However, the absence of such an understanding, suggests Drane (2000:95), led the church toward an all too uncritical embrace of the culture of modernity. As Shenk (1996:72) explains, Christendom inhibited the church from interacting critically or constructively with the changes that took place within modern society. As a result, the church became “absorbed and domesticated” into the prevailing culture of modernity (Goheen 1999; [www.newbegin.net](http://www.newbegin.net)).

As we saw in chapter three, this melding of the influences of Christendom and modernity within American culture seems to have reached the pinnacle of its expression during the 1950s, a period in which established churches across America flourished (Schaller 1999:140). Butler Bass (2004:78) describes the churches of this era as having been concerned with “the comfort of the familiar, not the challenge of the foreign.” This model “assumes that the surrounding culture is friendly and supportive of the congregation—which tends to be a homogeneous, closed system. Chapel-style churches are routinized organizations, where members receive customs, traditions, and beliefs rather than create new ones.” Butler Bass describes this as an “accidental church,” one that did not perceive itself as needing to relate to its context with missional intentionality. These congregations were not bad places, she insists, but rather “vibrant, successful, growing congregations that met the needs of people at a particular moment in American history” (:95). However, it was precisely because of the success of these congregations that they lost “the capacity to imagine church being different than how they experienced it and, essentially, froze tradition in its tracks.” As the culture began to change around the church, this lack of imagination contributed greatly to its own ineffectiveness.

Many commentators suggest that, as the church became “domesticated” within the world of modernity, the result was devastating to the church’s true vocation. Riddell (1998:59) describes modernity as a “Trojan Horse” that caused the church to adopt a syncretistic expression of the faith. As we saw in chapter three, with time, the church’s understanding of the gospel became reduced to the product of this syncretistic interface of gospel and culture (Shenk 1995:55-56). As Gibbs and Bolger



(2005:170) note, “Whereas Christendom provided institutional confidence, modernity provided an epistemological certainty based on foundationalism.” As a result of this relationship, asserts Shenk (2001:6-7), “a lack of integrity has undermined the credibility of the church in modern Western culture.” He adds, “The message, which had almost become a taunt, was clear: any peace settlement between church/religion and culture would be on the terms set by secular culture” (:39). This leads Riddell (1998:97) to offer the stinging assessment that the church of this era came to exist and function “in concert with the prevailing lie-tellers.”

Regardless of the factors that may have led the church to compromise its witness within the modern era, this “flirtation with modernity and the ideas of the Enlightenment” has contributed significantly to a loss of influence exercised by the church within society (Frost & Hirsch 2003:14). In fact, the acquiescence of the church to the culture of modernity, and the resultant trivializing of the gospel message, has led to the marginalization of the Christian faith (Miller 2004:178). Shenk (2001:2) points to the growth of the Christian movement in the non-Western world during this same period, largely the result of the modern missionary movement, to underscore precisely how costly the loss of a proper missional identity and vitality has been for the church in the West. The church has suffered declining influence during this period, not because its faith was unacceptable to the modern world, but because of its failure to bear witness faithfully (Bosch 1995:45). Notes Shenk (2005:73), “By isolating the question of mission, the church was effectively insulated from the adjustments that missionary engagement inevitably brings.”

In section 3.5.2.5, we examined the way in which this declining influence of the church became particularly notable during the 1960s and 1970s. Many commentators have suggested that this period constituted the dawning of an era of *post-Christendom*. This term, post-Christendom, captures something of the significant “relocation,” or loss of position, that has been experienced by the American church in relation to society in recent decades (Van Gelder 1998:54). The church in the United States began to experience disestablishment with the legal separation of church and state described in section 3.2.1.2. This disestablishment was further fuelled by the religious diversity brought about through immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (:50-52). However, the hermeneutics of decision (e.g. “oneself”

and “one’s situation”), which we introduced in chapter three as having emerged with such great force in the 1960s, contributed powerfully to a third wave of disestablishment of functional Christendom within American society (Carroll & Roof 2002:41).

Hauerwas and Willimon (1989:15-17) explain the impact that this has had upon the role of the church within society:

Sometime between 1960 and 1980, an old, inadequately conceived world ended, and a fresh new one began. We do not mean to be overly dramatic. Although there are many who have not yet heard the news, it is nevertheless true: a tired old world has ended...[In the past] Church, home and state formed a national consortium that worked together to instill “Christian values”...A few years ago, the two of us awoke and realized that, whether our parents were justified in believing this about the world and the Christian faith, NOBODY believed it today...[I]t is no longer “our world.”

Van Gelder (1998:54) offers a similar characterization:

[M]ost noteworthy was the collapse or substantial erosion of much of the church culture that had been built up over a period of two hundred years. Notions of shared public morals gave way to personal decisions of expediency, pleasure, or private judgment. Expectations of privileged position gave way to irrelevance and marginalization. People no longer assumed that the church had anything relevant to say on matters beyond personal faith. Public policy became increasingly secularized, as public morals became increasingly personalized and privatized.

Hall (1997:1) insists that these changes in the social location of the church represent a shift “of reverse proportions” to that which occurred under the leadership of emperors Constantine and Theodisius. Christendom, he insists, “is in its death throes” (:ix).

The cultural upheaval of recent decades truly has contributed to the dismantling of this world of Christendom and the demise of its guiding assumptions (Hunsberger 1996:16-17; Riddell 1998:13; Murray 2004:178-179). Murray (:19) describes the post-Christendom context as “the culture that emerges as the Christian faith loses coherence within a society that has been definitely shaped by the Christian story and as the institutions that have been developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.” Much like post-modernism, “post-Christendom” is not meant to be understood as a comprehensive descriptor of the emerging culture; rather, this term provides important insight into a key facet of the broader changes occurring (:3, 4). Furthermore, as Murray cautions, this term should not be confused with “post-

Christian.” The post-Christendom transition is not meant to imply the ultimate end of Christianity, but rather of a particular way that the church has been accustomed to existing within the prevailing culture. In essence, the church has been displaced from its long-established role as “chaplain to society” (Hunsberger 1998:28). It has moved from the centre to the margins, from the majority to the minority, and from a position of privilege to a context of plurality (Murray 2004:20).

For the purposes of this study, it is important that some effort is made to clarify the relationship between post-Christendom and post-modernity, and that we take care to maintain the distinction between these concepts. While encouraging a proper appreciation of both of these terms as genuinely reflecting transitional phases occurring within society, Murray (2004:12, 14) notes that neither can be credited as the direct cause of the other, nor can one properly be subsumed as a sub-heading under the other. Certainly, the critical stance of post-modern thought toward triumphalistic meta-narratives and authority structures has contributed to the unravelling of Christendom assumptions within society (:182, 183). Yet, Murray (:14) posits that, with time, the post-Christendom shift will prove to be of far greater and more lasting significance than its post-modern counterpart. However, at this particular moment in history, as the church endeavours to carry out its divine calling, we must acknowledge that the post-modern shift does indeed profoundly shape the immediate cultural context in which the church exists and endeavours to carry out its witness.

Because the assumptions born out of the “marriage” between Christianity and the prevailing worldview of modernity are woven so deeply into the core beliefs of the church, this makes it difficult for many congregations to respond creatively to the cultural changes that are occurring (Drane 2000:114; Miller 2004:178). As Mead (1991:3) notes, many congregations “were born into this culture of establishment, whether they approved of it and joined it, or disapproved and tried to remain apart from it.” Thus, the values of Christendom remain persistently influential within the life of the church today, instinctively and unconsciously shaping its sense of its identity and calling (Murray 2004:200-203). As Frost and Hirsch (2003:8) note, “while the Christendom story no longer defines Western culture, it still remains the primary definer of the church’s self-understanding in almost every Western nation,

including and perhaps especially the United States.” Kitchens (2003:27) similarly asserts that “the way we think about ministry is still rooted largely in a modernist paradigm more suited to the waning era of Christendom.”

A broad consensus has emerged to the effect that these old ways have run their course (Drane 2000:104). As Webber (1999:17) asserts, “the Christian faith incarnated in the modern culture, with its philosophical methodology, is eroding.” Kitchens (2003:27) notes that what the church has “‘always done before’ no longer works.” Similarly, Miller (2004:178) asserts that the “operational missiology” that guided the church during the period of modernity is no longer adequate. Mead (1991:18) reflects upon how deeply this way of doing things has come to be rooted in the life of traditional ecclesial structures:

[A]ll the structures and institutions that make up the churches and the infrastructure of religious life...are built on the presuppositions of the Christendom paradigm—not the ancient, classical version of the paradigm as it was understood centuries ago, but the version that flourished with new life in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This paradigm in its later years flourished and shaped us with new vigor, just as a dying pine is supposed to produce seed more vigorously as it senses the approach of its own death.

As a result, insists Drane (2000:95, 114), many churches are proving incapable of re-contextualizing; these churches evidence a resistance toward engaging post-modernism. This is creating a crisis for the church as it seeks to sustain its existence within the prevailing culture (:95). Suggests Drane (:114-115), the church’s resistance toward the post-modern merely betrays its loss of missiological integrity within the world of modernity. If the church’s stance within modernity was truly missiological, he queries, “why can’t we move on”?

## **5.2.2 Generational Segregation and Consumer-Driven Homogeneity**

### **5.2.2.1 Segregationism in the Church**

A second factor can be identified as to why many established churches are struggling to respond faithfully to the cultural changes associated with the post-modern transition. As we have already suggested, this struggle is bound up with the church’s efforts to navigate a complex generational context. Throughout chapters three and four, we have seen how, particularly in the last 100 years, modern society has given

rise to structures that foster segmentation and separation between the generations (Allen 2005:319). Furthermore, chapter three provided extensive evidence of how the church has responded to these developments within the praxis of society largely by mimicking or mirroring them. As Allen (:319) notes, “the societal trend toward age segregation has moved into churches also.” Harkness (1998:1) similarly observes that “in practice a rampant segregationism obtains in many congregations in the key aspects of congregational life: worship and education” (cf. Foster 1997:2; Barger 2005:124). This “generational segregation”, thus, is “a relatively recent ecclesiastical innovation,” yet has become deeply entrenched in the life of the church (Harkness 2003:13). As we saw in chapters three and four, this approach to intergenerational life has come to be perceived as a “natural” part of the world in which the contemporary generations were formed. It furthermore has shaped the perception and imagination of great numbers of established churches.

As we also have seen, this approach to structuring the life of the church has had profound implications for the ability of churches to transmit their traditions intergenerationally. In chapter two, we considered the crucial role that the formative years of young people plays in the development of any generation, as well as the importance of this period in the process of religious socialization. Then, in chapter three, we chronicled the growing separation of youth ministries from the broader life of local congregations. We have seen, as Hill (2002:164) suggests, that churches have favoured a practice of “[s]egregating (siloeing) the youth ministry of the church away from the larger life of the congregation.” These ministries have become “considered an appendage of the church but certainly not the primary purpose for being the church.” As chapter three demonstrates, with the advance of the twentieth century, evidence emerged that this approach was of limited effectiveness in combating the growing intergenerational divide within a peer-oriented youth culture.

In fact, as chapter three demonstrates, by the time of the Boomer formative years, this approach to structuring the life of the church was proving problematic and rather ineffective in promoting the intergenerational perpetuation of the faith traditions of local congregations. In the past, these churches were able to accommodate multiple generations with the traditional church programming to which older Christians were accustomed. As Benke and Benke (2002:1) observe, “While such programming took

into account age-related differences and needs, particularly concerning children and youth, ministries to the several adult generations were structured on the premise of relative cultural homogeneity, regardless of age bracket.” However, the dramatic changes that occurred in the relationship between the generations within society produced a radically different situation for the church. As Benke and Benke assert, the “multigenerational cultural continuity” that contributed to the character of traditional churches “is no longer intact.”

### **5.2.2.2 The Church Growth Movement and the HU Principle**

In chapter three, we noted the crisis that the exodus of vast numbers of Boomers created for many established churches. Amid the struggle to reengage the Boomer generation, the influence of the Church Growth Movement (hereafter referred to with the abbreviation “CGM”) began to emerge into prominence. Founded by missiologist Donald McGavran and fostered through the influence of theorists like C. Peter Wagner, this movement bore heavily the influence of modernity. Suggests Olson (2002:11-12),

The relationship of the church growth movement and the modernity project mirrors this two-sided puzzle. As the pieces of one come together, the other finds expression as well. As the principles of modernity are pieced together and then applied to the church, the picture that emerges is the church growth movement.

In response to the challenges the church faced during this era, notes McNeal (2003:21), this movement “exploded on the scene in the 1970s.” McNeal suggests that the CGM was meant to constitute “a missiological response to the initial warning signs that the church in North America had lost its mission.”

A core conviction of this movement was that the gospel meets people’s needs. Notes Olson (2002:13), “The church growth movement, being the flip side of the modern project, turned the church’s primary focus from God to the individual human being.” Olson (:20) further explains that the CGM

seeks to unleash people from all the trappings that inhibit their freedom. Tradition, doctrine, loyalty, and sacrifice only imprison the individual. The absence of these defining elements of congregational life means the church becomes the purveyor of whatever the individual desires. The church, now

focused around and committed to the free individual, dispenses commodities to ensure and further enhance this freedom.

While we need to avoid an oversimplification or misrepresentation of the intent of the earliest church growth theorists, Olson's comments do provide a fair reflection of how church growth thought came to be applied in principle within much of the American context. As was evident in section 3.5.1.3, the seeds of this way of thinking were already taking root during the thriving 1950s era. However, as we will see shortly, this sanctification of individualism by advocates of church growth thought would have profound implications for the life of the church.

As its name suggests, this movement centred upon the concept of growth (McNeal 2003:21). It was understood that "growth was a sign of life and was anticipated and even expected by God." The proponents of this movement asserted that growth would result when the church is obedient to the Great Commission given by Jesus. Furthermore, it was understood that, "if a church isn't growing it is being disobedient to God, falling short of his expectations." The fundamental way that the church's "success" is evidenced and measured, therefore, is through an increase in "numbers," more specifically the number of people participating in corporate worship services. As Roxburgh (1997:20) expresses, "Numerical growth is the talisman that all is well with our ecclesiastical souls." Snyder and Runion (2002:64-65) posit that this obsession with size and growth are most certainly a function of the modern American worldview that has shaped the perspective of so many churches.

Ward (2002:17-21) suggests that the church's notions about success and growth are furthermore born out of a mindset shaped by the world of Christendom. To describe this, he has coined the term "solid church." He explains: "Congregation characterizes solid church. By congregation I mean the tendency to emphasize one central meeting. Usually this meeting is a worship service held weekly on a Sunday morning." Indeed, suggests Ward, "Gathering in one place to do the same thing together is one of the core values of solid church;" it is assumed that "it is good for large numbers of very different people to meet in the same room and do the same sort of things together." Ward sees a primary consequence of this being the tendency for worship to become a "one-size-fits-all" exercise controlled by the preferences and prejudices of those who attend. In turn, church becomes "an exclusive club run for its members and organized

by a team of voluntary helpers.” The primary indicator of “success”, “spiritual health”, and “church growth” is the number of people who attend on a Sunday. Thus, says Ward, “The local church may support many good and important activities, including mission trips, evangelism, youth ministry, social projects, and so on, but they are all assessed in terms of their effect or otherwise on regular Sunday attendance.”

In support of this pursuit of success, growth, and progress, the CGM has appropriated the values of modernity by placing an emphasis on “technique” and “strategy.” This is closely bound to the ways in which the church’s self-understanding has evolved over a century’s time. The church has come to understand itself as a corporate organization guided by “purposive intent” (Van Gelder 2007:75). Within this frame of reference, suggests Olson (2002:14), “A mechanistic view characterized every function of the church...If the church could engineer itself a machine that would serve individuals perfectly, this would provide salvation and a full and happy life.”

Consistent with the values of modernity, this pursuit of technique was grounded in the assumption that the more knowledge and competency one was able to gain, the more one could master church life (:16). Toward this end, the CGM advocated the use of scientific insight by the church. As Olson (2002:13) suggests, “The social sciences provided the mechanism for fixing what was broken and making life work in the church.” He adds, “[T]he modern church has skillfully adapted statistical and measurable tools to assess knowledge, optimism, and goodness” (:19).

This emphasis on technique and strategy was bound up with a pragmatic mindset among the proponents of this movement. The defining question became, “Why do some churches grow and others do not?” (Van Rheenen 2004:2). Van Rheenen (2004:2) suggests that, while biblical passages were appropriated to lend validity to the theories advanced by church growth specialists, the core concern was anthropological. As he explains,

Assuming that they could chart their way to success by their ingenuity and creativity, Church Growth practitioners focused on what humans do in missions rather than on what God is doing. They saw the missional task as setting goals, developing appropriate methodologies, and evaluating what does or does not work rather than seeking God’s will based upon biblical and theological reflection. Their thinking segmented the gospel and practice, the human and divine into two compartmentalized worlds, and practice was



developed on the basis of ‘what works’ rather than the will and essence of God. Christian leaders placed more emphasis on developing effective strategy than forming communities shaped in the image of God. Although they advocated faithfulness to God, the system they proposed was based on human intelligence and ingenuity.

(:1)

Essentially, this movement embraced an a-theological, a-historical approach that was consistent with the values of modernity (Leith 1990:37; Webber 1999:75; McNeal 2003:23). In other words, this movement’s approach was rooted in human “objectivity”, which cannot be influenced by the past or by an eschatological future, rather than being rooted in “salvation history and God’s people as a historical people” (Olson 2002:17). The end result, asserts Roxburgh (1997:20), is that “God is but a legitimating footnote of ecclesiology.”

The Homogeneous Unit Principle was a core philosophical concept within the CGM. This principle was born out of McGavran’s experiences as a missionary working amid the context of India’s caste system. McGavran (1980:95) explains that “[t]he homogeneous unit is simply a section of society in which all the members have some characteristics in common.” He further explains this concept of the homogeneous unit (or HU, for short):

Human beings do build barriers around their own societies. More exactly we may say that the ways in which each society lives and speaks, dresses and works, of necessity set it off from other societies. Mankind is a mosaic and each piece has a separate life of its own which seems strange and often unlovely to men and women of other pieces.

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This concept is rooted in the assumption that individuals need a social identity if they are to develop and function in society. Thus, explains Gibbs (1981:116), “They therefore form themselves into various groups in which they identify themselves as ‘we’, as distinct from those who are outside and described as ‘they’.” Each such group cultivates “a particular life-style, language, and assumptions,” “develops its own behavior pattern” and is composed of individuals who “feel at home with one another.”

The HU Principle recognizes these “units” as playing an integral role within the process of church growth. This is reflected in McGavran’s (:223) notable assertion: “Men like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”

According to McGavran, this reflects “an undeniable fact.” McGavran (:225) insists that the Christian faith “can be communicated across the barriers, over the ditches, and thus built into the other societies, classes, castes, tongues, and segments of humanity.” However, by his account, asking people to cross these barriers in coming to Christ constitutes a “stumbling block” (:242). He argues that most cases of the growth of the church being hindered involve people being held back “not so much by the offense of the cross,” but “by nonbiblical offenses.” He adds, “Nothing in the Bible, for instance, requires that in becoming a Christian a believer must cross linguistic, racial, and class barriers” (:230). As we will see, the appeal of this principle has profoundly impacted the relations between generations within the church in recent decades.

### **5.2.2.3 Consumer Spirituality and the Proclivity for Homogeneity**

McGavran (1980:225) and his cohorts acknowledged that this concept of the homogeneous unit was elastic; its meaning could vary according to context. When applied to the efforts of American churches to reach Boomers, however, this principle posed some new challenges for the local church. This was particularly so in light of the impact of consumerist individualism on the religious practices of this generation. As we noted in chapter three, the world of modernity fostered an environment in which the individual’s choice of association and affiliation was of increasingly greater significance in all arenas of life (Ward 2005:41). As we also noted, the impact of a consumer mentality upon religious behaviour grew progressively with the advance of the Industrial economy, causing religion to be consigned and confined “to the privacy of an individual spiritual life” (Schmiechen 1996:10, 11-12; cf. Foster 1997:24). While we saw evidence of this focus very much at work in the church of the 1950s, the impact of consumerist values upon religious practice became particularly acute with the emergence of the Boomer generation.

Within the realm of religious behaviour, this gave rise to the triumph of the concept of the “spiritual marketplace” (Lynch 2002:11). Explains Wuthnow (1995:14-15), “It is now easy for materialism and spirituality to be conflated within American culture...The growing penetration of everyday life by materialism is even more profound in its implications for spirituality.” Several observers posit that this has

given rise to a “supermarket mentality” within the life of the church (Shenk 1995:73-74; Finke & Stark 2005:9), one that treats religious belief as a consumer commodity (Miller 2005:225). The concept of “church shopping” has come to be a common part of the religious vocabulary within our culture (Gibbs 2000b:139). This provides for a complex marketplace of choice, one that “generates consumer Christians who shop around for the best package deal” (Bosch 1995:57).

In turn, this has profoundly impacted our conventional understanding of Christian identity. As Bellah et al (1985:65) have suggested, voluntaristic individuality has become the “primary language” of many churchgoers, while Christian commitment often proves to be a “second language.” It has come to be understood that, “unless individual members are satisfied, they are free to change their voluntary association” (Van Gelder 2000:68-69). One result of this is that the relationship between the individual and the local church often is “fragile and short-lived,” as “a high proportion of people move from church to church like choosy and critical customers taking their custom from one store to another” (Gibbs 2000b:139). This tendency is evident in Anderson’s (1990:51) description of Boomer Americans looking for “full-service churches.” Consumerism, he suggests, is a leading factor in denominational decline (:47). As we saw in chapter three, while many denominations fostered the mindset of consumerism and choice (Bosch 1995:57), they have come to suffer for this (Wuthnow 1988:91).

All the more, suggest some observers, there has come to be a direct link between consumer religion and spiritual superficiality (Lynch 2002:106). Notes Roxburgh (2005:35), “The gospel and Christian discipleship have been cast in terms of this larger individualistic, consumer-oriented, suburban world.” As a result of this merging, observes Reeves (1996:67), “Millions of Americans today feel free to buy as much of the full Christian faith as seems desirable. The cost is low and customer satisfaction seems guaranteed.” A danger inherent in this, cautions Wuthnow (1995:14-15), “is that materialism is not only shaping how we live but the way we think as well...It becomes harder for us to hear the messages about the suffering of the poor, the need for economic justice, and the desirability of seeing God’s handiwork in simple things in nature.” This leads Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:242) to express concern that the influence of Boomers within local

congregations is leading to churches being “packaged” in a “convenience store” way, one that enables them to pick and choose their involvement and not allow it to impinge upon their personal lives.

This sort of environment requires churches to remain “competitive” within the religious market (Finke & Stark 2005:9). They no longer can count on denominational allegiance as a means of securing their sustainability, as denominational barriers and boundaries are far more fluid than was the case in the era in which many established churches were founded (Wuthnow 1988:91). Furthermore, notes Regele (1995:80), the church no longer holds a “premier position” within the broader marketplace of choice, but “is simply one more of the many alternative reality constructions in the marketplace of beliefs.” Thus, it has come to resort increasingly to marketing techniques. Suggests Sacks (1996:160), “consumer-driven” churches have emerged, trying to make their “‘product’ more appealing and entertaining in response to changes in American culture.” Frost and Hirsch (2003:19, 41) note that, while these strategies do represent an effort to respond to cultural changes, they continue to reflect Christendom’s “attractional” understanding of the church’s ministry, one that invites prospective participants to “come and hear.”

As we have already noted, the values of suburban life caused 1950s era churches to adopt an increasingly homogeneous approach to ministry. With the growing influence of the CGM in North America, the homogeneity-based approach came to be applied with narrower and narrower focus, a reality reflected in Wagner’s concept of the “ethclass” (1979:61). Frost and Hirsch (2003:46) suggest that this growing focus on homogeneity was an inherent outworking of the attractional mode of church. The focus on narrow niches was seen as helping to promote growth (Armour & Browning 1995:156; Carroll 2000:6-7). Worship services became designed to appeal to the specialized needs of certain niche groups (Olson 2002:19).

As one facet of this discussion, McGavran (1980:226-227) expressed an openness to the possibility that age groups could constitute one category of homogenous units. In developing this position, he drew a parallel between generational differences and language barriers separating people groups. In essence, because of the growing differences between Boomers and their elders fostered through the “language” of

consumerism, the HU Principle came to be appropriated in a way that emphasized the differences between the generations (Carroll 2000:6-7). As Branson (2007:104-105) expresses, Boomers expected experiences of church “community” based on affinity and “sung in soft-rock tempo.”

McNeal (2003:24) notes that this era gave rise to “seeker-sensitive” and “seeker-driven” worship services employing techniques and strategies born out of studies of the unchurched population (cf. Hadaway 2001:2-3). Hall (1997:28) asserts that these efforts tended to be focused “on the disenchanting and backsliding among those who would have been Christians had they not opted for or been seduced by secularity.” However, a considerable amount of the “growth” that actually occurred was merely the migration of Christian people moving from one church to another (McNeal 2003:22), a reflection of the consumer spirit surveyed above. “With rare exception,” suggests McNeal (:22), “the ‘growth’ here was the cannibalization of the smaller membership churches by these emerging superchurches.” As we will see, these developments have posed significant challenges to the life of many established churches.

#### **5.2.2.4 The Bimodal Struggle in Established Churches**

At this point, it may seem as though this chapter has strayed from its stated purpose. Our central concern here is intended to be with the church’s response to post-modernism and the first post-modern generation, Gen X. What does this discussion of homogeneity and the Boomer generation have to do with these topics? As we will see, the struggle over homogeneous expressions of the church has both limited the imagination and exhausted the energies of many established congregations. As a result, these churches have been ill prepared to understand and respond faithfully to the new challenges posed by Generation X.

While vast numbers of Boomers departed from established congregations during their young adult years, many members of this generation have since returned. Writing in the early 1990s, Russell (1993:208) noted that only one-third of Boomer drop-outs had returned to the church, while the remaining two-thirds of the dropouts (or thirty-eight percent of all Boomers) still were not involved in traditional religious activities.

Nonetheless, from the early 1970s to the early 1980s, attendance among Boomers born 1945-1954 rose from thirty-three to forty-two percent over a ten-year period (Roozen, Carroll, & Roof 1995:74). Roozen, Carroll, and Roof also clarify that the increase among Boomers during this period was greater than among all older cohorts.

Roof (1999:237) suggests that many Boomers returned to established churches for “family talk.” This often was driven by nostalgic memories of the relationship between their own families of origin and the congregations in which they were raised. While Boomers have been well aware of the distance between those memories and the realities within their own families, many have hoped to reconnect with the family orientation they experienced in the traditional church earlier in life. Thus, the decision for involvement in the church has sometimes been driven by motivations other than merely a concern for being devoted to a congregation.

However, in a religious climate charged with consumerist values, these Boomers have brought their preferences and expectations into the life of these congregations. To a certain degree, these expectations have been shaped by the trends being modelled within the broader religious marketplace. As Ammerman (1998:90) notes, when new people enter the church, while bringing new life to a congregation, they also “bring in new expectations, new experiences, and new connections to other parts of the community” (cf. Corpus 1999:9). Thus, as Rendle (2002:47) observes, pre-Boomers (i.e., G.I.’s and Silents) and Boomers have come to constitute the two primary centres of values represented within many congregations. Rendle describes this situation as a “bimodal” congregation. As he explains, bimodal congregations are those that “are increasingly housing populations with at least two centers of influence.” Both groups, operating largely from within the assumptions of modernity, bring to this situation their own values and agenda.

While Boomers may prefer homogeneity as a result of their consumerist values, their elders expect homogeneity on the basis of the predisposition toward convention, stability, and tradition that we explored in chapter three. The G.I. generation “prefers a formal church environment with no unexpected departures from the norm and where everything is done in an orderly manner” (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:236). Their affinity for “tradition” and stability has caused them to be slow to embrace the

“new” (Smith & Clurman 1997:8). Furthermore, notes Rendle (2002:60), “For these members, there is a right way and a wrong way to do many things, and the ‘right’ is determined by what is good for the group.” It is a native notion within the G.I. mindset that, if an approach to something is “right,” it is “right” for everyone. At the same time, “the GI generation value system specifies that once the path or pattern of how to do things has been determined, people should keep doing it the same way” (:59). Thus, for G.I.’s, it seems perfectly sensible to expect that “newcomers should maintain the established patterns of the congregation rather than initiating changes.” In fact, the bureaucratic structures this generation is celebrated for constructing, by their very nature, insulate against instability and resist change (Shawchuck & Heuser 1996:153-154).

Rendle (2002:19) explains that, as a result of the distinct values they bring to bear upon the life of “bimodal congregations,” Boomers and pre-Boomers have come to function like two distinct “primary media communities” or “pure markets”:

Also called ‘image tribes,’ these segmented and targeted groups of consumers with a shared identification by age, gender, race, socioeconomic standing, or any of a host of other variables are helped to see themselves and others as separate and distinct groups within the larger American public. We are actively encouraged by the media and advertising industries to see ourselves as a part of the specific image tribe or primary media community to which we most naturally belong.

This characterization of the generations as “pure markets” is important, for the concept “depends not only on attracting people of shared interests and needs to one another but equally on repelling people who don’t fit the profile.” As Finke and Stark (2005:11) suggest, making choices about appealing to one market segment may imply sacrificing another. For most churches, notes White (2001:180), the “primary ‘customer’ ...is the ‘already convinced.’” As many established congregations have learned, this has the potential to be a source of tension and to create considerable difficulty in the life of the church.

Rendle (2002:20, 21) notes that a significant problem lies in the fact that congregations are not “pure market” organizations. Rather, “congregations have been caught in the awkward position of being ‘impure markets’ in a time when people have come to expect that attention will be given to their differences.” Rendle draws upon

Tarrow's distinction between "society-making media" and "segment-making media" to explain this challenge. Segment-making media encourage small segments of society to talk to themselves, while society-making media have the potential to get all segments to talk to each other. Rendle (:21) explains how this impacts human community:

The effect of our segment-making strategies, Tarrow says, is to create a situation in which individuals are surrounded by reflections of themselves in ways that legitimize a world defined by their own preferences and needs. Marketers do not try to engage differences, large or small, in ways that negotiate those differences to build a broader sense of community. Rather, people are encouraged through self-interest to separate by similarity with others into the electronic equivalent of gated communities.

Because of their complicity in this "segment making" mindset, suggests Rendle, congregations often reflect the dynamics of homogeneity that surrounds them. As Roxburgh (2005:35) notes, "Congregations have become homogenous, attracting similar people with common sets of middle-class values."

Whitesel and Hunter (2000:162) assert that "comfort" is one of the most important reasons that churches choose to emphasize homogeneity when confronted with diversity. Within the American church context, it is not difficult to understand why this has become an issue. The presence of diverse generational groups can be profoundly disruptive to the comfort of the congregation. As Rendle (2002:49) suggests, "the more fully a congregation is able to include new generational cohorts in its membership and leadership, the more it is institutionally contributing to its own discomfort." This experience of discomfort is a source of concern for many within the church, as it "stands in stark contrast to the comfort and agreement that congregations are remembered to have enjoyed only a few decades ago." This is particularly true for members of the Silent generation, who, as Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:237) explain, want their churches to be "a place of calm and stability in a chaotic, shifting world," and for the members of the G.I. generation who want their churches to emphasize the importance of their heritage and opinions (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:75).

In many bimodal congregational contexts, this discomfort has given rise to tension and outright conflict. Sadly, the generational cohorts present within a bimodal



congregation tend “all too quickly” to assume “judgmental and defensive positions” when they encounter the differences between them (Rendle 2002:109). This tends to divert the agenda away from learning about and negotiating differences “to the task of assigning blame—which becomes a contest between ‘right and wrong.’” In recent decades, the “worship war” has come to be one of the focal points of this struggle within the church, as the generations have struggled over the right to tailor the corporate worship gathering to their particular style and musical tastes (Schaller 1999:17,133). Certainly, as Conder (2006:100) suggests, the “worship wars” must be understood as an expression of the market mindset described above:

I believe the real cause of this conflict is our culture of entitlement and the theological sanctification we give to our personal preferences. Our affluent, consumer-driven, multi-option society revolves around the market that provides outlets to suit our preferences...For church attendees, worship style can be just another place where we want to have it ‘our way.’

However, as Rendle (2002:112) notes, this desire of each generation to “have it their own way...heightens the tension by moving people more quickly toward win-lose solutions.” At the centre of such conflicts frequently lies the concern for who will exercise authority and control (Carroll & Roof 2002:4).

Rendle (2002:126) notes that the tendency to move quickly toward a problem-oriented strategy for dealing with conflict is limited in effect because “many issues that live on both sides of the cultural watershed have solutions that are right for one generation and wrong for the other...A search for winners and losers encourages people to engage in reflexive fight/flight behavior.” This response to conflict between the generations can be quite detrimental, if not entirely destructive:

If competition is the only mode of coexistence, if winners and losers must be found, then in any time of scarcity in the environment, one species will overwhelm and destroy the other. One generational value system will attempt to dislodge and force the other out. If insufficient resources or opportunities are available to nourish both, competition will enforce a ‘solution’ that eliminates the weaker or lesser partner in the system.

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Those who are familiar with the life of the American church in recent years can attest to the reality that this prospect has been all too frequently realized. Unfortunately, these “win/loss” struggles have constituted a significant part of the history of established churches in recent decades.

Many observers conclude that these developments have had a profound and enduring impact on the way in which the American generations experience church. Roof (1999:53), for example, observes the following:

Age-based religious patterns are now more visible than at any time since mid-century; then such differences were quite small and hardly noticeable, but in the sixties they began to widen and continued to increase during the 1970s and 1980s. Today patterns seem to have stabilized even as the younger cohorts have grown older. “One result of the religious transition of the sixties,” writes sociologist David A. Roozen, “appears to be the creation of an enduring stratification of religious expression by age.”

While, as we have seen, the HU Principle has contributed to the formation of new, generation-driven churches, its influence also has created pressure on established churches as they strive to remain competitive within the broader religious market. In some ways, we can assert, the HU Principle has acted like an accelerant in the emergence of conflict between generational groups asserting their homogeneous preferences. As a result of the changes that have occurred through this era of struggle, Van Gelder (2007:52) notes, “we now find generational, multicongregational congregations that segment the population around particular age groups.” Thus, for the first time in the church’s history, the segregation of age groups within the church has extended even into the adult population.

### **5.3 The Experience of Generation Xers with the Church**

#### **5.3.1 A Lack of Religious Socialization**

The above discussion of complexity and conflict within established congregations poignantly demonstrates how challenging it has been for generations to share life together in the church during recent decades. We turn now to a consideration of how this context of struggle has impacted the ability of established churches to respond to the post-modern transition by transmitting their traditions to Generation X, the first post-modern generation.

It must first be noted that fewer numbers of Xers were raised within the church than was the case within previous generations. This generation, which we have already identified as “the first post-modern generation,” has also been described as “the first

completely post-Christian generation in the history of our culture” (Hahn & Verhaagen 1996:17). Hudson (2004:15) notes that Generation X “is the first generation that, en masse, was not taken to church.” Carroll and Roof (2002:25) assert that this generation was “brought up with less exposure to religious institutions than was true for either of the preceding ones” (cf. Long 2004:200). Thus, the influence of the church’s intergenerational traditioning practices was absent from the lives of many Xers. As Hudson (2004:4) insists, “a whole generation of young adults has grown up without any religious background at all.” Even among those who did grow up in the church, Menking (1999:154-155) identifies “the reality of a thoroughly post-Christendom, secularized society” as a key factor influencing the religious attitudes and behaviours of the members of this generation. It will be helpful to consider briefly how this has come to be.

As the members of the first post-modern generation passed through their formative years amid vast cultural changes, the intergenerational dynamics described above tended to define their experience of life within the church. As Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:243) note, Xers grew up in churches dominated by the struggle between Boomers and the older generations. As a result, the experiences of many simply mirrored the brokenness and marginalization this generation encountered within society at large. These early experiences forced young Xers to witness G.I.’s, Silents, and Boomers battling over styles of worship, preaching, structure, and governance (:152). This fostered a cynical view of the church’s relevance in the minds of many young Xers (:245).

While these conflicts preoccupied the attention and energies of adults, the church’s attitude and approach toward Xers tended to reflect the antipathy of society at large. Scifres (1998:46) provides a poignant description of how this marginalization within the church followed the members of this generation throughout their formative years:

Regrettably, many of the churched children in this generation were raised in churches where children were truly seen and not heard. In the 1970s, a new trend emerged in American churches: Sunday School became a substitute for worship. Children no longer attended worship with their parents; rather, they attended Sunday School with their friends. Then, a funny thing happened when they and their friends reached the adolescent years: Sunday School became irrelevant and worship was boring, so they started sleeping in late on Sunday mornings.

(cf. Vanderwell 2008:9; Glassford 2008:73)

In essence, suggests Regele (1995:137), while the church is the one environment in which one would expect greater concern for children, in reality the emphasis was on “adults and their spiritual development more than on children.” Thus, when many Xers did attend church, notes Scifres (1998:46), “it was all too obvious to them that other church members were not comfortable with the presence of teenagers in worship.”

Kew (2001:62) suggests that the church’s limited efforts in promoting religious socialization among Xers were the result of “outdated notions of youth ministry.” He explains, “Taking our cue from the 1960s and 1970s the view has prevailed that we should let them go away and sow their wild oats, and they will be back as they get older. This mindset has provided an excuse in many mainline congregations for youth ministry to be allowed to slide.” However, this failure of churches to give attention to effectively socializing the members of this generation into their faith traditions further reinforced the impact of the youth culture “incubator,” through which vast numbers of Xers developed their values outside the church (Dychtwald 1999:214). More specifically, this enabled pop culture to play a potent role in shaping the values and perspective of this generation. Beaudoin (1998:21-22) suggests that, for the members of this generation “who had a fragmented or completely broken relationship to ‘formal’ or ‘institutional’ religion, pop culture filled the spiritual gaps.” As we saw in chapter four, this world of pop culture was overrun with the emerging influence of post-modernism.

Beaudoin (1998:13) describes his own experience with pop culture and religious disillusionment: “My increasing immersion in popular culture was coupled with a diminishing religious participation over the course of the 1980s. Televangelists’ clanging decline and fall and the mainline Churches’ more silent slip into irrelevance hastened my departure.” This disillusionment with religious institutions was widespread among the members of this generation, he asserts:

Many members of our generation who belonged to various religious traditions (myself included) waded into pools of agnosticism, apathy, or cynicism as the gap grew between the preaching and the practice of religious institutions. Members of our generation expressed their cynicism about religion by assuming one of two stances: either playfully ironic or completely dismissive. I found these postures

appropriate, as Churches seemed laughably out of touch; they had hopelessly droll music, antedeluvian technology, retrograde social teaching, and hostile or indifferent attitudes toward popular culture. For my peers, this distancing from religion often wasn't new at all, because their families had treated religion as a disposable accessory...[T]he step from religion-as-accessory to religion-as-unnecessary was a slight shuffle, not a long leap.

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As a result, notes Tapia (1994:5), many Xers came away from these early experiences with the sense that certain pop cultural forms of expression were more in line with their concept of religious expression than were “traditional evangelical modes.” This formative passage caused the members of this generation to be shaped by a distinct culture, one that was quite different from the culture of most established churches.

### **5.3.2 A Cultural Disconnect**

#### **5.3.2.1 The Disconnect between Doctrine and Experience**

These formative experiences with the church have led many Xers to view the realities represented within established churches as irrelevant to their understanding of the world. For example, the experiential orientation of this post-modern generation has engendered within them an attitude of ambivalence toward the modernistic doctrinal frameworks employed by many traditional churches. Moore (2001:133-134) explains that, “Because this is a generation with no fundamental belief in absolutes, too many of our traditional church practices put them off. They want an experience-oriented faith and are slow to embrace a firm position on doctrinal issues” (cf. Ford 1995:147).

To the members of this generation, suggest Carroll and Roof (2002:77), “Abstract formulations of deity seem cold, distant, and unconvincing...experience and feelings are the means of discerning the reality and presence of God.” Noting this fundamental attitude of suspicion, Miller and Miller (2000:8) similarly assert that “experience replaces reason, feeling is more important than form.” Thus, as Flory (2000:235) articulates, Xers tend to value the experiential and participatory dimensions of spirituality “over the more passive, rationalistic, or propositional form of previous generations.” Many Gen Xers want their experience of God to be unencumbered by doctrine. As Hahn and Verhaagen (1997:87) insist, “Perhaps no other generation has been so disinterested in a systematic exploration of the Christian

faith;” for Gen Xers, the fundamental question is that of “Does it matter?” (Celek & Zander 1996:30, 104).

The Xer assessment of traditional Christian doctrine is complicated by the fact that “by the time Generation X had grown up religious pluralism was deeply embedded in their consciousness” (Carroll & Roof 2002:40). Beaudoin (1998:58) concludes that the coupling of the post-modern plurality of religious options with the theological notions of pop culture has fostered Gen Xer disillusionment with the traditional church. Research conducted by Miller (1996:151) reveals that their immersion in this diverse religious environment has not resulted in Xers being attracted to religious traditions other than Christianity in any significant numbers. However, interaction with a pluralistic context has caused even many of those who were raised in the church and exposed to biblical teaching to demonstrate a tendency to “cut and paste” their religious views (Hahn & Verhaagen 1996:17). Beaudoin (1998:149) employs the term “bricolage” in describing this tendency. Bricolage refers to “an improvised, rough assemblage of whatever tools are at hand to solve a problem.” Says Beaudoin, “Xers are frequent bricoleurs, piecing together religious systems from available images, symbols, doctrines, moral codes, and texts.” Wuthnow (2007:15) also employs the term “bricolage,” but prefers to describe post-modern young adults as a “generation of tinkerers.”

Beaudoin (1998:74) further observes that, because many Xers are concerned with personal spiritual experience and “feel a sense of freedom and personal responsibility in regard to their spiritual lives,” they generally will not accept religious truth “paternalistically” from those in positions of religious authority (cf. Barna 1994:185; Miller & Miller 2000:8; Lynch 2002:117). For Xers, what counts as authentically spiritual must meet the ultimate test: that of personal experience. However, posits Beaudoin (1998:141-142), Xers have rarely heard from religious leaders and institutions about the role of doubt and uncertainty in the life of faith. Celek and Zander (1996:111) insist that they “aren’t looking for answers as much as people to identify with their questions.” Most Xers prefer to interact in an atmosphere in which individuals are free to express their opinions, and in which space is provided for individuals to hold contradictory views (Hahn & Verhaagen 1998:39). However, the attitudes of many churches have left some Xers with the impression that their

fragmented lives and improvised belief systems are evidence that they could never be people of faith: “We assume that stable, unitary faith comes only from a stable, unitary person” (Beaudoin 1998:141-142).

Moore (2001:133-134) credits this disconnect between the desire for an experiential basis for spirituality and the practices of many churches as being one explanation why, at the time of his writing, there were one-third fewer converts among Gen-Xers than there had been among Boomers at the same period in their generational life-cycle. As Schroeder (2002:55), a post-Christian Xer, proclaims, “Experience—spiritual experience—was exactly what we did not get at church.” In essence, it seems that the two key facets of faith formation surveyed in chapter two, religious socialization and religious experience, were not effectively achieved in the lives of so many members of this generation.

### **5.3.2.2 The Disconnect between Institution and Authenticity**

It is fair to suggest that the credibility of the church among Xers has suffered in part as a result of the broader suspicion toward institutions that characterized their formative years (Tapia 1994:2). Beaudoin (1998:41) observes that Gen X popular culture fostered within its participants a “deep suspicion of religious institutions.” Beyond this, however, as Moore (2001:14) indicates, Xers have tended to apply their scepticism toward “the institutions and materialistic systems that led them to inherit a debt-laden, divorce-riddled society...to the Church.” This assessment is similar to that advanced by Zustiak (1999:76): “For the most part, Xers are wary of all organized religion. It is their parents’ religion and those who control the ‘power’ in society; the very same people who neglected and abused them. It is part of the system, and they don’t trust the system.” This being said, it seems that it would not be appropriate to excuse the Church as merely the victim of unfounded generalizations.

In light of the experiences and influences at work within their ranks, it is perhaps understandable that many Xers do not feel bound by a conventional commitment to religious institutions in the way that the generation of their grandparents did (Beaudoin 1998:58). Some Xers have come away from their early experience with

the church feeling manipulated or exploited (Mays 2001:69). Many simply have gained the impression that the traditional church is boring, irrelevant, and “out of touch” (Scifres 1998:45; cf. McIntosh 1997:45). In turn, they conclude that they have better things to do with their time than to participate in church.

Nonetheless, it would be an error to misconstrue this as evidence that Xers are uninterested in spirituality. As Jackson (2000:28) suggests, there is a danger inherent in labelling this first post-modern generation, as though “post-modern man” is some kind of “human mutation, a new sub-species that will be impervious to the gospel” because his “God gene” has been removed. Contrary to this, many Xers possess a deep fascination with spirituality. Throughout recent decades, discussions of “secularization” have abounded in an effort to account for the changes in people’s attitudes and behaviours toward religious institutions. Integral to this theory is the understanding that people’s lives have become increasingly dominated by the values of a “secular” worldview devoid of spiritual beliefs and values. In recent years, however, this theory has been subjected to significant critique (Avis 2003:1-10). For example, Ward (2005:35-37) presents a compelling case for understanding secularization not as the end of belief, but rather the breaking free of belief from institutional structures. As Barna’s controversial *Revolution* (2006) has demonstrated, however imperfectly, considerable evidence exists to suggest that this trend is present among Xers.

Miller (1996:152) asserts that what made religion vital to the grandparents of Gen Xers does not apply to the members of this generation: “Rather than take an institutional approach to religion, most [Xers] are more interested in developing their own spirituality.” For the members of the G.I. Generation, there exists a neat divide between the secular world and the world of religion. For Xers, however, “the words ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ have lost their meaning,” while “the religious and secular spheres have collapsed in a society that is highly spiritualized and mystical” (Miller 1996:152, 153). Thus, as Ford (1995:139) suggests, many Xers are not interested in the church as an institutional gathering place offering comfort and absolute moral authority. They are looking for a faith that works. Similar to Boomers, “Rather than buy into the needs of religious institutions to perpetuate themselves,” Xers “seek to make an authentic connection with God” (Miller (1996:160, 161).



In section 4.4.1.3, we noted that Xers are sceptical toward the consumerist forces that were so prevalent throughout their formative years. Nonetheless, it would be unfair to characterize the Xer spiritual quest as immune from the influence of consumerism. As we have seen, the young adults shaped by post-modernism have also been greatly influenced by this culture of consumerism, one that teaches us to define ourselves fundamentally as consumers (Lynch 2002:107). In addition, we have seen above how this culture of consumerism has come to extend even into the realm of religion (Veith 1994:212). Young adults are now acculturated into a “Consumer Christianity” focused on individual choice (Lynch 2002:107). One powerful implication of this is that the allegiance of the members of rising generations cannot be assured, but rather must be won (Anderson 1990:47; Lytch 2004:191). Notes Flory (2000:243-244), much like Boomers, Xers “demonstrate the power of a religious consumption ethic; that is, individuals can ‘shop’ for whatever group seems to fit their desires and needs.”

This being said, it is essential to clarify that the fundamental impulse of Xers to pursue community, which we discussed in section 4.5.4, gives rise to significant differences in the nature of the spiritual “seeking” and consumer impulse of these two generations:

Xer seeking is more than just a quest for an individualistic spiritual experience—Xers are instead looking for and creating community, belonging, and authenticity, which can only be measured within the religious community. The desire seems to be first for community and belonging, and second for personal fulfillment or, perhaps more accurately, personal fulfillment comes through commitment to the community, and through the experience of belonging to such a religious/spiritual community...This is not community in the abstract, as with many churches that seek to develop community through various small group programs, but is a lived reality for Xers.

(Flory 2000:243-244)

Flory and Miller (2007:215, 217) employ the term “expressive communalism” to describe this concept of spiritual experience taking place within a body of believers and only being meaningful as it is experienced in that context. They assert that, while this approach to spirituality is related to the individualistic spiritualities described by sociologists as having been prevalent in past eras, its focus upon community also causes it to be distinct (:217).

Against the backdrop of the brokenness and fragmentation that characterized their formative years, the members of this generation yearn for an expression of community that is truly holistic (Ford 1995:116). For Xers, as we have seen, the choice is based more on finding a group with a perspective compatible with one's lifestyle and how one understands one's personal identity (Flory 2000:243-244). In large part, what Xers are looking for is others like themselves who will provide verification that there is something within a particular congregation or community that makes it worthy of their participation (McIntosh 1997:45). Thus, the nature and role of "community" becomes a clear point of distinction between the spiritual quest of Xers and that of their Boomer predecessors (Tapia 1994:4).

Many Xers have not assessed established churches as a very viable venue for finding this experience of authentic community. In one early 1990s study, Barna (1994:112, 141) indicated that, while Xers awarded the church high marks for "friendliness" and clergy concern, only twenty-nine percent viewed church as a source of friendships. Other observers have characterized the Xer experience of established churches in an even less optimistic light. Ford (1995:187), for example, suggests that Xers have experienced the church as cold and institutional. Cunningham (2006:62) similarly asserts that churches are sometimes perceived as unwelcoming, particularly to those who are unlike the majority of their attendees. Lynch (2002:119) insists that many Xers expect to experience more meaningful relationships through a range of other activities than through the church.

Schroeder (2002:56), endeavouring to speak on behalf of those Xers who have rejected their evangelical upbringing, identifies the church's shortcomings in the area of relationships as the fundamental problem. He insists that, while the evangelical church does display "both love and compassion... There is another legacy, of a dark current cruising beneath love's radar. Deep down we all know it—the trio of undertow: judgement, guilt, and fear." One example of this is Beaudoin's (1998:8) convincing description of how, "As churches ostracized their divorced mothers, many [Xers] were alienated from religious institutions and drew the conclusion that the church is no different than any other human organization." These experiences have left young adults doubting the church's claims to be an inclusive community. In fact, notes Cunningham (2006:25), among the members of this generation for which

diversity is both a value and a normal part of life, “many of them think the church is exclusive to a fault.”

## **5.4 The Church’s Ineffectiveness in the Post-Modern Transition**

### **5.4.1 Xer Church-Leaving**

The experiences and impressions formed by Gen Xers have had a profoundly detrimental impact upon their church participation as adults. As Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:17) indicated in the mid-1990s, “Our generation avoids the organized church like no other before it.” These authors cite one survey that found that, while approximately two-thirds of Xers claimed to consider a close relationship with God to be important, only one-third indicated assigning any import to church involvement (:44). A separate study conducted during this same period, which compared the attendance patterns of Xers with those of the three elder contemporary generations, found that Xers displayed the most significant evidence of decline in religious involvement (Regele 1995:146-160). Later studies further displayed the reality of this trend and heralded the likelihood of its continuation (Lynch 2002:12). For example, a study from the year 2000 revealed that only twenty-eight percent of Xers claimed to attend church services, in striking distinction from the fifty-one percent of older adults who claimed to do so at that time (Mays 2001:66).

More recently, the continuation of this trend was demonstrated by a study conducted by Woolever and Bruce (2002:13) among thousands of church members drawn from a broad range of denominations. This study found the average age of a worshiper to be fifty years old, six years older than the age of the average American. At the time of their writing, people aged forty-five to sixty-five comprised twenty-eight percent of the population and thirty-six percent of all worshipers. Those aged sixty-five and older accounted for only sixteen percent of the population, yet twenty-four percent of worshipers. Meanwhile those falling into the age categories of fifteen to twenty-four year olds and twenty-five to forty-four years old accounted for eighteen percent and thirty-eight percent of the population, respectively. However, these two groups only constituted ten percent and thirty percent of worshipers, respectively.

In summary, when one compares the age distribution within the church to that of the society at large, this reveals a sixteen point disparity between the two. Furthermore, perhaps quite predictably, people sixty-five years of age and older attend services more frequently than the average worshiper, while younger adults between twenty-five and forty-four years of age attend religious services less frequently than worshipers in other age groups (:63). Meanwhile, the Barna group (2004), noting that the average age of unchurched adults in America is six years younger than the median age of all adults, report that the number of adults who do not attend church has increased by 92 percent between 1991 and 2004 ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)). Summarizes McNeal (2003:3), “The further down you go in the generational food chain, the lower the percentage each succeeding generation reports going to church” (cf., Kew 2001:60-61; Hammett & Pierce 2007:62). As Regele (1995:107) notes, while a higher proportion of older people than the national average are filling mainline congregations, the number of Gen Xers in these contexts is “significantly below the national average.” Recent data published by Wuthnow (2007:51-53) chronicles the persistence of this trend.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this decrease in church attendance has been accompanied by a decrease in the societal influence enjoyed by established religious institutions. Russell (1993:207) observes that the proportion of Americans who expressed confidence that religion could address most of “today’s problems” declined from eighty-two percent in 1957 to sixty-three percent in 1990. During those same years, the share who felt that the influence of religion on society was increasing fell from sixty-nine to thirty-nine percent. Russell (:209) also reports that, by the early 1990s, while more than seventy percent of mainline Protestant church members aged sixty or older identified the church as the institution that helped them most in finding meaning and purpose in life, among those in their twenties, it was a considerably more modest forty-four percent. In contrast, private religious experience was deemed most helpful to fifty percent of those in their twenties.

Gibbs (2000a:190, 230) expresses concern that “a disturbingly large number of Gen Xers has given up on the church...For the most part [Xers] are not looking to Christian churches to meet their spiritual needs” (cf. Tapia 1994:2). More recently, Cunningham (2006:25) has noted that some Xers “question whether attending a local

church has anything to do with a person's faith. They wonder if sitting in a sanctuary once a week is a valid marker of transformation or spiritual growth." Observing these vast numbers of Gen Xers who could justifiably be described as "the floating, the disillusioned, and the indifferent" in their relationship to organized religion, Regele (1995:165-166) suggests that these young adults are the largest failures of the church. While "dropping out" is a common American religious phenomenon, with roughly one-half of all attendees becoming inactive at one point or another (Roof 1993:155), it is evident to many observers that what is taking place among these younger adults is of another order. Regele (1995:165-166), for example, predicts that these Xers, the first post-modern generation, represent the direction that institutional religious faith in America is moving and that an increasingly greater percentage of the overall population may reflect such a disposition in the future. Projecting this disillusionment with religion into the future, Regele (1995:143) speculates that, "if the current decline in faith involvement continues...around the year 2013 less than half of all Americans will still hold to some level of active faith." While it is difficult to know whether this forecast will be realized, it is important to recognize that such a prospect exists.

Many Xers would actually choose to classify themselves as "former" Christians:

These are people who attended church and Sunday school as children and in early adolescence, but for whom religious faith is no longer important. This is a different phenomenon from "taking a vacation from church," common among young adults of previous generations....I believe we find among Generation X a vast multitude who are genuinely "post-Christian" people.  
(Mahedy & Bernardi 1994:61)

Millions of young unchurched people now have no interest in church, even if it is "contemporary" in style. To these people, embracing church is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. Their interests, perceptions, and experiences make it very difficult for many established churches to reach them. As a result, the mission field that now lies before the church is no longer "over there," but rather located right outside its own doors (Mead 1991:25; Kew 1999:127; Hudson 2004:15).

#### **5.4.2 The Condition of Liminality**

Riddell (1998:29) notes that the church has not encountered a circumstance like the one it presently faces before: a culture "which has known and dismissed Christianity

as an option.” Riddell further posits that the church is not facing so much a lack of comprehension or opposition toward its message, but rather “a massive indifference,” a widespread sense that “Christianity lies in the past of the culture” (:7-8). Drane (2000:9, 12) similarly notes the perception that Christianity is part of the old cultural establishment and, thus, part of “the problem.” While this may not necessarily constitute an outright rejection of the figure of Jesus, it certainly entails a rejection of the institutional expression of the Christian faith as manifested in the modern church (McManus 2001:29). As a result of this, assert Hammett and Pierce (2007:xii), “No longer are North American churches living and serving in a church culture.”

Miller (2003:133) notes that, “In North American culture, we see a dramatic change from the religion of the 1950’s to the way people view religion today.” Within established churches, this has fostered a broad, chronic sense of uncertainty (Roxburgh 2005:40). As Mead (1991:42) suggests,

Congregations—like clergy, laity, and executives—are living in a time in which landmarks have been erased and old ways have stopped working. We also live in a time when the answers have not yet become clear. It is a time that calls for steadiness and perseverance through uncertainty. Such a time generates energy for change, but it also generates intense anxiety that makes partial answers attractive, so long as they are quick.

To describe this condition, Roxburgh (2005:23) employs the term “liminality,” which “describes the transition process accompanying a change of state or social position.” As Roxburgh (:24) explains, “liminality is the conscious awareness that as a group (or individual) one’s status-, role-, and sequence-sets in a society have been radically changed to the point where the group has now become largely invisible to the larger society in terms of these previously held sets.” In the American religious context, the state of liminality has come to be experienced as a crisis and loss of social function by churches that can be described in two parts: “first, the caretaker days of the churches are over; and second, modern culture—in which the churches find themselves—is itself undergoing fundamental transformation” (:3).

Roxburgh (2005:41) suggests that the church’s acquaintance with this condition of liminality demonstrates the relationship between *change*, the outward reality, and *transition*, our internal response to that outward state. The experience of liminality, he explains, should rightly be viewed as a “threshold experience”, a “paradoxical state

of both death and renewal, confusion and opportunity” (Roxburgh 1997:43). However, he notes, while liminality may pose opportunity for creative response, initially the crisis and anxiety that it creates for a given group “makes it difficult to initiate the reflection required to think in terms of alternative frameworks.” A danger in such periods is the tendency “to become so preoccupied with self that one cannot step outside oneself to rethink, reimagine, and redescribe larger reality” (Frost 2006:9; cf. Gibbs 2000a:13). In recent times, says Butler Bass (2004:31), church leaders and members have indeed felt “alarmed by the changes brought on by fragmented and detraditionalized culture.” Because the experience of loss and marginalization is so overpowering, alienating, and anxiety inducing, the impetus within a given group is often focused upon returning the system to balance (Roxburgh 2005:64).

Many churches do seem to have responded to the challenges of the present moment by attempting to restore a sense of normalcy. As Hudson (2004:4) expresses, amid the recent shifts occurring within our society, the participants within established churches “clutch desperately to the familiar. They strive to re-establish what has worked in the past. They want to stabilize the situation.” This desire within the church to feel as though it has maintained something of importance is perfectly understandable. Riddell (1998:38, 39) notes that, as the church endeavours to cope by “find[ing] enough that is familiar to act as a substratum, while other aspects of our world are rearranged...many Christians have clung to the rock of their Christianity to give themselves a foundational still point.” However, as Riddell explains regarding much of the church in the West, “they may have at times mistaken the forms of devotion with the content of it...This is the unique temptation of the community of faith: to confuse the container of the treasure with the treasure itself.” As we explored in section 2.6.3, this is precisely the tendency that militates against the vitality of a tradition.

In many cases, churches seem to have chosen to respond to the changes in culture by operating as though little of significance is happening (Hall 1997:4, 20). As Kitchens (2003:24) expresses, “The landscape in which we seek to be faithful to our calling has radically shifted beneath our feet, and yet we have managed so far to act as if nothing had changed.” McNeal (2003:2) similarly asserts that “the North American church largely has responded with heavy infusions of denial, believing the culture will come

to its senses and come back around to the church” (cf. Murray 2004:206). As a result, as Kew (2001:33) suggests, many congregations continue to function as if this were the middle of the twentieth century, rather than the beginning of the twenty-first. White (2001:177) similarly concludes that “many churches operate on a 1950s American middle-class methodology and mindset.”

In part, posits Hunter (1996:23-25), this causes established churches to conduct themselves “as though most people in our communities are Christians, as though ministry is merely the nurture and care of existing Christians” (cf. Barrett 1998:112). Meanwhile, those churches that are evangelistically engaged tend to employ approaches to “propagating the gospel” (e.g., the Sunday evening evangelistic service, the Sunday school, the revival, the camp meeting, the crusade, and one-to-one confrontational evangelism) fitted to a mid-twentieth century culture. However, says Hunter, these are “spent forces” that produce “declining yields.” In reality, efforts at evangelism are proving to have little impact outside of the church (Shenk 1996:66), beyond those who already share the fundamental worldview espoused within the church (McManus 2001:52).

Some established churches are disenchanted amid the changes they are experiencing and frustrated by the struggles associated with inspiring young people to embrace the faith. However, many simply are unsure of a better way forward (Drane 2000:viii). Concludes Mead (1991:18), “We are surrounded by the relics of the Christendom Paradigm, a paradigm that has largely ceased to work. But the relics hold us hostage to the past and make it difficult to create a new paradigm that can be as compelling for the next age as the Christendom Paradigm has been for the past age.” As a result of this captive state, as insists Hunter (1996:23-25), “many traditional churches are no longer able to reach, receive, retain, and grow the receptive people in their ministry area.”

Some of these congregations suffer from “goal displacement,” a process that involves the primary mission of an organization being “replaced by operative goals that have little, if anything, to do with the organization’s original reason for being” (Hadaway 2001:7). Hadaway observes that this “is rarely the result of conscious decisions to change the purpose and operational goals of an organization.” However, programs of



ministry rooted in the past have a way of becoming ends unto themselves and proving increasingly ineffective (Butler Bass 2002:10). Nonetheless, some of these churches are held captive by the hope that significantly different results can be produced by attempting to repeat the same actions or by simply doing “the same things better” (Frost & Hirsch 2003:196). Church leaders sometimes assume that renewed effectiveness can be accomplished through merely “tweaking” programs (Mead 1991:22; Kitchens 2003:28-29). As a result of this, it should be little surprise that, as Miller (2004:187) observes, “We seem locked into a vicious cycle of diminishing returns.”

Hadaway (2001:4-6) notes that, while many churches attempt to remain the same, rather than change, they actually do a fairly poor job of succeeding at this. As he explains, “All organizations are in a state of constant evolution, as members and leaders grow older, move out, move in, and as the group necessarily adjusts to a changing context.” Thus, their supposedly static nature is merely an illusion. In reality, while churches often are blamed for being oriented to the past, this is not entirely the case. Rather, many churches simply strive to conform to a self-created image of “the way things ought to be done around here” born out of an idealized version of traditional practices and normative forms. Such a vision is not actually rooted in reality, nor could it actually be recreated. Nonetheless, such congregations do change, but always in the direction of trying to recreate the church as it is remembered. Ward (2002:21) notes that this is proving problematic in the context of a culture that is moving toward greater “fluidity.” As churches endeavour to do “the same kind of things that we have always done,” in reality, “Few if any of us are immune from cultural change.”

Minatrea (2004:7) notes that some churches are responding to the isolation from society they are experiencing and the “associated lack of belief in capacity to have significant influence” by embracing a “maintenance mentality.” He adds,

The culture in which the church exists is a changing river, charting its own path without regard to the preferences of previous generational or cultural systems. Members of today’s churches, who once felt that they held the high ground in a vast Christian nation, now feel cut off and isolated—*islands in a fast-flowing stream*. Clearly, the Christian church in North America no longer possesses a home-court advantage.

Thus, the “maintenance mentality” of which Minatrea writes is motivated by something entirely different than that which was described in section 3.2.1.1 as native to the church within the world of Christendom; it is not one issuing from comfort and familiarity with *servicing* the predominant culture, but rather from a desire to *survive* amid the discomfort and alienation produced by this culture (cf. Jackson 2002:1; Roxburgh 2005:151). However, notes Van Gelder (2007:136), when survival becomes the primary goal of any organization, something clearly has been lost in terms of the rationale for its existence. Many of these churches are immobilized, suggests Hadaway (2001:8), “having done little positive mission or ministry in their communities in years.”

The practices of many established churches increasingly become “living expressions of worship from another era,” suggests Ward (2002:27), thereby taking on “a historical character.” However, particularly in a context of rapid social change, rather than being “a turn-off, for some people the weekly visit to church is attractive precisely because it offers a slice of living history.” Ward explains,

Worship has become part of the culture industry. The value of church is that it preserves the traditions of the past and makes them accessible to new generations... Ministers and people are willing to see gradual change, but every effort is made to respect the weight of tradition... The emphasis lies upon preserving for future generations that with which we have been entrusted.

However, cautions Ward (:28-29), this “mutation of solid church into heritage, refuge, and nostalgic communities has seriously decreased its ability to engage in genuine mission in liquid modernity.” The “nostalgic community” touts itself as the one place in society where “young and old gather together in ways they never do outside of church.” While this sort of thinking “makes us feel good about our congregation,” in reality, for the most part this is more myth than reality. Congregations are generally “monocultures reflecting the tastes of one or perhaps two different types of people.”

Ward (2002:25) suggests that these churches do “mutate.” As he notes, “Whereas once they reflected a social reality beyond themselves, now this is less likely to be the case. This means that since church does not reflect a wider community it must in some way compensate for this lack.” Ward explains that, in a culture that emphasizes church-going as a matter of a personal lifestyle choice, “solid churches” have found it

essential to make adjustments in order to be successful. “As a result churches have gradually adapted to a new, more fluid market environment while generally denying that such changes have taken place,” suggests Ward. However, he asserts, those who choose to attend church do so with a different set of social needs than many within the broader culture. As a result, “mutation has adapted the church to relate to some of the needs of those who are willing or able to fit their basic pattern, but they are unable or unwilling to change this solid way of being church to connect with those who find it unacceptable or unattractive.”

In reality, assert Benke and Benke (2002:6-7), many congregations have become “caretaker churches.” While not having accepted or adapted to the changing reality around them, such churches remain inwardly-focused, continuing to minister to the Christian culture of church members and their families, while being “virtually devoid of conversion growth because of the absence of any meaningful outreach to the masses of unchurched adults that compose the postmodernist cultures” (cf. McNeal 2003:32-33). These authors suggest that caretaker churches make only “limited attempts” to come to terms with the postmodern reality:

Their programming tends to remain much the same as it has been over past generations, with perhaps some modest changes...[F]or the most part, programming, leadership methods, and attitudes are a carryover from the past when the church played a somewhat different and more prominent role in American family life and in the community (:35).

Benke and Benke (:37) suggest that the limited growth that does occur in these churches is usually by transfer growth from churchgoers moving into the community or by “church hoppers.” While these traditional church congregations do continue to show some evidence of being multigenerational, “they are composed almost entirely of long-established churchgoing Christians and their families” (:88), those who “feel comfortable in a ministries setting that has carried over for many years” (:7).

In summary, we can conclude that many established churches have preferred practices and programs rooted in the past over the option of responding adaptively to contemporary culture (Carroll & Roof 2002:137). McLaren (2000:44) suggests that many churches have been hindered by the perception that their “wineskins” were actually equivalent to the biblical pattern and, thus, cannot be changed. In reality, however, much protestant ecclesiology is based more on tradition than on scripture

(Peterson 1992:43; Snyder 1996:50). Furthermore, many of these “traditional” patterns, as we saw in chapter three, are not particularly that old. As Beaudoin (1998:154) notes, much of what is called “tradition” within our contemporary context “is really an innovation little older than our grandparents.” What is particularly ironic is that some mainline churches actually have been willing to change their core teachings while resisting innovations in form (Butler Bass 2004:43-44).

As we have seen, these forms have become “outmoded” (Frost & Hirsch 2003:65). They have come to be characterized by standardization, predictability, comfort, convenience, and control, rather than life (McManus 2001:14); as a result, they no longer are proving meaningful to many young adults (Butler Bass 2004:48). Structures that were developed for the purpose of mediating grace, suggests Mead (1991:43), have actually come to hinder its availability (cf. Long 2004:117). The lack of connection between the church’s entrenched patterns and a changing culture has contributed to its failure in assimilating young adults:

In a wave of social change (and often unreflective resistance to it), many congregations lost their ability to retain younger members or attract new ones. Congregations often suffered because of the gap that developed between their internal inherited practices and external cultural realities. And, more than occasionally, they suffered because their particular pattern of congregational life was considered coterminous with “Christian tradition” or “orthodox faith,” hence confusing a historical movement in American culture with theological vitality and scriptural truth. In short, many mid-twentieth century churchgoers enshrined the pattern of social congregations as something akin to revealed truth!

(Butler Bass 2004:21)

This leads McManus (2001:31) to offer the potent assertion that many churches, while keeping their traditions, have lost their children (cf. Rouse & Van Gelder 2008:59).

### **5.4.3 The Established Church in Decline**

In recent decades, the issue of congregational “decline” has been much discussed. Shenk (2001:5) notes that, while concern toward evidence of waning religiosity “has weighed on thoughtful church leaders for more than a hundred years,” this concern has intensified in the concluding years of the twentieth century. Throughout many Western nations, decline is an empirical reality (Ward 2005:35). Writing from a British perspective, Jackson (2002:2-11) provides an astounding list of indicators of

the “bad news” in the Anglican church, including declines in baptisms, confirmations, church marriages, stipendiary clergy, churches open, giving, membership, frequency of church attendance, midweek churchgoing, and the disappearance of children from many churches. While the marginalization of the church in the US has not been nearly as pronounced as in many of its European counterparts (Lynch 2002:11), many of the indicators of decline Jackson identifies are relevant within the American situation, as well (Wuthnow 2007:51).

Many mainline denominations, though appearing to have maintained relatively steady membership since the mid 1960’s, actually have suffered a forty-five to fifty percent decline as a percentage of the total US population (Roozen, Carroll, & Roof 1995:78; Whitesel & Hunter 2000:16-17). Despite this, Finke and Stark (2005:3, 55, 247) insist that “mainline decline” is not a new issue, nor a complete account of the American religious situation. Decline cannot be explained away as indicative of a lack of interest in religion more broadly, but rather must be seen as the impact of the changing shape of the religious landscape upon particular religious institutions (cf. Miller 1997:3-4; McNeal 2003:11). They argue that decline had already begun at the time of the American Revolution in 1776, largely the result of the inability of mainline churches to adjust to the entrance of “upstart sects” like the Methodists and Baptists into the religious market. Thus, they assert, the mainline market share was in decline long before actual membership numbers began declining. In fact, by the account of these authors, the rate of religious adherence has actually been on the climb since Revolution era rates, which they estimate to have included roughly seventeen percent of the population (Finke & Stark 2005:22, 281). Thus, they conclude, the story of “mainline decline” is rooted in a narrative that consigns new Christian groups to historical insignificance (:8).

Having drawn this conclusion, Finke and Stark (2005:248) insist that “It is pointless to search the 1960s for the causes of a phenomenon that was far along by the War of 1812.” We can acknowledge the valuable contribution that these authors provide for one seeking a well balanced understanding of the issue of decline. Certainly, their thoughts about the relationship between decline and a failure to innovate are consistent with what we have stated above regarding the ways that many established churches are responding to a changing culture. However, we might not feel

compelled to go as far as these authors in diminishing the significance of the events that have occurred since the 1960s for the issue of declining adherence to the Christian faith. Indeed, we might do well to contemplate how the “disestablishment” that has occurred since the 1960s may have radicalized a dynamic that, as Finke and Stark properly note, has long been operative within our society.

Hudson (2004:15) observes that, though the American adult population increased and interest in spirituality seemed to grow throughout the 1990s, the church still experienced a net loss of membership. Toward the conclusion of that decade, more than one-half of those Protestant congregations that had been in existence since 1955 had shrunk in size in terms of average worship attendance, while an average of more than sixty Protestant congregations per week were choosing “to dissolve, disband, or merge into another congregation” (Schaller 1999:74, 88). This trend was not limited merely to those churches that historically have been understood as comprising the “mainline.” Rather, as Woolever and Bruce (2002:1-5) have reported, this pattern has been observed in a broad and diverse range of denominational groups.

Roozen, Carroll, and Roof (1995:68) suggest that a number of factors can be identified to account for this decline (e.g., high concentrations of congregations in areas of stagnant population growth and a shortage of new church development) (cf. Burgess 2005:6). These factors, each surely worthy of exploration in its own right, have contributed to an overall pattern of decline across all generations (Carroll & Roof 2002:19; Lynch 2002:11). One recent study suggests that actual attendance numbers within American congregations may be considerably lower than conventionally believed (Olson 2008:28). Nonetheless, the evidence clearly demonstrates that this decline is associated most markedly with the decreasing rate of adherence to organized religion among the younger generations (Twenge 2006:34; Wuthnow 2007:52, 75).

Perhaps partly in reaction to the excesses of some within the CGM, some church leaders respond to this decline by employing any of several commonly used arguments to justify a lack of interest in “numbers.” Jackson (2002:17-21) outlines four primary arguments that he frequently encounters:

1. The kingdom matters, not the Church.

2. It is a matter of quality, not quantity.
3. Small is often beautiful.
4. The church is for others; thus, service, not growth, is the key.

Jackson (:21) insists that, if we look at these four arguments closely, we may find a more fundamental attitude behind them: “It may be that the reason some people refuse to take the problem of the decline in church attendance seriously is not because of theological conviction at all but because of despair—despair that anything can be done about it.” This “failure to look decline in the face and do something about it,” argues Jackson (:22), constitutes one of the most serious impediments to growth in the church.

Many observers predict that, barring dramatic changes to the current trends evident in many congregations, church closings will continue at an alarming rate. As many as eighty to eighty-five percent of the congregations in American have been identified as plateaued or declining in size (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:14; Hammett & Pierce 2007:102). Drawing upon the research of Wagner, Kew (2001:43) notes that approximately 18,000 Protestant churches in the US are “terminally ill.” Says Kew, “Some might be treated and cured, yet the majority are likely to go out of existence.” Hammett and Pierce (2007:57) estimate that more than 50,000 churches will close their doors by 2010. Projecting further into the future, Kew (2001:59) notes that some researchers predict that as many as sixty percent of existing congregations will be closed by 2050. In a statement echoing the list provided by Jackson above, Kew asserts that both “church attendance and then the more detailed information that is hidden within the other arrays of statistics that are available tell some alarming stories.”

Whitesel and Hunter (2000:16-17) insist that the church is experiencing “a crisis of aging” and identify the primary cause of this development as being “the church’s failure to assimilate younger generations to the same high degree it has successfully incorporated older generations.” This is consistent with the range of statistics cited by Regele (1995:107) to demonstrate that “while the overall U.S. population is greying, the historic Protestant institutions are greying faster,” as well as Van Gelder’s (2007:83) observation that the median age of members in many Mainline

denominations now exceeds the national median age by twenty years or more. Carroll and Roof (2002:1) similarly suggest that Protestant churches are faced with an “imbalance” of those over the age of sixty.

McNeal (2003:1) assesses the long-term prospects of this generationally-borne trend in explicitly grave terms:

The current church culture in North America is on life support. It is living off the work, money, and energy of previous generations from a previous world order. The plug will be pulled either when the money runs out (80 percent of money given to congregations comes from people aged fifty-five and older) or when the remaining three-fourths of a generation who are institutional loyalists die off or both.

(cf. Hammett & Pierce 2007:57)

Regele (1995:52) is perhaps no more charitable in his assertion that “there are literally thousands of churches across America that are old and dying. In many churches, the average age of its members is between sixty-five and seventy. More and more these churches can no longer financially support themselves, and they will not recover.” Indeed, Miller (1997:16-17) expresses concern that many of these churches, lacking young families and young adults, will barely be able to maintain their physical structures.

These congregations that have enjoyed such a rich heritage are faced with a painful reality as they waver on the verge of extinction. Truly, says Rendle (2002:50), in many cases, “net losses from deaths will continue in the immediate future at a level that cannot be exceeded by gains from births and new members to achieve net growth.” While this seeming inevitability could provide the impetus for change, Benke and Benke (2002:36) express concern over what strikes them as the greater likelihood that, the older these churches become, the more they will be devoted to “survival for the sake of itself.”

#### **5.4.4 The Cultural Challenge**

Perhaps equally as significant as the demographic factors associated with the church’s decline is their widening inability to connect with a changing culture. Lynch (2002:120-121) suggests that, as the membership and influence of churches weakens,



these churches are at risk of losing touch with what form the pursuit of meaning is taking in the contemporary world. Through its failure to effectively transmit its faith tradition to Gen X, the first post-modern generation, the church is experiencing an increasing cultural gap in relation to post-modern culture. Many churches are “two steps removed” from those who have been shaped by a post-modern culture, suggests Van Gelder (1996:43). These churches “simply have not continued to reach even [their] own adult children who are now bearing their own children, let alone reach the significant number of younger families who are part of the general population” (Rouse & Van Gelder 2008:59). Thus, as Scifres (1998:42) notes, Xers pose a predicament for the future of the church; not only they, but also vast numbers of their children, are likely to be beyond the reach of many established churches.

Kew (2001:63) observes that Xers present churches with a challenge that is not so much generational as philosophical in nature: “They are thoroughly Postmodern in their worldviews...The gap between the churches and the young is widening as churches’ Modern, Enlightenment-shaped approach to ministry speaks to a smaller and smaller percentage of people.” Butler Bass (2004:21) similarly writes of a widening “gap between cultural change and congregational life” with the arrival of Generation X into adulthood:

Many of these younger Americans grew up disengaged from any form of traditional faith community and their worldviews differed sharply from those of their parents and grandparents regarding religious practice. While the previous generations’ social churchgoing reigned as the dominant form of establishment Protestantism, their children largely rejected that style and its patterns of practice as irrelevant to their lives.

(cf. Regele 1995:196)

In light of this growing cultural gap between the church and young adults, asserts McIntosh (2002:22), failure to understand and respond to the changes taking place among the generations in the United States may have a negative impact on churches and their ministries. He argues that the membership of churches that are cultivating an understanding of the changes evident among the generations appear to be growing, “while those that cannot understand and adjust to the changing generations are on the decline.” Thus, recognizing that post-moderns “will increasingly become the American norm and will make up the greater percentage of the population” in years to

come, Kimball (2003:57-66) insists that, “[f]or their sakes we must rethink our approach to ministry.”

#### **5.4.5 Congregational Ageism toward Xers**

Despite all that is at stake with this generation, numerous authors concerned to advocate for this generation note that Xers have been largely ignored or forgotten by many established churches. Many of these churches, furthermore, are in denial of this reality. Scifres (1998:40) and Householder (1999:42) both observe that, at the conclusion of the 1990s, church-goers remained largely oblivious to the fact that a generation was missing from their ranks. Responding to this reality of the relative absence of the post-modern generations from the pews of many congregations, Reifschneider (1999:35) explains the attitude evident in many churches: “Many church members think that young adults are missing because we have not settled down with a job, spouse, and family. They still believe that Xers will come to church when we have children. We don’t.” More recently, McNeal (2003:3) has offered the following tongue-in-cheek observations: “[O]f course, churches are launching an all-out effort to reach Gen Xers. I wish! Most churches have actually just written them off, waiting for them to grow up and learn to like what the church has to offer” (cf. Kimball 2003:57-66).

Tragically, it seems as though the elder generations within many churches have adopted all too uncritically the caricatures and stereotypes of Xers born out of the intergenerational struggle that has been unfolding within society at large. Writing in the mid-1990s, Ford (1995:48) indicated that many churches were influenced by bad stereotypes of Xers. More recently, Howard Merritt (2007:6) has taken note of the blatant and ironic ageism in mainline churches that have exercised such care in avoiding sexism and racism, evident most notably in the criticism that Xers have been forced to endure: “Maybe the ageism is acceptable in our churches because it’s utterly rampant in our society. There’s an idea that people under forty should never have any leadership or opinion on anything.” Howard Merritt (:14) adds that, within local churches, Xers have been “inevitably compared disparagingly to Baby Boomers, the civil rights movements of the sixties, and were eternally dwarfed in that Boomer-looming shadow.” She responds to this by asking, “How could the church understand

young adults if it continually looked at them through the tinted spectacles of older adults?” Some churches have contemplated whether they should merely “write off” the members of this generation altogether (Hadaway 2001:1). However, Schaller (1999:48, 60) suggests that this dismissive attitude toward Xers is most certainly contributing to the shrinking of older parishes.

In the mid-1990s, Mahedy and Bernardi (1994:136-137) and Ford (1995:30) noted that, while churches everywhere seemed to be using strategies and marketing techniques aimed at appealing to Boomers, little attention had been demonstrated toward Xers. At the turn of the Millennium, Rich Hurst (quoted in Rabey 2001:4) asserted that, while most churches had programs that met the needs of middle-aged people, “they [had] little that meets the needs of the average young adult, making this population the most unchurched portion of American society.” Howard Merritt (2007:30) more recently has offered a similar assessment:

[A]s younger people ‘shop around’ for a church, they might see that we have a Sunday school program and a smattering of things for children, but too often church leadership, social events, and fundraisers are geared toward people who are over sixty. In our highly segregated and ageist culture, younger generations get the message that since the church is for another generation, then it’s not for their children, and it’s definitely not for them.

Reflecting upon the evidence of such overt neglect, Moore (2001:13) expresses concern toward “[t]he very real danger...that we current leaders will altogether skip over Gen-Xers in favor of their younger siblings.”

#### **5.4.6 Congregational Marginalization of Xers**

##### **5.4.6.1 The Challenges of Complexity**

Though not in great abundance, a sizeable minority of Xers does remain in established congregations (Wuthnow 2007:2). Kimball (2003:57-66) notes that some of these young adults are at home there because they remain adherents to the modern worldview, which he identifies as being largely the result of their having been raised in Christian homes. Thus, modern churches are still attracting modern young people. Benke and Benke (2002:31) seem to be attempting to explain the continued church involvement of these young adults by suggesting that Christians “across all generational categories” are not affected by modernism and post-modernism in the

same way as the rest of society. As they posit, “The Christian belief system translates into a separate cultural orientation altogether.”

This might lead us to suspect that the influence of post-modernism is perhaps not operative among many of the young people who remain in the church. Rendle’s (2002:6) suggestion that “the length of one’s membership in a congregation is the stronger determinant of one’s behavior and preferences” might seem to lend support to this suspicion (cf. Armour & Browning 1995:177). Nonetheless, Rendle (2002:6) adds the clarification that “there is obviously a generational corollary” to this. In other words, contrary to Benke and Benke’s assertion, we can expect to find evidence of the influence of post-modernity among many of the young adults within the congregation. At the very least, the Xers within the congregation often are more conversant with the culture of post-modernism.

This adds complexity to an already complex situation in many congregations. Notes Gibbs (2000a:20), churches now contain a mix of those who have been influenced by traditional religious forms, those who are guided by modern assumptions, and those who are post-modern (cf. Hammett & Pierce 2007:35). Essentially, all of the generation-specific cultural changes that have been surveyed over the preceding chapters now come to bear cumulatively upon the intergenerational praxis of the church within the praxis of society. Hammett and Pierce (2007:30) reflect upon the challenges this poses for many congregations:

For the first time in history, most churches face the challenge of ministering to five or more generations at one time. Americans are living longer. And what pleases one generation often doesn’t satisfy the next generation, much less the third, fourth, or fifth....generations have different preferences for how they worship, learn, lead, relate, do ministry, and interact with one another. They have different personal preferences and lifestyles, styles of music, and attire.  
(cf. Loper 1999:2-3; Schaller 1999:17, 133)

Indeed, suggests Vanderwell (2008:2), because Americans are living longer, the age difference represented within the pews of established churches is greater than it has been in earlier years, even a generation ago.

In this sort of context, cross-generational ministry has become decidedly cross-cultural (Moore 2001:139). As a result, notes Hawn (2003:6), “generational differences have some of the same effects as varied ethnic perspectives within a

congregation. Younger members have been shaped by a set of historical events different from those that formed older members.” As we have seen, most Xers “are from a world with different values, traditions, rituals, and personal preferences—a different culture” (Hammett & Pierce 2007:4). Rendle (2002:45) reflects upon the challenge that this poses to the life of many congregations:

The bottom line is that otherwise similar people of different ages can have sharply contrasting life experiences, even as they live side by side in the same family, community, or congregation. Representing several generations, the people in our congregations are brought together by a choice to be with one another; but then they are confounded by their inability to understand one another or to find ready agreement on even the most basic questions...[T]hey are baffled by subtle and shaded differences that allow them all to use the same words but to impute different meanings to them, that allow them to have common goals but to disagree on strategies to accomplish them.

As these differing, and often competing, generational values are brought to bear on the life of the church, suggests Rendle (2002:56), “discomfort below the surface commonly makes sharing worship, program planning, or decision making difficult across generations.”

As we have seen in preceding sections of this study, many congregations have adopted structures and attitudes that foster generational segregation and separation. As Allen (2005:319) notes, “Though church leaders endorse intergenerational approaches in theory, in practice American mainline and evangelical churches generally conduct many of their services and activities...in age-segregated settings.” As a result, it has become more and more difficult for the generations to serve one another’s needs within the life of the church. Whitesel and Hunter (2000:7) describe this reality:

The Christian church is polarized along generational lines, and the generation gaps are intensifying this divergence....[G]enerational tensions in our churches separate young people from the maturity and experience that senior members can impart. In addition, the fresh energy and new ideas that younger generations can bring are being forfeited.

Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:234) go so far as to assert that “[t]here are few areas in our lives where the generation gap is greater than it is in the church” (cf. Gambone 1998:1). Hilborn and Bird (2003:162) describe a form of “intergenerational antipathy,” which “involves an age-related breach in the unity of God’s people.” It seems as though the “pure market” mindset surveyed in section 5.2.2.4 above has

become more pronounced and problematic. It is almost as though the intergroup dynamics experienced within these churches have caused the spirit of generational “identity politics” at work within broader society to define the intergenerational praxis of local congregations. Clearly, the interactions, activities, sentiments, and norms evident among the generations within local established congregations have caused the bonds of intergenerational solidarity to be significantly weakened. Thus, as Regele (1995:238) insists, in many congregations considerable anger exists between the generations.

In far too many congregations, this situation has been particularly detrimental to the standing of Xers. In chapter two, we surveyed two key components of the intergenerational traditioning process: 1) passing the good deposit to each generation and 2) empowering them to impact its shape. As has already been demonstrated compellingly above, far too commonly established churches have not been effective at reaching this generation. However, they also are not proving effective at granting this generation the opportunity to contribute to the shape of the congregation’s tradition. Though the members of this generation offer a knowledge of the culture of post-modernism that could be of service to their congregations, and though they are actively engaged in significant cultural production in other areas of life (Flory & Miller 2007:202), the post-modern young people within the congregation frequently are disempowered and devalued (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:19-20; Conder 2006:39). As Carroll and Roof (2002:138, 207) assert, younger people essentially participate on the terms dictated by their elders, rather than because of efforts at negotiation across generational lines or a willingness on the part of the elder generations to adapt programmatically.

Whitesel and Hunter (2000:41) argue that most churches “are staffed, programmed, and envisioned to reach one generation.” McIntosh (2002:13) similarly identifies a monogenerational focus as a widespread phenomenon and guiding assumption among many churches. More specifically, as we have seen, many churches are focused upon ministering to the adults who are already established within the congregation (Regele 1995:137). To describe this tendency toward cultural homogeneity within the church, Whitesel and Hunter (2000:32) employ the creative term, *ethnikitis*. They explain that the concept “could apply equally to Generation X, Boomers, or Builders in addition to

those groups distinguished by racial, tribal, or class differences... ‘Cultural ethnikitis’ and ‘tribal ethnikitis’ would thus be two ‘strains’ of the general category ‘ethnikitis’.” Whitesel and Hunter (:42) caution that, while generational like-mindedness does propel assimilation, when it is allowed to mutate into “generational exclusivity,” it can unintentionally stunt growth by creating a one-generational church. It can cause churches to become “malfunctional enclaves of bias and prejudice” (:97). In many established congregations, the influence of *ethnikitis* promotes something of an unconscious tendency on the part of older members to impose their cultural assumptions upon the post-modern young people in their midst. Writing from a secular marketing perspective, Smith and Clurman (1997:8) employ the term “generational myopia” to describe essentially the same phenomenon: “the shortsighted application of the values and attitudes of your own generation to the development of strategies for reaching another generation.”

This tendency often is motivated by good intentions. Whitesel and Hunter (2000:161) follow Wagner in speaking of “cultural overhang,” the tendency of the preferences and affinities of one culture to overhang or protrude into another. Observing that cultural overhang tends to affect the approach taken to worship services, these authors insist that the suggestions of older generations “are based upon a sincere longing to see these spiritual experiences reoccur in younger generations... What they may not realize is that their cultural overhang is widening a generation gap, and making it difficult for the good news to cross over to the younger worshipers” (:163). As we have noted previously, older generations tend to assume mistakenly that the differences between themselves and younger generations are merely a matter of “maturity.” As Rendle (2008:58) expresses, “The assumption is that once the younger people ‘grow up,’ they will behave more appropriately.” However, as we have seen, these are not merely issues of maturity but of genuine cultural differences, even of a redefinition of the marks of “maturity.” The result of these good intentions, unfortunately, is all too often a widening of the generation gap, even “an extensive rift between generations” (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:85).

#### 5.4.6.2 The Pre-Boomer Generations

Whitesel and Hunter (2000:32) suggest that many established congregations suffer from a very specific brand of *ethnokititis* they describe as *geriatrophy*, which results from the combination of an aging population and atrophy (a wasting away or failure to grow). *Geriatrophy*, they posit “may be the chief killer of churches in America because of the inability of many congregations successfully to reach across the generation gaps to youthful generations.” These churches are at risk of becoming little more than an institution for the elderly to bond, caution Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:250). All mono-generation churches “will eventually be faced with a challenge of passing the baton of leadership” and likely “will eventually die of geriatrophy” (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:97).

In some congregations, leaders are urged by their members and boards to “do something” to attract new people, only to find that these very same members actively resist efforts at bringing about changes aimed at reaching post-modern young adults. Howard Merritt (2007:31) notes that efforts to reach younger people, while sometimes effective, “often alienate older members while they attract younger members.” Hammett and Pierce (2007:4) similarly note the challenges of keeping the “over sixty crowd” satisfied while also reaching those under forty. Webb (1999:122) suggests that these efforts to contextualize local church ministry present a challenge not so much because post-modern people are hostile, but rather because they simply are *different*. The differences between these cohorts can lead to tension, resistance, and confusion. This prospect is particularly acute in small (less than 100 people in weekly attendance) and mid-sized (between 100 and 350 people) congregations. These churches have limited resources by which to provide for the various “pure markets” in their midst (Rendle 2002:31). As a result, more is at stake within these congregations and conflict more readily arises.

Rendle (2002:49) notes that the task of mediating these differences tends to fall “inordinately to staff and to key lay leaders.” He reflects upon the challenges these leaders frequently face:

[C]ultural changes are commonly resisted, and new ways of speaking about and sharing faith are challenged rather than embraced. Traditions and



practices that strengthened and supported one generation are held tightly rather than being adjusted or replaced to strengthen and support faith in the next generations. Key leaders in congregations spend their time and energy trying to understand cultural shifts and the needs of new generations, only to be resisted or opposed by the generations well established in the congregation. Rather than finding appreciation for experimental practices that might speak to new generations seeking faith, leaders not uncommonly discover that such experiments can easily become the evidence used against them when members of the established generations challenge their leadership.

(:2-3)

Kitchens (2003:4) offers a similar characterization:

We puzzle over why older members want to hold on to forms of church life that may have inspired them when they were young, but that do not meet the needs of today's 20-somethings...We feel as if we're beating our heads against an invisible wall, trying to help our congregations understand that if they want to remain healthy, they must be open to change.

In the face of such realities, leaders often feel at a loss to know how to guide their congregations into meaningful change.

Mead (1991:59-60) chooses to group the impediments to change at work within congregations into two primary and inter-related categories: "structural resistances" and "personal resistances." First, "structural resistances" are born out of the fact that, as has already been explored above, the systems employed in many congregations "affirm fixed patterns of congregational life and discourage efforts to do things that are off the norm." Loper (1999:30-31) suggests that older generations continue to demonstrate a concern for structure, the health of connectional systems, the buildings, and the polity of the church. Reflecting upon the members of the G.I. generation, Regele (1995:118-119) notes, "They are the last full generation of the Industrial Age. Conformity, bigness, a top-down management, and massification, all characteristics of industrialism, reached their apex in builders' programs." Silents similarly are accustomed to a ministry focused on "building the institution and creating programmes and structures" (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:238).

Howard Merritt (2007:91) notes that these generations continue to exercise considerable power within local churches. Even beyond retirement, she suggests, "their grip seems to tighten around their positions." Rendle (2002:91-92) notes that G.I.'s are accustomed to hierarchical approaches to organizational life employing

levels of authority, committee meetings, and governing board structures that are well suited to the value they place on deferred pleasure and the pursuit of consensus. These elders “have an authoritarian approach to leadership and use bureaucratic structures to enforce their own style on the rest of the church, relying on positional authority and claims of biblical truths, rather than on relationships and winning people over to their way of thinking” (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:239; cf. Whitesel & Hunter 2000:19-20; Raines 2003:136). As we have seen, these forms are inherently resistant to change. Furthermore, they are fundamentally incongruous with the values of Xers who, as we saw in chapter four, prefer “flatter” organizational processes, desire participatory decision making, expect to be directly involved, carefully guard their time, and prefer a more informal and relational approach to “doing business” (Miller 2004:203).

Eeman (2002:34) notes that “Silents currently hold power within their faith communities or are just passing leadership (in many cases) to the coming Boomers.” For many within this generation, this passing of leadership responsibility to the Boomers is something of a source of relief, since, as Gambone (1998:12) suggests, many have considered themselves “interim leaders.” This is consistent with the social role that many in this generation adopted as young adults. As Strauss and Howe (1992:283) express, while “America has looked to Silents to comment and mediate”, our society has not expected them to lead. The members of the Silent generation have continued to uphold the values of calibration, manipulation, respect, and aversion to risk (Strauss & Howe 1997a:164). Strauss and Howe (:213) characterize their accomplishments in the following light: “adding new definitions of fairness, new layers of process, new levels of expertise, and new categories of diversity.” Elsewhere, these authors suggest that many within this generation “would much prefer to discuss process than outcomes” (Strauss & Howe 1992:291). As Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:203) note, Silents have been known for leading “by delegation, by getting everybody on board through teamwork and shared vision.”

This being the case, as some Silents have functioned in leadership capacities within local congregations, they have endeavoured to stress acceptance and tolerance as important Christian themes (Eeman 2002:36). Says Eeman (:35-36),

They practice inclusivity, and genuinely appreciate the strengths of multiculturalism. [Silents] strive for consensus to weld the diversity articulated at the leadership table into a whole greater than the sum of its parts. They believe a good process will promote consensus. If the process is well designed, and takes into account all the contingencies, then fairness can be embodied, and inclusiveness is the result.

However, Silent leaders often have failed fully to appreciate precisely how time-consuming and difficult relational issues and consensus-building can be within the church (:38). Scifres (1998:37) describes the impact of this upon Silent leaders:

This generation is often accused of sitting on the fence... However, experience teaches that they sit on fences only in the hope of caring for the generations that surround them. [Silents] are often ambivalent about the current state of the church, wondering whether it shouldn't be more like the church they grew up in or more like the 'modern' church they read about in newspapers and magazines.

As one consequence of this, while Silents have been able to promote justice, peace, and inclusion in many arenas of life (Loper 1999:30-31), we are left to question to what degree they have succeeded in bringing these themes adequately to bear on the structural resistances that shape the intergenerational dynamics of the church.

Second, "personal resistances" frequently are rooted in the reality that "facing the changes of leaving one age of the church and discovering another may be most analogous to a kind of death" (Mead 1991:59-60). Granberg-Michaelson (2004:110) suggests that two common fears arise when change is being proposed within the life of a congregation: some fear that, after their congregation puts forth its best effort, it will experience the disappointment of discovering that *nothing* has changed. In this case, the discomforts of change and pain resulting from the loss of old ways would prove to have been unnecessary, while the experience of failure might merely reinforce the congregants' feelings of despair. Conversely, many of these same church members fear that *everything* will change.

Thus, Rendle (2002:60) is careful to insist that the "GI-oriented fold are not mean-spirited people trying to defeat the opposition unfairly." They often simply do not understand why cherished parts of their traditional religious experience need to be changed and can even feel as though they have been disempowered in the decisions being made about such changes (Mead 1991:36). Smith and Clurman (1997:31, 34)

assert that G.I.s are proud of their achievements in old age. It is difficult to avoid the perception that a new vision essentially constitutes a corrective to, if not an outright denunciation of, all that they have built (Riddell 1998:92; Rendle 2002:9-10).

Suggests Mead (1991:36), “they sometimes feel that their strong concerns about those cherished parts of the past are ridiculed and denigrated by clergy and denominational leaders” (cf. Whitesel & Hunter 2000:19-20). Particularly in the wake of their protracted struggle with the Boomers, G.I. elders are sometimes afraid of being “forced out” (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:23-24).

Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:34) suggest that some Silents evidence “a ‘hip’ and friendly style” towards younger generations that enables them to stay in touch with young people. Others, however, are resistant toward change because of their preference for “order, structure, even the decorations in the church they’ve been attending for decades” (:239). This actually is consistent with what we noted in section 3.5.2.6 regarding the decision of some members of this generation to “side” with their elders and others to identify more closely with the rising generation during the period of the 1960s and 1970s. However, because of their emphasis on security, some Silents are even more resistant than their G.I. elders. Codrington and Grant-Marshall (:238) note that many Silents “feel that church is no longer churchy, they feel abandoned. The world where religion had always been a solid foundation is, some feel, now lost to them.” Thus, they tend to be resentful toward new forms.

Rendle (2002:11) asserts that, when congregational leaders attempt new approaches to ministry, established members frequently “are looking over their shoulders telling them they are ‘doing it wrong.’” When these new practices are introduced into a congregation that is accustomed to established forms of worship and congregational life, “the new practices are likely to be evaluated by old standards—and found wanting” (:12). Thus, the factors hindering an innovative response to the changes within the larger culture are “mundane, but no less powerful” (Riddell 1998:39). Riddell cites worship forms, the maintenance of buildings, the barrier of group dynamics, internal policies of the institutions, allegiance to a code of behaviour, and the nostalgia for status as ties that frequently “hobble” a congregation. Attempts to alter these components of the life of a congregation can be the source of great controversy and anxiety. As Gibbs (2000b:53) suggests, “In churches with long

histories there are usually a group of older members with long memories who are prone to make unfavorable comparisons by idealizing the past.”

Furthermore, due to their formation in the world of Christendom, for older generations, “the primary target for mission or social welfare is the ‘other’” (Rendle 2002:86). Because of the value these elders place on convention and collegiality, a primary goal within their understanding of mission has been to change “others” to help them become like the group. Rendle explains that, while “[n]ot consciously seen as an imposition on the other, mission work was offered as an extension of a value system in which people wanted to share an important group identity and belonging.” As one consequence of this, however, there was little focus on changing the self through missional efforts, since the self already belonged as a part of the group. Thus, while older generations may be “[c]hampions of commitment (often of the lifetime variety), duty, and self-sacrifice” (Smith & Clurman 1997:23, 24), the reality that they tend to equate religion with “church going” significantly hinders their capacity to adapt to change (Strauss & Howe 1992:160). For these generations, the church is primarily “a place where they expect to be spiritually fed and have their needs met” (Rouse & Van Gelder 2008:59).

McNeal (2003:51) provides the fascinating observation that this lack of a missional perspective is a major contributor to the conflict that arises in many churches in the midst of change. He suggests that the “worship war,” a focal point of change in so many congregations, commonly is largely devoid of a missiological dimension. As a result, “absent a missiological center, North American theological reflections can easily drift toward figuring out who’s right and who’s wrong rather than who’s going with the gospel, who’s listening, and who’s responding.” Further, suggests McNeal, those without a missiological perspective tend to resent attempts at cultural relevance and tend to be plagued by a prideful preoccupation with their particular religious culture rather than the mission of Jesus. As a result of this reality, “Member values clash with missionary values...One of these value sets will triumph over the other. They do not coexist peacefully.” In fact, as Mead (1991:79) suggests, some members of congregations feel that their leaders are asking them to support activities “that the members themselves do not understand to be mission.” This poses a challenge for the renewing of the church’s mission among post-modern young adults.

### 5.4.6.3 The Boomer Generation

Wuthnow (2007:1) insists that “Baby boomers are no longer the future of American religion.” However, this is not a notion that many Baby Boomers seem eager to embrace. The prominence of Boomers within many established churches continues to make it difficult for Xers to be able to contribute meaningfully and equitably within congregational life. As we noted in the preceding chapters, the Boomers have constituted a “lead cohort” throughout their life course. Strauss and Howe (1997a:224) observe that “Boomers have been busy respiritualizing American culture and resacralizing its institutions. Even as they wreck old notions of teamwork, loyalty, and fraternal association...they are trying to restore a new foundation for public virtue.” At present, the dominance of this generation is very much evident within the life of established churches. Earlier this decade, Barna (2004) asserted that “Even within the local church, Boomers rule the roost.” As evidence of this, Barna notes that sixty-one percent of Protestant Senior Pastors were from that generation. Among the current lay leaders, fifty-eight percent were Boomers. Furthermore, he adds, “And if money talks, then we have the floor: 50% of the money given to churches last year came out of the pockets of Boomers. (That’s more than double the amount given by any other generation.)” (www.barna.org).

Barna (2004) suggests that the generational interests of Boomers are likely to continue to contribute to the marginalization of Xers within the church:

Unfortunately, we are not good at sharing. If we are the richest generation the world has ever encountered, we are also its most selfish. And we are driven by the one value that defines us and on which we are willing to squander our money: power. We believe so deeply in our decision-making capacity, and we enjoy the control and perks of calling the shots so much, that we have no intention of relinquishing that power, regardless of traditions, expectations, reason or future interests.

(www.barna.org)

Barna reflects further upon this Boomer fixation with power: “The sticking point is our core value: power. We love power. We live for power... Whether it is because of an unhealthy desire for control, a reasonable concern about maintaining quality, a sense of exhilaration received from making pressure-packed, life-changing decisions or due to other motivations, Boomers revel in power” (www.barna.org).

For Xers within the congregation, this poses at least two crucial challenges. First, churches dominated by Boomers may simply become havens for the members of this generation and thus fail to create a place for other generations to find a niche (Codrington & Grant-Marshall 2004:242). Drury (1996) explains what this is likely to mean for the members of Generation X:

The Xers will be crowded out, marginalized, ignored. Most boomer ministers don't even know what busters want. Or care. They are tired of changing. Like old warriors they now preach peace once they've moved in the army of occupation...And what of the rest of the boomers. They'll never even notice. Their congregations will age into the 50's and 60's in peace. They'll like their church. It will be pleasant there.

(www.drurywriting.com)

Drury assesses this prospect by cautioning that many churches are at risk of becoming little more than “evangelical boomer nursing homes.” Essentially, the predilection toward homogeneity at work among this generation may be difficult to overcome.

Second, Boomers are not demonstrating a concern toward passing the mantle of leadership to Xers. Notes Barna (2004), “The sad result is that most Boomers—even those in the pastorate or in voluntary, lay-leadership positions in churches—have no intention of lovingly handing the baton to Baby Busters.” Barna adds that, if Boomer leaders desired to do so, they would be “hard at work implementing the world’s most sophisticated and superbly executed transition plan to install the new strata of leaders” (www.barna.org). However, this simply is not the case. As Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:244) note, “Boomers are not mentoring Xers. Neither are they standing aside to allow Xers to develop their leadership skills and make changes.” As evidence of this, one 1999 study produced by the Episcopal Church Foundation revealed that that denomination was continuing predominantly to ordain the same generation that they had been ordaining a quarter of a century ago earlier, “except they [were] now in their later forties rather than mid-twenties” (Kew 2001:60-61).

Kew (2001:76) notes that Boomers are not expected to relocate upon retirement as many within past generations have done, but instead to remain active and engaged in their present contexts well into their latter years. Some authors are predicting that the Boomers will in some meaningful sense “redefine” retirement. Smith and Clurman (1997:67), for example, posit that the Boomer search for significance and fulfilment

will impact their retirement years. Thus, within the life of the church, as in other institutions, this is likely to have significant bearing on the ability of Xers to contribute meaningfully. Wuthnow (2007:1) offers the following assessment:

With the greying of America, they will be the most numerous group in the typical congregation. They will have more time to serve on committees and more money to put in the collection plate. They will also be the members who lament that things are no longer as good as they were in the 1960s (or 1980s). They will not be sure that change is a good thing, especially if it is being advanced by someone considerably younger than they are.

One *Washington Post* article assesses the Boomer mindset by suggesting that “we’ve just assumed the baby boomers would hand on to power until it was pried from their cold grasp some decades hence” (cited in Howard Merritt 2007:6).

#### **5.4.5.4 The Likely Results**

Mead (1991:22-23) suggests that many of the younger Christians caught up in the intergenerational dynamics of established churches are “suffering” as a result of the “dichotomy” of “being born into a new paradigm and unable to communicate with [those] who inhabit the old,” and thus are “running away from the pain.” Because of their own cultural orientation and because of the dynamics at work in many churches, says Rendle (2002:48), “the GenXers and millennials will have even more trouble finding a comfortable home in many established congregations than their baby-boomer parents have had.” As Scifres (1998:47) observes, even “many churched Busters are hesitant to offer an invitation to their friends when they know that there is not much being offered in the church that will be helpful or relevant to their friends.”

Several observers suggest that the eventual outcome of this marginalization of Xers within congregational life will be, as Barna (2004) expresses, “Widespread [Xer] flight from the institutions and movements we have labored for so long to build up” ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)). Drury (1996) explains that Xers are “not very good revolutionaries, so it’s unlikely they’ll lead a revolution and take over...like their parents did” ([www.drurywriting.com](http://www.drurywriting.com)). Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:245) similarly assert that, within the local church, most Xers, “by nature a non-confrontational generation, have felt that taking on the Boomers was NOT the best route to go.” Thus, many churches are not experiencing tension over efforts to reach



Gen Xers precisely because they no longer have any younger adults who are engaged enough to care. As Hammett and Pierce (2007:35) note, “Sadly, in many churches nearly everyone under forty has given up being actively involved in the church.” These young adults have found the church irrelevant to their spiritual quest and their desire to impact their communities as ambassadors for Christ (Rouse & Van Gelder 2008:59-60). As a result, many aging congregations watch their youthful members go elsewhere (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:7).

In section 4.5.4, we noted how the marginalization of Gen X has led members of this cohort to adopt an entrepreneurial style. Several observers note that the members of this generation are responding to their experiences within the established church by asserting this same propensity. Zustiak (1999:231), for example, suggests that, as they “find themselves at odds with church policy, leadership or tradition,” Xers may be tempted “to rebel and work around or against the institution.” Zustiak further suggests that this “is sure to get them branded as ‘troublemakers’ and ‘disloyal.’” As Hilborn and Bird (2003:164-165) note, “it is always likely that zealous younger leaders will arise who will challenge the perceived status quo embodied by their elders, and that this will lead to friction, and in some instances, to a parting of the ways....[I]n the increasingly entrepreneurial milieu of modern-day evangelicalism, they will now be as likely to establish new churches and organizations of their own.” Writing in the mid-1990s, Drury (1996), predicted that Xers would respond to the dominance of Boomers by starting their own churches ([www.drurywriting.com](http://www.drurywriting.com)). Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:245) similarly describe the prospect of Xers “leaving and starting their own inclusive churches.”

In classic Xer fashion, some have already become active in “creating new groups in the marketplace for themselves, regardless of whatever might have been provided for them by existing religious groups” (Flory 2000:243-244). A recent study by Flory and Miller (2007:215) found that many of these “innovators” cited the “overly institutionalized” and “inwardly focused” nature of the established church as their reason for starting new initiatives. These new churches tend to emphasize a communally oriented spiritual quest. This is expressed through a commitment to build community, to foster a committed life of discipleship, and a balancing of inward experience and outward expression of spiritual. In addition, these churches

demonstrate a commitment to “outreach initiatives” aimed at engaging the culture and “serving the city” (:214). Finally, these churches evidence a clear disinterest in established institutional forms of religion and a preference for non-hierarchical authority structures (:213).

Hilborn and Bird (2003:162) suggest that this “intergenerational schism” promises to impact the leadership transition within the church adversely. Hammett and Pierce (2007:68) demonstrate this same concern as they describe what they see occurring in many contexts:

All churches will soon, if they haven’t already, realize that younger adults are largely missing from their leadership. In the average church in America today, most leaders are fifty or older. Adults in their twenties often are not asked to take leadership roles. When they are, older leaders who work alongside them generally don’t approve of their new ideas or the thought processes that led to what they suggest.

Many churches are destined to “lament” over a leadership crisis, the result of the blindness of older adults toward the potential leaders in their midst (Howard Merritt 2007:92, 94; cf. Kew 2001:83). However, asserts Barna (2004), rather than taking concerted steps to address this matter, Boomers are likely to cast themselves as “the saviors compensating for a younger generation of irreverent and incompetent wanna-be’s.” The result of this, he predicts, is likely to be “the further dilapidation (and, in some cases, collapse) of the local church as we know it today” ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)).

In essence, the withdrawal of Xers from established churches threatens the very existence of these congregations. As Whitesel and Hunter (2000:7) observe, “many of these older churches and their proud legacies are doomed to die, if something is not done immediately.” As more and more members of the G.I. Generation pass away, the number of participants within established churches continues to dwindle (Hammett & Pierce 2007:30). Whitesel and Hunter (2000:49) suggest that many within the G.I. generation are awakening to the recognition that “the generation gaps are threatening to separate them from an intact legacy.” However, “too often the days to reach out to the younger generations pass them by before they are aware of the quandary they face” (:34). The aging members of these congregations are facing a crisis of spiritual generativity that reflects what is occurring within society at large and that threatens the ability of the congregations they have built to sustain their

witness through this transitional period. A failure to “take younger adults more seriously,” insists Wuthnow (2008:17), could jeopardize the very future of American religion.

## 5.5 Conclusion

In this study, we have been developing the theme that, as American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches are struggling to respond to culture change within a complex generational context. We furthermore have been considering the claim that the resulting ineffectiveness of these churches in transmitting their faith traditions to Gen X, the first post-modern generation, threatens their ability to sustain their witness through this transitional period.

While we have spent several chapters exploring this theme, the theoretical strands that have been developed across the preceding chapters have culminated in the present chapter, which has constituted the very heart of our presentation of the problem. In this chapter, we have brought together the following realities in demonstrating this problem:

1. Many established congregations have been ill prepared to respond to the challenges of post-modernity because of the marriage of Christendom and modernity that has shaped their existence.
2. The changing and increasingly complex intergenerational dynamics of established churches also have contributed to their failure to give adequate attention to the religious socialization of Generation X, the first post-modern generation.
3. In large part because of these factors, Generation Xers have not found the established congregation to be a meaningful place to gain spiritual experience or to gain a sense of belonging. As a result, vast numbers of them are now “unchurched.”
4. Despite this reality, the traditions, structures, and intergenerational dynamics of these congregations, together with their tendency to reflect ageist attitudes toward Xers, have caused these churches to demonstrate an astounding lack of concern toward their need to reach Xers or to empower the members of this “missing” generation.

5. As a result, these churches grow increasingly distant from the realities of a changing culture and face the prospect of extinction.

This chapter has demonstrated that this is a very real and very pressing matter. Much is at stake for the established churches under consideration here. Is this a situation with which we should be satisfied? If not, what hope can be offered to these congregations? It is to this very consideration that we will turn in chapter six.

## 6. MISSIONAL RENEWAL AND THE ESTABLISHED CHURCH

### 6.1 Introduction

Throughout chapters two through five, we have been engaged in a hermeneutical exercise devoted to helping articulate the central problem under consideration here.

We have been asserting that,

As American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established churches struggle to respond faithfully to culture change within a complex generational context. The resulting ineffectiveness of these churches in transmitting their faith traditions to Generation X, the first post-modern generation, threatens their capacity to sustain their witness through this transitional period.

Throughout this study, we have been concerned with the praxis of the church within the praxis of society. Essentially, the preceding chapters have been devoted to identifying a significant problem plaguing the intergenerational praxis of the church as it attempts to live and serve within a changing culture.

In chapters six and seven, we will extend this hermeneutical process by endeavouring to articulate a hypothesis. In other words, we will propose a solution to the problem that has been developed above. In these two chapters, we will advance the following hypothesis:

If established churches are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, they must engage in a process of missional renewal that encompasses Generation X. When considered from both a sociological and a theological perspective, this process must be seen as entailing a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice.

The present chapter will facilitate the development of this hypothesis through an exploration of the following themes:

1. In section 6.2, we will reiterate an understanding of the notion that the church presently faces a critical juncture, one in which it must choose whether or not to respond adaptively to the changes occurring within the broader culture.
2. Section 6.3 will be devoted to an exploration of the church's need to experience renewal. This will be shown to be fundamentally the work of the Holy Spirit and to be integrally connected to the church's traditions. We will emphasize *mission* as the central focus of the renewal needed within the

church today, a reality that we will describe through the use of the term *missional renewal*.

3. In section 6.4, attention will be lent to the crucial role that Gen X is postured to make in helping the church to experience this missional renewal.
4. In response to the reluctance of many established church members to change and of Gen Xers to embrace the institutional church, section 6.5 will demonstrate the need of local churches to give careful consideration to the processes by which they endeavour to promote missional renewal. This section will conclude with an emphasis on the need for the processes employed within established churches to be appropriately attentive to both the spiritual and sociological dimensions of the church's existence.

This chapter will help to set the stage for chapter seven, in which we will argue that, from both a spiritual and a sociological perspective, the church's efforts to experience missional renewal in the post-modern transition must entail a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice. Following that, in chapter eight, we will subject this hypothesis to empirical testing conducted among established churches. Before advancing to that step in the practical-theological process, however, we will proceed in the pages that follow by beginning to develop our hypothesis.

## **6.2 A Crucial Juncture**

In chapter five, we explored the reality that many established churches presently are in an at-risk state. Many of these churches are either in denial regarding the changes that are taking place around them or struggling to grasp how to respond faithfully. Furthermore, many churches are aging, declining, experiencing financial crisis, and facing the prospect of closure.

Meanwhile, there has emerged a broad consensus to the effect that the old ways have run their course (Drane 2000:104). As Conder (2006:8) suggests, "We live in a new age, and what we've known as solid and sure are no longer true and valued." Stated simply, our society is not going back to its former ways. As Anderson (1990:5) articulates, "Humpty-Dumpty is not going to be put back together again." The fact that post-modernism is still emerging makes it unlikely that we can predict the exact

form that this “future thought” will take (Best & Kellner 1997:254). Nonetheless, post-modernism now seems destined to dictate the governing worldview of society (Miller 2004:139). Best and Kellner (1997:15) go so far as to assert that the post-modern discourse is extending throughout the world (cf. Anderson 1990:6). While not everyone will accept the implications of post-modernism, Anderson (1990:253) suggests that no one will remain untouched. This challenges us to come to terms with the reality that “we may be reaching the half-way point” where the balance of society is shifting permanently toward a new cultural matrix (Riddell 1998:101). McNeal (2003:59) argues that, even if post-modernism is merely the “last gasp of modernism” as some suggest, it will be some time before it is revealed what comes next. Thus, we must acknowledge and respond to it.

McManus (2001:17) suggests that the church was designed by God to be “on the edge of change” and at “the center of history,” and therefore is meant to “thrive in a radically changing environment.” Furthermore, suggests McManus, the church should be compelled by “apostolic momentum” not merely to keep up with the times, but to change the times. The church’s place is not merely to anticipate the future, but to play a leading role in shaping it (Hadaway 2000:6). However, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, while the reality of change has always constituted one component of the world within which the church exists, the pace simply has accelerated in recent times. Anderson (1990:254) suggests that the post-modern transition actually has come to constitute a change in “the way things change.” As a result, as Conder (2006:8) posits, we now live in a new age characterized by “too many variables spinning too rapidly in trajectories that are beyond the existent models of prediction.” Sadly, as we have seen, far too many churches have found themselves unprepared to respond faithfully to this complex new reality (McManus 2001:64).

That being said, Kitchens (2003:5) suggests that the church has reached a critical juncture in which “[w]e really don’t have much choice about whether we are going to deal with these changes... We can adopt a whole range of strategies—from deciding to make wrestling with the meaning of this shift a cornerstone of our ministries to ignoring the cultural changes altogether and doing ministry just as we have in the past” (cf. Hudson 2004:13). The latter alternative, he insists, provides “a way of being the church that no longer makes much sense to younger Christians entering the

church” (:31). Kitchens (:30) further cautions that, “If we wait until we are confident in our understanding of the newly emerging cultural context, American society will have moved beyond us.” He adds,

Americans will be living out their postmodern 21<sup>st</sup>-century lives while we offer them worship, education, and fellowship more suited to the mid-20<sup>th</sup>. If we wait until we are sure we know what to do, the church will have missed its best opportunity to proclaim the gospel in ways that postmodern Americans can hear. The longer we speak in the cadence of modernity, the less interested postmoderns will be in making the effort to translate what we’re saying.

Kitchens (:36-37) posits that the likely outcome of this, as we demonstrated in chapter five, will be that “young Christians and seekers of all ages...will increasingly find our congregations less-than-faithful expressions of God’s mission in the world.”

As we saw in chapter five, this has become a matter of “life and death” for the church (Regele 1995:193). “If we choose to follow the status quo strategy,” suggests Regele (:51), “the church as we have known it will be crushed in the seismic waves of change that are rattling our lives.” Frost and Hirsch (2003:81) similarly assert that a “steadfast refusal or resistance by the church to seriously contextualize the gospel” will be a grave mistake that will only “hasten its declining influence on Western society.” This is difficult for many of the established churches that have been accustomed to being “entrenched in and colluding with middle-class culture.” The modern value of inevitable progress causes many of these congregations “to assume that they have an inalienable right to an infinite existence” (Beaudoin 1998:59).

Nonetheless, the challenges of the day are not going to be resolved by romantic “traditionalism” that seeks to preserve old cultural patterns intact (Anderson 1990:27). As Miller (2004:81) insists, “Our best intentions using the old paradigm are no match for the new conflicts of a highly complex, rapidly shifting world.” White (2001:177) notes that “the culture of the 1950s has obviously long since passed, and we can’t use yesterday’s tools in today’s world and expect to build a church for tomorrow.” Conder (2006:8) also emphasizes this point: “We can’t go back, and we can’t hold on to old practices as if they will protect us from the uncertainty ahead. We can’t keep doing the same old thing for another 30 years and expect the results will magically change.”



Gibbs (2000a:32) insists that the church is faced with a “strategic inflection point,” a moment in which fundamental changes are necessary. Properly responding to this critical moment requires vision for a different future and a fuller understanding of the present (:34). In part, this means that the church must reflect honestly upon its own decline or prepare to face the prospect of its continued descent into a “death spiral” over the next twenty to thirty years (McNeal 2003:54). As Jackson (2002:1) counsels, “We can face the truth of decline head on. We can examine it, learn from it, and know it thoroughly. And then we can apply the lessons we have learned and the encouragements we have discovered to break free of the cycle of decline.” This will require that the church be prepared to examine what we do and how we do it, to ask difficult questions of ourselves, our values, and our priorities, and to open ourselves to the transforming work of God (Hudson 2004:16-17).

Adjustments of this sort can be shocking, acknowledges Murray Zoba (1999:16). Our exploration of “liminality” in section 5.4.2 demonstrates how such periods of transition can be the source of considerable anxiety and pain. Many church members grieve the loss of Christendom (Murray 2004:208-209). Some resist change because of their discomfort with the post-modern transition (Conder 2006:81). As Junkin (1996:310) observes, these reactions evidence the reality that the world, our institutions and our hearts are all inextricably linked, and thus bear the marks of change; together, they point to our being on the way toward something new.

Nonetheless, to the degree that we have failed to change ourselves in response to the transformation occurring around us, we now must (McManus 2001:29). Hadaway (2001:4-6) suggests that we cannot fully anticipate the changes that will affect us or plan ahead effectively for the challenges they bring. However, he insists, we must embrace “the naturalness of change and escape the resistance/catch-up, resistance/catch-up in which most churches find themselves enmeshed.” Kew (2001:37) cautions that the church cannot afford to wait for a major crisis to provide the motivation for change. The present period is not one in which a “wait-and-see” attitude will constitute an adequate response, he insists. Thus, as Conder (2006:8) asserts, “Even if we are terrified and confused, we have to stumble forward and create and reform new models to engage our transitional age.”

McLaren (2000:189-190) suggests that the church should view post-modernism less as a problem to be solved and more as a transition lasting generations (cf. Riddell 1998:101). If the latter perspective is embraced, he asserts, the post-modern transition may in fact constitute a great opportunity for the purposes of God's reign.

Hunsberger (1998:77, 78) similarly suggests that the changes occurring offer great potential for the people of God, yet must involve the church's rediscovery of its identity in this new world. This necessitates that churches adjust to their new reality and learn to "navigate" the emerging culture (Sweet 1999:17; Ward 2002:15). This is sure to entail a process of reworking, revisioning, and reinventing (Junkin 1996:310). Many observers insist that a new understanding of the church's role already is emerging (Regele 1995:186; Butler Bass 2004:15-20). In the pages that follow, we will advance one account of what this might mean.

### **6.3 The Need for Missional Renewal**

#### **6.3.1 The Reduction of Tradition**

Over the preceding chapters, we have identified the reduction of tradition as one crucial facet of the problem in many congregations. As Petersen (1992:146) articulates,

Our contemporary church walks the razor's edge between tradition and traditionalism. Although we may affirm our commitment to the Scriptures as our sole authority, things are not that simple in practice. Most of us regularly lose our balance and fall into traditionalism. We get stuck in the past.

As we noted in section 2.6.3, the tendency to reduce our understanding of the Christian faith to the product of the interface of gospel and culture within one's particular context is perhaps inevitable. However, we also noted that the tendency toward *reductionism*, which entails preserving this particular expression of the faith through dynamics of control, is rooted in the "flesh" rather than the Spirit of God. Riddell (1998:67) notes that the desire for control and power, while "very human expressions," are not characteristics of the Christian life. He further cautions that, "Whenever the church drifts towards institutional form, it is drifting away from the one who was sent for crucifixion by the religious authorities." Thus, if, as Van Gelder (1998:72) has suggested, the church's structures are intended to function in support of its true essence and ministry, simply managing established forms cannot be equated to being truly the church.

The church that has ceased to be compelled by the mission of Christ has lost sight of its true identity. As Shenk (2001:86) asserts, “Whenever the church takes its identity from its sociohistorical context, rather than its covenant with God, it loses its distinctive vocation.” In fact, suggest Frost and Hirsch (2003:209), churches that lose sight of their accountability to Christ as the basis of their missiological mandate and allow their own designs to determine their sense of purpose and mission “never really engage in mission and so lose touch with Jesus.” Instead, suggest these authors, such churches “become closed sets as a result, and their experience of Jesus at the center fades into a memory of the time when they were really doing something. It becomes a matter of history rather than an experience of mission now.”

This is a tragic thing for, as Nel (2003:7) posits, apart from God’s purposes for it, the church has no right to exist. Thus, we must entertain the relevance of the potent observation by Barth (1962:874) to the effect that “a Church which is not as such an evangelizing Church is either not yet or no longer the Church, or only a dead Church, itself standing in supreme need of renewal by evangelization.” Whatever we might make of this claim, we have been presented in the previous chapter with compelling evidence demonstrating the lack of attention by many established churches to their need to reach the rising post-modern generation with the gospel of Christ. As we have seen, this threatens the very ability of these churches to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition.

### **6.3.2 Renewing the Tradition**

So, if many established churches have come to be bound by a reductionistic traditionalism that compromises and threatens their intergenerational praxis, what hope exists for such churches? In section 2.6.2, we advanced an understanding of the need for the church to engage in an ongoing process of the intergenerational traditioning of the faith. As we saw, this necessitates that the church be willing to entertain a certain tension regarding how its tradition is expressed. Furthermore, it requires that the rising generation be empowered to place its own distinct stamp onto the faith tradition. However, once this process has been compromised, what must

such churches do in order to renew their effectiveness in perpetuating their tradition intergenerationally?

In contrast to the many churches that have clung protectively to their traditional forms, another liminal response being embraced by some church leaders is simply to abandon tradition. This may seem to some like a reasonable and effective way for the church to locate its praxis within what has been described by some as a “post-traditional” society, one in which “inherited traditions play less and less decisive roles in the way that we understand and order our lives” (Carroll 2000:10). As was noted in section 2.4.3, during periods of rapid social discontinuity, the abandonment of tradition can be a very real temptation. Furthermore, as we noted in section 3.2.2.2, a preoccupation with the “new” is a mark of the modern worldview. Thus, some church leaders, upon determining that their traditional institutional frameworks are not working, merely choose to adopt utilitarian values: “What works?” then becomes the crowning question (Mead 1991:40, 41). This often is expressed as a concern to be on “the cutting edge” (Leith 1990:37).

However, a growing body of evidence suggests that the members of the younger generations actually desire to be a part of a renewed tradition, properly understood (Kew 2001:29). For these young people who have been formed in a post-modern world offering few stable reference points, tradition provides a source of orientation (Butler Bass 2004:32). Carroll and Roof (2002:55) reflect upon this:

Among generation Xers especially, there are mixed feelings about tradition. There is a longing for answers to religious questions—for a “bedrock against this whirl of change,” as one person told us—yet an insistence on tolerance, understanding, and openness to other points of view even while asserting their own point of view....[T]here is a paradox in their many spiritual expressions, described simply as wanting an anchor for their lives yet not wanting to be overly tied to it.

As one manifestation of this desire among Xers, Gibbs (2000a), Carroll (2000), Langford (2001), and Webber (2002) each notes a trend among Gen Xers toward embracing the liturgical worship of the Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Episcopal churches. As Gibbs (2000a:161) observes, “This attraction is highlighted by the desire of young people to establish deeper roots to compensate for the transience and fragmentation of the world in which they grew up.” These young

adults desire to be connected to a larger history and, thus, find ancient symbols, rituals, and practices to be meaningful (Flory & Miller 2007:204). Some of these young people desire to play a role in reinvigorating longstanding traditions. This being so, the outright abandonment of tradition may actually rob the church of one of its richest resources in engaging this generation.

In addition, when efforts are made simply to brush aside tradition, the older members of the congregation tend to respond defensively. Thus, tradition must not be seen merely as something to be dismissed. Furthermore, while leaders sometimes view it in this light, neither should it be seen as a formidable obstacle to change. Rather, tradition should be embraced as an asset to be mined, one that “carries deeply held values embedded within the life of an organization” (Granberg-Michaelson 2004:172). Webber (1999:17) insists that the goal of “honestly incarnat[ing] the historic faith in the emerging culture....will not be accomplished by abandoning the past, but by seeking out the transcultural framework of faith (i.e., the rule of faith) that has been blessed by sociocultural particularity in every period of church history.” While the core of the faith must not change, says Webber (:15), the wineskins we employ must be changed to respond to the emerging paradigm. Thus, he asserts, “Our calling is not to reinvent the Christian faith, but, in keeping with the past, to carry forward what the church has asserted from its beginning. We change, therefore, as one of my friends said, ‘not to be different, but to remain the same’ (:17). So, how might this come about?

Visser’t Hooft (1956:109) expresses grave concern over the church’s “confusion of forms”, by which he means the institutional and organizational aspects of its existence, with its understanding of its own “holiness.” His assessment is that, “once that step has been taken, real renewal becomes a practical impossibility.” He further indicates that the “self-imprisonment” of the church in institutionalism, characterized by the aims of self-preservation and self-assertion, generates forces of “inertia” that work against renewal. This inertia, he insists, is an “almost insuperable obstacle to renewal” (cf. Shenk 2005:75). This is a very sobering assessment. Surely it introduces into the present discussion a profound awareness of precisely how difficult it can be for some established institutions to experience renewal.

Because of the considerable difficulty of the objective of renewal in established congregations, notes Hadaway (2001:1), some Christian leaders have chosen to “write off” older, plateaued, or declining churches in order to focus on newer, more healthy congregations for which change comes more easily.” However, he suggests, this strategy “may be shortsighted...because the majority of churches in North America are stable or declining.” Surely there is something more that the Living God would have us to consider for these churches. As Benke and Benke (2002:38) suggest, the resources that these churches have make them ideal launching platforms for ministry to new generations. That being said, if we choose not merely to dismiss the ongoing relevance of these churches, “we are faced with the problem of what to do about them.” Says Hadaway (2001:1), “The problem is one of change, or better yet, transformation” (cf. Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:18).

### **6.3.3 The Work of the Spirit**

Some established church members, inspired with hope by age-old stories of revival, may respond to the challenges of this moment by praying for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit. Underlying this desire is often a hope that such a work of the Spirit would restore the church to its prior glory. Leith (1990:11-13) notes that it is correct to view the renewal of the church as being rooted in an utter dependence upon the renewing presence of the Spirit in its midst. However, while throughout recent centuries numerous movements of “revival” have sought to give attention to this renewing work of the Spirit, as Shenk (2001:32) suggests, the reality that this series of renewal movements has “failed to change the church at the core” has become a “nagging historical question.” In reality, he argues, reform efforts undertaken in the modern era “have not availed to deliver the church from enfeebling compromise.”

The reason for this, he asserts, lies with what has been the church’s prevailing understanding of its relationship to the broader culture. Within the context of the Christendom paradigm, Shenk (2001:61) suggests, “it made sense to speak of ‘revival,’ vivifying the spiritually moribund without radical critique of their worldview and the structures of their society.” Thus, by the 1840s, the term “conservative” had come to be employed to describe the special relationship whereby Christianity was the “true conserving and developing power of a nation” (:59). This

tended to cause revivals to be a “backward looking” phenomenon, one devoted to restoring ideals of vitality and morality rooted in the past (Murray 2004:207).

Shenk (2001:62) suggests that “the conjunction of Enlightenment anthropology and revival preaching that emphasized the individual—without relating this to society/church—undermined the meaning of church... This put a premium on program rather than the formation of a community of disciples.” Revival campaigns or crusades were planned and became routinized for the purpose of energizing Christians. These gatherings, note Finke and Stark (2005:89), “persisted year in and year out.” The key became finding the right methods and techniques and organizing campaigns or crusades (Shenk 2001:62). As a result, however, the effectiveness of these revivals tended to be limited and their impact short-lived (Murray 2004:182, 224). Perhaps this lesson from history might lead us simply to conclude what Visser’t Hooft has asserted above: the near impossibility of the renewal of established institutions. Before drawing this conclusion, however, let us continue our consideration of what the renewal of the church might mean today.

If these efforts at renewal have been largely limited in effect, how might we find a better way? We must begin by returning again to the fundamental principle that the renewal of the church is the result of the Spirit’s outpouring, a gift from God for which the church must wait: “Hence a renewed and vital church cannot be programmed, arranged, planned” (Leith 1990:11). In the biblical witness on this subject, notes Visser’t Hooft (1956:23, 89-90), renewal is not something brought about by the church or by religious leaders, but rather by God. He suggests that the church tends almost inevitably to fall into the worldly way of “going through the motions” of church life and, therefore, essentially becomes a part of the world (:91). When viewed from the perspective of the church’s relation to God, this amounts to rebellion, self-seeking, and egocentricity (:23-24). For Visser’t Hooft, these struggles with the “forces of the old age” are simply a manifestation within the life of the church of the continued tension between the “already” and “not yet” aspects of God’s reign (:30-31). Genuine renewal, thus, is not an act of the church, but rather the work of God affecting the victory of the new age over the old (:90).

Visser't Hooft (1956:84) argues that the entire existence of Christianity on earth is a matter of “a continuously renewed creation.” In fact, as Mead (1991:vi) expresses, God is always calling the church to be more than it previously has been. This reality is vividly captured in a quote from Ellul (in Visser't Hooft 1956:84):

The whole history of the Church is the history of the reformation of the Church by the Spirit...[T]he permanent reformation of the Church is therefore the obedience of the Church to the Spirit; it means accepting that God leads his Church forward and changes it, that the Church does not settle down in a revelation which it treats as if it were its own property, but rather that it is constantly on the lookout to receive the new order which the Spirit brings.

Thus, the story of the Church is a story of many resurrections (Visser't Hooft 1956:67). Through the gift of the Spirit, the church is enabled to remember and recover its identity, not by returning to its past, but rather by returning to its origins in the call of God in Christ (Leith 1990:15-16, 27).

If our most fundamental assertion regarding the renewal of the church is that it is the gift of God through his Spirit, what role, if any, might the church have in promoting renewal? Is there anything the church can do to help foster the conditions for renewal? Leith (:12-13) insists that, while renewal may be a gift of the Spirit, it also entails “human works”: “While waiting for the Holy Spirit, we can be at work claiming God’s promise...The renewal of the church begins on the human level with...a remembering of what has been bequeathed to us.” Visser't Hooft (1956: 34) suggests that the New Testament emphasizes the human role in the renewal process by weaving together three complimentary themes: 1) while the Christian is “a new man,” 2) he or she is being renewed, and 3) is to seek renewal. He insists that our struggle with the forces of the old age, the great contradiction between our calling and the reality of our life, should cause us to desire and pray for our renewal (:38-39). Furthermore, our desire for renewal should cause us to be continually on the watch for God’s initiative (:91).

Integral to this process is the church’s listening to the authoritative voice of scripture. Visser't Hooft (1956:94) suggests that the church’s loss of a proper eschatological perspective and its succumbing to the temptation to make its own existence an aim in itself is a tragic by-product of not giving the Bible its rightful place. The church’s capacity for radical self-criticism and the renewal of life is lost. Thus,



If the church which seeks to renew itself takes its lead from some new religious or cultural development or some new technique, it remains in fact within the closed circle of the old world. If it turns for inspiration to some period of its own past it is not directly in touch with the source. It can only break out of the old world and enter into living touch with the new world by submitting itself to the judgement and inspiration of God's revelation itself. (:92)

Visser't Hooft (:93) insists that it is through listening to the Word of God that God's design, the very *raison d'être* of the church, is rediscovered.

Visser't Hooft (1956:95) also argues that true renewal inexorably entails repentance. Truly, if the church is to have a renewed impact in any era, the call to conversion must begin with the repentance of the one doing the calling (Drane 2000:12). Thus, all genuine movements of renewal have been movements of repentance. As the Spirit, through the testimony of the Word, reminds the church anew of its true identity and calling, the church is challenged to turn from the path of this world and to let itself be renewed (Visser't Hooft 1956:47). Repentance involves this "turning from the old world to the new, from the past to the future, from the closed world to the open heaven, from egocentricity and church-centredness, to God's kingdom" (:96). Thus, repentance is not only an individual practice, but one in which the entire church must engage, for the entire congregation stands under the judgement of God (:58). A repentant church, in its turning from the "old ways," is renewed in its capacity to live by the power of the new age (:47). Repentance constitutes "a positive and creative turning toward the source of life and renewal in God" (Anderson 2001:180).

Above, we have described movements of revival that have been of limited, even short-lived effectiveness. Surely these efforts at renewal were well intentioned. Surely they were born out of an authentic desire to experience the movement of God's Spirit, to live in obedience to the authoritative voice of scripture, and to turn from worldliness. How, then, might contemporary churches desiring to experience renewal fare any better? Certainly, as we will see in the pages that lie ahead, the contemporary renewal of the church will be no less concerned with the work of the Spirit, the voice of scripture, or a willingness to repent. That being said, what might we learn from the example of these previous efforts that could be instructive to the

church in the present and help to promote the renewal of its faithfulness and effectiveness?

Before proceeding with this question, it will be helpful to provide a word of clarification from Howard Snyder (1989:267-313), arguably one of recent decades' leading students of the history of Christian renewal movements, regarding the characteristics of the movements of renewal that have had a sustained impact. Through his extensive analysis, he has determined that, in order for renewal efforts to be of lasting significance, the renewing work of the Spirit, the counsel of the Word, and the commitment to change must come to impact the life of the church in five distinct, yet interrelated categories: the 1) personal, 2) corporate, 3) conceptual, 4) missiological, and 5) structural dimensions. Anderson (2001:182-183) demonstrates a similar perspective in insisting that renewal must entail theological, spiritual, and social repentance, categories that he links closely with a concern for the church's missiological and structural integrity. The renewal movements that have proven to be of lasting impact are those in which all five of these domains ultimately were touched and co-implicated by the work of the Spirit. Snyder (1989:267-313) points to the Wesleyan revival as one example of this. Those efforts that have fallen short of long-term transformational impact have lacked this full-fledged expression (Visser't Hooft 1956:83, 86-90). If the desire for renewal at the present moment in the church's history is to be fulfilled, how might these five dimensions need to come together in contributing to the shape of a renewed church?

#### **6.3.4 The Missional Focus**

In this chapter, we are arguing that, if the church is to sustain its witness through the post-modern transition, this must entail a process of *missional* renewal. Essentially, we are asserting that the church has entered into a moment in history in which it is faced with a pivotal opportunity to embrace the implications of the Spirit's work of renewal in all five of the categories outlined by Snyder above. As we have suggested throughout the preceding chapters, established churches find themselves in their current state in large part because of the impact of Christendom era notions of missiology, modern concepts of the Christian faith, and the way in which these two

primary modes of thought have shaped the personal, corporate, and structural dimensions of Christian experience in the modern Western world.

In section 5.2.1, we noted the observation by Hall (1997:1) to the effect that the post-Christendom turn is a development “of reverse proportion” to the changes that occurred in the fourth century. Unfortunately, it does not seem that the solution to a challenge of the magnitude of that which the church presently faces can be reduced to the instantaneous intervention of the Holy Spirit. Thus, as the church seeks its own renewal amid such profound changes, it remains essential that the work of the Spirit, the authoritative counsel of the Word, and a willingness to turn from old ways be permitted to impact the missiological, conceptual, corporate, personal, and structural dimensions of the church’s life. Yet, we might feel compelled to ask, how is this to be expressed within our contemporary context?

Fundamentally, the present moment calls for an experience of renewal that entails fresh attention being given to the missiological dimension of the church’s life. McNeal (2003:15) asserts that the church in North America “is suffering from severe mission amnesia,” having “forgotten why it exists.” He adds, “Too many of us have forgotten....Even worse, many of us never have known” (:19). Thus, in a post-Christendom world, the rediscovery of the church’s missional identity is the central concept with which the Christian community must grapple (Newbigin 1986:2-3; Goheen 1999:2-3). Shenk (2001:32-33) reflects upon this critical issue: “[T]he church of modern Western culture lives out of the inheritance of Christendom, a church severed from mission. Renewal that does not result in a church renewed in mission is not genuine.”

Rather than using the prevailing model of the church, one that Shenk (2001:35) describes as “lacking theological and conceptual integrity,” as its starting point in the pursuit of renewal, the church’s present circumstances require a change in conceptual perspective that is theological in nature (Gibbs 2000a:31). Schmiechen (1996:96) suggests that, while theological reflection “cannot produce reform or renewal,” it can help “turn our attention to the church’s true treasure.” Thus, as Shenk (2001:72) asserts, “Theology that is worked out as a community-building response to the contemporary situation will be lifegiving.” Many commentators who share this

perspective see the crisis of the present moment as an exciting and powerful opportunity. While many Christians grieve the sense of loss that has accompanied the decline of Christendom, others find hope in the prospect that “the end of this epoch actually spells the beginning of a new flowering of Christianity” (Frost 2006:7).

From a theological perspective, the missional renewal of the church lies not in a commitment to *missions* as understood in the Christendom era, nor necessarily in whether the church itself possesses a clearly articulated mission statement, but rather in its relationship to the mission of God. As Shenk (2001:32) asserts, “The sole source for renewal of the church is the *missio Dei* as the basis for its life in relationship to the world.” Riddell (1998:18) posits that the mistaken notion that “God has given the church the task of mission is bordering on blasphemous.” The theme of mission cannot properly be understood primarily as a derivative of the nature of the church, nor as something that somehow emerges alongside its existence.

Mission, as Bosch (1991:390) suggests, “is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God.” The *missio Dei* actually precedes the existence of the church. Mission constitutes the very rationale for which the church was created, the essence of its calling; it is integral to the reality into which the church has been invited to participate (Nel 2003:16-18; Riddell 1998:118; Guder 2000:51). Understanding this can help us appreciate the logic of Brunner’s (in Bosch 1995:32) bold statement to the effect that “The Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.” Stated simply, mission constitutes an integral ingredient in the church’s true identity. As Hunsberger (1998:82) suggests, “the church’s essence is missional, for the calling and sending action of God forms its identity.” Wright (2006:24) explains that the term *missional* is “an adjective denoting something that is related to or characterized by mission, or has the qualities, attributes, or dynamics of mission.” In the case of the church, it denotes “our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of God’s world for the redemption of God’s creation” (:23).

Apart from engaging with a missional theology, insists Bosch (1995:32), “we will not achieve more than merely patch up the church.” In essence, this moment presents the church with the challenge of moving to a new paradigm of mission, one that is able to

address the fundamental issues associated with the magnitude of the cultural shifts taking place (Mead 1991:58; Van Gelder 1996:27, 28). Roxburgh (1997:4) suggests that the church's experience of marginalization presents the opportunity for a "radical reformation" consisting of a renewed missionary encounter with culture. McNeal (2003:18) colourfully describes the church as needing "a missional fix...a rebooting of the mission, a radical obedience to an ancient command." The shift in thinking this will entail is "so profound that it resembles a deconversion, a deprogramming that we typically associate with helping people escape the clutches of a cult" (:11). Thus, while the church's liminal condition provides a tremendous missional opportunity (Roxburgh 1997:2, 4), the structures and thought patterns with which the church is acquainted pose immense challenges for the task of missional renewal (Riddell 1998:12-13; Miller 2004:188).

Van Gelder (2007:15-26) notes that the growing recognition of the need for the missional renewal of the church in North America has indeed emerged from theological origins. He sees the renewed interest in foreign missions that occurred during the period of 1811-1910 and the maturing development of a missiology of foreign missions during the period of 1910-1950 as important precursors to the rediscovery of the church's missional nature in North America (:14-19). Beginning in 1950, the conversation surrounding the theology of mission began to shift toward a focus upon the *missio Dei* and the reign of God. Notes Van Gelder (:20), "The concept of the *missio Dei*, though not without controversy, has proved to be a Copernican revolution within the discipline of missiology." This began to set in motion a change in focus from a theology of foreign mission to a theology of mission (:20).

As one result of this development, among missiological scholars, "churches and their congregations everywhere began to be conceived as being in a mission location" (2007:23-24). However, as we have seen, many churches during this era demonstrated an unwillingness or inability to engage in God's mission. In addition, missiologists struggled to bring their insights to bear on the need for strategic transformation of the North American church. Van Gelder (:24-26) sees the church's preoccupation with church growth thinking during the period of 1975-1995 as a divergence from the advancement of a missiological understanding of congregations.

However, since 1995, inspired by the legacy of Leslie Newbigin, a new conversation has emerged in the North American context. Notes Van Gelder (:27), “[T]his new movement is much more explicit about bringing the connection of the *missio Dei* with the kingdom of God into conversation with particular congregations with respect to the emerging postmodern context.”

In light of where we find ourselves at this present moment in the historical unfolding of God’s mission, we certainly can affirm what has been articulated above regarding the cruciality of the Spirit’s work in enabling the church to experience missional renewal. Shenk (2005:78) asserts that mission “is the work of the Spirit, who indwells the church.” Guder (2000:50) insists that the Holy Spirit’s presence in indwelling the church has always been integrally linked with the purpose of mission. The giving of the Spirit at Pentecost “may also be celebrated as the divine event which turned the people of God into a missionary people, opening their ranks to receive men and women of all nations, tongues, races, and classes....and empowering them to move out into all the world” (cf. Bosch 1991:40). Thus, from Pentecost forward, “the church must be understood primarily and centrally in terms of its mission as God’s people....for this purpose the promised Holy Spirit is given to it” (Guder 2000:51).

In emphasizing the role of the Spirit in both renewal and mission, we furthermore can affirm McNeal’s (2003:27) identification of a vital “missional spirituality” as a key ingredient that is necessary if the church is to reach its culture. The contemporary North American church, he suggests, lacks such a spirituality. There exists a deep need for the Spirit of God to impart to the church a heart for the things of God (Jackson 2002:31, 53). If the Spirit of God authentically brings about a work of renewal within the church, insists Riddell (1998:118), this will move the church toward missional engagement. As he explains, “The Spirit is at work in the world, drawing the world toward Christ; actively luring people who have no contact with the institutional church.” The genuine work of the Spirit in the hearts of the church, thus, ought to redirect the faith community from a preoccupation with themselves toward a concern for being the people of God for others. The very concept of the renewal of the church, we can assert, implies the rediscovery of its apostolic missionary character (Visser’t Hooft 1956:100). As Moltmann (1978:109) articulates, “the renewed church

is one engaged in mission, participating in the action of God for the liberation of man.”

This renewed heart for the mission of God will generate within the church a fresh sense of needing to prioritize evangelism (Kew 2001:39; Shenk 2001:72-75). Visser't Hooft (1956:101) chooses to describe mission and evangelism as the “normal task” of the whole church. Thus, the church cannot rest in its past evangelistic accomplishments. Embracing “the evangelizing task” more fully must be understood as a key factor enabling the church to “realize its integrity” more wholly (Shenk 2001:72, 73). As Shenk (:73) explains, “The church cannot sustain its own conviction for the gospel only on the basis of history. The world will not feel challenged by a body that is nostalgic for a time now gone. The church’s own experience of the gospel gains vitality in direct proportion to its engagement in witness now.” This is consistent with Lohfink’s (1999:136) assertion that the church cannot be renewed if it does not accept “the ‘todayness’ of what has happened to it.” Lohfink insists that this requires the church to believe that God’s promises can be fulfilled in the present and that he is at work in the world today.

In contrast to conventional modern notions of witness, we must be careful to emphasize that the missional renewal of the church calls for its witness to be understood in a holistic light. The church has been empowered and liberated by the Spirit to manifest an “alternative social order”, one that bears witness to God’s redemptive purposes for the world (Dietterich 1998:146-147; Guder 2000:58). In essence, God’s intent is that the church might point beyond itself as a sign, instrument, foretaste, and agent of the reign of God (Bosch 1995:33; Hunsberger 1996:15-16). The church, says Guder (2000:67), is God’s “means to an end.”

When witness is viewed in this holistic light, Guder (2000:62) suggests, it must be understood as entailing “*far more* than particular oral messages.” Witness involves the tangible demonstration in the life and activity of God’s people of the fact that God’s rule is breaking in among the disciples of Jesus Christ (:62). Christian witness thus has “a profoundly ethical dimension” that accompanies the church’s spoken witness (:70). Essentially, suggests Guder (:89), the people of God “translate the gospel into practices that demonstrate the meaning of God’s love in Christ.” The

totality of the church's life, as well as that of each member of which it is composed, is meant to provide an embodied witness to the good news (:56). This being the case, says Barrett (1998:128), witness is not only what the church does, but what it *is*. The life of the church is the "primary form of its witness" (Guder 2000:68). A full-fledged understanding of witness, thus, must be seen as entailing the *being* of witness, the *doing* of witness, and the communication ("*saying*") of witness (:70).

A renewed commitment to its identity as a witnessing people will foster a fresh concern within the church to engage its context. Following in the way of Jesus, the church will strive to be related incarnationally to its community (Frost & Hirsch 2003:12, 37) and to reach out to all people (Gibbs 2000a:19). Thompson (2003:186) notes that this will pose a profound, and perhaps painful, challenge for many congregations:

The more a congregation is different from its context, the more renewal that will be required... Congregations that are more committed to doing what they are doing now rather than adapting to new mission opportunities are less likely to take two necessary steps. One is to look at their context and themselves with eyes wide open. Another is to entertain important options in light of honest self-assessment.

Nonetheless, the missional renewal of the church must be rooted in an appreciation of the contextuality of its ministry (Van Gelder 2007:122; Hastings 2007:42). As Van Gelder (:127) notes, "A Spirit-led congregation will learn to adapt and recontextualize its ministry to address the challenges and opportunities that it faces [within a changing context]—always forming and reforming." He further suggests that the church must embrace "a dynamic relationship between a congregation and its local context" (cf. McNeal 2003:33).

In turn, this renewed engagement with a changing context will challenge the church to discover fresh insights regarding its call to proclaim and embody the gospel. Guder (2000:71-204) insists that this reflects the "continuing conversation" of the church. In other words, he explains, through the transcultural process, the church itself is repeatedly "evangelized." This requires the church's own members to hear and be challenged by the present implications of the truth of the gospel. The logic of this, explains Guder (:37), is rooted in the reality that the church's understanding of the good news of God's reign within any single context is always partial. The call to



continuing conversion draws attention to the comprehensiveness of the church's missionary calling. If the gospel is intended by God to be translated and adapted into the particularity of every culture, then the limitations in understanding native to any single context must constantly be stretched (Guder 2000:83; Shenk 2005:74). Thus, as Riddell (1998:118) insists, the church that is being renewed in missional focus will turn from resting upon expressions of faithfulness born from a passing era for the sake of moving forward in obedience to God's call in Christ. As he asserts, "Mission always requires leaving behind the shelters of false religious orthodoxy, and treading the virginal unexplored lands of discovery."

This is not meant to be understood as an endorsement of some sort of pragmatic "compromise" of the church's core beliefs or an abdication of its cherished tradition, but rather as a call to faithful innovation (Finke & Stark 2005:251). This necessitates that the church strive to discover what it means to live within an appropriate tension between faithfulness and relevance in relation to its cultural context. Barrett (1998:114) describes the redemptive tension that the missional church must strive to cultivate in its relationship to its context:

The vast majority of the church's particular communities share with their neighbors a primary culture or cultures, which include their language, food, perhaps styles of dress, and other customs. But they are called to point beyond that culture to the culture of God's new community...[T]he church is always bicultural, conversant in the language and customs of the surrounding culture and living toward the language and ethics of the gospel. One of the tasks of the church is to translate the gospel so that the surrounding culture can understand it, yet help those believers who have been in that culture move toward living according to the behaviors and communal identity of God's missional people.

For the church to compromise its faithfulness to the gospel in favour of cultural "relevance" is to abdicate its proper place as a community of "resident aliens" (Hauerwas & Willimon 1989:11-13). At the same time, the promotion of faithfulness at the expense of relevance represents a failure to live in accordance with the incarnational nature of the gospel message. Thus, asserts Hunsberger (1998:79), "The struggle to be both faithful and relevant is constant for every church. It is the church's calling to embody the gospel's 'challenging relevance.'"

In maintaining this tension, the church follows the example of Christ. Describing Jesus, Shenk (2001:46) suggests that “He approached the culture of his day with infinite compassion and courageous truth telling...he started where people were and pointed them to life renewed through God’s loving redemptive power.” Shenk (:53) notes that the call to follow in the way of Christ caused the early church to be charged by their contemporaries with “upsetting the world, a charge that was undoubtedly true, for as a result of their preaching people turned against the accepted ways of their culture in response to a new authority.” The witness of the early church “resulted in disruption of socioeconomic structures and inspired people to give their highest allegiance to Jesus the Messiah.” Similarly, suggests Shenk (:54), if a contemporary church lives “under the inspiration of its head” and truly believes the gospel, “the conviction that the world is on a course that leads to death” will cause it to have “no other choice than to invite men and women to become a part of God’s new order, the kingdom of life.” Such a church addresses “the heart of matters and lays bare the injustice and evil that mark personal and social relations” (:55).

The challenge of embodying the redemptive tension between gospel and culture also invites the church to grapple with the relationship between its tradition and the task of innovation (Butler Bass 2004:44-45). It calls the church to demonstrate a readiness to change by reaching into the present in an effort to achieve renewed relevance. It also invites the church to employ a “chain of memory” to reach into the past, in order that it might rediscover and reengage the vital essence that once gave shape to its tradition (:42, 47, 50). As Butler Bass asserts, “anamnesis, the ‘recalling to memory of the past,’ must be central to congregational life” because, if a community is to be enduring, it must entail some notion of tradition.

This will require the congregation to exercise theological imagination as it lives out the biblical tradition within community (Butler Bass 2004:47). As it does so, some aspects of the church’s particular tradition may, in a new context, be found to be inconsistent with the essence of the faith. However, while challenging what needs to be challenged, the church also must find ways to appropriate the best of its tradition in the present (Conder 2006:82). This enables the tradition to be “fluidly” and freshly reinterpreted and re-appropriated. It furthermore will challenge the congregation to consider innovative approaches to framing its practices, rituals, and symbols to be

meaningful in a changing culture. While this is sure to entail the experience of pain accompanying the loss or changing of cherished elements of the tradition, it also is the path to life (:82).

The missional renewal of tradition will have definite implications for the structure of the church (Jackson 2002:68). As Guder (1998:228) posits, authentic submission to the Lordship of Christ will gain structural manifestation. This is necessary because the church is simultaneously both a spiritual and a sociological phenomenon, a concrete social entity (Van Gelder 2000:25). Nel (2003:67) notes that the church “always remains more than a mere sociological reality. It is, above all, a theological reality.” However, while the church may be a people constituted and called by the supernatural power of the Spirit of God, this does not mean that it has been delivered from the “the general laws of social mechanisms.” Thus, as a social entity, the church must be conscious of the unavoidability of its need to introduce some means of organization into its life and efforts. Snyder (1996:136) insightfully observes that churches must be structured in a way that promotes the work and life of the Spirit within the church; while structure cannot produce life, he notes, the lack of such structure frequently precedes death. However, as Visser’t Hooft (1956:77) notes, contrary to Luther’s assertion that the “Word will do it,” meaning that the Word would somehow bring its own forms into existence, this process does not occur without considerable care and intentionality.

As a people called to exist in service to the mission of God, the church also must be careful that its approach to organizational structure be conceived in a manner consistent with its missional nature and able to function in support of its true calling (Van Gelder 2000:37; 158). As Van Gelder (2000:37) expresses, “The church is. The church does what it is. The church organizes what it does.” Van Gelder asserts that keeping these three aspects in the correct sequence is crucial to the church’s structural integrity. Furthermore, as a local congregation seeks to organize its shared life in a manner consistent with the marks of the reign of God, this actually serves as an vital expression of the holistic witness of that congregation (Guder 1998:226-227); essentially, the structure employed by the church constitutes an “incarnational” translation of the transforming message of the gospel within the particularity of a given sociological context (:222, 227).

The church truly seeking to be renewed cannot stop short of this “incarnational” transformation. Shenk (2001:83) cautions that, though the church, “like all human enterprises, readily looks to its structures to ensure the continuity of the faith,” it must recognize that these structures also are time-bound. Thus, recognizing that “[i]nvariably structures undergo change in response to the environment, which itself is continually changing,” church structures must remain “flexible and adaptable” if they are to avoid being regarded as “obsolete” and ultimately “discarded” (:84-85). As churches strive to remain vitally connected to their changing cultural contexts, they will find it essential to dismantle “archaic forms that impede missionary witness and the devising of new structures that support the mission” (Shenk 2005:78). Indeed, as Gibbs (2000a:58) cautions, “New wine cannot be poured into old wineskins or a new patch sewn onto an old garment” (Matt. 9:16-17). Thus, because Jesus “brings a newness which cannot be confined within old forms,” structures that “inhibit the expression and advance of the Gospel...will need to be replaced by those which facilitate the expression of life” if the church is to avoid “fossilization” (cf. Snyder & Runion 2002:54).

This human activity of cultivating the church’s institutions and practices over time must be understood as an arena of the Spirit’s ongoing activity (Smith 206:130). Nel (2003:2-9) helps us to appreciate this through his compelling description of the renewal of the church as a forward looking process of “upbuilding.” “Upbuilding” is much more than merely “an ordinary social process of change” (:67). It is fundamentally the work of God’s Spirit. However, the process of “upbuilding” is not exempt from the challenges native to any human organization. This being the case, the church must remain attentive to the question of what God wants to do in and through its life. The human effort of building up the church is meant to occur in service to God’s activity (:16-18). It is a matter of constant, responsible reformation in the congregation’s life and operations: its thinking, attitudes, and functioning (:68). Notes Hall (1997:42), “God permits and commands the church to be involved in its own self-assessment and change.” Through adapting to the plan and work of God, the church is able to experience true stability and continuity (Visser’t Hooft 1956:84). As Jackson (2002:53) expresses, “only a Church that reforms or revolutionizes itself in

response to the Spirit's promptings is able to be a channel and enable renewal to work its way through the life of the body of Christ."

Barrett et al (2004:xii-xiv) offer the following summary of the patterns of life that will characterize a church striving to embody a renewed commitment to missional faithfulness:

1. A commitment to the church's missional vocation. This will cause the church to redefine "success" and "vitality" in terms of faithfulness to God's calling and sending.
2. An emphasis on biblical formation and discipleship. The authoritative voice of scripture will factor prominently in the life of this congregation.
3. A willingness to take risks as a contrast community. This church understands itself as different from the world because of its participation in the life, death, and resurrection of its Lord. It strives to grapple with challenging questions about the church's cultural captivity and with the ethical and structural implications of its missional vocation.
4. The exercise of practices that demonstrate God's intent for the world. A missional church is indicated by how Christians behave toward one another.
5. An understanding of worship as public witness to the in-breaking reign of God.
6. A vital dependence upon the presence and power of the Holy Spirit within the congregation.
7. An awareness of pointing toward the reign of God. In part, this means that the church is conscious of the fact that its own response is incomplete and that its conversion is a continuing necessity.
8. An understanding of missional authority as the shared authority given by the Holy Spirit to the entire body.

So, what will it look like for these patterns to gain expression contextually within those established churches that endeavour to experience missional renewal within the post-modern transition? What specific implications will arise for the approach that the church takes to its life, practices, and structures? Rendle (2002:137) notes that renewal requires the redefinition of purpose, while Riddell (1998:90) suggests that it requires new vision and imagination. As the Spirit of God causes local congregations

to gain a renewed missional vision and sense of purpose at this moment in its history, what fresh expressions will this cause to emerge? Clearly, the renewed church cannot look the same as the pre-Christendom church, for it cannot separate itself from the residue of the Christendom era (Murray 2004:205). But, what will it look like?

Conder (2006:85) posits that the transition into the emerging culture of post-modernism is indeed an opportunity for the church to rediscover its mission and for its traditions to be re-enlivened. As he asserts, “Our goal is not to be a postmodern church or to affirm postmodernism any more than our goal is to reject any all things associated with this worldview. Our goal is to embody the gospel of Jesus Christ authentically as a community in an ever-changing culture” (:43). This will necessitate the “deindigenization” of the gospel from its assimilation into the prevailing culture of modernity (Turner 1993:63). It also will require the adoption of a missional hermeneutic that shapes and guides the continuing formation of the church in a changing society (Guder 1998:227). As the church finds ways to span the “yawning gap between the Christian message and the quest and questions that mark our culture,” it will be enabled “to draw individuals, households and communities into the life of grace that marks the Church” (Avis 2003:17).

Riddell (1998:18) notes that “God’s missiological adventure proceeds within history, and as many as are willing are invited to share in it. It is an open river which flows where it will, into which we may plunge if we have courage enough.” However, Hall (1997:39) questions whether the church will merely allow the current period of transition to “happen to us”, or whether we will take an active role in influencing the process. As he proposes, intentionality may be the great key to the church’s future: “[E]ndings can also be beginnings; and if we are courageous enough to enter into this ending thoughtfully and intentionally, we will discover a beginning that may surprise us” (:43, 51). McManus (2001:89) would like to see the church serve as a “catalyst of change” for the sake of God’s reign within the broader society. However, in order for this to occur, the church will need to experience both an “inner” and an “outer” transformation (Goheen 1999:4). This can only come through struggle and through a conversion in our understanding of the church and its role in the world (Shenk 2005:75).

## 6.4 The Need for Generation X

In section 5.4.1, we discovered that one of the most blatant effects of local churches' failure to engage effectively in change amid the post-modern transition is the increasing absence of Gen Xers from their pews. As we have seen, many of these churches have merely chosen to dismiss the members of this generation in a manner that uncritically mirrors the broader mood of society. Nonetheless, a central assertion of this study is that, if established churches are to make serious efforts at missional renewal in the post-modern transition, they must come to recognize the essentialness of reengaging the members of this dismissed and denigrated generation. Within this transitional passage, Generation X provides an essential link in at least two critical respects.

First is a simple matter of pragmatics. As was articulated in the preceding chapter, the capacity of established churches to sustain their witness into the future is jeopardized by the absence of this generation. As Householder (1999:44-45) observes,

The church body has need for all parts to be active in order to be whole. Yet, if we take an honest look at many of our congregations, we will discover that we are missing some very important parts. Generation X is, generally speaking, missing in action!

In order to avoid a doubtful future, roughly twenty-five percent of the church needs to be composed of young adults (Long 2004:36). Thus, as Shawchuck and Heuser (1996:257-258) insist, congregations failing to renew their connections with the rising generations “will find their homogeneous pool drying up and will be confronted with...the slow decline to extinction.” They add that those congregations that attempt “to just skip over problem generations like Generation X, and wait for the next generation to come along...will likely not survive beyond 2025.”

As was already suggested in section 5.4.5, churches may simply look with hope to the greatly esteemed, allegedly neo-traditionalist Millennials as their hope for the future. This mindset is reinforced by the work of Eemen (2002:104), who employs Strauss and Howe's cyclical generational model (see Appendix B) in arguing that there is a predictable ebb and flow to the religious patterns that occur among the generations.

This model essentially provides the assurance of the inevitability of future renewal, with the Millennials destined to be the next generation to lead the way in achieving this. However, this cyclical model of Strauss and Howe has been subjected to significant critique. One criticism is that this view is not entirely compatible with a Christian view of history. More significantly for this present discussion, while this theory may provide intriguing speculation regarding the relationship between generations and the social and spiritual dynamics of society, it does not adequately address the implications of a change of the magnitude of a vast paradigm shift. Surely, the church cannot rest assured that the future offers them an inevitable generationally-driven cycle of renewal.

There are some clear indications that the religious behaviour of Millennials is worthy of optimism. Benke and Benke (2002:82) assert that, while, “as postmodernists they are open to all religious persuasions and have a pick-and-mix attitude,” and while they seem to question the exclusive claims of Christianity, Millennials are displaying evidence of being more open to the church than their Xer predecessors. In Smith and Denton’s (2005:32) extensive study of Millennial teens, the vast majority of respondents identified themselves as “Christians.” This study also revealed that, in contrast to the “spiritual seeker” description that seems fitting for many Boomers and Xers, Millennials are participating in considerable numbers in conventional religious traditions. This conclusion is supported by other studies of Millennial involvement in religious organizations. In one poll cited by Howe and Strauss (2000:34), Millennial teens identified “religion” as the second-strongest influence in their lives, behind parents, but ahead of teachers, peers, and the media. Howe and Strauss further observe that, “The share of kids who regularly go to church is down a bit from Gen Xers at the same age-but in an era when churchgoing is becoming an increasingly family-oriented activity, it may be rising relative to all other Americans.” Miller (2003:108) references one survey conducted among 217,000 Millennial sixth through twelfth graders in which sixty-three percent listed a religious community as an asset in their lives.

This being said, while there are many reasons to be optimistic regarding the future contribution that Millennials may make within the established church, there also are manifold reasons to remain cautious. Forecasts regarding the future of their



involvement in such institutions are mixed. According to Smith and Denton (2005:67), of those teens presently belonging to a congregation, 77 percent indicated intending to be a part of that same kind of congregation at the age of twenty-five. At the same time, while a survey conducted in 2002 found 44 percent of ninth grade males and 73 percent of ninth grade females involved in a religious community, this same survey revealed that only 39 percent of males and 31 percent of females identified such involvement as high school seniors (Miller 2003:19). This decline in involvement through the high school years is consistent with what some observers are forecasting regarding the future religious behaviour patterns of the members of this generation. For example, Howe and Strauss (2000:183) suggest the following: “Millennials expect to focus more on outer-world achievement, and less on inner-world spiritualism, than their Boomer parents. By the time they reach their parents’ age, they expect to spend less time on religion, roughly the same amount of time on family matters, and more time on careers, government, and technology.” While it would be difficult to know entirely what to make of the validity of these forecasts, it seems clear that established churches cannot merely count on future Millennial involvement as the solution that will stem the tide of decline.

Second, we must acknowledge that, if churches desire to engage in renewed mission within a post-modern world, Gen Xers will provide an important link. Even if we think entirely without reference to intergenerational issues or post-modern culture, we can affirm that the effectiveness of churches in reaching Xers is an indication of their missional vitality. As Shenk (2005:74) notes, “There are no people to whom [the church] is not responsible to witness concerning God’s saving purpose.” This means that, if a church is to be engaged in truly contextual ministry, it should be striving to mirror the full social mix of the community in which it is located (we will return to a more penetrating exploration of this point in chapter seven) (Van Gelder 1998:70). Thus, we could expect that effective missional churches would be striving to reach Gen Xers and to see the members of this generation constitute a percentage of the congregation comparable to the makeup of the community at large. Shenk (2005:75) suggests that the proof of the church’s missionary character “will be demonstrated by its response to the world.” Demographically speaking, Xers clearly comprise a significant part of the world in which many established churches find themselves.

Beyond this, however, we can recognize that Gen X plays an important role in helping local congregations respond to the changes associated with the emergence of a post-modern world. The church presently is being provided an opportunity to recast its faith and practices in ways that are meaningful for a new culture (Roof & Clark 2002:214). Nonetheless, as was demonstrated in chapter five, it is difficult for many church members and their leaders to understand or respond to the post-modern realities by which they are surrounded (Hudson 2004:16-17). Thus, “For the church to be effective and authentic in this day,” suggests Conder (2006:43), “we must better understand postmodernity, become conversant with postmodern people, and be able to function in the midst of many postmodern assumptions.”

This being said, Kitchens (2003:36) suggests that we may be tempted to wait several decades until we have a much clearer grasp of the changes in our culture before beginning to marshal a response to post-modernity. As Schaller (1999:75-76, 77) notes, history has shown there to be “a normal lag of two or three or four decades between the introduction of a culture-changing concept and the time when the churches begin to adapt to a new way of life.” However, posits Kitchens (2003:36), we already have the resources we need to begin this process of discernment immediately. Prominent among these resources is the presence of post-modern young adults within the church (cf. Reifschneider 1999:36; McLaren 2000:180). Hudson (2004:11) posits that “Generations X, Y, and Z will always be more comfortable in the postmodern world than their elders will.” Thus, the more that the presence of young adults in the church is taken into consideration, suggests Kitchens (2003:76), “the more clarity the church as a whole will have about the boundary between its worldview and values and those of the surrounding culture.”

Nonetheless, as we saw in chapter five, the established members of many congregations struggle to understand post-modern young people (Drane 2000:117). As we also have seen, this has manifested itself within the church in a number of unfortunate ways. Nonetheless, Rendle (2002:6) argues that, “unless congregations learn to manage the current generational differences and expectations, they will have to struggle even harder to pass on the faith to the generational cohorts that are beginning to line up behind those now in the congregation” (cf. Hammett & Pierce 2007:6). The accelerated pace of cultural change makes it essential to keep up with

what is occurring within the emerging generations (Twenge 2006:8). Therefore, the very differences that can cause conflict within congregations can also be seen as opportunities for creative response (Raines 2003:44).

Gibbs and Bolger (2005:22) suggest that a preoccupation with generational differences “has done much more harm than good for those churches that believe the church’s main problem is a generational one.” They note, as we have done, that “[g]enerational issues are imbedded in the much deeper cultural and philosophical shift from modernity to postmodernity.” Thus, as churches become attentive to the widespread demographic trends occurring around them, it is essential that they grasp the reality that the changes taking place, though manifested generationally, are not merely generational (i.e., Xer) trends, but rather larger worldview changes (Kew 2001:68; McManus 2001:56).

Nonetheless, it is precisely for this reason that the much maligned Xer generation is needed desperately during this time of transition (Regele 1995:225; Conder 2006:182). As Corpus (1999:14) asserts, though it often fails to do so, the need for the church to listen to the members of this generation is great. Some Gen Xer Christians, notes Kew (2001:26-27), have come to describe their place within the church as a generational “interim ministry.” Because of their chronological proximity to the post-modern transition, Kew (2001:26-27, 126) insists, Xers should be recognized as a “catalyst generation” and “hinge generation,” one that might help the church to deal with the tensions surrounding the transition beyond modernity. A rejection of them, he suggests, constitutes a denial of the true circumstances in which the church finds itself. The members of this generation provide the church with a “transitional case study” for its movement into ministry in the post-modern world (Long 2004:59). Thus, as Drane (2000:117) asserts, the challenge associated with engaging the emerging post-modern generations constitutes an issue of central importance in the church’s mission today.

Fowler (1995:10) explains that the contribution of the rising generation actually plays an important role in promoting the renewal of a tradition: “The cumulative tradition is selectively renewed as its contents prove capable of evoking and shaping the faith of

new generations...As these elements come to be expressive of the faith of new adherents, the tradition is extended and modified, thus gaining fresh vitality.” Integral to this process is the capacity of young people to foster sensitivity to neglected needs in the face of institutional entrenchment. This has been a recurring theme throughout church history (Strommen et al 1972:245). In every generation, insists Shenk (2001:12), “The tension produced by the discrepancy between churchly reality and official creed has concerned people...to press for renovation of the church so that it might live wholly under the lordship of Jesus Christ rather than in subservience to worldly power, and that the church might demonstrate in its own life a commitment to righteousness/justice” (cf. Visser’t Hooft 1956:112).

At the present moment, the perspective offered by young adults is as significant and essential as ever. Mahedy and Bernardi (1994:146) advocate the need for the elder generations to understand and appropriate the vision of Gen X as a critical consideration: “The tendencies we see arising among the Christians of Generation X are enormously important, because they represent an intuitive and practical effort to live as Christians in this technological civilization.” Thus, As Mahedy and Bernardi (:48) observe, “Humanly speaking, upon the excruciating difference between the intuitions of Generation X and those of its immediate predecessors rests the hope of the earth’s future.” Truly, they add, “Generation X stands at a historical juncture...The first postmodern generation can also be the first ‘post-Constantinian’” (:50). Tapia (1994:2-3) anticipates that Xers eventually will “rewrite” the rules of society, including the church. Thus, the more proactive a stance the church can take toward the insights of this generation, the better it will be served as it prepares to embrace the future.

Kitchens (2003:83) expects that, as a result of their ready awareness of the “divergence” between the values of the church and those of the larger culture, missional engagement with the world “may be the one [arena] in which our postmodern members will most naturally take the lead.” Mahedy and Bernardi (1994:50, 51) offer valuable insight into such a prospect:

The postmodern world requires a radical, profound Christian life and witness. We believe this is the vocation to which God is calling the Christians of Generation X...Christian Xers, deprived of much that their elders took for granted, and with little esteem in the eyes of many, are well placed by God—

precisely because they lack so much—to become the foundational generation of the post-Constantinian Church.

Because of this, predicts Kew (2001:30), these young adults will place a greater focus on integrity of mission in a way that challenges “those ideas, doctrines, ethnicities, and issues that previously separated us.” As we saw in section 4.5.4, the members of this generation are hungry to be engaged in a sense of mission that makes a tangible difference within their circles of friendship, neighbourhoods, and communities. For these young adults, mission “is more of a verb rather than a noun” (Howard Merritt 2007:84).

Furthermore, while many Millennials may share the same disdain toward the stereotypical Gen X slacker as the rest of society (Howe & Strauss 2000:56), it is expected that this younger generation still will look to Generation X for pragmatic guidance (Gambone 1998:15); thus, while elder generations may be tempted to ignore the significance of Xers and opt to focus on the Millennial cohort, these generations would do well to take to heart Regele’s (1995:224) observation that “the most likely generation to put it together [in this revisioning period] and make it work on a practical level” is Generation X. Thus, in light of all that stands to be gained from a genuine openness to this generation, Reifschneider (1999:36) seems to offer a sensible proposal in suggesting that the Gen Xers are “the group of people to start with” in bringing about change amid the post-modern transition.

Roxburgh (2005:67) suggests that the shift through which society presently is passing likely may take two or three generations (cf. McLaren 2000:189-190). This being the case, “The processes of change we’re all involved in is more than a battle between two groups over style or generational difference.” He suggests that the generation that will give concrete shape to new forms of missional life might not even be born yet (:138). Roxburgh indicates that those who are situated differently within this transition, those whom he describes as “liminals” and “emergents” need one another. While not speaking directly to generational distinctions *per se*, we can assert that this distinction does have a generational corollary. Thus, his observations certainly are applicable here. In the face of the struggle to understand how to be the church in a radically changing context, these groups can help each other “lead church systems through discontinuous change.”

## 6.5 The Importance of Process

The things articulated above are deeply important and exciting to envision. Clearly, the present moment requires the church to open itself to change if it is to be faithful to its true calling (Anderson 1990:140; Peterson 1999:160; Conder 2006:12).

Furthermore, traditional patterns clearly are not likely to be effective in engaging many Xers (Fickensher 1999:67). Thus, notes White (2001:177), “In our modern world, method and style must be brought kicking and screaming into the twenty-first century or else we will lose our full potential for reaching the postmodern Generation X and beyond for Christ.” However, therein rests the problem. As we saw in chapter five, all too often efforts at change within established churches are indeed accompanied by “kicking and screaming.” As was evident in that chapter, this has its origins in the church’s rootedness in the marriage of Christendom and modernity, the values of the generations currently in leadership, and the specific ways in which the church has chosen to order its intergenerational praxis in relation to the intergenerational praxis of society. To a large degree, the church has looked critically, even dismissively, upon Xers and has prevented them from an experience of full participation in the life and leadership of the church. In the face of this reality, we might be compelled to ask how established congregations can come to recognize and embody the value of engaging the members of Generation X.

Furthermore, we have seen that, from the vantage point of Generation X, the church is a place in which they expect to experience brokenness and marginalization similar to that which they have experienced within the broader society. This has been shown to be an offence to some of the most strongly held values of this generation. As a result, many Xers have left the church altogether, while many of those who remain are disillusioned and disengaged. Thus, it is nice to assert in theory that established churches should reconnect with Generation X. However, the conspicuous absence of this generation from the ranks of many established churches poses a significant challenge. How can these congregations reach the members of a generation that has developed such scepticism toward the established church? Pursuing renewed ties with Gen Xers is not something that is going to happen automatically. Furthermore, missional renewal is not likely to come about as a result of an instantaneous intervention by God’s Spirit. How then might local churches engage in a process of

change that is faithful to God's purposes, that responds appropriately to the barriers described above, and that invites all generations to journey together in a way that fosters missional renewal?

### **6.5.1 The Shortcomings of Strategy**

Clearly, the church is in need of such a process. As we saw in section 5.2.2.2, in recent decades, the Church Growth Movement has tended to provide the chief script by which churches might choose to respond to the questions posed above. Van Gelder (2007:26) notes that, though church growth thinking was largely discredited in the academy by the early 1980s, "Within much of the broader church in the United States today, the ethos of church growth is still very much present and represents the functional missiology of many congregations." As a result, notes Roxburgh (1997:21), standard pastoral responses to marginalization tend to reflect "the immanent values of modernity." As an example of this, he cites "the cultural values of instrumental rationality, expressed in 'if it works and is successful then it is true,'" as guiding much pastoral strategy (:20).

Within this framework, it follows that challenges like the absence of Xers can be addressed through identifying and adopting new strategies for "church growth" (Van Gelder 1998:72-73). While these do accomplish some good, these strategies often are merely tactical attempts to regain a sense that the church is accomplishing something of significance, "to breathe new life into old structures" (Regele 1995:183). As Roxburgh (1997:20) articulates, "Technique is the primary method for re-establishing the church's place in the culture." Van Gelder (2000:68-69) notes that, as a result of this mindset, the focus on engaging in strategic action *on God's behalf* causes "endless attention" to be "invested in developing, redeveloping, and adjusting the form of the organization to achieve ministry effectiveness."

In reality, the assumption that a "technique" or "strategy" can be found to solve the challenges of ministering in a post-modern world betrays precisely how bound many established congregations are to the values of modernity (Shenk 1995:56, 97; Roxburgh 1997:21). Miller (2004:60) notes that many church growth strategies are rooted in an era that is foreign to post-modern people. Such approaches are of limited

effectiveness in a profoundly changing world (Frost & Hirsch 2003:62-63). Often, they reflect a lack of appreciation of the alien nature of the church (Shenk 1996:23). Snyder (1996:23) provides the following assessment of the church's strategies for responding to a changing culture:

One the one hand, much of the institutionalized church talks to itself in a corner about how to be relevant and usually comes up with a theology that has as its unstated premise, "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em." Too often it presents a "theology" of political and/or social causes so hopelessly tied to passing cultural fads that its demise precedes that of its promoters.

This is an inadequate response to the new reality with which the church has been presented (McManus 2001:26; Miller 2004:178). As Roxburgh (2005:143) asserts, twentieth century systems and leadership capacities are no longer adequate for leading churches toward God's next step.

Many of these strategies reflect "symptom thinking," rather than addressing the deeper, core aspects of cultural change (Miller 2004:135-136; cf. Mead 1991:70). In contrast to the dynamics of resistance described in chapter five, the effort to employ technique for the purpose of quickly regaining a sense of place within culture is an equally inadequate response to the experience of liminality (Roxburgh 2005:23). Rather than learning and responding adaptively, the rush to employ a technique represents a desire to resolve the anxiety and uncertainty associated with these times of transition. When the church oversimplifies its present situation and the questions it poses toward this situation, it does injury to itself and the viability of its witness (Conder 2006:40). Gibbs (2000a:113) suggests that, "If there is one thing worse than a church not having an agreed philosophy of ministry, it is a ministry statement designed to respond to yesterday's ministry needs and opportunities." Thus, it is essential for us to recognize with McNeal (2003:xvi-10) that the methodological preoccupations of the church have tended to be rooted in the wrong questions. While the pursuit of wrong questions "will continue to turn the wheel of the church industry," McNeal predicts that it will render little service to the reign of God.

Clearly, the process by which missional renewal is pursued within established churches must entail something more than merely employing technique-oriented solutions. Guder (1998:238) suggests that, while the fruit of the church's liminal efforts, such as mission statements, goals, and objectives, are good, we now need a



more radical critique of the church's cultural captivity. Frost and Hirsch (2003:15-16) similarly assert, as we have noted above, that the challenges of the present moment call for more than a "reworking" of the existing ecclesiological and missiological assumptions presently guiding many churches. Thus, as McNeal (2003:23, 24-25) advocates, the church must transition from its preoccupation with competition, strategies, survival, and success. As we have noted, this transition must not be fundamentally about programs, but rather about adjustments in thought and theology (Conder 2006:15). Notes Roxburgh (1997:2), "What are required at this point in the dialogue about a missionary encounter are not so much solutions and strategies for engagement, as models that enable the churches to locate better their social reality on the new cultural map of North America." This being the case, the genuine missional renewal of the church will entail the prioritization of the interests "of the long haul rather than the quick fix" (Frost & Hirsch 2003:11). How might this be reflected in the processes employed within established churches?

### **6.5.2 The Sensitivities of Xers**

Furthermore, the expectation that Xers will be drawn by strategic endeavours that fail to address some of their most fundamental criticisms of established churches betrays a lack of penetrating insight. Rabey (2001:20) expresses concern that, while there is an element of good in the efforts of churches to employ marketing strategies in offering the message of hope to Xers, "uncritically adopting the marketer's depiction of a generation may have blinded some churches to the true soul of the emerging generations." This is a serious matter; as Reifschneider (1999:32) asserts, the members of this generation "are tired of people putting on a show to try to sell us something." Miller (2004:129) employs somewhat more graphic terms in suggesting that Xers have a "B.S. meter, a finely tuned ear for authenticity; a not-so-delicate way of seeing through the images and words; like bloodhounds sniffing out the trail of reality." Rather than being treated as a religious "target market," Xers desire to be valued as complete persons and want to be respected as being capable of making their own decisions (Hicks & Hicks 1999:260; Mays 2001:68; Howard Merritt 2007:137). This being the case, as Smith and Clurman (1997:90) observe, "They get quarrelsome when they think they are being narrowly classified." Thus, even those interested in

exploring church participation will “run away from overblown promotion and shrink back from a hard sell” (Moore 2001:132).

As we saw in the preceding chapters, because of their experiences with the church, many Xers are sceptical toward both its claims about itself and its underlying motivations. Fickensher (1999:83) suggests that many Xers feel as though churches “are only concerned about themselves.” Unfortunately, many churches have sought to employ ministry programs and strategies without substantively addressing some of the factors at work in their midst that most potently and painfully impact the lives of Gen Xers. Hahn and Verhaagen (1996:64) caution that the church is in error to assume that it will be able to succeed merely by employing an approach akin to replicating MTV. While these efforts may be well-intentioned and somewhat helpful, the help they provide is largely superficial and destined to be of limited effectiveness (Kitchens 2003:71; Howard Merritt 2007:137). Rainer (1997:179) suggests that, while the members of this generation may appreciate the efforts of churches to make cultural accommodations for them, “they want to know that there is more to the church and to the faith it represents.” Rainer cautions that Xers will leave the church suddenly if they discover that little substance exists beneath the cultural sensitivity.

In a post-modern world, the church’s own life must serve as the plausibility structure by which its message is validated (Dockery 2001:16; Long 2004:206). In other words, “the medium is the message” (Long 2004:206). Thus, suggests Gibbs (2000a:30), the church’s witness among post-modern young adults needs to be “self-evidently altruistic.” Frost and Hirsch (2003:154) reflect upon this theme:

If we take seriously that the medium is the message, then there’s no way around the fact that our actions, as manifestations of our total being, do actually speak much louder than our words. There are clear nonverbal messages being emitted by our lives all the time. We are faced with the sobering fact that we actually are our messages. Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher, called this “existence-communication” by which he meant that our lives—our very existence—is our communication.

Thus, as Taylor (quoted in Frost & Hirsch 2003:155-156) has observed, in a post-modern world, all means of communication are futile “unless they are actually born out of the very truth they are meant to convey.” Of course, this is consistent with the vision of the missional church articulated above. This necessitates that the church

give much thought to both what it endeavours to do in engaging Xers and how it chooses to go about it. Again, this challenges us to lend careful attention to the processes employed by the church in its pursuit of renewal.

### **6.5.3 The Struggles with Change**

In addition, conventional thinking about strategy and technique frequently fails to demonstrate appropriate sensitivity to the struggles established church members often experience in adjusting to change. Rendle (2002:9-10) suggests that, while much of the literature that is produced on the subject of generational ministry would be easier to employ if the church were concerned with reaching only one cohort, in reality ministry in established congregation settings is “much messier than that.” Benke and Benke (2002:87) note that launching new ministry endeavours intended to engage emerging cohorts often involves major changes. Thus, they caution, “Churches must precede these with appropriate preparation...At best, some leaders and members of these churches have a vague understanding of postmodernism, while most have no understanding at all.” Unfortunately, as Rendle (2002:22-23) notes, despite the wealth of resources that has been published on contemporary ministry, “virtually nothing has been written about the processes of change necessary to introduce these new patterns” in congregational settings where the approach to ministry has been developed in response to the preferences of older generations.

Though Gen X may play an important role in this time of transition, this does not provide a justification for church leaders to be sensitive and responsive to this generation only. Not only they, but also their elders must be afforded proper care and consideration. As we saw in chapter five, older members of the congregation may be prone to resist efforts to promote change in the name of reaching the young. However, does this resistance justify the marginalization and victimization of older members of the congregation as a means of accomplishing the desired ends (Hammett & Pierce 2007:4)? Law (2002:26) suggests that many advocates of change characterize those who resist change “as if they were the enemy.” He adds, “Some even talk about giving up on them and starting over somewhere else. I can’t do that. They are members of the body of Christ, too.” Hilborn and Bird (2003:53) insist that we must be conscious of our need to strive to reach out to the younger members of

society without disenfranchising the older members of the congregation or promulgating ageism.

In some cases, the concerns of older church members are not altogether ill founded. Particularly in the wake of the protracted struggle between pre-Boomers and Boomers in many congregations, the resistance of some church members is informed by negative past experiences with efforts at change. All too often, a key problem when change efforts are undertaken is that the leaders tend to “push” or “jump” without proper attention to pace or process. Nel (2003:68) suggests that some leaders undertake change merely for the sake of change, which invariably is an unhealthy and dangerous proposition. At times, this simply amounts to the “tyranny of the new” (Mead 1991:77). Often leaders move too quickly toward the implementation of new ideas (Rendle 2002:14-15; Nel 2003:68) or fail to “install” changes well (Mead 1991:77).

If a leader jumps ahead in an effort to institute ministry endeavours geared toward engaging Gen Xers without first negotiating the generational cultures present within the congregation, this “may throw the whole congregation into conflict” (Rendle 2002:141). Note Whitesel and Hunter (2000:36), “The church leadership may feel the pastor does not possess a clear and concise plan that will reach out to the younger generations while protecting the traditions and practices that mean so much to the older generations.” As we noted in chapter five, this prospect is particularly acute in congregations of less than 350 attendees, in which limited resources cause established members to perceive that more is at stake.

Unfortunately, the emergence of win/loss scenarios is all too frequently the result of a failure on the part of congregational leaders to appreciate the complexity of the shared life of a congregation. For example, Shawchuck and Heuser (1996:141-145) explain that an organization is composed of structures (“the sum total of the ways in which organizational effort is divided into distinct tasks and the means by which coordination is achieved among these tasks”) and a belief system (“a widely shared mental model of how the organization governs its relationships, expectations....The belief system also includes deeply held, often unconscious, assumptions espoused by the people which strongly influence their actions and their expectations of one

another.”). They go on to explain that many of the expectations that compose the belief system of a congregation are implicit and unwritten. Shawchuck and Heuser caution that both belief system and structure need to be addressed in change efforts, though they rarely are. All too commonly, the underlying belief systems of a congregation are not adequately considered. As a result, these authors point out, attempts to focus exclusively on organizational structure foster conflict and dissent, and frequently fail. Mallory (2001:54-56) similarly cautions that it usually is pointless to attempt to introduce change into a congregation’s organizational structure “and not address its underlying culture.” Thus, as Granberg-Michaelson 2004:78 suggests, the religious organizations that will be equipped to address the challenges posed by changes in our culture will “have intentionally learned how to instill steady and deep change in their organizational culture.”

Hammett and Pierce (2007:143) note that this issue of the underlying culture of the congregation is one key reason that changing worship styles is frequently not the solution to reaching young adults. As they observe, this effort frequently is founded in the misconception that “simply changing the way they do worship will show that people under forty are welcome.” Conder (2006:96) suggests that, because of the church’s roots in the assumptions of Christendom, instituting changes in worship services often constitutes a liminal response to the absence of young people from the pews. However, if the leadership does nothing to change the church’s values or culture, assert Hammett and Pierce (2007:143), “their net numbers way well be negative. Those over sixty will leave, and those under forty in the neighborhood may not even know that the church is trying to appeal to them.” Thus, changing the church’s worship style is often precisely the wrong point at which to begin (Conder 2006:96; Howard Merritt 2007:137).

Woolever and Bruce (2002:72) offer the intriguing suggestion that reports of an unwillingness to change among parishioners constitute a “myth trap.” In their extensive research among American parishioners, they found many expressing “ample willingness to try new things (61%),” while “many believe their parish or congregation is already considering or implementing new directions (51%).” In comparison to this, only thirty percent of respondents expressed uncertainty regarding whether their congregations were ready to change, while only nine percent said that

their congregations were not presently ready (:76). A question regarding “your opinion of the future directions of this congregation” bore the following results:

Need to get back to the way we did things in the past	5%
Faithfully maintaining past directions	12%
Currently deciding on new directions	17%
Currently moving in new directions	34%
Need to rethink where we’re headed	6%
Unclear or doubtful	2%
Don’t know	23%

(:77)

These results strike a rather positive tone. Nonetheless, as Rendle (2002:4) suggests, *expressing* a willingness to change and *demonstrating* a willingness to live with its consequences must be appreciated as two distinct phenomena.

This being said, we would do well to question how extensively these respondents are prepared to change. Are these parishioners prepared to embrace the implications of missional renewal for the approach to church and life with which they are acquainted? Some insight into this query is provided by responses generated in answer to another question. When asked to identify the “main roles” of the pastor, only sixteen percent of congregants surveyed viewed “training people for ministry and mission” (Woolever & Bruce 2002:74). This paled in comparison to other more traditional pastoral duties native to the world of Christendom. This reflects the reality, as we have chronicled throughout the preceding chapters, that the perspectives and expectations of many established church members have been formed by the marriage of Christendom and modernity. In reality, notes Regele (1995:219), many within the congregation find it difficult to accept that the local congregation must become the primary unit of mission in the twenty-first century. As Kew (2001:36) suggests, “Breaking deeply ingrained, 1,500-year-old Christendom habits requires extraordinary re-education and enormous effort.” Rouse and Van Gelder (2008:60) express that “helping those in the older generations...cultivate a more missional vision” seems to be the “biggest challenge.” This being so, how might those church members who are comfortable with the church as it is be helped to learn their way into a new culture and new values in a way that does not alienate or degrade them?

Granberg-Michaelson (2004:152-153) suggests that, in many cases, church leaders simply do not know how to guide this sort of transformational change process. Others,

however, fail because they value organizational cohesion above all else and fear the anticipated impact of efforts at change. Some leaders struggle to understand how to lead from a position of consensus in settings in which they are not invested with sufficient authority to foster such consensus. As Rendle (2002:24) notes, “Our leaders have the complex task of building consensus in volunteer systems where participants can ‘take it or leave it,’ can participate or not....in which members always have the choice of belonging or not belonging, supporting or not supporting.”

At the same time, in light of the tensions that seem inevitably to arise between the generations, it frequently proves to be the case that pretending as though everyone can simply live together is an inadequate approach (Rendle 2002:118). Even the notion of “compromise” frequently proves ineffective. However, many leaders find themselves feeling as though they do not know how to find a better way forward (:22-23, 51). The failure to cultivate common understanding or to demonstrate a clear plan can lead to upheaval, and can even precipitate the end of a pastor’s tenure within the congregation (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:36). However, insists Nel (2003:79), harmony at all costs simply does not constitute a valid objective.

The question is not so much a matter of whether conflict is likely to arise within the congregation, but rather what will be done with this conflict (Nel 2003:75). In fact, it likely is necessary for growth (:80). Ammerman (1998:119) notes that, while the presence of conflict is sometimes seen as the death knell of established congregations, not peace, but indifference, should be seen as the opposite of conflict. She insists that conflict is most likely to arise when people care about, and are committed to, the congregation. Thus, it is actually the *absence* of conflict that could signal impending demise in some congregations. As Armour and Browning (1995:24) note, a congregation with no creative tension lacks the spark for vision, imagination, and fresh insight. For any church that endeavours to undertake innovation, conflict is likely to be a natural by-product of the process; while this is not always so, it may actually be a vital indication that there is hope for the congregation (Ammerman 1998:76). The challenge is less a matter of avoiding tension than finding a way toward fostering “understanding about the emotional intersection where the generations meet” and developing a “clear, workable strategy” by which the

generations can peaceably co-exist and engage in ministry together (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:14).

This being said, we can recognize, as Rendle (2002:7) suggests, that established congregations facing these challenges and conflicts offer much of value to the broader body of Christ during this passage from modernity to post-modernity. Indeed, he insists, there is much to learn from such congregations, because the tensions they face “are driven largely by generational differences that leaders must learn how to negotiate if the congregants are to move with confidence into the future.” As Rendle explains,

We are also reminded that we have not yet reached the destination in this transition that is not only generational but also global and cultural. As ample as the evidence may be that we are well on our way to post-Christendom and postmodern health, we are still assuredly not further along than the uncomfortable middle stage of transition...the ‘neutral zone,’ the time between letting go of our old ways of ‘doing’ faith and the claiming of new beginnings.

This being the case, we must be conscious that established congregations provide precisely the sort of laboratory setting in which we can learn about what it means to shape and transmit the Christian tradition from one generation to another in this new era; indeed, they may provide a “snapshot” of what it will mean to progress toward the “once and future church” (:6). Suggests Rendle (:117), “The disputes encountered, the decisions made, the practices altered are all steps taken to prepare living faith traditions to address the people of the future.”

#### **6.5.4 Spiritual and Systemic Indicators of Healthy Process**

As we have noted above, all of the challenges being catalogued here call our attention to the importance of the *process* by which missional renewal is pursued within the church (Van Gelder 2007:154). Clearly, any efforts to pursue renewal within the congregation must provide for the church to reflect penetratingly upon its cultural location, for interaction between the generations to be fostered, and for established church members to be helped to grapple with the implications of cultural change. Ample attention must be given to the various ways in which the renewing work of the Spirit, as he invites the church into renewed engagement with God’s mission, comes



to bear on the individual, corporate, conceptual, and structural aspects of the church's experience.

In essence, in light of what we have affirmed above, as we contemplate the “means” or “processes” by which missional renewal is promoted within the church, we must reiterate the necessity of appreciating both the spiritual and the human nature of the church (Van Gelder 2000:25; Nel 2003:67). As our reflections in this chapter have suggested, neither of these dimensions can be neglected if the church is to experience the renewal of its mission in the post-modern transition successfully. Both of these dimensions must be permitted to inform the church's hopes and aspirations and the indicators it employs in measuring its progress and “success.” Thus, in the pages that follow, we will briefly offer some broad categories to help identify what a healthy process might look like from the vantage point of each of these two closely related dimensions, the spiritual and human natures of the church. This enables us to address the need of the church and the members of which it is composed to experience the Spirit's renewing work, while also addressing the individual and corporate humanness of both Xers and their elders within the congregation in light of their particular socio-historical locations.

#### **6.5.4.1 The Spiritual Perspective**

First, we can assert together with Snyder and Runion (2002:130) that every part of the church is to bear the “DNA” of Jesus. As they express, “the church's whole life should itself be witness of God's kingdom.” (:50-51). We can take this to imply that not only the desired ends of the church, but also the means it employs, are to bear the marks of the reign of God. As Dawn (2001:155) asserts, “we represent before the world this unity between ends and means.” Thus, we can join Schmiechen (1996:27) in offering a critique of the modern instrumentality that separates means from ends: “Is there no sense in which these acts embody the presence of God and are of value in and of themselves?” The upbuilding and growth of the church, suggests Leith (1990:15), is a matter of “the church's simply being what it says it is, the people of God.”

If the church is to engage in a process of missional renewal through which both means and ends holistically bear the marks of the reign of God, this desire is perhaps best captured in the biblical concept of *shalom*. Schreiter (1998:53) insists that the idea of *shalom* “is a rich one.” As he explains, it refers to “the state in which the world is meant to be. It is the best description of what the reign of God will be like: a place of safety, justice, and truth; a place of trust, inclusion, and love; a place of joy, happiness, and well-being.” Reflecting upon this concept, Steinke (1996:84) notes,

The primary meaning is “wholeness.” *Shalom* is a condition of well-being. It is a balance among God, human beings, and all created things. All parts are interrelated. Each part participates in the whole. Thus, if one part is denied wholeness (*shalom*), every other part is diminished as well.

This means that *shalom* is more than merely the “cessation of violence and conflict” (Schreiter 1998:53) or “the absence of war” (Volf 2005:189). Far more than this, it describes “the flourishing of the community and of each person within it” (Volf :189).

Swartley (2006:424) notes that God “wills peace (*shalom* in its fullest sense).” The New Testament, he asserts, “overwhelmingly enlists us” in the service of seeking to be peacemakers (:420). Certainly, this has profound implications for any “means” that the church might undertake. However it is particularly important for any church truly desiring to gain an authentically renewed engagement with God’s mission. As Swartley (:424) notes, “[P]eacemaking unites us to God in sharing the divine mission, the *Missio Dei*.” This being said, true wholeness can only be experienced as “God’s gift.” As Swartley (2006:424) expresses, “*peacemaking* is not simply done by human effort, but by the power of God’s Spirit and living humbly under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Otherwise, peace efforts soon wear down the best intentioned people. Jesus Christ is both our peacemaker-prototype and our living Lord who by his Spirit and Word empowers us.” The gift of God in Christ, by the power of the Spirit, enables the members of the church to learn the new patterns of the new creation (:416). As Dietterich (1998:147) notes, “The spirit empowers this community to manifest love, to work toward peace, to express patience, kindness, and good news, and to exhibit gentleness and self-control (Ga. 5:22). In this way, the Holy Spirit alone is the antidote to the works of the flesh.” This commitment to the well-being of all, the “fruit” of “the Spirit’s bearing in and through the believing community’s life” (:148),

has profound implications for any means that the church employs toward its desired ends.

#### **6.5.4.2 The Systemic Perspective**

In complement to this vision of God’s Spirit causing the process of missional renewal to be permeated with the marks of shalom, we must consider a human counterpart. Throughout this study, we have been chronicling the ways in which the structures employed in the church have impacted its life. Furthermore, we have suggested that, if established churches are to experience missional renewal of a lasting nature, this will have structural implications; this is an expression of the reality of the church’s sociological or human nature. However, as we have seen, efforts to transform the structures of the church often lead to tension and conflict. This leads us to acknowledge that, if the church is to engage in processes of change healthily, issues of organizational structure must be recognized as secondary to “systems thinking.” Armour and Browning (1995:7) argue that the human systems within the church and how they intermesh are of far greater significance than structure. Similarly, Galindo (2004:52) asserts that “[v]iewing a congregation primarily as an organization, management system, or institution leads ultimately to toxic approaches to congregational leadership and to tragic ministry practices.” The “hidden” systemic life of congregations, he insists, “is where so much of how a congregation ‘really works’ lies” (:51).

Since this term, “system,” already has been used a number of times throughout this study, we must be careful here to be clear in defining the specific sense in which we are employing this term at this point. Steinke (1996:3) explains the essence of “systems theory”:

It is a way of thinking about how the whole is arranged, how its parts interact, and how the relationships between the parts produce something new. A systems approach claims that any person or event stands in relationship to something. You cannot isolate anything and understand it...All parts interface and affect each other.

Elsewhere, Steinke (1992:9) notes, “Systems thinking instructs us to look at how the world is wired together.” Robinson (1996:25) explains that, within human groups, the systems model gives rise to “the recognition of the connections between people.” It

reflects an appreciation of the fact that participants can only be understood fully within the context of their relationships. As Robinson articulates, “No one lives or acts in isolation, and we are all affected by each other’s behavior” (cf. Steinke 1996:7).

Within human systems, interactions become repeated, patterned, and predictable (Parsons & Leas 1993:7). “As the interaction is repeated, it is reinforced,” notes Steinke (1992:6). With time, the pattern itself comes to regulate the way in which the parts function. Suggests Steinke, “It’s as if the pattern has a life of its own.” These established patterns are described as *homeostasis*. A system’s tendency toward homeostasis moulds the behaviour of its members into predictable patterns, “making it possible for us to ‘get along,’ to do work, to find safety, to trust” (Parsons & Leas 1993:7). The parts of a system are arranged into a whole through the positions in which they function. By functioning in a particular way, each participant contributes to the balance of the system. As Steinke (1992:6) notes, “As long as everyone functions in the same way, the arrangement is stable.” Apart from this tendency, the members of a human system would have to reinvent their relationship every time they came together (Parsons & Leas 1993:7). Galindo (2004:52) notes that the dynamics of how the church handles and expresses emotions, how energy is exerted, how the church organizes its life, how control is exercised, and how relationships function are all integrally linked with this “hidden” facet of the congregation’s life.

Within any congregational system, a number of factors help to sustain the experience of homeostasis. Steinke (1992:6) specifically cites the keeping of traditions and the following of rules as homeostatic forces within the congregation. Parsons and Leas (1993:9-11) caution that these traditions and rules may not necessarily be stated or defined explicitly. Nonetheless, they may be “tacit.” In other words, while not written or openly discussed, they may come to be expected and agreed upon in the minds of the congregation’s members. As Parsons and Leas (:11) note, “[T]acit rules can be subtle, but they are known at some level. And the keeping or breaking of the rules influences the system as a whole.” These authors note that tacit rituals also abound in the church. These “are the rites we engage in with little or no conscious awareness of what we are doing or why” (:17). We only tend to be conscious of these rituals when “someone does ‘it’ wrong.” In addition, congregational systems develop

tacit goals, which are “established through the agreements that people make nonconsciously about what they are trying to do.” In fact, it is possible for a system to have formal goals and tacit goals that directly contradict one another. If an organization has stated goals that contradict its tacit goals, “the tacit goals will probably win out.” While the formal goals are written on paper, the tacit goals are written “in people’s hearts” (:17).

When changes occur in one part of the system, it produces changes in all other parts (Steinke 1996:4). This can generate problems as the various parts of the system interact in dealing with the process of change. In turn, this commonly gives rise to anxiety within the system (Steinke 1992:25). Though we have not consistently employed systems language to describe these dynamics up to this point, throughout preceding chapters we have encountered considerable evidence of the impact of systemic functioning within established churches as they struggle to respond to change. Parsons and Leas (1993:18) note that, when one part of the system believes that it is the most important or finds it difficult to empathize with the needs of other parts of the system, it becomes very difficult to work together.

Reflecting upon the impact of systemic dynamics within congregational life, Steinke (1996:10) suggests that health is evidenced by the congregation that “actively and responsibly addresses or heals its disturbances, not one with an absence of troubles” (cf. Hanson 2005:133). In fact, a healthy congregation may actually create tension by fostering an atmosphere in which diverse voices and approaches are honoured. As Parsons and Leas (1993:22-23) note, “The tension becomes something life-giving, creative, and renewing.” In essence, suggests Steinke (1996:19), “The health of a congregation is multifaceted. It is a power-sharing arrangement. Attitudes count. Working together counts. Faithfulness matters. Mood and tone are significant...Healthy congregations are spirited. They are graced and gracious, generous with each other and outsiders.” However, notes Steinke (:25), health is a process, not a static condition: “It is ongoing, dynamic, and ever changing.” Indeed, he adds, “it is a direction, not a destination.”

#### 6.5.4.3 The Relationship between These Two Dimensions

Steinke (1992:x) observes that some people assume “that the church’s relationship system is different from the human interactions experienced elsewhere in our lives” because of the presence of the Holy Spirit within the church’s ranks. However, he cautions, this does not negate the reality of human nature: “The church is more than its emotional processes, but it is never less than these processes.... We are urged to control the powers of human nature, but that is not the same as denying their reality.” That being said, we can identify a close knit and positive correlation between the Spirit within the congregation and the spirit *of* the congregation (its *esprit de corps*) (Shawchuck & Heuser 1996:125). As Barger (2005:135-147) argues, the Spirit of God is able to bring about a “new and right spirit” within the patterns of human interrelatedness within the congregation. Conversely, the presence of a healthy spirit within the congregation provides conditions that welcome the continuing work of God’s Spirit.

Snyder and Runion (2002:14) posit that, when the church’s self-awareness is rooted in the “genetic” language of systems thinking rather than merely in organizational categories, “we are actually closer to Scripture, and to the way God works in nature and in society.” However, they note that strategic endeavours all too frequently have failed to reflect an appreciation of the church’s systemic nature:

The church is a totality of complex factors, not a linear cause-and-effect system... Far too much church programming assumes that the church is a linear cause-and-effect system... Many of us have felt intuitively for years that this approach is wrong... The church is a body, not a machine or a corporation... The church is a body, and the body is a complex system with unique DNA... We get into trouble when we try to program the church, just as we do when we try to program a teenager, or the love between two people, or the life of a family.

(:37-38)

The change-related challenges outlined above in sections 6.5.1 through 6.5.3 bear testimony to the fact that, when processes of change are undertaken in an intergenerational context, it often is precisely the struggle to discern the systemic dynamics of the church appropriately that hinders the Spirit’s work. At the same time, proper attention to the interrelationship of this dimension of the church’s existence and the work of the Spirit may actually provide the best hope that the

process of missional renewal will be able to have a lasting impact upon the way in which the congregation structures its life.

How might this insight regarding the interplay between the spiritual and sociological dimensions of the church's life be applied more specifically to the challenges associated with the process of missional renewal in the post-modern transition? As we have seen, the intergenerational implications of this process alone present a significant challenge to the church. In chapter seven, we will endeavour to respond to this reality at some length. We will posit that, from both a spiritual and sociological perspective, if established churches are to renew their mission within the post-modern transition, the process of renewal must entail a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice. Only then will these churches be able to engage Gen Xers effectively and faithfully.

## 6.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have begun to advance the following hypothesis:

If established churches are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, they must engage in a process of missional renewal that encompasses Generation X. When considered from both a sociological and a theological perspective, this process must be seen as entailing a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice.

The present chapter has contributed to the development of this hypothesis through an exploration of the following themes:

1. In section 6.2, we emphasized the notion that the church presently faces a “critical juncture,” one in which it must choose whether or not to respond adaptively to the changes occurring within the broader culture.
2. Section 6.3 was devoted to an exploration of the church's need to experience renewal. This was shown to be fundamentally the work of the Holy Spirit and to be integrally connected to the church's traditions. We emphasized *mission* as the central focus of the renewal needed within the church today, a reality that we described under the banner of “missional renewal.”
3. In section 6.4, our focus was upon the crucial role that Gen X is postured to make in helping the church to experience this missional renewal.

4. Finally, section 6.5 responded to the reluctance of many established church members to change and of Gen Xers to embrace the institutional church. This section demonstrated the need of local churches to give careful consideration to the processes by which they endeavour to promote missional renewal. This section concluded with an emphasis on the need for the processes employed within established churches to be appropriately attentive to both the spiritual and sociological dimensions of the church's existence.

Having explored these themes, we now are prepared to proceed with chapter seven. The chapter that follows will help us to grasp that, from both a spiritual and a sociological perspective, the processes by which the church endeavours to promote its own missional renewal in the post-modern transition must entail a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice.



## 7. INTERGENERATIONAL RECONCILIATION AND JUSTICE

### 7.1 Introduction

In chapter six, we began to develop a proposal for addressing the ineffectiveness of many churches in transmitting their faith traditions intergenerationally amid the post-modern transition. We suggested that the present moment in the church's life calls for an experience of renewal rooted in the Spirit's work and centred in the mission of God. In addition, we suggested that Generation X must be recognized as playing a crucial role in helping established churches to experience renewal during this transitional period. However, as we also saw, many established churches are ill prepared to undertake changes without alienating Xers, their elders, or both. This recognition led us to assert the critical importance of *process*. We suggested that a healthy process must give attention to both the spiritual and systemic dimensions of the church's life.

Having explored these considerations, we now are compelled to propose that, if established churches are to be effective in carrying out a process of missional renewal that encompasses Generation X, this process must entail a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice. First, we can submit this affirmation on theological grounds, for reconciliation and justice are marks of the reign of God. Many churches have failed to embody God's shalom in their relationship to Generation X and in the approach that they have taken to change. Thus, if the church is to engage in processes that aid it in living more fully and faithfully within its identity as a sign and foretaste of the reign of God, it must be concerned to strive to employ *means* that are in accordance with the marks of this reign. At this moment in history, reconciliation and justice are crucial to the church's integrity as it endeavours to pursue missional renewal within the current generational climate.

Second, we can submit this affirmation on sociological grounds. As we have seen, the formative experiences of Xers have caused them to be particularly sensitized to such issues. However, as we also have seen, the experiences of Xers with local churches have been significantly at odds with these values. In far too many cases, the systemic functioning of the church has tended to reflect the intergenerational dynamics evident in other small world contexts throughout our culture, thereby

compromising the integrity of its theological vision. Thus, if indeed “the medium is the message,” then the church will need to endeavour to conduct itself with authenticity and integrity if it is to engage the members of this generation. As Ford (1995:174-175) asserts, in working among Xers, the church’s “embodied apologetic” must extend to issues of reconciliation and justice.

In the pages that lie ahead, we will briefly develop each of these themes, first intergenerational reconciliation, and then intergenerational justice. Consistent with what has been articulated above, we will explore how these themes are rooted in the renewing work of the Spirit and how they might call the church to turn from “worldly” patterns and be converted afresh by the praxis of the gospel. Furthermore, we will demonstrate how the renewing work of the Spirit might cause the emphases of intergenerational reconciliation and justice to help foster a new and right spirit within the systemic functioning of the congregation. In each case, we will see that this will help to promote the congregation’s efforts to enfold Generation X into the process of renewal. However, we will see that intergenerational reconciliation and justice also offer the benefits of wholeness and wellbeing to members of the older generations within the congregation.

Our purpose here is not to advocate for an understanding of intergenerational reconciliation and justice as the essence, entirety, or end of missional renewal. Neither are we arguing that reconciliation and justice can be expected to function as “causes” of the church’s desired ends. Rather, considering the relationship of intergenerational reconciliation and justice to missional renewal in established congregations can lead us to assert that

we cannot understand one thing without the other. A and B are indivisible. Rather than thinking that A causes B, we see that A and B are mutual influences on one another. To think in terms of cause and effect is to think that things are influenced only in one direction...System theory teaches us to think of loops instead of lines.

(Steinke 1992:4)

Furthermore, systems theory assumes multiple causes, rather than a simple cause. It assumes that there are many contributing factors to any occurrence (Parsons & Leas 1993:19-20). Thus, while there surely is more to be said about missional renewal in

established churches, our point is simply to assert that intergenerational reconciliation and justice constitute essential dimensions of the process.

Miller (2004:186) recognizes that it is easy to confuse end outcomes (“dramatic results”) with process (“organic and cumulative”). However, he asserts, “in complex systems the leverage comes from a fanatical focus on small things...not constructing a grand plan and bold campaigns.” Thus, as Snyder and Runion (2002:38-39) insist, vital congregations will “focus on the many small actions that collectively give visible expression to the life of Jesus in the world.” When engaged in planning and programming, such churches ask, “How will this affect people’s real growth? Will it provide an environment for them to come to know Jesus Christ more deeply and serve him more surely?” In preceding sections of this study, we have insinuated that the missional renewal of the church is in fact a revolutionary aim of transformative proportions, indeed a paradigm shift. However, we must balance this recognition with the awareness that, in established congregations, this change is likely to be achieved through small, intentional steps. Even if intergenerational reconciliation and justice are but “small things,” the potential impact is considerable for any church desiring to be renewed in the purposes of Christ. In reality, as we will see, intergenerational reconciliation and justice are by no means small matters. The challenges associated with these dimensions of the renewal process are considerable. However, the opportunity they provide for established churches to undertake the process of missional renewal in a whole and healthy manner is even more significant.

## **7.2 Intergenerational Reconciliation**

### **7.2.1 The Priority of Relationship**

As we have already noted, the prevailing paradigm within many established churches causes them to view “programs” as the path by which to accomplish their objectives. Peterson (1999:149) notes that older generations within the church tend to see participation in organizational programs and processes as a primary means of connecting with one another. Many Xers, however, are “not familiar with the traditional Christian church that many of us know and are comfortable with. To them it may seem as a dark, cold, lonely, and completely unfamiliar place” (:141). Thus, contrary to the assumptions that have guided previous generations, *programs* are not

likely to constitute the most effective basis from which to engage in ministry among Xers.

The prevalence of technique within the modern church's worldview may actually contribute to Xers' perceptions of the church. Shenk (2001:97) notes that "technique has been woven into the very fabric of our lives. The ways we communicate and relate to others are shaped by technique." Shenk (:62-63) cautions that this all too frequently has had adverse implications for the ministry of the church. Because it entails the "objectification" of the one toward whom it is directed, technique tends to depersonalize and therefore inherently to foster alienation. Adds Shenk, technique "separates into parts, resulting in fragmentation." Thus, perhaps it should not surprise us to find Miller (2004:120-121) concluding that the emphasis on growth methods in recent decades has cost the church in terms of relational cohesion. Frost and Hirsch (2003:211-212) note that "[i]t is very easy for key leaders to program the church out of a natural community experience...Programs are important, but we need to remember that every medium has its own innate message—we invent our tools, and they in turn reinvent us." Within this framework, suggest Frost and Hirsch (2003:63-64), genuine connections between people in such churches tend to be "usually quite rare."

Because of the priority that the members of this generation place on community, many of those who have sought to minister among Gen Xers conclude that *relationship* actually provides the most effective place to begin in striving to reach them. As has already been surveyed at length in chapter four, Xers are accustomed to criticism, brokenness and alienation (Zustiak 1999:166, 192). In the face of these realities, they are keenly aware of their need to experience a different way of relating (:217). In particular, they desire to experience genuine love and acceptance. As Fickensher (1999:72) articulates, "Gen Xers seek companions who will not abandon them...Because such steadfastness is unusually difficult to find, Gen Xers will be drawn to communities that offer unconditional love in demonstrable, pragmatic ways." Peterson (1999:151) similarly notes that "Generation X is in search of relationships...Generation X wants to be loved. Generation X wants to engage in a meaningful faith journey within the context of a relationship." While many Xers are unprepared to commit the traditional church expectations, they are eager for

opportunities to connect authentically with others (Hammett & Pierce 2007:117). The perception that congregations tend to be cold and unresponsive heightens the significance of this issue for many Xers (Carroll & Roof 2002:211). The members of this generation are more likely to respond to “relationship churches” that evidence a concern for authentic relationship and community building than to those that depend upon “large, slick programs” (Scifres 1999:47, 48). Thus, authenticity and spontaneity are more important than programs (Corpus 1999:13).

Fickensher (1999:77) cautions that the fact that Xers desire “faithful friendships, intensity, and ‘realness’ does not necessarily mean that the most outgoing, hyper-friendly congregations will be the most successful in drawing them in.” Rather, the members of this generation “tend to have a different visceral response to hospitality than Baby Boomers”, because “[a]nything that appears too organized, too orchestrated, or ‘slick’ will not be trusted” (:78). In fact, when church leaders insist upon using assimilation techniques rooted in past assumption in an effort to reach Xers, it can leave the impression that the church does not genuinely care (Hammett & Pierce 2007:122). Xers place great importance upon the question of whether churches exhibit an appreciation of the need for a “come as you are” starting point to all relationships. Xers are likely to be reached meaningfully by ministries that are prepared to help them deal with the fear and distrust rooted in their past and to offer a meaningful model of community in the present (Fickensher 1999:62; Long 1997:119). Further, many Xers desire to find “a community where pain, failings, and guilt are openly acknowledged in an atmosphere of trust and compassion,” and where the “contradictions and questions that in the modern era were smoothed away in the name of consistency and mastery” also are acknowledged (Fickensher 1999:69).

Thus, we can assert that, if the church is to undertake a process of missional renewal that engages the passions and needs of Generation X, this process must entail a commitment to *persons* before *programs*. This elevates the significance of community within the church’s life to a place of considerable importance. Notes Peterson (1999:143),

A recent article in *Changing Church Perspectives* says this: ‘Community is central to the twenty-first century church. Today, we are a culture of fractured families and changing social structures. We are time-starved and isolated by distance, work, individualistic pursuits, and even our neighbourhoods. Yet,

we are created for community. Community in the church of the future is more than just making relationships or being in a small group. It is an expression of the gospel. It is both hermeneutic and apologetic.

Mahedy and Bernardi (1994:57) suggest that the value Xers place on community and friendship reflects “gospel values in secular dress.” These authors feel that Xers demonstrate an affinity for the second commandment, the love of neighbour (:66). The members of this generation “want to change the world...by changing the way we relate to one another.” This emphasis on community and relationship, which Mahedy and Bernardi (1994:117) see as “a radically different course from [Gen X’s] predecessors...has enormous implications for the world’s future.” Thus, as White (2001:178) asserts, the fact that post-modern Xers place “a remarkably high value on community...holds great promise and opportunity for the church.”

### **7.2.2 The Priority of Intergenerational Reconciliation**

That being said, as section 5.3.2.2 demonstrated, many Xers have not given the church particularly high marks where community is concerned. Many have found the church to be a context characterized by alienation, exclusion, and judgment. The formative experiences of many Xers exposed them to a church in which separation and rivalry existed among the generations. Perhaps most notably, many members of Generation X have been subjected to the same sort of denigration within the church that they have experienced within society at large. Thus, as we have seen, many Xers have concluded that the church does not offer them the experience of secure and authentic community they seek. Stated most simply, the relationship between the church and many of the members of this generation is broken. In turn, as we have seen, the unity of the church has been ruptured both formally, through the ways in which the church structures its life, and informally, through the intergroup dynamics that exist among the generations.

Over the course of chapters three through five, we have provided a thorough socio-historical account of how these realities have come about. However, this account is not altogether complete. In addition to what has already been articulated, we must recognize that these struggles also have a theological dimension. In part, they are a product of our fallenness. As Hines and DeYoung (2000:50) assert, “Sin causes

polarization and alienation and estranges people from one another. Sin is spiritual apartheid that forces us apart from God and from one another.” DeGruchy (2002:48) similarly suggests that, “as a result of human disobedience humanity is alienated from God, experiences enmity in its own ranks, and is estranged from nature.”

The origins of this problem can be traced back to the Genesis 3 account of the fall of humanity, which Elolia (2005:153) describes in the following terms:

...the beginning of human alienation from harmony and community with God and one another. It is the foundation of hatred, division, and injustice—the tear in the fabric of our cohumanity as illustrated by the story of Cain and Abel...Our sin obscures the image of God, which in turn causes us to deny that image to others in order to justify their subjugation and exploitation.

While the presence of alienation and brokenness within the human race may be rooted in this ancient origin, Woodley (2001:110) suggests that “Satan has few tools,” and thus recycles them in every generation. Human brokenness has a way of repeatedly being manifested in hatred, prejudice, exclusion, and violence. Hines and DeYoung (2000:5, 50) assert that the generation gap being experienced today is in fact a contemporary manifestation of this ancient struggle. They insist that it is rooted in “the same spirit that limits people by separating them into gulfs of suspicion and alienation.”

Because of the presence of alienation and enmity within the ranks of the human race, violence frequently erupts within the context of human relationships and communities. Schreier (1992:32-33) suggests that violence has a way of distorting the identity of those who are involved and the narrative structure through which they strive to find meaning for their lives. Violence delivers its participants into bondage to a “narrative of the lie.” Might it be fair to assert that Generation X’s experience of being marginalized and denigrated as a group of “Beavis and Butthead” slackers is a form of violence, a narrative of the lie that has profoundly impacted their sense of place and purpose? Beyond this, how might the systemic forces associated with modernity’s tendency to separate and depersonalize be responsible for doing injury to all contemporary generations? Have the claims and promises of modernity constituted a narrative of the lie that distorts human identity and that undermines authentic flourishing? If so, what can be done about this?

Against the backdrop of the challenge presented by our alienation from God and one another, scripture introduces the theme of “reconciliation.” Hines and DeYoung (2000:xxi) insist that the New Testament shows reconciliation to be “God’s priority.” These authors note that the term most frequently translated “reconciliation” in the New Testament literally means “to change completely, thoroughly, or radically” (:3). This is made possible by the initiative of God through the redeeming work of Christ at the cross (Schreiter 1992:43, 56-57; Schmiechen 1996:135; Schreiter 1998:14; Hines & DeYoung 2000:142). As Nalunnakkal (2005:49) explains, reconciliation “is a process of God’s Spirit through Jesus Christ...putting an end to enmity of all sorts. In other words, reconciliation is a restoration of relationships that had been lost. It refers to a new relationship between God, humanity and nature, and affected and effected by Christ’s redemptive work on the cross” (cf. DeGruchy 2002:51). Viewed at the broadest level, this reconciliation is cosmic in scope. It entails “the moral transformation of the world” (DeGruchy 2002:67, 69). The New Testament teaches that all things are reconciled in Christ (Schreiter 1992:56-57).

The New Testament indicates that this cosmic work of God reconciling all things to himself in Christ will not be complete until the final consummation of all things. Nonetheless, scripture also teaches clearly that reconciliation is a present reality because of what God has done through Christ (Schmiechen 1996:125, 145). Therefore, reconciliation is not merely a future state to be anticipated, but something to be expressed and experienced within the realm of human relationships. DeGruchy (2002:46) emphasizes “the interpersonal character of the term” and its relationship to “our understanding of both human and social existence.” He adds that reconciliation “always has to do with personal relationships.”

DeGruchy (2002:52) suggests that, in Pauline theology, reconciliation refers to the way in which the love of God in Jesus Christ turns enemies into friends, thereby creating peace. It entails the breaking down of barriers of exclusion and the establishment of peace between individuals or groups of people (Schmiechen 1996:111; Steinke 1996:87; DeYoung 1997:92-93). It involves the fundamental repair and healing of human lives (Schreiter 1992:21). Because the narrative of the passion, death, and resurrection of Christ has overcome the narrative of the lie (Schreiter 1992:61), reconciliation achieves “the shattering of the false claims of the



world” (Schmiechen 1996:122). It liberates humankind from structures and processes of violence (Schreier 1992:22) and enables interactants to be made new in accordance with God’s new creation (II Cor. 5:17). In essence, reconciliation mirrors the nature of the triune God and is closely linked with the *shalom* that God desires for all of creation (Steinke 1996:87, 131).

The interpersonal nature of reconciliation means that this divine priority must be embodied within “a community of restored relations” (DeGruchy 2002:88). Thus, the local church factors prominently and powerfully in the biblical vision of reconciliation (Moltmann 1978:86; DeGruchy 2002:99; Elolia 2005:158). DeYoung (1997:10) argues that God’s plan for reconciliation actually *begins* with the local church. The church, having been reconciled to God, is called to be a community of reconciled persons who are actively engaged in the ministry of reconciliation (Schmiechen 1996:135; DeYoung 1997: 126-127; Hines & DeYoung 2000:10, 32-33, 130-131; DeGruchy 2002:94). Through the life of the church, God desires to demonstrate the reconciliation he intends for the world (Steinke 1996:131). As a sign and foretaste of God’s reign, the church is to exemplify a shared way of life that stands in striking contrast from the patterns of brokenness and alienation native to the world (Schmiechen 1996:166; DeGruchy 2002:90).

In this community, worldly divisions are meant to be healed (DeYoung 1997:48) and unity is to be experienced as normative (Hines & DeYoung 2000:21, 51). As Hines and DeYoung (2000:300) express, “Divisions, inequities, and injustice based on age, race, culture, gender, social status, or economic position were removed in Christ” (cf. Johnson 1999:108). The church’s Eucharistic table fellowship is meant to be a profound expression of this reality (Moltmann 1978:86). It is “the central place where God breaks down the dividing wall of hostility, racism, tribalism, and sexism and builds up the body of Christ” (Elolia 2005:158). Thus, as DeGruchy (2002:99) suggests, the table is “a sign of the reconciliation God wills for society as a whole” (cf. Wogaman 2004:147).

As an instrument and agent of God’s reign in the world, the church is called to participate in the transformation of the patterns of brokenness and alienation by inviting others to become a part of this reconciled and reconciling community

(DeGruchy 2002:55, 74-75; Snyder & Runion 2002:131). Essentially, because the church's mission is only properly understood in relation to the *missio Dei*, and because reconciliation is integral to God's mission, reconciliation also must be understood as integral to the church's calling (DeGruchy 2002:53; Nalunnakkal 2005:44; Schreiter 2005:82-83). As Schreiter (2005:80) expresses, "reconciliation is first and foremost the work of God, and we cooperate in God's work....The mission of reconciliation is therefore based in the *missio Dei*." Reconciliation, then, constitutes an essential component of what it means for the church to live in faithfulness to its missional vocation. As DeYoung (1997:59) suggests, "It is an honor and privilege to be God's ambassadors of reconciliation. Simply stated, to be a Christian, by definition, is to be involved in the ministry of reconciliation."

The meaning with which the concept of reconciliation is invested can never be determined chiefly by cultural or context factors. It is fundamentally a theological concept (DeGruchy 2002:46). However, reconciliation can only be expressed within the particularities of a given context (Schreiter 1998:13; DeGruchy 2002:153). The intergenerational dynamics being explored in this study provide precisely such a context. Thus, the gospel of reconciliation has powerful implications for how the church cultivates its intergenerational praxis within the praxis of society. How might God's work of reconciliation impact the way in which the generations within the church relate to one another? How might a commitment to live in faithfulness to the biblical vision of reconciliation influence the mindset of established churchgoers toward the members of Generation X? If the church truly endeavoured to model intergenerational reconciliation within a complex generational context, how might this shape the way that the church lives out its witness in the midst of society's fragmentation and discord?

### **7.2.3 The Competing Vision of Homogeneity**

In chapters three through five, we have chronicled the increasing influence of church growth philosophy, with its affirmation of homogeneity, upon the life of the American church. Woodley (2001:30) sees the targeting of homogeneous groups as having become the basic formula of American church growth (cf. Foster 1997:5-6; Elolia 2005:155). Schaller (1999:60) suggests that it provides the underlying rationale for

the “replacement model” of church planting, one that encourages a mission achieved by focusing on a precisely and narrowly defined potential constituency. While the proponents of this homogeneous approach certainly would not discount the importance of reconciliation as a priority for the Christian community, they might wish to take issue with the suggestion that reconciliation between the generations must be manifested within the life of local congregations.

Proponents of the homogeneous approach do not see this framework as inherently inconsistent with the gospel of reconciliation. McGavran (1980:241) insisted that “‘one-people’ churches are righteous.” While McGavran (:239) did recognize the tearing down of dividing walls and the promotion of oneness as part of God’s agenda, he asserted that these objectives “must never be considered the whole work.” As a challenge to those who emphasize the need for unity, he posed the rhetorical question of whether it is better “to have a slow growing or no growing Church which is really brotherly, integrated, and hence ‘really Christian,’ than a rapidly growing one-people Church” (:238). In essence, he seemed to suggest that the HU Principle provides a more effective approach than the inclusive church can. McGavran (1980:238-239) insisted that his HU Principle is not to be understood as a justification for injustice, intolerance, or the powerful enforcing segregation against the disempowered. In fact, he suggested that integration of two or more “homogeneous groups” before one or the other is ready can itself be a form of injustice and “is often the kiss of death to the weaker party” (:241). If ethnocentrism or exclusivity persists within homogeneous fellowships, argued McGavran (:239), it does so “in spite of the Christian faith, not because of it.” Thus, for McGavran, expediency in spreading the gospel is the primary criteria by which this framework should be assessed.

As we saw in chapters three through five, the emphasis on expediency as a justification for a generationally homogeneous approach to church life has been widely influential within the American church in recent decades. In reflecting upon how this approach has been appropriated to target specific generations, White (1999:104) asserts that this is an effective strategy and is in fact a work of the Spirit. Benke and Benke (2002:8-9) also speak affirmingly of “generation driven churches.” These authors suggest that such churches “experience high levels of conversion growth....Their ministries are designed to respond to the cultural needs, attitudes, and

thought processes of the unchurched in the generational categories they have targeted.” Perhaps Schaller (1999:99) captures the mindset of expediency most poignantly in questioning whether it is necessary to base our strategies for reaching diverse cultures on “how the world should be” when adopting an approach based upon “the trend toward separation as a fact of life” promises to accelerate the rate of its success.

Does this approach to church life provide an adequate framework for the church’s missional vocation to be expressed? Is it truly faithful to the gospel of reconciliation? If so, this might force us to reconsider the value of working to promote intergenerational reconciliation within established churches. Schaller (1999:60) suggests that “the replacement model” of church planting is responsible in part for the shrinking of older parishes. In other words, because new churches are formed to serve each rising generation, older churches are left in a state of decline. Should we simply accept this as the natural order of things, as part of God’s will for the church? Are older members within established congregations entitled to conclude that “their people” consist simply of others their own age and thus release themselves from responsibility for reaching Generation X and those who come after them? Clearly, if we are going to advance a case for the prioritization of intergenerational reconciliation within established churches, we must engage critically with this approach that has been so prevalent in shaping the imagination of the American church. While it lies beyond the scope of this study to undertake a complete assessment of the merits and deficiencies of the HU Principle in relation to a context such as the caste system of India, where McGavran first formulated this concept, we do find it necessary to take a critical stance toward the way in which it has been appropriated within the American cultural context. Indeed, we must assert that the American brand of homogeneous church falls short of being a faithful expression of the church’s missional vocation.

As we saw in chapters three and five, within the American context, the focus on homogeneity has come to be linked closely with the values and emphases of a consumer culture. This reflects the church’s complicity in American society’s “carceral continuum,” the term Foucault (1977:303) has developed to describe the disciplinary matrix that moulds us to conform to societal expectations. In the case of

American society, this matrix disciplines us to define ourselves fundamentally as consumers. As Brownson et al (2003:3) note,

The real difficulty is that, as more than one pundit has noted, most of us no longer consume to live; we live to consume. Our lives are orchestrated around habits of consumption that no longer serve any higher purpose, but which have become ends in themselves, to be desired for their own sake. These habits in turn transform our relationships with other people, as friendships and even marriages are entertained around the question of meeting our personal needs.

As we saw in chapters three and four, all contemporary generations have been shaped within this matrix. Thus, it now is difficult for most people to imagine any other way of living or to contemplate why an alternative to the life of consumerism might even be desirable.

Some voices within the Christian community urge that we rather uncritically accept this market framework (Burgess 2005:10). Gibbs and Bolger (2005:138) note that churches that have adopted a market mindset “say they are only meeting the felt needs of individuals.” However, Gibbs and Bolger caution, “like all marketing organizations, they have a strong say in what those felt needs are.” These authors express concern that churches all too frequently “adopt cultural narratives that say that every person lacks something, is impoverished, and needs a particular product to be satisfied.” The appropriation of this narrative within the church forms people in a way that reinforces rather than challenging the carceral continuum at work within society at large. Thus, as Barger (2005:13) notes, many church-goers today are unashamedly engaged in “church-shopping.” It is not that contemporary church-goers are incapable of making commitments. However, their church involvement tends to be mostly a matter of personal choices.

This approach poses several profound problems. First, it fails truly to advance an understanding of discipleship as something that requires the individual to experience transformation. In this respect, it stands in stark contrast to the vision of the church that orients our lives to the reign of God. McGavran (1980:239) asserts that people “must be disciples before they can be made really one.” However, we are compelled to ask whether a congregation that centres in the interests of the individual will ever truly challenge this egocentric focus in a way that leads one to sacrifice for the sake of others. Barger (2005:25) insists that the narrative construct of consumerism, rather

than challenging us toward subjecting ourselves to God, actually invites us to put God at our service. In essence, by Barger's account, consumerism "trivializes God."

Barger (:27) suggests that this tendency to want to allude transformation is an agenda as old as Eden. In its American consumerist manifestation, it invites us to say, "I am in charge. I will change if I choose." This, says Barger (:49), is the kingdom of self. The sort of compartmentalized thinking this encourages toward God and the church "means that instead of the church and its sacred story being the organizing principle that informs, gives shape, and holds together a lifestyle, the lifestyle is what is finally served" (:56).

To illustrate the power of this consumerist mindset in undermining personal transformation, we can appropriate Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power." Reno (2002:98) explains the significance of this concept:

[A]s Nietzsche recognized clearly when he identified the will to power, the only way we can acquire the freedom to be ourselves is to change everything else. The world must reflect me so that I do not reflect the world. The upshot is a complex attitude toward revision, reform, discipline, and change. We deny the inward need to reform our souls, and at the same time we insist upon the need to reform all outward cultural forms.

Nietzsche's idea of the will to power helps us appreciate that, in a context in which ever increasing arenas of life are reduced to a matter of personal preferences and choices, our consumer mindset becomes the principle by which we are empowered to order our lives to reflect ourselves.

We can connect this with Sartre's (1989:45) claim that "Hell is other people." When we employ a consumer mindset as the basis for community affiliation, we may be prone to choose the "paradise" of groups that reflect ourselves, thereby insulating us against the "hell" of those whose differences might challenge us to change. As Volf (1996:91) asserts, the "self" is prone to put boundaries around its soul in its effort "to guard the integrity of its territory." Frost and Hirsch (2003:46) suggest that, when we surround ourselves with people "who are like us, who think the same thoughts, who have the same things, and who want the same things", this "confirms us... It is a form of self-justification." Thus, we may be tempted to select those settings that reflect us without transforming us.

Woodley (2001:30) suggests that this gravitation toward those who are “just like us” invites us to establish our faith upon the foundation of comfort. Elolia (2005:155) similarly notes that “most people, particularly visitors, may likely be comfortable and likely to join churches with others of their kind (much like joining a social club).” However, as we suggested in sections 3.5.1.3 and 5.2.2.3, this approach tends to foster shallowness (Follis 1991:1). A concern for salvation and justice can become replaced by the desire for personal well-being and psychological security (Miller 2005:85). In essence, asserts Schmiechen (1996:161-162), because it confines our thoughts to the horizontal plane of human choice, the principle of voluntary association is inadequate. “While the concept serves well to emphasize that membership in the church involves a free decision,” he notes, “it fails to lift before us the fact that the church is grounded in God’s goodwill, which creates a new spiritual reality in this world.” Indeed, as Brownson et al (2003:5) urge us to consider, the social script that encourages us to view ourselves as self-interested consumers is fundamentally at odds with the mission of God.

This leads us to a second concern: the distortion of the church and its mission that a consumer-oriented focus on homogeneity fosters. Hines and DeYoung (2000:5) see the homogeneous approach to church as a “half-hearted attempt” at realizing God’s true agenda of reconciliation and an “easy fix” that actually moves away from God’s intentions for the church. The focus becomes centred in “the realm of private feelings and values rather than in the shared mission in which God’s people participate” (Brownson et al 2003:7). In a market-driven culture, the church comes to be perceived as an entity that offers programs and experiences to meet people’s needs (Barger 2005:2-3). Barger (:3) suggests that this framework conditions us for “gimmicks” and for immediate gratification. As a result, however, the concept of “church” actually is distanced from its members (Hunsberger 1998:85).

In turn, the emphasis on programs, technique, and growth actually tends to undermine the experience of intimacy and authentic community that God desires for the church and for which many people long (Miller 2004:120-121). Gibbs and Bolger (2005:139) explain this reality:

Consumer churches promote self-interested exchange and thus violate an inherent part of the gospel, that of the gift. They want satisfied customers who

will return the next week. This distorts relationships among church members who expect certain things from others depending on whether they play the role of consumer or producer.

The limitations of this understanding of church life lead DeYoung (1995:154) to assert that, even among those who are “alike”, very little community exists; he sees such churches as making only limited attempts within narrow parameters. Faith rooted in separation has become the norm, while unity is now a unique occurrence (:58; cf. Moltmann 1978:29). Even though many churches strive to be “friendly,” their capacity to embody redemptive community proves quite limited (Hall 1997:26-27). Schmiechen (1996:14) suggests that this is an inevitable result of the church’s uncritical embrace of our culture’s “low view of institutions and community.” As he suggests, when community becomes utilitarian in nature, “the things that nurture, sustain, and build up a common life” tend to be neglected.

A third concern that must be expressed here is the great potential of this approach to church life in perpetuating prejudice and in reinforcing exclusivity. While proponents of the HU Principle insist that it is not intended as a justification for exclusion or prejudice, we are compelled to question whether this model sufficiently challenges the innate tendency toward ethnocentrism. Osborne (2005:43) asserts that homogeneity can flow out of either the flesh or the Spirit. However, can this approach truly be reduced neatly to such simple and dichotomized categories? Van Gelder (1998:73) suggests that an inherent flaw in church growth thinking is the assumption of the neutrality of culture. As a result of this, he suggests, the brokenness evident within society can be seen as normative for the life of the church, as well. As he expresses, the condition of the church being “divided and conflictive in its historical expressions” is “accepted as inevitable, and, for the most part, unresolvable” (Van Gelder 2000:121).

Even apart from the justification that the principle of homogeneity provides, the church may reflect the “inter-communal antipathies present in the society at large” (Volf 1996:36-37). As DeYoung (1997:7) expresses, the church’s experience of community can be limited by “the same walls we construct in society.” Gustin (2005:48) asserts that the inherent human tendency to exclusiveness and ethnocentrism” poses a challenge to unity and harmony; it inevitably fosters “distrust,



prejudice, and interpersonal division in all its forms.” Thus, when churches consciously employ a strategy that follows the lines of division drawn within the broader society, there is great potential that they will reinforce rather than heal the wounds of society (Woodley 2001:98).

Some critics insist that prejudice is not only a potential problem within the homogenous church, but inherent to the very concept. Writing from an indigenous Native American perspective, Woodley (2001:62) assesses the focus on homogeneity as constituting a sophisticated form of “-isms.” He asserts that numerical growth at the expense of inclusiveness is not true success because the ends never justify the means (:63). Woodley (:117) further insists that community established on the basis of division cannot produce true unity. Rather, its members are forced to seek uniformity. However, uniformity as a means of achieving unity, cautions Gustin (2005:48), is not only unrealistic, but unhealthy. In reflecting upon the application of this homogeneous approach among the generations of American church-goers, Stuart Briscoe (quoted in Zahn 2002) is compelled to compare intergenerational relations in the church with the system of apartheid ([www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com)).

While homogeneity most certainly can be rooted in ungodly intentions (Gibbs 1981:124), overt rejection or discrimination toward others may not be necessary for homogeneity to cause those from outside of the dominant cultural group to experience exclusion. Simple neglect and insensitivity toward them may adequately achieve this. A market-based approach, as Anderson (1990:165) poignantly illustrates, requires us to make choices about who to serve. However, this also has the potential to legitimize the human tendency to be friendly to “our kind of people” (Angrosino 2001:vi, vii; Woodley 2001:101; Hammett & Pierce 2007:76). In essence, the church can become inadvertently a “closed system” (Van Gelder 2007:126). Moltmann (1978:30), noting that “birds of a feather flock together”, suggests that “[t]o those who are ‘in,’ this seems to be the most natural thing in the world.” However, he adds, “those on the ‘outside’ feel excluded, degraded, and wounded.” Thus, as McNeal (2003:30) asserts, monoculturalism “does not embrace kingdom growth, because it insists that people conform to a cultural standard in order to gain admittance to the religious club.”

The narrowness that this generates actually may hinder the effectiveness of the church's witness. Homogeneity limits the congregation's worldview (Hawn 2003:6). For example, in generationally-homogeneous congregations, insights about the faith that naturally arise in a generationally diverse context become lost (Van Gelder 2007:52). This is true whether a homogeneous church is composed predominantly of younger or older members. Gibbs (1981:128) expresses concern that a church that "identifies exclusively with one group" is at risk of living "a self-centred, impoverished life." Frost and Hirsch (2003:39) see this evident in the many churches that they describe as being plagued by "bland middle-class conformity" and a "stifling monoculture." As a result of this, suggest Hines and DeYoung (2000:22), when congregations become "merely a nice crowd of saved 'look-alike, smell-alike, sound-alike' people...they will not be ready or able to impact the society around them and bring about the kind of change God desires to see in this world" (cf. Gibbs 1981:124-125). Frost and Hirsch (2003:46) similarly articulate that such a church "will always be severely impeded in its attempts to win the world for Christ." Thus, in a culturally complex environment, this homogeneous "ghetto mentality" simply is not adequate (Woodley 2001:98).

As the preceding chapters have evidenced, this focus on homogeneity actually may threaten the sustainability of the church's witness. Visser't Hooft (1956:77) offers the fascinating observation that the death of the church in North Africa was linked to its rootedness in one particular class, language, and culture. Similarly, asserts Gibbs (1981:128), when the group of which a homogeneous congregation is composed dwindles, "the church will face extinction." As we saw in section 5.4, many established churches today are threatened by the seeming inevitability of this prospect. If the planting of new churches for the sake of reaching the young is guided by a mindset of homogeneity, can the long-term prospects of these churches be any more optimistic? We noted in section 2.6 that the presence of multiple generations within the church is essential for the sustaining of the church's witness through time. However, suggests Murray Zoba (1999:68), "being a 'youth church' by definition precludes the development of healthy intergenerational relationships within the church." Thus, we are compelled to question whether the potential for these churches to develop a sustainable witness is likely to be any greater than that of their predecessors.

Furthermore, we must note that reliance upon homogeneity can compromise the credibility of the church's witness in a post-modern context. McNeal (2003:58) suggests that, in a post-modern culture, redemption must be understood as inherently relational. Thus, the community of reconciliation also is a crucial part of Christian witness in relation to this culture (Long 1997:97). Citizens of the post-modern world are crying for "oases of cohesion" (Miller 2004:180). This being the case, the market mindset about the church's mission is likely to hinder the cause of Christ in this generation greatly. As White (2001:180) explains, relational unity is necessary for the church's growth among the members of the first post-modern generation: "Without unity, we have little to offer the world that it does not already have...[I]t is no longer enough to present the gospel's propositional truths." Thus, the dependence upon homogeneity minimizes the church's impact on its social context (Gibbs 1981:126). As Hines and DeYoung (2000:22) insist, people do not need to encounter the same brokenness in the church that they find within society at large. The church's embrace of homogeneity actually damages its testimony to the world as a community of the new creation (Dawn 2001:98-99).

Another problem inherent in this dependence upon the use of homogeneity is the potential for the endless proliferation of churches devoted to specific subgroups (Follis 1999:1). As Schmiechen (1996:63) notes, the "demand for differentiation" within our society essentially constitutes a slippery slope in which all past expressions of freedom must be surpassed. Post-modern tribalism certainly has the potential to cause division and distance within our society to increase (Dietterich 1998:176). Thus, we would do well to contemplate how one identifies what sort of cultural factors should serve as a basis for the formation of distinct homogeneous groups? In other words, at what level of cultural distance should we identify the barriers that separate people as beyond direct structural confrontation by the gospel of reconciliation?

In McGavran's treatment of this subject, it seems as though he made little effort to assign any relative weight to the various sorts of "barriers" that separate groups. However, we are forced to ask, are all language, ethnic, economic, and socio-cultural barriers created equal? This is a particularly crucial question with which to grapple in

a context in which, as Nalunnakkal (2005:46) expresses, the market now “determines the destiny of people” and “decides one’s dignity and identity.” Should the church allow itself to be guided by the lines of demarcation that have been drawn within a market economy, or should it strive to transcend and transform these artificial distinctions? While this is not meant to diminish the distinctions that exist between the first post-modern generation and their modern elders, we must question to what degree contemporary churches are permitting stylistic differences in musical preferences and other facets of generational experience to serve as the basis for perpetuating fragmentation. How many of these churches are truly engaged in what Turner (1993:60-69) has called “deep mission”, the work of critiquing and converting in the “deeper” layers of culture (which we introduced in section 2.2)?

As we saw in section 3.4, in the late 1800’s, concerns were being raised about young people forming their own churches. In section 3.5.2.5, we noted that, by the 1970’s, this prospect had been realized among the members of the Boomer generation. Now, this trend continues among the members of Generation X (section 5.4.6.4). Benke and Benke (2002:6) affirmingly predict “an ongoing trend toward churches that are focused in outreach toward selective generational groups, as opposed to a multigenerational orientation.” Is this trend truly something to which we can add our affirmation? When will we reverse this tide in an effort to bring people together rather than apart? Bosch (1996:466) insists that we

cannot but take a stand against the *proliferation of new churches*, which are often formed on the basis of extremely questionable distinctions. This Protestant virus may no longer be tolerated as though it is the most natural thing in the world for a group of people to start their own church, which mirrors their foibles, fears, and suspicions, nurtures their prejudices, and makes them feel comfortable and relaxed. If Wagner (1979) is praised (on the dust cover of his book) for having transformed “the statement that ‘11 A.M. on Sunday is the most segregated hour in America’ from a millstone around Christian necks into a dynamic tool for assuring Christian growth”, then something is drastically wrong...[T]he essence of heresy, says Hoekendijk, is the “fundamental refusal to participate in a common history” (1967a:348).

If Best and Kellner (1997:279) are able to assert that there is still common ground of experience and shared concern between moderns and post-moderns within society at large, how much more should this be true within the reconciled body of Christ?

These observations leave us with some serious questions about a generationally homogeneous approach to church life. Frost and Hirsch (2003:52) suggest that “leaders of suburban, middle-class churches are being hypocritical” when they criticize the validity of the HU Principle for the missional church to fulfil its imperative to reach specific people groups. Responding fully to that claim is perhaps best reserved for another study. However, it is worth noting that these authors do acknowledge the legitimacy of the concerns of church leaders toward the limitations of generationally heterogeneous churches. As we have demonstrated above, a focus on homogeneity does not offer the best hope for helping established churches navigate the challenges associated with the current generational climate. Neither does it provide these established churches with a viable framework for living in renewed faithfulness to their missional vocation (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:95, 125).

Armour and Browning (1995:156) claim that few viable alternatives to this model have been proposed. However, a lack of alternatives hardly constitutes a legitimate reason to defer to this approach to church life as the only option. Frazee (2001:88) reminds us that what we measure is our mission. Increased numbers of attendees certainly can be an indication of kingdom growth. However, as Keener (2005:39) argues, “[W]e dare not use data about ‘homogeneous’ churches’ rapid growth to ignore [God’s] invitations to diversity.” Is it enough merely to measure numerical growth while deemphasizing the implications of the gospel for our relationship to our neighbour (Van Rheenen 2004:5)? Gibbs (1981:127) insists that this cannot really be justified biblically. For the church that is striving to live in faithfulness to its missional vocation, the indicators of success “are not determined by quantitative measures”, but by “the quality of Christian love experienced in the midst of its common life and ministry” (Dietterich 1998:156). As McNeal (2003:67) asserts, the missional renewal of the church must involve changing the ministry “scorecard.”

Clearly, if established churches are to experience missional renewal in the post-modern transition, they will need to find a better framework within which to operate than the HU Principle. An individualistic solution to a systemic problem invites inattention to the true issues needing to be addressed (Conder 2006:73). As Rendle (2002:118) expresses, “Pretending that all members can shape congregational life in their preferred image does not help generations... negotiate how to live together, share

worship, or pass on the faith.” Howard Merritt (2007:9) suggests that the models espoused within the CGM often are not attainable unless one is planting a new church. However, as Keener (2005:38) expresses, “differences of opinion will show up in even the most niched congregations.” In contrast to the CGM’s focus on “the uniqueness and distinctiveness of people groups”, the missional church is rooted in the assumption that “the gospel breaks socio-economic and ethnic divisions between peoples so that all become one in Christ....[It] views God’s mission holistically” (Van Rheenen 2004:3). Thus, the established church that is striving to be renewed as a missional community will endeavour to move beyond the dynamics of likeness, fragmentation, and competition (Conder 2006:157), and will work to embody intergenerational reconciliation.

## **7.2.4 Pursuing Intergenerational Reconciliation in the Church**

### **7.2.4.1 Pursuing Intergenerational Unity in Diversity**

Clearly, if established churches are to strive toward an experience of missional renewal that encompasses Gen X, this will require a paradigm shift in the “intergenerationality” of the church (Allen 2005:328). These churches must find a way to overcome the dynamics of fragmentation, division, and alienation that plague our society. The current intergenerational climate provides the church with the opportunity to lead the way in modelling “how to live more respectfully and caringly” for the rest of society (Gambone 1998:20). The church has the potential to be the place where true intergenerational community might be achieved (Harkness 1998:6). As Whitesel and Hunter (2000:100) express, the church “has a contribution to make as a tri-generational refuge.” Fortunately, a growing number of churches are recognizing this reality and are working to bring the generations together (Peterson 1999:107, 108). Zahn (2002) notes that, in many congregations, a renewed concern for building cross-generational relationships is motivated by a desire to strengthen faith formation in community ([www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com)).

The renewed emphasis upon intergenerational community resonates with the values of Generation X. This generation is steeped in a culture for which bringing things together in holistic harmony is an important objective (Drane 2000:125). Furthermore, for the members of this generation, integrating diverse people groups

into the church is a central goal (Cunningham 2006:59). Frazee (2001:195) reflects upon this change in emphasis:

[T]he growing value of intergenerational life is being recognized by young adults in their twenties; driven by postmodern values, they seem to be crying out for it. One Gen X couple is recorded as saying, “Our generation, without necessarily knowing it, is calling the church back to what the church has always been called to be—a multigenerational, multicultural, open, orthodox, and culturally engaged body of believers.” Dieter and Valerie Zander, pastors and baby-boomer mentors to Gen Xers, make this comment: “The potentially endless proliferation of new subgroups begins to look like it is based on nothing more than catering to new styles. That kind of shallowness won’t last.”

Frazee predicts that Xers likely will never fully see these ideals realized.

Nonetheless, strides toward the realization of this vision can be achieved within the life of local churches. As Staub (2003) asserts, the best scenario for reaching Xers is provided by those churches that are composed of at least three generations, because they offer the potential for meaningful intergenerational connections ([www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com)).

This, of course, presents the church with the considerable challenge of actually pursuing unity. Scripture leaves little doubt as to the imperative nature of the call to unity (Gustin 2005:46). White (2001:178) asserts that “Jesus clearly maintained that there was a direct relationship between Christian unity and effective evangelism (John 13 and 17). He taught that the world’s attention would be arrested if His followers would maintain relational unity.” Gustin (2005:47) also reflects upon the relationship between unity and our witness:

[T]he biggest single reason that both Jesus and Paul gave for maintaining unity is the impact it has on our witness. Unity brings glory to God. It demonstrates to the world the power of the gospel to do what humans cannot do alone. The unity of the church is the greatest advertisement there is for God’s power and grace. This demonstration of unity empowers our mission and enables our witness. To the extent that the church reflects the reality that it is the body of Christ, united in love—to that extent, the church’s mission will succeed.

In seeking to be unified, the church expresses its commitment to its missional task of promoting healing as a reconciled and reconciling community. This healing task goes against the grain of the prevailing expectations within the dominant culture (Barrett 1998:134, 135; Riddell 1998:69). Thus, it also will powerfully confirm the church’s testimony in the world.

The unity that God desires for the church encompasses a rich and complex diversity. This is evident in the life of the early church. As Woodley (2001:34) suggests, Pentecost was marked by diverse people being blessed by unity. Though the first conflict in the church (Acts 6) was a cultural conflict, this community remained together (:67). Lohfink (1999:174) urges us to contemplate the improbability of the early church's experience of community:

We should try to imagine how such different people could sit at one table. They were like fire and water. But just there began the miracle of the eschatological people of God. If each one were to remain in his or her own corner and individual house nothing of the reign of God could be seen. Its fascination can only appear when people of different backgrounds, different gifts, different colors, men and women sit together at a single table.

Lohfink (:218) further insists that the Christian community in Jerusalem “did not see themselves as a group of like-minded friends and also not as a group of people who had joined because of particular interests; they were a gathering created by God.” Snyder and Runion (2002:24) describe the unity evident among these first Christians as “miraculous” and “one of the most amazing things about the early church.”

The legacy of the early church also helps us to appreciate that the unity God desires for the church is not dependent upon members being pressed toward conformity or uniformity (Gibbs 1981:124). Angrosino (2001:2) points to the Acts 15 account of the Jerusalem Council as evidence that God does not condemn cultural differences or require people to change their cultural identity. Eloia (2005:156-157) sees this emphasis reinforced in Galatians 3:26-28:

Paul does not envision a community in which differences disappear but one which affirms and celebrates differences...By affirming our differences as members of the human family, we can recognize others as members of the same family, though they may belong to distinct social and ethnic groups. The Galatians passage therefore calls us to affirm the wealth of human diversity; anything less is a violation of the good news.

Reflecting on the more than thirty occurrences of the metaphor of “the body” to describe the church within the Pauline epistles, Steinke (1992:56-57) insists that the presence of diversity within the church actually is quite necessary: “When a group is diverse, it is more resourceful, having many ideas, gifts, and functions at work... The church is a gathering of dissimilar parts. It is not necessary that the parts be identical



to one another. It is necessary that they be identified with one another.” Thus, in the New Testament, we see evidence of a church that gained its strength not from uniformity, but from “unanimity” (Lohfink 1999:236).

The work of God within the early church remains relevant in today’s complex intergenerational context, as well. Clearly, cultural differences need not necessarily be barriers to human community (DeYoung 1995:180). Thus, the fact that ministry among the contemporary generations is complicated by cross-cultural dynamics does not necessarily discount the possibility of intergenerational unity. Furthermore, as Volf (1996:48) observes, within the “differentiated body of Christ”, “[b]odily inscribed differences are brought together, not removed.” Explains Volf, the body of Christ “lives as a complex interplay of differentiated bodies—Jewish and gentile, female and male, slave and free—of those who have partaken of Christ’s self-sacrifice.” The Spirit does not erase such “bodily inscribed differences,” but rather allows the people in possession of such differences to enjoy access into the one body of Christ on the same terms. In section 2.3.2, we were introduced to the concept of generational “age location in history” (Strauss & Howe 1992:48). We can assert that the differences between the generations in terms of their current location within the human life course constitute one category of “bodily inscribed differences.” By Volf’s account, this category of differentiation certainly does not lie beyond the scope of Christ’s unifying work.

This recognition presents the contemporary church with an important choice. As Foster (1997:35) asserts, when encountering diversity, the church has to make decisions about its life and work. Will we strive to move toward greater faithfulness to God’s intent for the church or away from it? In reflecting upon the challenges associated with bringing the generations together in the church, Driscoll (2005:42) frames this same question in poignant and potent terms:

[R]egarding diversity in the church there are really only two destinations: Babel or Pentecost... The way a church travels toward Babel is by asking, ‘How can we glorify ourselves by growing our ministry?’ This desire leads to a false gospel that does not call me to love my neighbor and show hospitality toward those who are different from me. This gospel expects that I love only those who are like me and who share my same values and interests.

Conversely, Pentecost is God’s attempt at kingdom unity through diversity—hanging out with people unlike me because God has been gracious

to us all... The way a church travels toward Pentecost is by asking, ‘How can we glorify Jesus by expanding his kingdom?’ This desire leads to the true gospel that calls me to love my neighbors who are unlike me, and welcome them into Christ’s church.

Driscoll insists that the real question for us is not whether we are pursuing diversity, but rather whether we genuinely are following the gospel of Christ. If we are living in accordance with the gospel, he asserts, “diversity will occur as a result of the reconciliation accomplished in Jesus Christ.” Thus, we should not only tolerate diversity, but seek and celebrate it; we should not only accept it, but appreciate it (Woodley 2001:43).

#### **7.2.4.2 Pursuing Intergenerational Inclusivity**

As with the early church, this diversity challenges local congregations beyond uniformity to a genuine inclusivity. As Dietterich (1998:179) expresses, a church that is striving to be faithful to its missional vocation will “welcome and nurture the incredible richness and particularity of perspectives, backgrounds, and gifts, but always within the embrace of God’s reconciling unity.” This requires the church to live as an open system, rather than one that is closed to “others.” Law (2000:16) notes that all organizations are by nature exclusive: “When an organization declares its existence, it defines its boundary and, therefore, defines who is part of the organization and who is not.” Law (:18) adds that all communities have a “boundary function”, which is “the mechanism by which a person or group is accepted as a full member of the community” and “is transformed from being ‘them’ to ‘us.’” For the church, the boundaries by which its existence is defined are intimately wrapped up in the gracious invitation of Jesus.

Thus, as Law (2000:26) insists, “One of the central missions of the Christian community is to welcome those who are excluded...In other words, the boundary function of a faithful Christian community begins with inclusion.” This sort of openness is only possible when a community “operates on the assumption that there is always an abundance of God’s grace” and thus is secure enough to open its boundaries to include others (:35). While Law (:14) suggests that exclusion does have a place in preserving the community, he also insists that it should not “overshadow”

or outweigh the work of including outsiders. Thus, churches must be willing to reassess those attitudes and practices that have fostered distance in relation to post-modern young adults. As Long (1997:117) cautions, by standing in the way of Gen X's encounter with the grace of God, the church mirrors the disposition of the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son.

The effort to be inclusive requires that members of the church be willing to open themselves to embrace those whose generational identity is distinct from their own. Embrace, as Foster (1997:1) notes, entails an interplay of both "differentiation and intimacy." Thus, rather than expecting that newcomers assimilate into the cultural patterns of the majority culture represented within the congregation, a culturally open congregation "will display a spirit of receptivity toward the community's cultural diversity" (Hawn 2003:8). In essence, the church is enabled to be "a 'Church for others,'" one that embraces "the 'other' and the 'outsider'" (DeGruchy 2002:94). In reflecting upon Buber's "I-It/I-Thou" distinction, Elolia (2005:150) observes that the "other" is not to be an 'it,' which connotes both detachment and depersonalization, but rather a 'thou,' which expresses the dignity of human personhood for the other." In section 2.5, we noted the intergroup dynamics that cause the members of differing generations within "small world" contexts to develop an "I-It" posture in relating to one another. As we have seen throughout chapters three through five, these dynamics are evident both throughout society and within the church. The evidence provided in preceding chapters suggests that Generation Xers have suffered the impact of this depersonalization at least as much as any generation.

However, the gospel serves as an "antidote to dehumanization" (Bosch 1995:45). Xers must be provided opportunity to experience this hope through the "embodied apologetic" of the local congregation. For a generation that struggles with a sense of alienation from their families and society as a whole, the church has the potential to offer a place of belonging, involvement, and serving a greater purpose (Zustiak 1999:192). Thus, it is important that churches to go out of their way to cultivate "a congenial environment for young adults" (Kew 2001:64). As Zustiak (1999:166) notes,

What Xers don't need is more criticism and rejection. They have lived their whole lives with a sense of failure and disappointment. Bridges need to be

built between the generations and healing administered to fragile and broken lives. Generation X is not going to respond to new arguments about the truth claims of Christianity. They are going to respond when they experience the genuine care, concern and involvement of Christian people reaching out in compassion and understanding.

This challenges churches to invite Xer participation in their activities and to make it clear that both they and God desire to receive the members of this generation as “they are right now” (:217).

A culturally open church recognizes the neighbour as a divine agent of blessing or even of challenge (Foster 1997:51). According to Angrosino (2001:4), sometimes those who seem to be of our culture on the surface are hardest to understand and accept. As we noted in section 4.6.2, this is precisely the situation that many older church members face as they struggle to understand the post-modern young adults with whom they come into contact. Thus, perhaps the current state of intergenerational relations in the church should come as no surprise to us. However, insists Moltmann (1978:30-31), as we accept one another “as Christ has accepted [us]”, we are provided “a new orientation”, one that “opens us up for others as they really are so that we gain a longing for and an interest in them.” This invites us beyond friendship “within a closed circle of the faithful and pious,” toward “open friendship” with those who are different than ourselves (:60-62).

This has powerful implications for the church’s ministry among Xers. However, as Zustiak (1999:192) observes, “The typical church is going to have to make some adjustments in attitude and approach if it is going to be effective in reaching out to Generation X.” In section 7.2.1, we noted that Xers tend to respond negatively to the “programs” of hospitality employed in many churches. As we have noted, they prefer to be known and understood. They desire to encounter authenticity and honesty (Reifschneider 1999:37). Thus, as established churches strive to demonstrate an open receptivity to Xers, it is important that they be sensitive to the reality that patterns of hospitality “are specific to each culture, and knowing the nuances of what counts for hospitality in any given culture is essential to the exercise of hospitality in that culture” (Schreiter 1998:89). Corpus (1999:13) suggests that the church should strive to extend the same respectful “cross-cultural grace” to people from another generation that they would in welcoming “someone from a distant culture.”

As the church strives to know and understand Generation Xers, listening must be the beginning point of relationship (Peterson 1999:146). As Householder (1999:45, 46) expresses, “The church needs to talk less and listen more, label less and love more.” Otherwise, it is unlikely to gain the trust of this generation. Corpus (1999:13) suggests that it may actually come as a relief for many Christians to know that sharing the gospel with younger generations entails talking less and listening more. However, “Listening is a simple and obvious strategy with people who are different from you, but listening between generations does not always come easily.” Nonetheless, asserts Howard Merritt (2007:127), “When we understand the context of young adults and listen to them, without smugly dismissing or denying their realities, we begin to connect with those under forty in our midst, where they live and how they live.” As a result, the church’s leaders will be blessed and challenged with fuller and more meaningful insight into what it might mean to engage in mission in a post-modern context.

#### **7.2.4.3 Pursuing Intergenerational Mutuality**

In section 2.2, we introduced the concept of “solidarity” to describe the “glue” by which “group cohesiveness” is maintained within a given society or community (Roberts, Richards, & Bengston 1991:12). Throughout chapters three and four, we chronicled the decline of solidarity between the generations and identified this as a challenge within contemporary society. Foster (1997:68) notes that some theologians have adopted this term to describe “the dynamics in communities that affirm and embrace these incomprehensible differences as gifts to our common life.” However, he argues, an even more helpful term might be “mutuality.” As he explains,

In the experience of mutuality different peoples share similar feelings or ideas. It involves an action of reciprocity, of give and take. The goal of mutuality is to have the sense of belonging to one another—of having empathy for the other. The impetus in groups—including congregations—toward the experience of mutuality is powerful. It originates in our human quest to be connected to others, to share a sense of commitment to one another, to be on intimate terms with another. It draws on the persistent assumption that despite our differences we have something in common.

Foster insists that the differences that exist among people within the church cannot be reduced to some cultural “common denominator.” To illustrate this, he specifically

cites the intergenerational distance between the experience of the child born in the 1990s and that of his or her parents at the same age. It is precisely because of this weighty challenge that Whitesel and Hunter (2000:85, 127) advance a framework for the “peaceful co-existence” of the generations within the church that “insulates” them organizationally from one another. However, is this mutual protection from one another truly all that we can hope to achieve in a multigenerational context? As we endeavour to bring diverse generations together within one unified body, how can mutuality ever be experienced truly among these generations? What will it take to cultivate such mutuality?

At this moment in history, the pursuit of mutuality will require the church to break out of its cultural blindness and to make a genuine effort at bridging the generation gaps that exist within our society (Roof & Clark 2002:208, 210). It will challenge us to cultivate a shared life together that expresses the reality of God’s reconciling work. Schmiechen (1996:145) insists that the experience of reconciliation is possible “in the here and now,” even despite “the weakness and brokenness of the church.” However, building a church for the future will take all of the sense of community that we can summon (Mead 1991:63). It will require a rediscovery of community as central to Christian faith and practice (Drane 2000:120). In the face of our individualistic culture, we will need to engage in a “remoralization” of social life, so that we are enabled to move beyond narrow self-interest (Roof 1995:254). This renewed moral commitment will entail an emphasis upon interconnected relationships and mutual dependence. This is consistent with the marks of missional vitality. As Riddell (1998:169-171) asserts, a missionally vital congregation will be one that is open to others and that places a high premium on relationships. The missional church is one in which the freedom and reconciliation opened in principle in Christ must be lived out in social concreteness (Dietterich 1998:159). Thus, Snyder and Runion (2002:40-41) encourage churches that are striving to live in faithfulness to their missional vocation to focus upon “building vital, accountable community.”

Amid the intergenerational challenges with which the church is faced today, the cultivation of a community of mutuality is no small task. Because peace is not something that we work out with those we like or simply a matter of imposing our will on the other, it is not easy to achieve (Schmiechen 1996:133). As Lohfink

(1999:320) asserts, the experience of community is not something that can be accomplished by means of human effort:

Where [community] exists it has a share in the great history through which God leads God's people. Therefore it cannot be 'made,' but is created by God alone. Hence also the many disappointed people who came together to make something new for themselves, usually to meet their own needs, only to see the new thing slip through their fingers.

The experience of genuine Christian community can only occur when people are challenged toward an experience of reconciliation that they could not achieve "without God's supernatural help" (Hines & DeYoung 2000:51). This reconciliation cannot be substituted by human "counterfeits", such as the "lesser goals" of "integration, accommodation, and tolerance" (:51). Neither is it something that can be realized solely through conflict mediation strategies (Schreiter 1992:25). As Schreiter (1998:14) notes, "reconciliation is not a human achievement, but the work of God within us." It is a ministry of the Spirit and takes place in the Spirit (Kim 2005:22). Through the Holy Spirit, churches that are striving to live in faithfulness to their missional vocation "are empowered to participate in God's shattering of all barriers" (Dietterich 1998:162).

Thus, if the generations within the church are to be remade into a community of mutuality, this will require a disposition of reliance upon and devotion to God (Woodley 2001:43). Schreiter (1998:26) believes that reconciliation "is more a matter of spirituality than strategy." As he explains, "Reconciliation is not mastered, but discovered. Mediation is a technical rationality, a matter of skill and problems. Reconciliation is more about attitude than skill, a stance before the broken world rather than a tool to repair that world." This is not to suggest that the pursuit of reconciliation does not entail strategies (:16). The key is for Christians involved in reconciliation "to understand how they interact with the work of God and how they become instruments of God's work in all of this" (:12). In other words, they must remain attentive to the relationship between spirituality and strategy:

There is, then, a balance between spirituality and strategy. A spirituality that does not lead to strategies does not fulfil its goal. A strategy that is not based in a spirituality will fall short of the mark. There must be this mutual interaction. In that interaction it is the spirituality that should guide the strategy.

(:17)

Thus, asserts Schreiter (:16) “the cultivation of a relationship with God” becomes the basis by which reconciliation can happen.

In addition to this reliance upon God, the congregation will only be able to rediscover life together as a community of mutuality as its members return to an authentic vision of the church. This entails putting to death false notions of the church and reconnecting with the ancient and authentic story of the gospel in a way that forms a community of faith with passion and character (Barger 2005:71). The church is not ours, but God’s; it does not bear witness to the choices we make, but to the choices God has made and continues to make (Barger 2005:22, 76). As Snyder and Runion (2002:52-53) express, “When the Bible speaks of being a part of Christ’s body, the emphasis is not on the individual’s action but on God’s action as he joins us to Christ, makes us part of the body, and adopts us as his children.” The biblical vision of the church critiques the assumptions of consumerist individualism and the practices of volunteerism as being inadequate (Van Gelder 1998:71). Thus, as Miller (2005:228) suggests, our consumer culture’s focus on the private realm of the individual must be brought into an ecclesial discourse to enable us to discern and address both its appropriate and illegitimate claims upon our lives.

Our culture’s emphasis on consumerism does not have to be viewed solely as a problem to be solved. Rather, as Miller (2005:228) suggests, the importance placed upon choice can be appropriated to challenge Christians to choose to live in accordance with the values of God’s reign. As Brownson et al (2003:34, 53) note, scripture calls us to become “swept up in God’s larger purpose” and to participate in God’s reign. As we live in the reign of God, we are enabled to overcome “consumer spirituality” (Lynch 2002:107). In its place, we are able to practice a missional spirituality that emphasizes our commonality and that subverts the reign of the individual (Riddell 1998:132-135). Mahedy and Bernardi (1994:66) suggest that, when the church becomes more “we-centred” and less driven by market values, “Generation X may begin to see in us the living God.” At the same time, by inviting Xers to be engaged by the story of God’s reign, churches are well positioned to challenge Xers to examine how their own spirituality has been shaped by the “deep influences of culture” to much the same degree as the institutions they are prone to criticize (Beaudoin 1998:59). In essence, the biblical vision of the church challenges



local congregations to “entwine an intergenerational community that connects with God, each other, and the world” (Howard Merritt 2007:137).

In addition to relying upon God and returning to the true story of God’s reign, the pursuit of mutuality must entail the diverse members of the congregation turning toward one another for the purpose of “remaking” relationships (Schreiter 1998:35). If old relational patterns are not changed, the result will be unsatisfying.

Reconciliation does not amount merely to the restoration of the *status quo* (Schreiter 1992:55). Rather, it takes all parties to “a new place” (:56; cf. Schreiter 1998:30). However, the establishment of peace can only begin when “opposing sides are willing and able to adopt a new beginning” (Schmiechen 1996:133). DeYoung (1997:74) asserts that true reconciliation is “centered in relationships that empower all parties involved” and “takes place between equals who acknowledge their need for each other.”

This cannot be merely a hasty peace, a superficial substitute for genuine Christian reconciliation (DeYoung 1997:18). DeGruchy (2002:71) insists that “[t]here is nothing cheap about God’s reconciliation.” Thus, the reconciliation we are called to pursue is no less “cheap” (Hines & DeYoung 2000:2). Hill (2002:162) asserts that “[t]he business of the body of Christ is to build bridges between the generations, and the wood used for the bridge is the cross of Christ. It is the cross of Christ that brings us together, and it is the life of the cross that we are called to live.” The church that is striving to live in faithfulness to its missional vocation must be intentional about investing time, energy, and resources in helping people to unlearn old patterns and to learn the new ways of living that will help to build reconciled relationships (Dietterich 1998:152; DeGruchy 2002:184). Thus, the work of intergenerational ministry will need to focus upon intergenerational healing and reconciliation (Loper 1999:37). This is an important consideration for a generation that, as we saw in sections 4.4 and 4.5, largely has not had the advantage of seeing healthy relationships modelled. As we saw, while many members of this generation hunger for a more meaningful experience of relationship, they struggle to know how to achieve this. However, as we saw in chapter five, the need for relational healing certainly exists among the other generations within the congregation, as well.

As the generations within the congregation strive to rebuild reconciled relationships, they also will be challenged to identify and address those structures and mindsets within the congregation's life that undermine mutuality. As Miller (2004:187) observes, we need "to gain a more systemic understanding of our unintentionally destructive actions." Furthermore, suggest Hines and DeYoung (2000:32-33), we must be prepared to turn away from these barriers to reconciliation:

We must repent of everything in our local congregations that would nullify reconciliation and hinder the solidarity that God intends us to have. We must repent of everything that has developed in our communities and regions that cuts us off from this solidarity... We must renounce attitudes, traditions, customs, and structures that embarrass and compromise our testimony of reconciliation and solidarity.

Unless local churches are prepared to acknowledge and deal with these unpleasant realities, they will continue to subvert their best intentions to look and be like Christ (Woodley 2001:66). However, a commitment to repentance for the sake of rebuilding intergenerational relationships will come to bear upon the life of the congregation in several important ways. We will consider three of these ways briefly here.

First, if the church is going to provide a context for the rebuilding of reconciled relationships between the generations, this will require it to move away from ways of organizing its life that reinforce barriers between people rather than promoting reconciliation (Foster 1997:16; DeYoung 2000:140-141). Lohfink (1999:220) asserts that the centre of the church's life does not reside in some kind of bureaucracy or the activity of a group, but rather in "the assembly in which the whole community comes together or is at least represented, and in which the union with the whole Church is preserved." Thus, assembling together is integral to the church's identity. As Lohfink explains "The communion of believers thus is not something that is merely spiritual and intellectual. It must be embodied. It needs a place, a realm in which it can take shape" (:262). Furthermore, the assembly provides the basis for mutual reconciliation; it offers a context "where solutions allowing for a new beginning can be found" (:235). Thus, if the church is going to make progress in fostering intergenerational reconciliation, it must find ways "to get older people and younger people spending meaningful time with each other" (Loper 1999:12).

This is a complex task. As we noted in section 5.2.2.2, the church's imagination tends to be limited by the legacy of "solid church" that has been embedded deeply in its consciousness. This causes the generations within the church to be prone to focus their attention on the Sunday morning worship services and, as a result, to move rather swiftly toward win/loss power struggles over what takes place during that time. Furthermore, because the generations have been shaped by distinct paradigms, they also have distinct expectations regarding the essence of how "unity" is expressed within the assembly (Miller 2004:140-141). The elder generations tend to emphasize the sharing of a rational worldview. Boomers tend to emphasize experience. Post-modern young adults favour interactive relational connections. While this poses a challenge for the church, it is not impossible to provide structured opportunities for intergenerational interaction. Gibbs (1981:127) notes that, when divisions arose between Hebrews and Hellenists in Acts 6, "the solution was not to divide these people according to their ethnic and cultural differences," but to address the problem administratively.

How might churches today respond to the intergenerational complexities they face by finding organizational answers that foster the restoration of relationship? Bosch (1995:34-35) insists that, as churches incarnate God's mission of reconciliation in the world, "we can initiate approximations of God's coming reign." Thus, while the structural solutions that churches employ might not be perfect, they can provide a context for the generations within the church to express a "non-final reconciliation" in the midst of their struggle to work out a lasting peace (Volf 1996:110). Anderson (1994:150) offers realistic and sage counsel in recommending that church leaders "not introduce the most important changes at the point of greatest risk." As he explains, the point of greatest risk often is "the Sunday morning assembly... Sunday morning assemblies are the most 'sacred' time and the most sensitive place and thus should be least tampered with." Perhaps established churches will need to begin elsewhere in developing opportunities for the generations to cultivate mutuality.

Snyder and Runion (2002:39-40) suggest that organizational structures must be designed to work in harmony with the relational system that they are intended to facilitate. Thus, structure is "a functional question" in that it must "help the church really be the church" (cf. Van Gelder 2000:37). Miller (2005:225) suggests that the

sort of structures that have been employed in recent years have tended systematically to confuse well-intentioned people. Now, rather than structuring the church with an orientation to individual choice and consumption, the church must strive to develop forms that reflect its identity as God's "new family" (Westerhoff 1974:131, 160). Westerhoff (1974:130) suggests that this should lead the church to endeavour to bring together at least three generations for activities as often as possible. Indeed, as Frazee (2001:195) notes, "In all places of effective community,...the various strata of generations spend both structured and spontaneous time together." One way that the church can accomplish this is through "counterbalancing the nature of its purpose-driven meetings and programs with less structured family gatherings and more interactive formats" (Miller 2004:191). In a very real sense, this coming together can be recognized as an expression of God's mission. As Moltmann (1978:107) asserts, "Mission does not mean only proclamation, teaching, and healing, but it also involves eating and drinking. Mission happens through community in eating and drinking."

Second, as the generations come together, the commitment to rebuilding reconciled relationships will challenge all prejudices and intergroup stereotypes that do not contribute constructively to wholeness among God's people. The generations within the congregation must decide how they will define the "other" hereafter (Schreiter 1992:54). As Elolia (2005:151) expresses, "Do we define them as reflecting God's image, or does some kind of demeaning image shape our definition?" This certainly has relevance for our present discussion. As Householder (1999:45) notes, the church must recognize its prejudice and condescension toward Generation X: "[M]any in today's church have over-labelled and under-estimated Generation X." It is almost as though this generation has been assigned the role of the "scapegoat" or "identified patient" within an anxious society and within anxious churches (Shults & Sandage 2003:73-74). However, the gospel provides for this generation to experience "re-naming", which brings about the removal of false and exclusionary labels (e.g., "slacker"). It also provides for the "re-making" of this generation, which involves tearing down the barriers that prevent them from moving from excluded to included (Volf 1996:73).

Furthermore, the rebuilding of relationships has the potential to transform the way in which the participants of all generations view one another. Anderson (1990:257)

cautions that one-dimensional identities, the sort that give rise to the intergroup dynamics and stereotyping that takes place between the generations, are no longer adequate in a post-modern world. The pursuit of reconciliation challenges all members in the community to view themselves and one another in light of their shared human-ness (Volf 1996:124; DeYoung 1997:104; Foster 1997:15). In essence, we share in a solidarity of sin; there are no innocents (Volf 1996:80, 82). As DeGruchy (2002:92) notes, as fallen humans, we share “an ‘ethical solidarity’, but it is one of ethical failure.” Thus, we cannot be divided into neat categories of victims and violators (Volf 1996:80). A genuine embrace of this reality has great potential for drawing the members of the first post-modern generation into a meaningful experience of mutuality; as McNeal (2003:58) notes, “Brokenness is what unites people in the postmodern world.”

In Christ, we have been called to a renewed identity as one new humanity (DeYoung 1995:28; Hawn 2003:12). As Colijn (2004:77) suggests, old group identities are superseded by our new citizenship and new family identity. Our new identity in Christ calls us beyond “clean” identities that group “us” over against “them” (Volf 1996:126). This new identity makes it possible for the members of the body to employ both a catholic personality, one that is enriched rather than threatened by the culture of the other, and an evangelical personality, one that has been “brought to repentance and shaped by the Gospel” (Volf 1996:126). This also has the potential to radically alter the damaging intergroup dynamics that exist within the church and to foster mutuality in Christ. As Rendle (2002:116) expresses, the generations within the church have been called together “to find a larger common spiritual identity with those not in our identity tribes or pure-markets” (Rendle 2002:116).

Third, the effort to rebuild relationships between the generations also must entail a commitment to heal the memories of past disappointments and wounds. As Volf (1996:132-133) expresses, a memory of exclusion “is itself a form of exclusion...In my memory of the other’s transgression the other is locked in unredemption and we are bound together in a relationship of nonreconciliation.” Certainly, some Gen Xers retain the memories of painful experiences with the church from their formative years. Others have been disillusioned by the exclusion they have experienced as young adults. Many struggle with distrust because of the brokenness they experience within

their homes and society. Older members of the congregation have been touched by pain, as well. Some are plagued by the pain of intergenerational win/loss struggles that have divided their congregations. Movement beyond these memories will not be accomplished through denying the particular history of what has occurred (Schmiechen 1996:111). It is not merely something that can be achieved “intrapsychically,” within oneself. Rather, it must be expressed “intersubjectively” in relationship with the other generations who are present within the congregation (Shults & Sandage 2003:14, 37, 38).

In order for this to occur, however, the church must be prepared to function as community of memory. As Schreiter (1998:94-95) explains, a community of memory is “a place where a people can come to common memory of the past...For a past truly to be overcome, people must come to a common memory of it. Otherwise the divisions of the past are perpetuated in the present.” In order for this common memory to be formed, the participants must be permitted to retell their stories of what has happened (Schreiter 1998:45). Rendle (2002:41-42) sees the congregation as one of the few institutions remaining in our culture that has this potential of inviting people of different generations to sit together and share their stories. Capitalizing upon this potential will require considerable care. As we noted in section 4.3.2, modernity and post-modernity foster distinct understandings of the relationship between our narratives and reality. Thus, even the telling of stories has the potential to be a source of conflict. Nonetheless, it is important and worthwhile for the church to endeavour to provide space for these stories to be told. With time, an effort must be made to connect these narratives of brokenness with the redemptive narrative of Christ’s passion, death, and resurrection (Schreiter 1992:61).

However, for the church to be the sort of community in which the rebuilding of relationships is fostered, it cannot remain oriented solely to the past (Schreiter 1998:91). Rather, the generations within the church must strive to cooperate in writing a new story together. As the members of diverse generations share in life together, they can learn to listen to one another and care for each other (Hill 2002:162; Howard Merritt 2007:21). They can learn to value and share their differences (Keener 2005:42; Hammett & Pierce 2007:166). While the generations have found it difficult to communicate meaningfully with one another (section 4.6.2),

they now will need to “identify and develop a new language that expresses both our diversity as well as our unity in order to build the kind of community that can rightly be called the Body of Christ” (Elolia 2005:162). Furthermore, they will need to learn to see life through one another’s eyes. As Hines and DeYoung (2000:42) suggest, “We can use aspects of our own life in tandem with a disciplined listening ear to gain a sense of what others are experiencing. We must gain points of reference for understanding if we are going to create lasting, meaningful relationships.”

The congregation’s efforts to place the story of God’s mission at the centre of its shared life can provide a powerful basis for the generation to write a new story together. Lohfink (1999:236) insists that unanimity is achieved within the congregation when “they allow themselves to be united in favor of something that is beyond themselves: the will of God, God’s work, God’s gospel, the history that God has begun in the world.” In reflecting upon the relationship between mission and unity in the New Testament, Lohfink (1984:119) observes that “Paul made the ‘common work’ (ergon) the ‘core which guaranteed unity.’” Thus, a commitment to God’s mission can in fact be “a major method for maintaining unity” (Gustin 2005:47). As Gustin (:48) explains, by focusing on our shared mission,

we find unity of purpose and action that ties us together in a very practical and deeply meaningful way....Mission unites people at a deep level that allows for an underlying unity that does not require some kind of outer uniformity... We come to realize that the things that unite us are greater than those that divide us.

The unifying impact of our mandate to be witnesses in the world can enable us to recognize ourselves as “brothers and sisters of those who are completely different from us” (Elolia 2005:160). Thus, as Conder (2006:169) expresses, “In a society that experiences intense boredom, loneliness, and deep-seated individualism, the creation of churches as missional communities offers disconnected individuals opportunities for meaning and involvement.”

This shared intergenerational life promises to enrich the members of all generations (Harkness 1998:4; Hill 2002:162; Allen 2005:320). Gen Xers can experience the benefit of interacting with older members of the body who exemplify stability of commitment and who possess wisdom about life. Those who were not presented with healthy conditions for identity formation during their adolescent years can now

experience the local church as a context for discovering and being formed in accordance with a new identity in Christ. The church also can offer a setting in which they are included in healthy family activities and in which they are mentored by the members of older generations.

The older members of the congregation certainly will stand to benefit, as well. As Eggers and Hensley (2004:95-100) note, intergenerational interaction causes the elderly to experience joyfulness and fun. It also bolsters their faith that the future is secure in the next generation. They are provided a sense of purpose and meaning through helping the younger generation, the feeling of being wanted and needed, and the satisfaction of significant connections with other. In essence, says Johnson (1999:108), when we bring the generations together, it “keeps the old younger.” The church can be an exception to the “crisis of generativity” introduced in section 4.6.1. In turn, says Corpus (1999:13), interaction with young adults is actually likely to deepen the spiritual life of these older members of the church.

At times, a commitment to remaining together across generational lines will be uncomfortable and challenging. It will require the generations within the church to learn to sacrifice their preferences for one another. However, asserts Driscoll (2005:41), this process of learning to sacrifice for others is integral to the maturing of our faith (cf. Frazee 2001:195; Keener 2005:38). In prophetic contrast to the carceral continuum of American society, the ultimate goal of God’s redemptive program is not the “kingdom of freedom”, but rather one of love (Volf 1996:105). This transforms the “project of liberation” as we have understood it. As Schmiechen (1996:127) expresses, “Freedom is always the freedom to be in Christ and with one another. Life with one another is not something added on to liberated persons; life together is the purpose of our liberation.” Thus, rather than asserting their own preferences, the various generations can learn to live in accordance with the “Titanium Rule”: “Do unto others, keeping their preferences in mind” (Raines 2003:34). This will enable the church to model a level of civility that is notably lacking amid the win-loss competitions so prevalent within our society (Rendle 2002:21). Hines and DeYoung (2000:115) insist that this commitment to submit to one another in diversity will be more powerful than illegitimate unity. Indeed, they insist, God will bless the church.



The challenges associated with cultivating mutuality within a diverse intergenerational community can be a threatening prospect. In fact, some might find it too risky to imagine ever undertaking this intergenerational paradigm shift. However, asserts Woodley (2001:30), God can handle the risks associated with diversity. Thus, he insists, we should not fear it. Hanson (2005:136) is confident that, when we are defined by our faith, rather than our fears, we will grow together: “Fear hardens lives and closes borders. Faith calls us to see the world through the eyes of God’s vision for the world—a vision of the goodness of creation, humanity created in God’s image, interdependent, praising God, and pursuing justice and peace.” By finding the faith-filled courage to turn their hearts toward one another, the generations within the family of faith will actually come to reflect the heart of their Father (Woodley 2001:67).

In a culture plagued by fragmentation and alienation, this can provide a powerful testimony to the world (Harkness 1997:17-18). When we relate to one another as family, the community’s “intentional alternative lifestyle” demonstrates tangibly the reality of God’s reign and the freedom of the Spirit (Moltmann 1978:119). In turn, suggests Dawn (2001:147), “our life as a community of peace” has the potential to “make ready an interest on the part of our neighbors in hearing the good news of God’s shalom, which we proclaim in Christ.” As we have considered above, this embodied witness can communicate powerfully within a sceptical post-modern context. As Gambone (1998:20) notes, the credibility of the congregation’s commitment to intergenerational life enables it to increase its outreach “by saying to communities that are fragmented, isolated, and separated, ‘Come and experience our faith community which is working every day to promote authentic relationships between generations.’” Thus, a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation truly can be a powerful component of the missional renewal process within established congregations.

### **7.3 Intergenerational Justice**

#### **7.3.1 Intergenerational Injustice in the Church**

In addition to what has already been articulated above regarding the essentialness of intergenerational reconciliation within the process of missional renewal, we turn now

to a consideration of the theme of intergenerational justice. We must assert that this too is a crucial consideration within the process of missional renewal. To a certain degree, this assertion is rather self evident, for it is impossible to achieve reconciliation without also striving to do justly (Schreiter 1992:37; 1998:22, 65). In reality, these two concepts are interrelated and inseparable. Nonetheless, in light of the specific challenges outlined in the preceding chapters, it will be valuable for us to engage in a more sustained exploration of the theme of intergenerational justice in its own right.

In chapter four, we learned that many Xers have experienced considerable inequity and marginalization throughout their life course. Furthermore, chapter four has shown us that the formative experiences of this generation have caused them to be particularly sensitized to issues of justice within institutional settings. When injustice is perceived, the allegiance of the members of this generation often is difficult to secure. Within a congregational setting, suggest Whitesel and Hunter (2000:185), the sensitivity and scepticism of this generation gives rise to concerns regarding “the question of how a church is organized and governed.” These authors add that the formative experiences of Generation X also have provided them with a sensitivity to whether there is “accountability for the leadership as well as clear lines of communication.”

In chapter five, we discovered that established churches have all too commonly chosen to reflect the marginalization that Xers have experienced within society at large. Xers frequently have been hindered from contributing meaningfully or from assuming positions of leadership within the church. In many cases, opportunity to influence the bearing of tradition meaningfully within the congregation has been hindered, as older generations presently in leadership have been concerned to preserve their traditional ways. These congregations frequently demonstrate a tendency to resist or dismiss the need for involving the younger generations equitably in their organizational life. Thus, those post-modern young people present within the congregation frequently feel disempowered and, as a result, are not likely to be utilized to their full potential in aiding the congregation toward greater engagement with the post-modern context. In turn, many Xers have either left or simply become disengaged from active participation. As Everist and Nesson (2008:91) explain, “To

be inside a structure and trivialized may be more frustrating than exercising power from outside the institution.”

Celebrated CEO and author Max DePree (1997) has reflected upon the importance of justice within the life of organizations, particularly those within the non-profit realm, in terms that are of relevance to the experiences of many Xers. He notes that justice is an important issue in contemporary organizations: “Justice is high on most people’s list of ideas that tell us the way life ought to be...[J]ustice [in the non-profit realm] begins with the opportunity to make a meaningful contribution” (:61). DePree continues by suggesting that justice within organizational settings is demonstrated through *equity*. “Equity is a characteristic of healthy communities,” he asserts (:63). “The heart of justice in organizations is relationships constructed on right practice” and “is related to everybody in the organization” (:106). Equity, asserts DePree (:156), “means to be fairly treated” and “to have access.” Unfortunately, as we have seen, many Xers do not feel as though the church is a place in which they have been afforded such fairness and access.

In seeking to describe these experiences, we can employ two social-scientific categories: “power” and “capital.” First, Weber’s (1978:53) classic definition of power describes it as “the chances which a [person] or group of [persons] have to realize their will in a communal activity, even against the opposition of others taking part in it.” Power is not bad or good in itself. The question is not whether there is power in a church, but rather how it is used (:130). Thompson (2003:114) notes that power in the congregation is often a function of status, class, or party:

[C]ongregations have a strong tendency to regard certain individuals and groups more highly than others...Persons whose secular, community status is high are likely to be held in similar esteem by the congregation; conversely, those who are otherwise regarded as less important to society likely will be considered the same in a church.

Not merely the possession of power, but also the *perception* of power matters, suggests Law (1993:14-15), for “the perception of power is our sense of authority and ability to influence and control others...This perception of power expresses itself through one’s behavior and attitude.”

Unfortunately, inequitable power dynamics can become institutionalized within organizational systems. When this occurs, suggests Van Gelder (2007:124), “it is quite difficult to reform.” Tragically, as DeYoung (1997:9-10) notes, such “systemic injustice is at the root of many inequities in our society.” Even more tragic is the reality that systems of injustice can be at work within the life of the church. As Law (1993:14) notes, when people of diverse cultures come together, the power dynamics that cause one group to dominate and claim more power than others are perhaps inevitable. However, the systems of injustice that perpetuate these inequities, suggests DeYoung (1997:12), “exact a heavy cost on those outside the centers of power” within both church and society. Everist and Nesson (2008:89) note that “[w]hen those in power hold that power clearly and firmly, they feel they can afford to ignore the powerless.” As we saw in chapter five, when we consider both the possession and perception of power, we find that Xers have not experienced equity within the systemic functioning of many established congregations. Many Xers have been left with the impression that their voices are not valued within the congregation (Corpus 1999:14). As Regele (1995:234) observes, the church has often been experienced by Xers as “a telling place.”

Secondly, we can observe that the inequitable distribution of power has caused Xers to be impacted by an imbalanced appropriation of “human capital” within the congregation. This term, borrowed from the realm of economics, “consists of the ways that persons apply their own experience, skills, energy, and interests toward certain activities and programs, with the expectation that such an ‘investment’ will pay ‘dividends’ to them” (Thompson 2003:101). Thompson (:103) insists that this concept provides helpful insight into the relationship between individual members and the life of the church:

For believers...gifts of the Spirit become—in a sense—part of the human capital...What believers have to invest are abilities given to them, yes, but to exercise through the body of believers. In other words, their investment of human capital into the congregation pays off for them as the congregation benefits from what they provide.

Thompson further notes that those churches that thwart the efforts of participants to use their gifts can expect to lose members. As we have seen, in many established congregations, Xers have faced limits in the degree to which they are able to bring their gifts, experiences, and insight to bear on the way in which their faith tradition is

expressed. They have not been permitted to exercise their creativity and passion in ways that help to promote the renewal of their traditions within the post-modern context, nor have they been empowered to exercise leadership. Rather, older generations have seemed to be more concerned with their own *dividends* than with making *capital investments* in future generations.

Another author who provides us some helpful lenses for understanding the experiences of Xers in many established congregations is the ethicist John Rawls (1999:251-258), who has written about the issue of justice with specific regard for the intergenerationally just distribution of resources within society. Says Rawls (:252), “Each generation must not only preserve the gains of culture and civilization, and maintain intact those just institutions that have been established, but it must also put aside in each period of time a suitable amount of real capital accumulation.” In essence, Rawls is advocating for the choice of the generations presently in control to allocate resources for the sake of the continued advancing of society within future generations. Rawls (:254) continues, “It is a natural fact that generations are spread out in time and actual economic benefits flow only in one direction....[I]f all generations are to gain (except perhaps the earlier ones), the parties must agree to a savings principle that insures that each generation receives its due from its predecessors and does its fair share for those to come.”

Rawls (1999:257) further posits that it is not acceptable for the dominant contemporary generation to justify prioritizing its own interests at the expense of future generations:

[A]ll generations have their appropriate aims. They are not subordinate to one another any more than individuals are and no generation has stronger claims than any other. The life of a people is conceived as a scheme of cooperation spread out in historical time. It is to be governed by the same conception of justice that regulates the cooperation of contemporaries.

According to Rawls, this recognition will have significant implications for the ethical choices that each generation makes in relation to those that follow it: “We can now see that persons in different generations have duties and obligations to one another just as contemporaries do. The present generation cannot do as it pleases but is bound by the principles that would be chosen in the original position to define justice between persons at different moments of time.”

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, there has arisen something of a crisis of intergenerational responsibility within our culture. We would add here that, amid the praxis of modern society, many established churches also have failed to exemplify a commitment to intergenerational justice. Employing the language of DePree and Rawls, this can be restated as follows: there has been a lack of systemic equity and, more specifically, a lack of concern regarding the equitable distribution of the resources of power and human capital among the generations of which the congregational system is composed. As we have seen, at times this gives rise to win/loss scenarios in which either young or old end up as victims of inequity. As Lyons (1995:93) asserts, “Generational conflict...is fundamentally about justice within and between generations.” However, as we also have seen, many times this has simply resulted in the withdrawal of disillusioned Xers from congregational life. In turn, this poses an even more egregious inequity in that the love and grace of Christ is essentially being withheld from those post-modern Xers who reside just outside the doors of the church, yet who remain at considerable cultural distance from its traditional forms. This is captured poignantly in the reflections of Cunningham (2006:25): “Should my generation continue to invest in local churches that don’t connect with us and with our peers? Can we maintain unity with the previous generation’s churches without sacrificing the best opportunities to influence our generation?”

Elbel (2002:110) insists that, in a society marked by intergenerational struggles, “Intergenerational justice must be given equal consideration to social justice.” He adds, “Are we stealing from the future for the sake of the present, thus abdicating our tradition of leaving things better than it was?” He continues, “Future generations deserve nothing less from us than our full compassion and our every effort to ensure them a sustainable future.” If this is true for society at large, how much more so should it be for the community of Christ? As we noted in section 5.4.6.2, many churches have sought to champion significant causes of social justice, while at the same time neglecting issues of intergenerational justice within their own ranks. Now, if it is not merely to reproduce the injustices that presently exist within society or even to create new and potentially more injurious injustices, the church must recognize its need to reflect ethically upon what constitutes a proper response to the complexities

of intergenerational coexistence (Lyon 1995:96). This is a matter of “the moral callings of the generations in their relations with one another” (:93-94). If not properly addressed, this issue ultimately may pose a crisis for the sustainability of the church’s witness.

### 7.3.2 A Theological Vision of Justice

Lyon (1995:95) urges us to reflect upon this theme of intergenerational justice from a distinctively Christian vantage point:

We must grapple with the moral callings of the generations in their relationships with one another in the midst of the particular social, cultural, and psychodynamic contexts of their realization. To ask these questions and to see them as important in individual and communal formation is to recover an older tradition of ethical reflection. Only as we struggle with such questions can we have a chance of achieving compelling cultural and religious resources that might resist the influence of the market.

What insight can the church’s theological resources provide in addressing the reality of injustice within its own ranks? As we will see, if the missional renewal of the church is to help it achieve renewed connectedness with its identity as a sign and foretaste of the reign of God, this must also lead it to a renewed concern to embody justice. As Lohfink (1999:132) suggests, “The reign of God means justice.”

We must acknowledge that the relationship of justice to the renewal process will certainly not be obvious to all. As Wolterstorff (2004:79) notes, some Christians see justice as a concept concerned entirely with the future:

Christian hope is no hope for what might transpire in history but hope for a state of *eudaimonia* that transcends history. Hence it has nothing in particular to do with the struggle for justice within history. Christian hope is not hope that our struggle for justice will bear fruit; nor is it hope that our longing for justice will be satisfied.

Understandably, the practical outworking of this sort of thinking is that Christians are excused from working for the establishment of justice within the present reality.

Wolterstorff (:82) insists that this is a mistake. True Christian hope, he asserts, entails two distinct hopes, “neither to be assimilated to the other: hope for a new creation, and hope for the just reign of God within the present creation” (:87). Wolterstorff (:86) insists that “what is intrinsic to the redemptive story line...[is] God’s seeking

justice—that is, God’s working to undo injustice.” DeGruchy (2002:54) notes that this theme is intimately linked to God’s agenda of reconciliation: “[T]o say that God was reconciling the world in Christ is another way of saying that God was busy restoring God’s reign of justice.” Thus, the Christian hope for justice is not only about the future, “but about the impact which God’s future has on our present experience” (:210).

This being the case, as we have articulated above with reference to reconciliation, the justice of God is to be embodied in the concrete social reality of the life of God’s people. As Lohfink (1999:132) articulates, “justice cannot exist in a single person.” The Old Testament account of the nation of Israel helps us to understand the place of justice within the covenantal community. Notes Birch (1991:177), in reflecting upon the Hebrew nation, “Righteousness and justice are the terms most often used to characterize what is called for in covenant society....[T]hey are lived out in relationships (with God and with neighbor) which require discernment and judgment.” He adds,

These qualities are rooted in the character of God who has acted in justice and righteousness toward the people. God then expects these qualities to be reflected in the life of God’s people in their relationships to one another and to God...Justice and righteousness are also the moral values which are to characterize covenant obedience. They are basic to the identity of the covenant community if it is to be faithful to its relationship with God.  
(:259-260)

Stated simply, within this covenantal understanding of justice, “the vertical and the horizontal are inseparable,” while “the system of human justice can work only if it is seen as a reflection of God’s justice” (Dunn & Suggate 1993:32, 36).

The call to embody justice factors prominently in the life of the New Testament community, as well. DeGruchy (2002:54) notes that, for this community born out of the redemptive work of God in Christ, “To be reconciled to God and to do justice are part and parcel of the same process.” Relationships of justice within the community, thus, “arise out of gratitude for God’s initiative” (Dunn & Suggate 1993:36).

Brownson et al (2003:83-84) offer these reflections upon the place of justice within the life of the church:

It is not about our desires or interests, nor even in the first place about our rights, but about the boundless depths and heights of God’s concern for us and



for all creation...In human terms, it is the way we are called to live for one another and for God...It is basically a contribution in a concrete relationship, directed toward affirming other persons as God affirms them, healing relationships that have been broken or damaged.

Through their behaviour in contributing to the building up of the community, members of the church are able to participate “here and now” in the just reality that Christ will bring about fully in the future (Koester 2004:311). As Koester (:312-313) asserts, the body of Christ “is challenged to already make real the vision of the future by the way its members order their own lives with each other.” What matters most, he suggests, is “how one relates to one’s brothers and sisters” (:313).

While a comprehensive exploration of biblical justice is not possible within the scope of this present project, it will be helpful for us to consider what theological insight we might be able to gain regarding the issues of equity introduced above. One crucial implication of the biblical witness on the subject of justice is that the church is called to be a community of equality (DeYoung 1995:174). As Koester (2004:311) notes, members of the new community have been asked “to establish equality and justice in their own midst and to spread the message, the gospel, to as many people as they can, inviting them to join the new community of justice and love.” He insists that the celebration of the Eucharist speaks powerfully to this aspect of the community’s character: “[T]he shared bread establishes and maintains a new community of equality and mutual care and respect.” In this community, suggests Koester (:313), “Total equality, regardless of any inherited differentiations, is the basis for ethical behavior.” This principle cuts across every boundary line that humans might establish. The church, thus, can be described as a “world community of responsible relationships that transcends nations and cultures and gives them a creative place in the economy of God” (Brownson et al 2003:101).

The distribution and exercise of power, which is of particular concern within our present discussion, is implicated in this theological vision. Law (1993:13) suggests that biblical justice is concerned with “equal distribution of power and privilege among all people.” In reflecting upon the nation of Israel, Birch (1991:259) notes that justice “relates to the claim to life and participation by all persons in the structures and dealings of the community, and especially to equity in the legal system.”

Similarly, the New Testament community is shown by Koester (2004:312) to be one guided by a vision of the church constituting “a functioning social and political entity in its own right, distinct from such political organizations as the Roman society and its imperial hierarchy.” This community’s distinctiveness is found in part in its concern with the pursuit of goals “in terms of quality relationships, not quantities of power or possession” (Brownson et al 2003:102).

This is not to suggest that authority and power are not to exist within the church. Rather, as Lohfink (1984:116) suggests, it means that “authority must not be domination of the sort that is exercised in the rest of society.” He adds that, within the church, “authority must derive completely from service” and thus can only be exercised by “one who abstracts from oneself and one’s own interests and lives a life for others.” This means that, within the Christian community, “relationships of domination are not permitted” (:49). Instead, the Christian community must strive to make God’s justice a present reality within its political and social organization (Koester 2004:314).

This being said, much of the biblical witness regarding justice is rooted in the context of addressing the presence of inequity within the world. Wolterstorff (2004:84-85) helps us to appreciate the nature of injustice in his explanation of what it means, from a biblical perspective, to be “wronged”:

It is to fail to receive or enjoy what is due one... Injustice occurs when someone is deprived of some good that is due him or her—that is, when a person is wronged, when that person is deprived of something to which he or she has a right. Conversely, justice is present in some community insofar as its members enjoy those goods that are due them, to which they have a right. Justice is present when no one is being wronged.

As we have already noted above, the reality of injustice can arise as a result of “the operation of a transpersonal ‘system’ that is both ‘institutional’ and ‘spiritual’”, one in which dominative power is employed “to exclude others from scarce goods, whether they are economic, social, or psychological” (Volf 1996:87). Often, this is cloaked as “the low-intensity evil of the way ‘things work’ or the way ‘things simply are,’ the exclusionary vapors of institutional or communal cultures under which many suffer but for which no one is responsible.”

DeYoung (1995:118-119) asserts that the presence of such injustice threatens the very peace that God intends to reside at the centre of his renewed creation, for peace is inextricably linked with the establishment of just and equal relations among people. As DeYoung (:120) expresses, justice and peace “walk hand in hand as complimentary components of God’s desire for this world.” Hunsberger (1998:91) asserts that, “Without justice, there can be no real peace, and without peace, no real justice.” Thus, a significant biblical theme is the restoration of justice within those systems and settings where injustice is present. Harris (1996:78) notes that this entails “the restoration of a situation or an environment that promoted equity and harmony—shalom—in a community.” In her treatment of this subject, Harris (:79) encourages us to consider the Old Testament imagery of the celebration of jubilee.

Wright (2006:265-323) also has reflected at length upon the contemporary implications of jubilee. In its original context, the year of jubilee “was to be a proclamation of liberty to Israelites who had become enslaved for debt and a restoration of land to families who had been compelled to sell it out of economic need sometime during the previous fifty years” (:290). This practice reflected within the nation of Israel what God desires in principle for all of humanity: “broadly equitable distribution of the resources of the earth...and a curb on the tendency to accumulation with its inevitable oppression and alienation” (:296). Properly understood, this was not a “redistribution” of resources, but rather a “restoration” (:297). In essence, the jubilee had two central thrusts: release/liberty and return/restoration (:300). Notes Wright (:297), “the jubilee approach was immensely practical and fundamentally socioeconomic. It established specific structural mechanisms to regulate the economic effects of debt.”

Wright (2006:300-301) argues that the contemporary relevance of the jubilee tradition is rooted in the ministry of Jesus. According to Wright, in his announcement of the imminent arrival of the reign of God, Jesus appropriated the imagery of the jubilee. In fact, he asserts, Jesus actually “fulfilled” the jubilee that he proclaimed (:301). Thus, posits Wright (:300), “The theological underpinning of the socioeconomic legislation of the jubilee is identical to that which undergirds the proclamation of the kingdom of God.” Harris (1996:76) suggests that, within our contemporary context, the jubilee tradition invites us to “a fiery, prophetic, unrelenting” commitment to

explore and establish “what belongs to whom and to return it to them.” She adds, “the particular meaning of justice that Jubilee stresses is the notion of ‘return,’ not in the Jubilee journey sense of a return home but return as relinquishing, giving back, and handing over what is not ours to God and to those crying for justice throughout the whole, round earth” (:79). Harris sees this as a gift from God. The practical implications of this are potent, for a serious consideration of “Jubilee justice” may lead us to the recognition that “we—and our possessions—must decrease if justice is to increase” (:90).

It is essential for us to note here that the biblical vision of justice extends not only into the ethical conduct of contemporaries within the covenant community, but also into the relations among generations across time. As Klay and Steen (1995:987) suggest, a concern for intergenerational justice is a significant theme in scripture:

In the context of both old and new covenant our actions are a channel of either blessing or curse for generations to come. The Old Testament offers specific instructions for protecting the future and honouring the past....Without such a picture, it is difficult to sustain any ethic of sacrificial responsibility among generations.

Consistent with the things we have affirmed above, these authors suggest that it is unlikely that any “nonmetaphysical scheme” will provide a sufficient motivation for members of the community to make the sacrifices necessary to sustain moral commitments across generations. Rather, inspiration is drawn from the church’s eschatological nature. “For Christians,” they assert, “the fundamental basis of generational justice is God’s timeless love” (:992). This scriptural attention to intergenerational justice suggests that a concern for sustainability should supersede the propensity to exhaust the resources which the community has at its disposal in the present.

The jubilee tradition can actually be understood as illustrating scripture’s intergenerational concern. Wright (2006:291) notes that the jubilee was intended chiefly as a means of economic protection for “the father’s house.” Wright explains that this term, the father’s house, referred to “an extended family that could comprise three or four generations living together.” The original intend of Israel’s land system had been for the land to be distributed as widely as possible throughout the entire kinship system. While the land was in Israel’s possession, it remained under God’s

ownership (:292). Thus, while financially challenged members of the community might have found it necessary periodically to sell their land and even to sell themselves as bondservants, God established jubilee as a means of assuring that this “undesirable state of affairs” would only continue “not more than one generation” (:294). God did not desire the inequities forged within one generation to be perpetuated to the next. The declaration of liberty from the burden of debt and the return of the family to its ancestral property was intended to help preserve “the survival and welfare of the families in Israel” (:295). In essence, the central thrusts of freedom and return had inherently intergenerational implications.

### **7.3.3 Doing Justice Intergenerationally in the Established Church**

What insight might this theological vision have for established churches engaged in the process of missional renewal? What would it mean for churches to strive to live in accordance with this vision within their own systemic functioning? Surely the reality of intergenerational injustice is not grounds for abdicating “the covenant promise of God and therefore not doing justice but wallowing in resignation, inertia and melancholy” (DeGruchy 2002:210). Rather, the church must grapple with the practical implications of the call “to do justly” (Micah 6:8) within the concrete realities of their present context. How might this be applied to the life of the established church seeking missional renewal within a post-modern context?

#### **7.3.3.1 Intergenerational Equity in the Established Church**

First, the spirit of jubilee justice necessitates that established churches regain a proper perspective regarding *whose* resources are at stake within the life of the church. While we have appropriated social-scientific categories to describe the resources of power and capital within the church, we can affirm that the deeper spiritual realities these categories describe are fundamentally imparted to the congregation by virtue of God’s grace. For example, the true essence of the power at work within the church can be understood as residing in the missional authority with which the Lord invests every member of the body. As Van Kooten and Barrett (2004:140) articulate, “The Holy Spirit gives the missional church a community of persons who, in a variety of ways and with a diversity of functional roles and titles, together practice the missional

authority that cultivates within the community the discernment of missional vocation and is intentional about the practices that embed that vocation in the community's life." This means that communities of the Spirit are neither hierarchical nor egalitarian. They are not autocratic or democratic, but "pneumocratic" (ruled by the Holy Spirit). Thus, "Authority within missional communities is found neither in particular status nor in majority opinion. It is dispersed throughout the whole body through the illumination and empowerment of the Spirit" (Dietterich 1998:173-174). Because the power of the Holy Spirit is unlimited, ministry in the church "is not a competitive sport" (Everist & Nesson 2008:87).

Furthermore, the issue of human capital within the church is inextricably linked with the "gifts of the Spirit" that the Apostle Paul demonstrates as playing an integral role in the *upbuilding* of the congregation (I Corinthians 12). Far from being the possession of any individual, Paul explicitly explains that these gifts are distributed among the members of the body "according to the grace given to us" (Romans 12:6). Dietterich (1998:173-174) reflects upon the practical implications of this for the life of the faith community:

Because all receive gifts to contribute to the common good, everyone enjoys the right and the obligation of participating authoritatively in decisions of faith and practice. Yet because the Spirit distributes different gifts, responsibilities, and functions, there is also an element of differentiation. Spiritual gifts are not distributed in monotonous uniformity but in rich diversity...None is given advantage; all are equipped for service.

Within this framework, notes Volf (2005:116), "the Spirit puts the talents of each person at Christ's disposal." Thus, we can understand this to imply that any artificial categories the congregation may employ in limiting the exercise of gifts has the potential to be an affront to the intended administration of the Spirit's endowments and, thus, is likely to compromise and impair Christ's purposes in building up his church.

Volf (2005:57) suggests that a proper understanding of God's economy will profoundly impact the spirit in which the members of the community participate in their shared life. In essence, it will foster the sort of *freedom* for which jubilee justice calls. In contrast to a "sales mode," in which "we give something in order to get a rough equivalent in exchange," Volf insists that the Christian community is to be

guided by a “gift mode” in which members give generously. He suggests that this is possible because the “new self” indwelt by Christ is able to overcome the self-centeredness of the “old self.” Underlying this we find two interrelated realities: first, the Christ who dwells within the members of the community is not a “taker” nor a “getter,” but a “giver;” second, because God has given to us, we should share with others (:58-59). Volf (:60) suggests that, “if we are blessed without being a blessing, then we fail in our purpose as channels” and are indeed “at odds with ourselves.” Because of our identity as “channels of gifts,...we can’t just do with them as we please.” As Volf explains, “They come to us with an ultimate name and address other than our own.” Thus, being a channel involves God’s intentions for the good of others. “If I block the flow of God’s gifts,” suggests Volf, “I haven’t just failed the giving God; I’ve also failed the intended recipient.” To be a giver, then, is to renounce gain for oneself and to bestow it on others (:68).

Volf (2005:73) suggests that this sort of generosity provides a foretaste of an eschatological future: “Gifts are most generously given, and therefore all things are common: that’s a Christian vision of the world to come.” In the present, this vision should inspire Christians to engage in gift giving that establishes parity “in the midst of drastic and pervasive inequality” (:82). This will have a profound impact upon the way in which the resources of the Spirit of God are appropriated within the life of the church:

Each one, gifted to give, now gives to others...The reciprocal exchange of gifts expresses and nourishes a community of love. Take reciprocity out of gift giving, and community disintegrates into discrete individuals...Take gift giving out of reciprocity, and community degenerates into individuals who’ll cooperate and split apart when it suits their interests...The best gift we can give to each other may be...our own generosity. With that ‘incredible gift’ called Christ, God gave us a generous self and a community founded on generosity...[I]t subverts hierarchies and transforms rivalries into mutual exaltations. And in all of this, it forges lasting bonds of reciprocal love.  
(:86-87)

Essentially, as the Lord entrusts the community with stewardship over his resources, all members of the community must be free, in terms of both giving and receiving, to share that which the Spirit has dispersed among the members of the body. The aim of this is not absolute uniformity, insists Volf (:82). The biblical vision of equality does allow for one member to have much while the other has little. However, this vision is incompatible with one member having “‘too much’ while the other has ‘too little.’”

### 7.3.3.2 Intergenerational Empowerment in the Established Church

Thus, if the spirit of jubilee justice should cause us to *return* the rightful administration of power and capital to God, and if it should cause all to be liberated to participate freely in a fellowship of mutual sharing, this will have profound implications for our present discussion of intergenerational justice. Established churches will be challenged to consider what it will mean to promote a more equitable distribution of power among the generations. Howard Merritt (2007:9, 92) describes this as “power sharing” within the multigenerational congregation. All generations must be free to participate fully in the missional authority of the body. Thus, as Law (1993:14) notes, “To do justice, then is to be able to see and recognize the uneven distribution of power and to take steps to change the system so that we can redistribute power equally.” The practical outworking of this, he insists, will be to give attention to the “Power Distance” evident within a system, which he defines as “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations accept that power is distributed unequally.” For the disempowered, “this means gaining more power themselves and getting into the power system, forcing the system to change” (:20). Law (:48) asserts that this is accomplished through a “power analysis,” which lends attention to which participants in the system have power and which are disempowered. It will require the church “to take time to recognize and talk about power dynamics” (Everist & Nessian 2008:92).

For older generations accustomed to holding power within the church, the implications of this are significant. Howard Merritt (2007:96) notes that, while many congregations desire to achieve intergenerational growth, they often experience stress once it occurs: “Often churches do not realize that inviting young members into their congregations means allowing them to have some weight in decisions, and sharing power can be the largest obstacle in the way of ministering with young adults.” When those who have been accustomed to holding power see others begin to gain *some* power, they may assume that these new participants will eventually want to take all the power; thus, they may be tempted to try to regain their hold on the power dynamics (Everist & Nessian 2008:93). Thus, the tension of attempting to please those in current leadership while also engaging and empowering post-modern young people



poses something of a dichotomy in many congregations (Hammett & Pierce 2007:96). Yet, this will be essential to the process of missional renewal in a post-modern world, for the mission of God is never ours to possess or control. Suggests Riddell (1998:67), following Christ “is a pilgrimage which involves learning how to give up power for the sake of others,” one that “produces a freedom from fear and anxiety, so that followers can relinquish the need for control.”

If the church is to practice justice, this means that older members of the congregation will need to learn to *give up* or *return* power as an exercise of faith in the capacity of their Lord to administer his reign justly. Follis (1999:1) suggests that, while Xers can be ambassadors for a new and disorienting world, any effort to engage this generation in relearning ministry within a post-modern context will require the church to be willing to engage in “sharing power and resources with those who have some fluency in that new environment.” This will help to foster a commitment to sustainability within the congregation (Miller 2004:132-134). Beyond this, however, as Howard Merritt (2007:146) notes, “We will need to share power, not just for the sake of institutional viability, but for the sake of young adults. We can show the next generation what it means to be a part of a caring supportive environment, so they might function as valued members of the body of Christ.”

In the previous section on reconciliation, we noted the importance of listening in ministering among Xers. A listening posture is also one simple, yet profound way in which a commitment to empowering young adults can be expressed (Drury 1996; Hammett & Pierce 2007:68). Howard Merritt (2007:145) notes that this will constitute something more than merely drawing together a “focus group” of young adults: “[S]ignificant ministry to a new generation will occur when we listen to the voices of young adults regularly, when their insight becomes crucial in forming our vision, when we encourage people in their twenties and thirties to have some space around the table every month.” This is consistent with Regele’s (1995:234) suggestion that, if the church is to bridge the gap with Generation X, it must begin to engage in “systemic listening.”

While listening across generational lines will not always be easy, it offers something valuable to the life of the church:

Church leaders need to listen to this generation. Those who push back and challenge methodology are doing so only because they care about the church. And if they are critical about how things are done in a postmodern world, often their criticism has an element of truth. If nothing else, it reflects the thinking of that age group and should be taken seriously if the church is to reach and keep this generation.

(Hammett & Pierce 2007:68)

Hammett and Pierce suggest that, when older church members listen to young adults, there is a good chance that these young people will in turn listen to their elders. As a result, a spirit of generosity may be enabled to flow in all directions. The benefits of this are potentially powerful. The members of Generation X are well acquainted with change (Hicks & Hicks 1999:255; Zustiak 1999:196). Kew (2001:26) suggests that this generation may actually help to provide “a significant change of climate in the way we handle controversy and divisiveness.” As this is the first generation to have come to maturity within the post-modern world, and because of their formative experiences, Xers “seem to have certain instincts that could make them better able to handle the kind of tensions the withdrawal of Modernity is leaving behind...their attitudes could very well be a catalyst helping us to look at our circumstances from a different angle” (cf. Best & Kellner 1997:280).

In addition, a commitment to intergenerational justice will necessitate that the church be willing to empower post-modern young adults with the freedom to contribute actively to leadership (Howard Merritt 2007:68). This seems logical in light of what we have affirmed above regarding the gifts and talents with which the Spirit has invested members being essential for the upbuilding of the body. We can assert that the gifts and talents of every member *of every generation* are important. Thus, suggests Barna (2004), those in power within congregations need to be prepared “to graciously and joyously let go of the reins” to allow gifted young adults to emerge into leadership ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)). Howard Merritt (2007:93) asserts that, while young adults “usually do not have power, time, or money”, they do possess the valuable resources of “potential, creativity, imagination, vision, and ideas.” Their contribution needs to be recognized as a valuable asset.

In reflecting upon the need for empowering young adults, Barna employs categories that are consistent with the concern we have developed above regarding the intergenerationally just stewarding of God's resources within the community of faith:

If we can objectively examine the big picture we will realize that our efforts cannot bear the maximum return on our investment until we enable those who follow us to embrace and enhance what we developed...The purpose of our leadership is not to magnify self but to be used by God in the furtherance of His kingdom. Insistence upon continued control is a clear reflection that we do not understand God's purposes for us, and that we have misled the community of believers. As an act of Christian stewardship it is our responsibility to pass on the baton with grace, love, hope, excitement, and joy. This is not a 'sacrifice' on our part: it was God who allowed us to lead, for a season, and it is His prerogative to usher in a new cadre of leaders to pick up where we left off.

(www.barna.org)

Whitesel and Hunter (2000:19-20) caution that the local church will not be successful in assimilating young adults if it does not open leadership positions to them or "if they are frozen out of the planning and decision-making process." Unless the local church is willing to learn from Xers and to permit them to lead, insists Follis (1999:2), it is not likely to survive long in a post-modern context. At the same time, when Xers are enabled to have ownership of a decision, asserts Long (1997:154), this will foster greater commitment.

In order for this to become a reality, the church will need to create the kind of environment that will enable younger leaders to prosper (Reed 2000:28). Suggests Howard Merritt (2007:146), "As we begin to trust younger people in our congregations, pulpits, and governing bodies, and we allow them to have some power, then our churches will reflect that leadership." This will require the church to take seriously its need not only to provide an excellent CE and youth ministry, but to follow this with "a congenial environment for younger adults" (Kew 2001:64). It will require the church to endeavour to counsel, guide, train, and enable emerging leaders (Kew 2001:9). It will necessitate that Xers be empowered in their tasks, rather than controlled (Long 1997:156). As young people engage in leadership, it inevitably will introduce changes into the community. However, as Corpus (1999:9) suggests, "We can anticipate that such change will enliven the church as new believers share new gifts in the body of Christ." This has the potential to offer a sense of significance and worth to older members of the church, as well. As Bolinger (1999:105) articulates,

“When the generations lead together...there is a wonderful synergy of ideas, mentoring, and spiritual refreshment.” In turn, the “crisis of generativity” that we have considered in previous sections of this study can be powerfully overcome as the church cultivates an intergenerationally sustainable leadership culture.

A commitment to intergenerational justice also will profoundly inform the extent to which the congregation empowers young adults to be free to influence the bearing of its tradition. Volf (2005:107) insists that the spirit of generosity that accompanies properly locating ourselves within God’s economy will impact our attitude toward “goods.” As he notes, “Our relation to things changes once we truly understand that everything has been given to us by God.” This recognition enables us to draw an analogy to the protective control of the traditioning dynamic that often occurs within many congregations. As we saw in section 2.6.2.1, McIntyre (1984:222) has argued that a *living* tradition entails the continuous presence of an argument internal to that tradition regarding the *goods* with which it is concerned. As we noted in that same chapter, the “goods” with which the Christian tradition is concerned centre in God’s gracious gift, the *transgenerational* Good News of Christ.

Thus, if a congregation’s tradition is to remain vital, the generations of which it is composed must be willing to *return* any illegitimate claims regarding possession of its essential *goods*. Furthermore, they must strive to do justice through the freedom they afford the rising generation in influencing the shape of the tradition (Howard Merritt 2007:82). In essence, the church needs to become “a place of flexible stability” (Scrifres 1998:49), one that allows the entrepreneurial spirit of Generation X to gain expression (Peterson 1999:160). Notes Howard Merritt (2007:85), “The body will become aware of the gifts and needs of that particular group and respond to them by teaching the traditions of belief and practice in a more fluid, not rigid, way. The congregation will...become open to forming affirming traditions.” Furthermore, she adds, the church may need to strive to permit young adults to nurture their own spiritual traditions. As Tapia (1994:6) urges, Gen Xer Christians need to be empowered to serve the Lord in their generation, not that of their predecessors.

In addition, suggests Volf (2005:108), the spirit of generosity that accompanies properly locating ourselves within God’s economy will transform our attitude toward

“others.” Often, he notes, we do not give to others “unless the difference is so great that the competition is no longer a contest, in which case we’ll be able to afford to give.” As we saw in section 5.4.6, the need for this is all too evident in those churches where young adults are welcome to participate only on the terms dictated by the older generations. In addition, we have seen how *pure market* intergroup dynamics often lead to conflict with *others* over the perception of limited resources within the congregation. However, insists Volf, within the economy of the giving God, it is no longer appropriate to think of others as competitors for the possession of goods.

Thus, suggests Howard Merritt (2007:143), “if there is reluctance for the next generation to take over some of the customs of our congregations, we need to grieve that loss, but we have to let some things go.” Older members of the congregation can actually come to see young adults as collaborators in sustaining a vital tradition *until he comes*. Asserts Kew (2001:29), “it is highly likely that as they [young adults] forage through the basements and attics of the church, deep but forgotten spiritual riches from the diversity of classic Christian traditions will pour back into the church’s life.” This has the potential of being a great blessing to the congregation. Furthermore, the church can model to the broader society what it might mean to move beyond fragmentary identity politics toward a more holistic vision of shared life, a societal need that Best and Kellner (1997:278) identify as being of imperative significance.

Thus far, one may gain the impression that the call to intergenerational justice places demands solely upon the members of older generations. However, the way of intergenerational justice also promises to pay dividends for these older members of the congregation. As Schreier (1998:29) notes, God’s path of justice not only calls for the end of dominative power, but also precludes the disempowered choosing to “counter power with the same kind of power.” While doing so may restrain the power of another group, it does not bring about peace. Rather, it merely perpetuates the violent cycle of dominative power in a new form (:37). Thus, if we apply this awareness to the intergenerational dynamics within the established church, we must recognize that a call to intergenerational justice provides no room for the victimization of the elderly in the process of reaching the young. As Hammett and

Pierce (2007:81) insist, targeting a younger generation does not mean neglecting those who are over sixty. Neither does it mean doing violence to their sense of place within the congregation. Clearly, the church must find a way beyond the pattern of win/loss conflicts that has characterized recent decades.

As Schreiter (1998:29) advocates, there exists a need for a spirituality that “involves not directing one’s thinking along the lines of traditional channels of power, but making possible the springing up of alternatives to dominative power.” Reflecting on the description of the “wolf and lamb” in Isaiah 11:6-9, Law (1993:3) observes that, “In order for the animals to co-exist in this Peaceable Realm, very ‘unnatural’ behaviors are required from all who are involved.” Thus, he asserts, “Perhaps we have to go against the ‘instinct’ of our cultures in order for us to stop replaying the fierce-devouring-the-small scenario of intercultural encounter” (:4). Within our present discussion, we certainly can recognize the relevance of this counsel for the destructive patterns of intergroup interaction between the generations. Notes Volf (1996:116), a change in such patterns is possible only as the powerful and the disempowered both repent of “the seductiveness of the sinful values and practices” and allow “the new order of God’s reign” to be established in their hearts.

The suggestion that the disempowered need to repent sounds at first like an indication of acquiescence to the dominant order. However, notes Volf (1996:116), its true purpose is to create “a haven of God’s new world in the midst of the old and so make the transformation of the old possible.” Furthermore, the call to repentance confronts the temptation of the disempowered to excuse their own reactive behaviour either by claiming they are not responsible for it or that it is somehow necessary (:117). Thus, while Xers may lack confidence in “conventional methods of creating change” (Mahedy & Bernardi 1994:138), they must learn to exercise patience toward the resistance they may encounter from some older members of the congregation (Zustiak 1999:231).

Xers should not be concerned merely with their own interests or with what older church members can do for them, but also with what they can do in helping to prevent the body of Christ from fragmenting along generational lines (Crouch 1999:83). Older members of the congregation will feel threatened if young adults treat them in a

way that communicates that their opinions are second class. Older members also will feel imperilled when younger members give them the impression that the traditions and procedures that mean so much to them are old fashioned and in danger of being eliminated (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:19-20). Thus, a commitment to equity will be expressed in part through the younger members valuing their older counterparts:

You'll win the support of those over sixty in reaching those under forty if they don't feel the church is turning its back on them...Respect them. Ask their opinion. Not all of them have to have their own way. They may just want to be included, to know that they are not forgotten or ignored. And their wisdom is valuable.

(Hammett & Pierce 2007:141)

These older members of the congregation truly are rich in wisdom. Thus, as Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004:236) suggest, it is a shame when they are left feeling as though they are too old to make a contribution. In fact, they note, "It's worth sharing with them, and learning from their solid, lifelong commitment to their faith."

Law (1993:14) proposes that, if interactants of differing cultures are enabled to gain an understanding of the root causes of the "wolf and lamb" scenario, "we can then work together toward finding new ways of being where power is more evenly distributed." However, this means that the pursuit of justice cannot be a univocal concept. Rather, the parties concerned must examine carefully the meaning that they understand this term to convey (Schreiter 1998:121). This is particularly crucial because the existence of competing accounts of what constitutes "justice" is often bound up in the cycle of conflict between groups (Volf 1996:121). Rival traditions and rival cultures give rise to rival justices (:206). Certainly we can appreciate that this is true in the case of the intergenerational power struggles we have described in preceding portions of this study. Thus, if peace is to be of a lasting nature, agreement on justice must be reached (:196). In order for this to occur, suggests Volf (:197), "agreement on justice depends on the will to embrace the other." Indeed, he adds, "justice itself will be unjust as long as it does not become a mutual embrace."

This is challenging, for all accounts of justice are "particular." In other words, even Christians striving to promote the justice of God do so from within their own culture (Volf 1996:198-199). Certainly this is true in an intergenerational context,

particularly one in which the influence of both modern and post-modern values are operative. This requires that the church be the sort of community of equality in which all have a voice and in which a spirit of sharing and listening emerges (DeYoung 1995:174). It calls for a “discipline of dialogue,” a “multidialogical” approach that takes others seriously as persons (:175). Rendle (2002:5) cautions that the tendency to search for “solutions” within the multigenerational congregation has a tendency to undermine prematurely these sorts of “dynamic, productive, and necessary” conversations. However, assert Everist and Nesson (2008:90), when time is taken for the parties to learn from one another, “the ability to respect, to really see the other and to receive each one’s gift fully...is changed. Once this relationship is transformed, fear is lessened, the potential for more just distribution of resources is increased, and growth in partnership is exponential.”

In addition, it necessitates that all participants in this dialogue “distinguish between [their] idea of God’s justice and God’s justice itself” and nurture an awareness of their own fallibility (Volf 1996:199). It requires that participants adopt an “enlarged way of thinking,” which entails a “willingness to reason from the others’ point of view” (:212). This is essential for enriching and correcting the participants’ notions of justice and for fostering some measure of shared understanding (:212, 213). Lyon (1995:94-95) suggests that, in an intergenerational context, systems theory can be a potential resource in helping congregations to cultivate such understanding. In reality, the church must recognize itself from a systems perspective before it is able to do anything about it (Frost & Hirsch 2003:210-211). However, as Gibbs (2000a:34) suggests, a great deal can be learned by paying attention to the differences between how systems are understood within the modern and post-modern contexts. Indeed, the resources of both modernity and post-modernity can be employed in the learning process (Best & Kellner 1997:290).

### **7.3.3.3 Creative Justice in the Established Church**

The restructuring of power relations requires the exercise of “creative justice” (DeGruchy 2002:184, 202). As Harris (1996:81) expresses, this requires that members of the community “dwell in God’s creative presence; trust God’s liberating action while recognizing it usually occurs through human beings; experience God’s



forgiveness; hope in God's promises; and practice God's justice." It enables them to "use power in new, mutually respectful, and energizing ways" (Everist & Nesson 2008:98). Participants must covenant together to restore justice by sharing and, thereby, building a moral community (DeGruchy 2002:207). This entails both reflection upon justice and the active pursuit of justice (Volf 1996:217). An ultimate aim of this is what Schreier (1998:122) describes as "structural justice," the goal of which is correcting the structural inequities that have existed. As Harris (1996:66) articulates, a concern for structural justice entails "recreating systems, structures, institutions, and practices that oppress or keep people from freedom." Foster (1997:38) provides a realistic picture of this in suggesting that "movement toward this 'peaceable kingdom' comes in small steps." Nonetheless, every step that is taken is important and powerful.

The pursuit of structural justice will most certainly have implications for the way in which the congregation organizes its ministry and engages in decision making. Ammerman (1998:111) suggests that the approach a congregation takes toward making decisions "is an important window on the inner dynamics of its life together." She insists that churches need to be attentive to both *formal* and *informal* decision making processes, recognizing that they may not be altogether consistent (:107). Certainly, the informal processes that impact decision making in the congregation have considerable bearing upon the degree to which justice is embodied. However, the explicit, formal processes play an especially important role within the church's "embodied witness."

Commenting with particular reference to those situations in which Boomers are in leadership, Whitesel and Hunter (2000:61) note that a concern toward the decision making processes that are employed is an especially crucial consideration for Xers:

Generation X views Boomer ideas and suggestions with a measure of suspicion. It will cautiously appraise Boomer ideas, and hold them up in comparison to its own ideas of fairness, justice, and integrity... They suspect Boomer motives, perhaps with good reason, and as such, Gen-Xers must be allowed to participate in the decision-making process or they will not possess goal ownership.

Thus, we can recognize the wisdom in Granberg-Michaelson's (2004:91) assertion that "deciding how we decide" will be crucial to the ongoing effectiveness of the

church's mission. As he explains, "In the years ahead, changes in decision-making processes may represent some of the most fundamental shifts of organizational culture."

It does not lie within the scope of this chapter to propose any specific organizational models. Furthermore, as we have already noted, institutional change must come gradually. By advancing a specific model as a desired *end*, we would undermine the stated purpose of this chapter, which is to focus upon the *process* of missional renewal. In addition, we have asserted in section 6.3.4 that the church's structure must function in service to its particular mission. Thus, rather than proposing a specific model, we must make allowances for a variety of models to emerge in different contexts.

These things being said, there is little question that the process of missional renewal in the post-modern transition will challenge the congregation to move beyond the limitations inherent in the hierarchical model of church life native to modernity. Frost and Hirsch (2003:134, 176) note that, while many residents of the post-modern world "are searching for an inclusive community that is democratic, nonpatriarchal and compassionate", this is not what they encounter in many established congregations:

[T]he Christendom-era church, with its preference for hierarchical structures, favors a chain-of-command approach...Decisions are made at the top end of the structure and filter down to the grass roots. There's no interaction, no broad participation...[T]he membership at the so-called bottom of the system often feel silenced and resentful.

Griffin and Walker (2004:172-173) suggest that the hierarchical model often undermines authentic community and can even function in a manner that subjects members of the congregation to abuse. These are prospects to which Xers are highly sensitive. Furthermore, insist Snyder and Runion (2002:56), hierarchy is antithetical to the biblical picture of community.

Kitchens (2003:71) cautions that the hierarchical approach to church life actually fails to address the desire of Generation X to be engaged by a compelling mission:

Gen X and younger Christians are also interested in finding a place to commit their lives and to make a difference in the world...Neither are they interested in simply providing for the congregation's life and ministry, taking care of its own internal needs. Therefore, the most deadly thing we can do initially with

a postmodern Christian is to stick her or him on a committee. That's definitely not the kind of community or the kind of service in which these folks are interested.

The incongruence between this approach to structuring congregational life and the cultural values of the post-modern generations discourages these young adults from meaningful involvement. As Frost and Hirsch (2003:21) assert, "in the emerging global cultural context the hierarchical model has little to say to a generation that values egalitarianism and community" (cf. Peterson 1999:155). Thus, there is a need to move from *committee* to *community* (Howard Merritt 2007:120).

Kew (2001:61) insists that this is indeed an issue of systemic justice: "until the processes that the older churches use are radically overhauled they will continue to favor the older rather than the younger aspirant, the mature over those whose youth puts them at a disadvantage when seeking to find their way through 'the system.'" This poses a challenge to the congregation to change the "shape of the table" by using new strategies to enable all voices to be heard and by adopting participatory methods for decision-making (Everist & Nesson 2008:98). Because of the different generational cultures represented within the congregation surrounding issues of decision making and team dynamics (Raines 2003:136), changes of this nature will not be easy. However, as Kew (2001:28) asserts, structural changes are inevitable in the hands of the emerging generations. Thus, the church would do well to proceed with a disposition of proactive openness to such changes. The renewal of the church's structures is an expression of its care toward the rising generations and therefore must not be an afterthought (Lyon 1995:94-95).

Peterson (1999:157) suggests that two principles need to be evident in any structural changes that the church undertakes: (1) the church's ministries need to be participatory (team structured), and (2) egalitarian or nonauthoritarian (permission giving). In other words, the church's structures must be "relationally based and empowering." Frost and Hirsch (2003:21) call for a "flattened" organizational structure, one that reflects "heir-archy," rather than hierarchy. They suggest that the church of the future will need to reflect a "movement" ethos, rather than an institutional ethos. Miller (2004:80) describes this as a matter of developing "cooperative wineskins." Hammett and Pierce (2007:96) advocate an approach to

church life that emphasizes “permission-giving and empowerment”, rather than “polity and control”: “Maybe the time has come when streamlining decision-making in your church will expedite decision-making and push it from those who are in positions to those who are filled with passion for ministry, and toward birthing the new rather than just managing the present or past.”

This is a powerful prospect: Gen X, the crucial *hinge* generation being empowered and inspired to contribute to the unfolding intergenerational traditioning of the church’s witness. As we have seen, the promotion of justice is integral to God’s mission. As the Spirit brings about renewal within the church, the congregation should be enlivened with a concern for justice. In turn, as the church strives to embody justice in its shared life, it will exemplify something that is attractive and trustworthy to the cautious members of the first post-modern generation. Stated simply, a commitment to intergenerational justice constitutes an integral dimension of missional renewal in the post-modern transition.

#### **7.4 Conclusion**

Throughout chapter six and seven, we have been advancing the hypothesis that, if established churches are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, they must engage in a process of missional renewal that encompasses Generation X. Furthermore, we have asserted that, from both a sociological and theological perspective, this process must entail a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice. Chapter seven has been devoted to developing these themes of intergenerational reconciliation and justice. We have demonstrated the sociological reasons why these themes are important and have sought to respond to these sociological challenges by constructing a theological vision rooted in the reign of God.

In light of the legacy of division and alienation within society at large and within the life of many local churches, we have advocated for a restoration of relationship between the generations in Christ. This entails an openness to receiving diversity as a gift, to cultivate mutuality between the generations, and to work actively at rebuilding relationships. In addition, in response to the realities of the marginalization of Xers and the intergroup power struggles that occur in many churches, we have advanced a

vision of intergenerational equity within the church. This entails a returning and releasing of inordinate claims that members have made toward God's resources, the cultivation of an atmosphere in which all members are free and empowered to contribute, and the development of organizational structures that promote equity. While it has not been our purpose here to argue for intergenerational reconciliation and justice as the direct causes of missional renewal within established churches, we have shown that these priorities will be inextricably linked with the pursuit of missional renewal. These priorities give attention to both the spiritual and the systemic dimensions of the process of missional renewal. Thus, they have the potential to help foster a *new and right spirit* within the life of the congregation.

Having completed this final portion of the hermeneutical cycle, we now will proceed in chapter eight by subjecting this interpretation to a process of empirical testing. Chapter eight will help us to determine the degree to which the interpretation provided in chapters three through seven corresponds to the lived reality of local churches.

## **8. EMPIRICAL EVALUATION OF INTERGENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE**

### **8.1 Introducing the Empirical Process**

The present study is concerned with addressing the problem 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 has further been suggested that a key manifestation of this problem lies in the reality that many of these same churches are proving ineffective at transmitting their faith traditions to Generation X, the first post-modern generation. As a result, the ability of these churches to sustain their witness through this transitional period has been shown to be in jeopardy. Furthermore, this study has been guided by the hypothesis that, if these churches are to sustain their witness through this transitional period, they must engage in a process of missional renewal that entails a concern for reaching Gen X. It has been asserted that this process will, of necessity, involve a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice.

Throughout this study, we have been employing the practical-theological research paradigm advanced by Gerben Heitink (1999:6). This has led us to maintain an understanding of practical theology as a “theory of action” concerned with “the empirically oriented theological theory of the mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of modern society” (:6). Heitink outlines a practical-theology research paradigm consisting of three movements: the hermeneutical perspective, the empirical perspective, and the strategic perspective. The first of these is focused upon providing meaning, the second upon testing action, and the third upon systematic action. As Heitink suggests, these three perspectives must be allowed to interrelate as movements within “a distinct circulation system or ‘circuit’ of theory formation” (:165), a conceptual triad that moves along the path of “understanding— explanation—change” (:235). Chapters two through seven of this research project have been devoted to articulating a hermeneutical interpretation of the above-stated problem and hypothesis. The goal of these chapters has been to establish a thorough basis of meaning and understanding. However, the concern in these chapters has not been only with providing a hermeneutical understanding of the nature of the church’s

praxis in society, but furthermore with endeavouring to understanding the very praxis of God in which the church has been called to participate.

Of course, though every effort has been made to provide a fair and accurate presentation of the phenomena under consideration here, the preceding chapters bear the limitations inherent in the subjectivity brought by their author to the process of interpretation. This reality highlights the necessity of the next step in the process of practical-theological research: a movement beyond the development of understanding and toward explanation through the use of the empirical perspective. As Heitink (1999:221) argues, if any practical-theological enterprise is to be faithful to its location within an “empirically-oriented” discipline, the pursuit of explanation must be seen as an integral dimension of the research process. As was explained in section 1.5.3.3, the concept of *empiricism* represents an epistemological approach that recognizes all *scientific* knowledge as based on experience and deducible through sense perceptions. It demands a testing process for the purposes of establishing validity and veracity. In the specific case of formulating a theory of action, it helps to provide a scientific basis for academic inquiry into the meaning or effectiveness of action (:221). Inherent in this process is the assumption that, through empirical testing, critical insight will be provided to strengthen or correct our hermeneutical constructs regarding praxes that truly serve the kingdom of God.

Heitink (1999:225) urges the practical theologian to keep in focus the reality that “improvement of the situation toward the desired praxis is the underlying interest of practical-theological research.” It is precisely that sort of culmination toward which the present research project is directed. Chapter nine of this thesis will be devoted to the third movement of practical-theological research: a strategic perspective that endeavours to make practical proposals regarding the need for change. However, if this project is to be characterized by methodological integrity, it is necessary that we first subject the hermeneutical interpretation developed in chapters two through seven to a process of testing. In order for the development of strategic proposals, the end toward which this study is aimed, to be of optimal benefit to the life of the church, the foundation of interpretation upon which these proposals are constructed must be tested to determine the soundness of its validity and veracity. With this in mind, the empirical dimension of practical-theological research will come into focus in the

present chapter. As we transition from the conclusion of this chapter into an exploration of strategic proposals, we will do so with the aid of a body of empirically-based evidence regarding the ways in which God is inviting the church to enter into missional renewal amidst the post-modern transition.

## **8.2 Survey Methodology**

### **8.2.1 Designing the Survey**

As was articulated in chapter one, numerous methodological options exist regarding how one might proceed with the process of empirical testing. An examination of the benefits, limitations, and challenges inherent in these various methods led this researcher to the conclusion that the present project would be most feasible and best served by a quantitative analysis of the experiences of local churches. This would be accomplished through the conducting of a survey.

This conclusion led the researcher to enlist the aid of Dr. Ed Simanton, Director of Assessment at the University of South Dakota's Sanford School of Medicine. Dr. Simanton has extensive experience in quantitative research and possesses a Ph.D. in Research Methodology from the University of North Dakota. Under his supervision, I prepared a thirty-seven question survey composed of two sections aimed at gathering descriptive statistics.<sup>1</sup> The first section, consisting of twelve multiple-choice questions, focuses largely upon the identity of the respondents, the demographic make-up of the congregations represented, and aspects of the strategic approaches to ministry being employed in each of these local-church contexts. The second section consists of twenty-five statements intended to test the problem statement and hypothesis upon which this research project is based in light of the experiences of these local churches.<sup>2</sup>

With this in mind, the problem statement and hypothesis were reduced to hermeneutical "zones." These zones essentially equate to the key logical pieces or constituent parts of which the hypothesis and problem statement are composed; the

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<sup>1</sup> The survey instrument is included in Appendix A.

<sup>2</sup> Because this survey was sent out under the letterhead of the North American Baptist Seminary, the institution at which I was employed at the time that the survey was conducted, it also required the approval of the institution's President's Cabinet, which provided another layer of critique.



logical flow and content of chapters two through seven can be summarized within these various zones. Each of the twenty-five questions in section two of the survey was carefully crafted to test the hermeneutical content encompassed by one of these “zones.” The seven zones were isolated as follows:

1. Many established churches struggle to respond faithfully to cultural change.
2. Many established churches struggle to respond faithfully within a complex generational context.
3. Many of these same churches are proving ineffective at transmitting their faith traditions to Generation X, the first post-modern generation.
4. These churches need to engage in a process of missional renewal.
5. This process will entail a concern for reaching Gen X.
6. This process will involve a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation.
7. This process will involve a commitment to intergenerational justice.

In preparing this second section of the survey, the researcher decided to employ a 1-5 Likert Scale, which is derived from an approach developed by Rensis Likert in the 1930s to assess people’s attitudes (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:197). This format enables respondents to express their level of agreement or disagreement across a range of five possible responses. For each statement, respondents were asked to indicate whether their opinion was best reflected as “strongly agree,” “agree,” “neutral,” “disagree,” or “strongly disagree.”

### **8.2.2 Gathering the Data**

The basic rule in statistical research is, “The larger the sample, the better” (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:221). However, the present study had to be conducted within the parameters of limited resources. Thus, in June of 2006, the survey was distributed by post to 150 churches, thirty in each of five denominations: American Baptist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, North American Baptist Conference, Reformed Church in America, and the United Methodist Church. These denominations were selected because of the high number of students from each of them studying at the North American Baptist Seminary (renamed Sioux Falls Seminary in 2007) in Sioux Falls, SD, the institution at which the researcher taught at the time. The desire was to generate data that would be of relevance and benefit to

the NABS student body. Without question, had other denominations been included in this study, this surely would have further enriched the data generated through this study. However, recognizing that the field had to be limited by some means, these were the criteria employed.

The “sample” selected to participate in any survey research project is a critically important consideration. As Leedy and Ormrod (2001:210) note, “the researcher can use the results obtained from the sample to make generalizations about the entire population only if the sample is truly representative of the population.” In essence, this determines the “external validity” of a research project. Thus,

The sampling procedure depends on the purpose of the sampling and a careful consideration of the parameters of the population... The sample should be so carefully chosen that, through it, the researcher is able to see all the characteristics of the total population in the same relationship that they would be seen were the researcher, in fact, to inspect the total population... [U]nless the sampling procedure is carefully planned, the conclusions that the researcher draws from the data are likely to be distorted.

(:211)

Bearing this caution in mind, the churches selected for inclusion in this study were identified with the aid of lists provided through publications and websites of their respective denominations. While surveys were sent to churches in all regions of the United States, roughly seventy-five percent of the surveys were distributed among churches concentrated in urban centres within the six-state region of Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North and South Dakota, and Wisconsin. Two primary criteria were employed in limiting the field in this way. First, as with the decision regarding which denominations to study, the churches within this six-state region provide the main constituency to which the North American Baptist Seminary relates. Second, the states within this region include vast rural areas dependent upon an agricultural economy. Demographic data from numerous sources reveals that, while Gen Xers tend to constitute a fairly small percentage of the population in many of these declining rural areas, they are concentrated in considerably more significant numbers in high-population areas (Dunn 1993:143). This being the case, it was felt that the insights generated by this study would be informed more meaningfully by data gathered among churches within larger communities and would be of most to relevance to such churches.

Each of the 150 envelopes distributed by post to these churches was addressed to “Senior Pastor” at the church’s mailing address. This title commonly is given to the lead pastor within congregations served by a ministry staff composed of multiple pastors. It was hoped that directing the survey to pastors holding specific roles within the church, rather than simply to the church address, might heighten the response rate. Senior pastors were chosen in particular because it was believed that their vantage point within their given congregations would enable them to provide a credible and informed assessment of their churches. Even in those churches that are served by a solo pastor, mail addressed to “Senior Pastor” still would be likely to find their way into his or her hands. In addition to a copy of the thirty-seven question survey and a cover letter on the North American Baptist Seminary stationary, each envelope contained a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. These envelopes were coded to enable the researcher to track responses. While the survey materials did not require respondents to identify themselves or their churches, the cover letter assured survey recipients that all returned forms would be handled with the strictest of confidentiality.

Dr. Simanton’s recommendation was that a fifty percent return rate would be necessary to provide valid data. Because the typical return rate for a mailed questionnaire frequently is less than fifty percent (Rogelberg & Luong 1998), this would constitute a very good rate of return. Thus, the goal of receiving seventy-five completed surveys was established. In an effort to promote maximum response, a reminder postcard was sent out to those churches that had not returned surveys two weeks after the initial mailing. Despite these efforts, at the completion of the survey period, the goal of seventy-five responses had not been accomplished, with a total of only sixty-eight surveys having been returned. A second mailing was conducted in late August, with eighty-two surveys being distributed among those that had not responded to the initial mailing. While this second attempt generated only thirteen additional survey responses, this was enough to exceed the stated goal of a fifty percent response rate. One additional survey was returned after the rest of the data had already been processed, and so was not able to be included in the summary provided in this chapter. The relevance of this research project was validated not only by the number of surveys returned, but also by the fact that six respondents submitted

letters of affirmation with their surveys. Several of these pastors expressed a desire to receive a report about the insights generated by this study.

### 8.2.3 Interpreting the Data

The data gathered through the returned surveys was processed with the aid of the SPSS software. This software enabled the results of each question in part one of the survey to be expressed in terms of percentages. In addition, because the desire in conducting this survey was to gain insight into the experience of the “average” respondent, the SPSS software was able to calculate the results from part two of the survey as “mean” scores, which provide a measure of “central tendency” or “the fulcrum point for a set of data” (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:264). In determining mean scores, a numerical value is assigned to each of the possible responses, with 1 corresponding to “strongly agree,” 2 being equivalent to “agree,” 3 reflecting neutrality or lack of an opinion, 4 indicating “disagreement,” and 5 corresponding to “strongly disagree.” Thus, whereas a mean score of 1.98 would reflect agreement on the part of the average respondent, a mean score of 3.5 would suggest tentative disagreement. A mean score of 2.45 would indicate unstable or uncertain agreement, while a score of 4.0 reflects firm disagreement.

While the text of this chapter will contain references to these mean scores, this presentation will be augmented by tables that report data crucial for establishing their statistical legitimacy. Specifically, each table will include “standard deviation” and “significance” figures. Standard deviation, “the standard measure of variability” (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:269), reflects the range of answers provided to a given question. A larger standard deviation indicates a greater diversity of opinion. A standard deviation of 1.7 suggests a broad diversity, including respondents who provide both considerably more positive and considerably more negative responses than the mean score indicates. A standard deviation of .4 would indicate little variance of opinion. Standard deviation, therefore, reflects the extent to which respondents agree or disagree in their assessment of a given question.

*Significance* is an important consideration when comparing the results of multiple survey groups. In order for the differences in how two or more groups answered a

given question to be deemed statistically significant, when inserted into a mathematical “significance” formula, the mean scores of these groups must be shown to be statistically distinct from one another to a ninety-five percent certainty (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:275-276). When this occurs, it is expressed by a significance score of .050 or less. A significance score of .020 reflects that the difference in results between multiple survey groups is statistically significant to a ninety-eight percent certainty. A significance score of .75 suggests that, while the differences in results may have some statistical significance, this cannot be determined conclusively.

Roughly a dozen different formulae for determining significance have been developed over time. Each of these has been adopted and employed to varying degrees within the broader scholarly community. These formulae could be plotted along a continuum in terms of the relative *liberality* or *conservatism* inherent in the approach they represent to establishing statistical significance. That being the case, in an effort to strengthen the integrity of this research project, the decision was made, at Dr. Simanton’s recommendation, to employ the Bonferonni formula, arguably the most conservative formula available for the purposes of establishing statistical significance. As a result, while the differences in experience identified through this survey might not appear as pronounced as they would with the aid of less conservative formulae, those that have been identified as statistically significant are reported here with the added benefit of greater statistical weight.

Before proceeding, we must acknowledge the limitations of the material being presented. Leedy and Ormrod (2001:196) observe that

[s]urvey research captures a fleeting moment in time, much as a camera takes a single-frame photograph of an ongoing activity. By drawing conclusions from one transitory collection of data, we may extrapolate about the state of affairs over a longer time period. At best, the extrapolation is a conjecture, and sometimes a hazardous one at that, but it is our only way to generalize what we see.

So often, the survey reports that we read seem to suggest that what the researcher found in one sample population at one particular time can be accepted for all times as a constant.

These observations help us to appreciate how imperative it is for the following summary to be presented with appropriate humility. Care must be taken to avoid inflating the external validity of this study.

It must also be acknowledged that this survey is effective only to the degree that the researcher chose to pose good questions. Furthermore, the usefulness of the data generated by each of the questions posed, however carefully crafted, is limited by the subjective interpretation of the individual respondent and the bias out of which he or she chose to respond. While the group whose responses provide the basis for the conclusions drawn in this chapter is both fairly sizeable and somewhat diverse, this study would have benefited all the more greatly had the resources been available to conduct this survey on a larger scale. It might also have been helpful to gain additional insight into some of the factors that could contribute to bias on the part of the respondents. For example, it seems that the length of a respondent's tenure at his or her church might influence his or her perceptions. However, respondents were not requested to provide this information.

It also might have been beneficial if some insight could have been gained about the differences between respondents and non-respondents. As Rogelberg & Luong (1998) have demonstrated, non-respondents often are different from respondents in significant ways. For example, they may simply have less interest in the topic being researched or may be too sensitive toward the topic of inquiry to respond. Thus, the fact that our observations can be drawn only from among the eighty-one responding churches is itself an indication that an unavoidable element of bias is present within the results being summarized here (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:223).

In turn, while every effort has been made to handle the data gathered in a fair and accurate manner, the summary provided in this chapter is not altogether free from the subjectivity of its author. Constraining the influence of bias upon the interpretive process is a crucial task for the researcher (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:221-223). However, this simply cannot be avoided altogether. Though the use of interviewing as a qualitative method lies beyond the parameters of the present study, the opportunity to record respondents' descriptions of their experiences in their own words would surely have added intersubjective substance to the interpretation represented here. Despite all of these limitations, however, the present chapter can be trusted to provide valuable insight into the problem and hypothesis under consideration in this study.

### **8.3 Summarizing the Data**

#### **8.3.1 Identity of Respondents**

As was mentioned above, five Protestant denominations were targeted through this survey. The highest response rate occurred among those representing congregations from within the Reformed Church in America. Of the thirty RCA churches to which the survey was distributed, twenty-three (28.4 % of total respondents) returned completed surveys. Twenty-one (25.9 % of total respondents) North American Baptist churches responded. Fourteen (17.3 % of total respondents) responses were generated by United Methodists, thirteen (16% of total respondents) by American Baptist churches, and ten (12.3% of total respondents) by Evangelical Lutheran congregations. Unfortunately, the number of respondents within these three final groups was not large enough to make it possible to determine whether any statistically significant differences exist between the experiences of these denominations. However, the ability to engage in such a comparison was not a primary objective of this study. The fact that the data included in this chapter was drawn from a diverse group of denominations only serves to broaden the relevance of this study.

Of all those individuals who completed this survey, sixty-eight, or eighty-four percent, were senior pastors. One respondent was a youth/young adult minister. An additional seven respondents, or 8.6 percent, identified themselves in the category of “Other Ministerial Staff Member.” Five surveys, or 6.2 percent, were completed by individuals who grouped themselves under the category of “Other.” In light of the fact that surveys were addressed simply to the “Senior Pastor” of the churches targeted, rather than to specific individuals, perhaps this should come as little surprise. An unfortunate result of this, however, is that the number of non-senior pastors is insufficient to provide any basis for exploring whether any discernible difference exists in the perspectives of senior pastors and non-senior pastors. Particularly because this study is concerned with investigating perceptions of intergenerational dynamics within the congregation, it would have been interesting to explore whether a comparison of senior pastors with others might have produced any noteworthy insights.

When examined from the perspective of age, the majority of respondents identified themselves as having been born “Between 1945 and 1964”; indeed, fifty-nine (72.8%) belong to this category. This is consistent with what has been stated in previous chapters about the current demographic composition of the church’s leadership. Thus, Boomers provided the overwhelming majority of the data for this study. Comparatively, only seven (8.6%) respondents were pre-Boomers born prior to 1945. An addition fifteen respondents identified themselves as members of the post-modern generations; fourteen (17.3%) respondents were born “Between 1965 and 1981”, while only one was born “After 1981.” In employing these different age categories as a means for comparing how respondents answered questions, it was fascinating to discover that no statistically significant differences emerged on any of the questions posed. Even when comparing the responses of Boomers with those of respondents born after 1965, no such differences arose. Based upon the insights provided in preceding chapters, this does not come as a surprise. While this study did not afford the opportunity to do so, it certainly would be interesting to explore the underlying factors causing this to be so. Regardless, this lack could itself be identified as a profoundly significant discovery generated by this survey.

### **8.3.2 Character of Churches Represented**

It will be helpful to introduce briefly not only the identity of the respondents, but also the makeup of the churches they represent. In crafting this survey, efforts were made to gather specific categories of information about each of these churches that, particularly when employed in multivariate analysis, would provide valuable information to aid in testing the hypothesis being advanced here. We will summarize these categories briefly and explain why they are of interest to this study.

#### **8.3.2.1 The Founding Year of Responding Churches**

Respondents were asked to specify the year in which their church was founded. Sixty-eight (84%) of these churches were established before 1965. Eleven (13.6%) were started between 1965 and 1990. Only two (2.5%) came into existence after 1990. Sadly, the shortage of data from churches founded after 1965 weakens our ability to engage in truly conclusive comparative analysis of such churches against



those founded before that date. However, it certainly provides a generous amount of data from the sort of older, established churches with which this study is chiefly concerned. This date of 1965 is significant within the overall contour of this study for at least two reasons. First, as was indicated in section 3.5.2.5, this year constituted the beginning of the downturn in American religious participation patterns. Thus, one could expect that churches founded after this date might reflect the character of having been established with a view to addressing the new cultural realities that were emerging at that time. Second, this year corresponds approximately to the leading edge of the Gen X cohort. This being the case, it seems that churches founded before and after this date might reflect somewhat differing attitudes and experiences based upon how the life course of this generation has interacted with the unfolding life course of the congregation itself. The members of this generation would have been the first babies populating the nurseries of these congregations. Thus, while this data will have to be introduced with caution, we will do well to remain attentive to distinctions arising between churches founded in the different eras represented within this survey.

### **8.3.2.2 The Missional Clarity of Responding Churches**

In addition, an effort was made to explore the clarity of mission out of which each congregation is ministering and the impact of any differences that might arise. This is important because, as was asserted in chapters five through seven, churches that have sought to discern their missional vocation generally are likely to reflect different attitudes about intergenerational reconciliation and justice, and toward Gen X in particular, than churches merely engaged in liminal preoccupations or those suffering from *goal displacement*. Because, as has been noted, the process of identifying a mission statement can itself be a liminal endeavour at times, care was taken within this survey to inquire as to whether or not the “congregation is guided by a clearly articulated, shared sense of mission;” in other words, does an articulated sense of mission matter or serve a vital role within the life of the congregation. The responses to this survey provide a sound opportunity to engage in an analysis of this point. Thirty-two (39.5%) of those who responded to this survey indicate that “Our congregation is guided by a clearly articulated, shared sense of mission.” Thirty-six (44.4%) responding churches presently are engaged in a process of clarifying their

congregational mission. Thirteen churches (16%) indicate that, at the present time, neither of the two above categories is true of their congregations.

### **8.3.2.3 The Age Demographics of Responding Churches**

Important information was provided regarding the age demographics that make up the churches surveyed. This category of enquiry provides us a crucial lens through which to test the hypothesis being advanced here. In the preceding chapters, considerable attention has been given to outlining the attitudes, values, and experiences of each of the generational cohorts of which the American adult population is composed. By exploring the complexion of responding churches according to age, this enables us to gauge the degree to which these churches reflect, or perhaps are distinct from, the generational norms that are at work within the society at large.

Among those churches studied, only three (3.7%) indicate having adult populations in which Silents and GI's (defined as those age sixty-two and older at the time of the survey) make up "More than 75%" of the overall adult membership. In nineteen churches (23.5%), the Silent and GI members constitute "Between 50 and 75%" of the adult membership. Twenty-three churches (28.4%) have a Silent and GI population that amounts to "Between 25 and 50%" of the adult membership. In thirty-six churches (44.4%), Silents and GI's now make up "Less than 25%" of the membership.

Only one of the churches surveyed indicated that Boomers (defined as those 41-62 years of age at the time of the survey) make up "More than 75%" of the membership. Only nine (11.1%) have a Boomer population constituting "Between 50 and 75%" of the membership. Fifty-five churches (67.9%) are composed of "Between 25 and 50%" Boomers. Sixteen (19.8%) have adult memberships of which Boomers make up "Less than 25%."

None of the churches responding to this survey indicated being made up of a proportion of "More than 75%" of Gen Xers (defined as those between 25 and 41 years old at the time of the survey). Only five (6.2%) suggest that Xers constitute "Between 50 and 75%" of their membership. Thirty-six (44.4%) have an Xer

population making up “Between 25 and 50%” of their membership. Meanwhile, forty churches (49.4%) are composed of a demographic distribution in which Xers constitute “Less than 25%” of the overall membership.

#### **8.3.2.4 The Proportionality of Xers within Responding Churches**

Because Xers are the primary cohort with which this study is concerned, it seemed important to explore the percentage of each congregation composed of Xers relative to the age composition of the community at large. As was suggested in section 6.4, churches that strive to be faithful to their missional identity should be expected to reflect the demographic makeup of the communities by which they are surrounded. Thus, the posing of this question was motivated by the understanding that such an inquiry might help to provide insight into the effectiveness of local churches in engaging in mission among the post-modern young people of their communities. Forty-two (51.9%) respondents indicated that their churches have “Age demographics similar to those of the community in which it is located.” Eight (9.9%) suggested that “The percentage composed of Gen Xers (adults 25-41 years old) is noticeably higher than in the community at large.” Thirty-one (38.3%) report that “The percentage composed of Gen Xers is noticeably lower than in the community at large.”

#### **8.3.2.5 The Participation Trends of Xers within Responding Churches**

Respondents also were asked to characterize the attendance patterns of Gen Xers within their churches over the period of the past three years. In chapters six and seven, some aspects of church growth theory were critiqued on the grounds of their seeming tendency toward the equation of pragmatic success with missional faithfulness. In light of this critique, it would be consistent for data reflecting numerical growth to be employed here only with appropriate care and qualification. Nonetheless, it has been argued in the previous chapters that a commitment to engage in mission among post-modern young adults should manifest itself through a discernable trend of actually reaching these young people. In response to this query, nine (11.1%) respondents indicate that “The number of Gen Xers has decreased” in the last three years. Twenty-eight (34.6%) have seen the number of Gen Xers remain “essentially the same.” Thirty (37%) suggest that the number of Gen Xers in their

churches “has increased slightly,” while thirteen (16%) have observed the number of Xers increase “significantly.”

### **8.3.2.6 The Size of Responding Churches**

Respondents also were asked about the current average weekly worship attendance of their churches. As was explained in chapter seven, Xers are not necessarily attracted to larger churches (indeed, some sources have indicated that many members of this generation actually prefer smaller congregations). However, as Rendle (2003:31) has effectively demonstrated, larger churches possess the resources to be able to appeal to a broader range of “pure markets,” while smaller churches are faced with the reality of only being able to do a limited number of things well. Thus, it is significant to note that thirty-eight (46.9%) respondents indicated that their church has a weekly worship attendance of “Less than 150.” Thirty-one (38.3%) identified themselves as experiencing “150-400” in weekly attendance. Seven churches (8.6%) average between 401-750 attendees each week, while only five (6.2%) are acquainted with a weekly attendance of greater than 750.

### **8.3.2.7 The Worship Styles Employed within Responding Churches**

A rich diversity emerged in the way in which respondents characterized the worship styles employed within their churches. Sixteen (19.8 %) indicated that their churches employ “Mostly traditional music.” Ten (12.3 %) churches employ “Mostly contemporary music.” Thirty-seven churches (45.7%) indicated using “A blend of traditional and contemporary music;” it must be acknowledged that this “blended” category is somewhat imprecise and, perhaps more than the other categories employed in this question, is at the mercy of the subjective interpretation of the respondent. “Two or more services with distinct music styles” are being employed in eighteen (22.2%) of the churches surveyed.

Among the thirty-eight churches with an average attendance of less than 150, the majority claimed to employ a “blended” (55.3%) or “traditional” (28.9%) approach to worship. Among these churches, those using a “contemporary” style and those employing a multiple service format constituted 7.9 percent of respondents each. The

thirty-one churches of 150-400 average attendance favour a blended (38.7%) or multi-service (29%) approach, while a predominantly traditional (16.1%) or contemporary style (16.1%) is employed in considerably fewer cases. Among the seven churches of 400 to 750, none employs an exclusively traditional or contemporary style. Indeed, five (71.4%) are committed to a multi-service approach, while two (28.6%) are endeavouring to cultivate a “blended” approach to their worship gatherings. Among the five churches that fit into the largest size category of 750 or more, two indicate employing contemporary worship patterns exclusively. A further two maintain a blended approach to corporate worship, while one employs a multi-service format.

### **8.3.3 The Experiences of the Churches Represented**

Once again, this study has been designed to explore a perceived problem among established churches in responding to cultural change within an increasingly complex generational context. It has been asserted that, as one consequence of this struggle, many churches have proven ineffective at transmitting their faith traditions to Gen X, the first post-modern generation. This problem constitutes the first three empirical *zones* that contributed to the design of this survey. Against the backdrop of this perceived problem, it has been asserted here that, if churches are to sustain their witness through this transitional period, they must engage in a process of missional renewal that encompasses Gen X. It has further been suggested that this process must entail a concern for intergenerational reconciliation and justice.

In advancing these ideas, this research project essentially is making specific claims about the practices through which the church might fulfil its calling to mediate God’s kingdom purposes for the world. Indeed, a process of missional renewal that encompasses Gen X is being advocated, as is an accompanying concern for intergenerational reconciliation and justice. A fundamental conviction of the practical-theological research paradigm being employed here is that this understanding must be tested empirically. If the hypothesis being advanced here is valid, some compelling evidence of its veracity should emerge from among the churches surveyed. With this in mind, we will explore the survey results in the pages that follow.

### 8.3.3.1 The Positive Relationship Cluster

In analyzing the surveys returned, significant differences arose in relation to the values, attitudes, priorities, behaviours and experiences evidenced among responding churches. Four factors proved to be of primary significance in distinguishing between the experiences of local churches:

- a. ***Whether or not the church is guided by a clear, shared sense of mission.*** This question proved to be one of the most telling indicators in helping to identify the differences between congregations. Strong differences were evident throughout the data field and were statistically significant for nineteen of the twenty-five items examined in part two.
- b. ***The demographic composition of the congregation relative to the surrounding community.*** In twelve of the items included in part two of the survey, significant statistical differences emerge when the churches in which the Gen X population is similar to or greater than that of the community at large are compared with those in which a percentage of Xers is noticeably lower than the surrounding community.
- c. ***The rate of growth or decline of Xer participants within the church over the last three years.*** When the churches that describe themselves as experiencing either increased or stable involvement of Gen Xers are compared with those that indicate having seen a decrease in Xer involvement, statistically significant differences arise in the data provided in response to twelve of the twenty-five items in part two of the survey.
- d. ***The age make-up of the local congregation.*** Analysis of the data provided by respondents revealed statistical evidence of a stark contrast in experience between churches with a composition including more than twenty-five percent Gen Xers and those with less than twenty-five percent Xers. Statistically significant differences emerged in how representatives of these two categories answered ten of the twenty-five questions in part two of the survey. Consistently, those churches in which Xers compose twenty-five percent or more of the overall

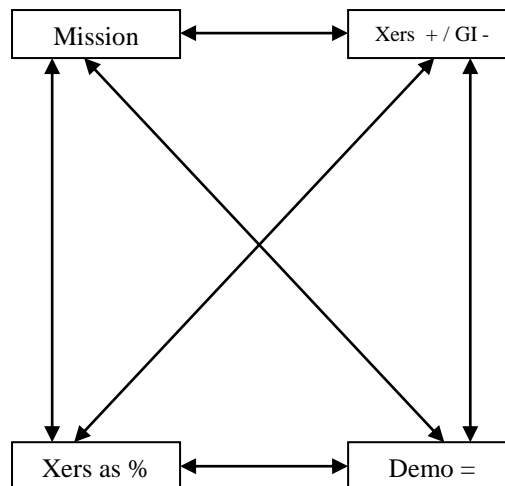
congregation provide a more optimistic assessment of their effectiveness or experience in each one of these categories.

Similarly, in eleven of the twenty-five questions in part two of the survey, statistically significant differences in response were tied to the percentage of the congregation composed of pre-Boomers (G.I.'s and Silents). The most notable differences arise when churches in which pre-Boomers constitute twenty-five percent or more of the congregation are compared with those in which they make up less than twenty-five percent. Repeatedly, the higher the percentage of pre-Boomers in a congregation, the more negative or tentative the responses provided tend to be.

It is important to note, as well, that these two categories of churches, those in which Xers compose more than twenty-five percent and those in which pre-Boomers do so, bear a high degree of statistical distinction from one another. Only sixteen of the eighty-one responding churches report having a congregational composition including more than twenty-five percent pre-Boomers and more than twenty-five percent Xers. Thus, these two factors are related in that they are almost two sides of the same issue.

Throughout this research project, it has been argued that the Boomers function as a *lead cohort* within society. That being the case, one might anticipate that the percentage of a congregation composed of Boomers might be a significant factor influencing the attitudes of that congregation. One might further anticipate that, in comparing congregations, differences in the percentage of the congregation composed of Boomers might be accompanied by differences in attitude and experience. That being said, it is worth noting that differences in the percentage of congregations composed of Boomers did not emerge as being tied to any statistically significant distinction in how respondents characterized the experience of their respective churches.

Figure 8.1—Positive Relationship Cluster



It is worth noting that these factors correspond closely to the expectations articulated in section 8.3.2 above, as well as in previous chapters. **However, perhaps even more worthy of note for the sake of this study is the high degree of statistically significant relationship that exists among these four variables, as figure 8.1 depicts. A significant relationship is evident between the clarity of mission possessed by responding congregations and the percentage of the congregation composed of Xers.** All five of the churches in which Xers make up more than fifty percent of the adult congregation indicated that they presently are guided by a compelling sense of mission. Similarly, among those congregations that report having church body compositions that include twenty-five to fifty percent Xers, 41.7 percent indicated being guided by an articulated mission, while 47.2 percent presently were in the process of clarifying such a mission at the time of the survey. A smaller portion of respondents in this group, 11.1 percent, do not fit into either of these categories. By contrast, among those churches that had compositions including less than twenty-five percent Gen Xers, thirty percent reported being guided by a clearly articulated sense of mission, while 47.5 percent presently were grappling with the need to develop such a focus. The 22.5 percent of churches in this category that were neither guided by a shared sense of mission nor in a process of discerning their mission is considerably higher than in the other two categories combined.

**In addition, there existed a strong relationship between the level of articulated mission at work with in the life of local congregations and the degree to which they reflect the demographic makeup of their surrounding communities.** Among



those churches that included a proportion of Xers higher than the community at large, seventy-five percent considered themselves to be guided by a well-articulated, shared sense of mission. An additional 12.5 percent were in the process of clarifying their mission. Among those churches indicating that the proportion of Xers within their own ranks was relatively similar to that of the larger community, fifty percent had adopted a unifying mission, while 40.5 percent were in the process of clarifying their mission. Among the churches enjoying percentages of Xer participants higher than or similar to the demographics of the surrounding community, 12.5 and 9.5 percent of each category, respectively, had not yet engaged in a process of discerning their mission. Conversely, among churches with percentages of Xer participants lower than the communities in which they were located, 25.8 had not so much as begun a process of clarifying their mission, while 58.1 percent were engaged in such a process at the time of this survey, and only 16.1 percent were functioning in accordance with an articulated, shared sense of mission.

**A strong relationship also was evident between the level of articulated mission and the three-year participation patterns of Xers.** Among the thirty-two churches claiming to be guided by a vital, shared sense of mission, twenty-four (66.7%) reported either a slight (16) or a significant (8) increase in Xer attendance over a three-year period, while eight (33%) had seen Xer involvement remain essentially the same. Among those thirty-five churches that presently were engaged in a process of clarifying their mission at the time of this survey, fourteen (40%) had experienced either a slight (12) or a significant (2) increase in Xer attendance over a three-year period, while fourteen (40%) had seen the number of Xers involved remain essentially the same and seven (20%) had experienced declining participation among this age group. Among those twelve churches that had not entered into a process of clarifying their mission, four (33%) had seen any measure of growth among Xers during this period, while among eight, this population had either remained static (6; 50%) or declined (2; 16.7%).

**A strong positive relationship also was shown to exist between Xers as an overall percentage of congregational membership (question 8) and the age demographics of the congregation relative to the surrounding community.** Among the forty-one churches in which Xers constituted more than twenty-five percent of the membership,

63.9 percent reported having age demographics similar to the surrounding community. Among these churches, 8.3 percent characterized the number of Xers participants as being greater than within the demographic distribution of the surrounding community, while 27.8 percent reported having a lower proportion of Xers than the surrounding community. In contrast, among those churches in which Xers constituted less than twenty-five percent of the adult membership, 52.5 percent had a lower proportion of Xers than the surrounding community and 42.5 percent had a proportion similar to that of the community at large.

**Similarly, a positive relationship existed between Xers as an overall percentage of the church's membership and the three-year participation patterns of Xers.**

Among the five churches in which Xers constituted a majority of the membership, three reported having experienced a significant increase in Xer participation over the last three years. One had experienced a slight increase, while one reported that the number of Xers participating had remained “essentially the same.” Among the thirty-six churches in which Xers constituted between twenty-five and fifty percent of attendees, twenty-two percent had seen a significant increase in Xer participation, while 44.4 percent had experienced a slight increase. One in four (25%) of these churches had seen the number of Xer participants remain essentially the same, while a modest 8.3 percent reported a decline in the number of Xers. Comparatively, among those churches in which Xers comprised less than twenty-five percent of the membership, only 5.1 percent indicated having seen significant increases in Xer participation over a three-year period, though 33.3 percent did report gradual increases. Almost half (46.2%) of these churches had seen little change in the number of Xers participating in three-years time, while 15.4 percent had experienced a decline in the number of Xers.

**A strong relationship also could be identified between recent Xer participation patterns and the degree to which churches reflect the demographic makeup of their communities.** Of those churches that included a percentage of Xers higher than the surrounding community, fifty percent had experienced significant growth over a three-year period. An additional 12.5 percent had grown slightly, while twenty-five percent had maintained a number of Xers that is essentially the same. Only 12.5 percent of such congregations had experienced decline. Among those congregations

that included a proportion of Xers similar to that of their surrounding communities, 11.9 percent had experienced a significant increase in Xer participation, 47.6 percent had seen slight increases, and 35.7 percent had maintained essentially the same number of Xers. Only 4.8 percent of these churches reported experiencing decline. Those congregations that included a percentage of Xers lower than their communities at large reflected a somewhat less encouraging, though by no means dismal, condition. A significant number of these churches, 13.3 percent, indicated that they actually had seen the number of their Xer participants grow significantly, while thirty percent suggested that the number of Xers had grown slightly. An additional 36.7 percent of these churches suggested that the number of Xer participants of which they were composed had remained much the same. Perhaps the most significant difference between this category of churches with a lower proportion of Xers and the two preceding categories lay with the twenty percent that reported a decline in the number of Xer participants over a three-year period.

It would be unwise to posit any unwarranted conclusions regarding cause-and-effect relationships underlying the relationships cited here. Such insights simply cannot be drawn on the basis of the data produced by this survey. However, while we are significantly limited in deciphering any cause-and-effect relationships, doing so is not really essential for the primary objective being pursued here. **Rather, it is enough to note that this group of churches, which share in common the characteristics of striving to live in faithfulness to a shared sense of mission, reflecting the demographic makeup of their contexts, including a significant percentage of Gen Xers in their congregational life, and reaching a growing number of the members of this generation, demonstrate statistically significant differences in values, attitudes, priorities, behaviours, and experiences than the churches not bearing these characteristics. For this reason, we have chosen to describe this group as a “positive relationship cluster” (hereafter, referred to as PRC).**

As will become evident below, the differences that emerge when the churches of this group are compared to their counterparts lend considerable empirical weight to support the hypothesis being advanced here. **As we will see, churches that strive to take their mission seriously are not reaching young adults by chance, but rather also are striving to take the objective of ministering to young adults more**

seriously. Furthermore, as will be evident below, these churches also evidence a greater commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice. In exploring the experiences of responding churches, we will begin by summarizing the responses related to hermeneutical zones four through seven and follow this with an exploration of zones one through three.

### 8.3.3.2 Missional Vitality

It has been proposed here that, if churches are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, they must engage in a process of missional renewal. **As one might anticipate, the results of this survey demonstrate that churches falling within the PRC truly possess a more active commitment to mission than those not belonging to this group.** Perhaps not surprisingly, all churches claimed to be rather seriously engaged in “actively exploring how we can participate in God’s mission within our community” (Table 8.1). Yet, those churches that were operating out of a clear, shared sense of mission (mean 1.53) and those that were pursuing such a mission (2.11) affirmed this statement with considerably greater certainty than those churches not actively engaged with a sense of mission (2.85).

TABLE 8.1			
Statement 4: “Our congregation is actively exploring how we can participate in God’s mission within our community.”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
All Respondents	2.00	1.012	N/A
Shared Mission	1.53	.567	.000
Clarifying Mission	2.11	1.036	
Not active	2.85	1.214	

Similarly, all respondents affirmed the notion that their “congregation is engaged actively in efforts to influence our community for the sake of God’s kingdom” (Table 8.2). Perhaps unsurprisingly, a great distinction in response existed between those that were operating out of a clear, shared sense of mission (1.44), those that were clarifying their mission (2.53), and those churches of which neither of these things could be said (3.31). In addition, those churches in which the proportion of Xers was

equal to or greater than in the community at large responded more favourably than those in which this was not the case (2.00 vs. 2.58). The same could be said of those churches in which the number of Xer participants had grown over a three year period when compared to those in which Xer participation had either remained the same or decreased (1.81 vs. 2.62).

<b>TABLE 8.2</b>			
Statement 19: “Our congregation is engaged actively in efforts to influence our community for the sake of God’s kingdom.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.22	1.095	N/A
Shared Mission	1.44	.564	.000
Clarifying Mission	2.53	.941	
Not active	3.31	1.182	
Xers => Community	2.00	1.010	.019
Xers < Community	2.58	1.148	
Xer 3-yr. +	1.81	.648	.000
Xer 3-yr. =/-	2.62	.899	

Of course, in practice, the prioritization of mission over established norms is challenging for most every church. This reality is evidenced by the extent to which respondents chose to characterize their churches as being “more concerned with a commitment to mission than with maintaining established patterns of ministry” (Table 8.3); indeed, the average respondent provided a fairly pessimistic assessment of this statement (3.17). However, a direct correlation exists between churches in which Xers constituted at least twenty-five percent of the overall participants and a more favourable response to this statement (2.86). Conversely, those churches in which Xers made up less than twenty-five percent of attendees responded less optimistically to this statement (3.46). Almost identical results are generated by comparing those churches in which the proportion of Xers was equal to or greater than in the community at large against those in which this was not the case (2.91 vs. 3.57), or by comparing those churches in which the number of Xer participants grew over a three year period against those in which Xer participation had either remained the same or decreased (2.90 vs. 3.44). So, while a serious commitment to mission is difficult in practice, those churches that have a clear sense of mission and that are proving

effective at reaching Gen Xers consistently demonstrate a higher level of commitment to this than other churches.

TABLE 8.3			
Statement 12: “It often seems that our church is more concerned with a commitment to mission than with maintaining established patterns of ministry.”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
All Respondents	3.17	1.159	N/A
Xers 25% >	2.86	1.206	.024
Xers < 25%	3.46	1.047	
Xers => Community	2.91	1.151	.015
Xers < Community	3.57	1.073	
Xer 3-yr. +	2.90	1.114	.042
Xer 3-yr. +/-	3.44	1.133	

### 8.3.3.3 Concern for Post-modern Young Adults

Another assertion of the hypothesis being advanced in this study is that, in order for churches to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, they must possess a concern for post-modern young adults. **Among those churches included in this survey, those counted among the PRC evidence such a concern to a greater degree than their counterparts.** For example, respondents were asked to characterize the extent to which their congregations were “searching actively for ways to minister to younger generations of people” (Table 8.4). All respondents provided a fairly optimistic assessment of their churches (mean: 2.20). Perhaps unsurprisingly, a statistically significant distinction in response exists between those that were operating out of a clear, shared sense of mission (1.63), those that currently were clarifying their mission (2.28), and those churches of which neither of these things could be said (3.38). Furthermore, among those congregations in which Xers constituted more than twenty-five percent of attendees, a higher level of agreement with this statement was registered (1.93). Those congregations in which the overall composition included less than twenty-five percent Xers provided a more cautious assessment of this statement (2.48). Quite similar results are generated by comparing those churches in which the number of Xer participants had grown over a three year

period against those in which Xer participation had either remained the same or decreased (1.77 vs. 2.65).

<b>TABLE 8.4</b>			
Statement 13: “Our congregation is searching actively for ways to minister to younger generations of people.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.20	.993	N/A
Shared Mission	1.63	.609	.000
Clarifying Mission	2.28	.815	
Not active	3.38	1.121	
Xers 25% >	1.93	.755	.012
Xers < 25%	2.48	1.132	
Xer 3-yr. +	1.77	.571	.000
Xer 3-yr. =/-	2.65	1.136	

A similar pattern emerges in the responses provided to the statement, “Older members of our church express a desire to reach the younger generations” (Table 8.5); all respondents provided a fairly positive assessment (mean: 2.32). However, those churches that were operating out of a clear, shared sense of mission (1.97) provided a more strongly affirmative response than those that were in the process of clarifying their mission (2.47), and those churches of which neither of these things could be said (2.77). Among those congregations in which Xers constituted more than twenty-five percent of attendees, a higher level of agreement with this statement was registered (2.10). Those congregations in which the overall composition included less than twenty-five percent Xers provided a more cautious assessment of this statement (2.55). Almost identical results are generated by comparing those churches in which the number of Xer participants had either decreased or remained the same with those that had experienced growth over a three year period (2.05 vs. 2.57).

<b>TABLE 8.5</b>			
Statement 11: “Older members of our church express a desire to reach the younger generations.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.32	.972	N/A
Shared Mission	1.97	.782	

Clarifying Mission	2.47	.971	.018
Not active	2.77	1.166	
Xers 25% >	2.10	.800	.035
Xers < 25%	2.55	1.085	
Xer 3-yr. +	2.05	.844	.012
Xer 3-yr. =/-	2.57	.959	

We are able to draw some helpful insights from this. Perhaps one might expect those churches that have not been effective in reaching the younger generations to demonstrate a more earnest concern to find ways to do so. However, the strongest relationship exists between a concern with reaching young adults as part of a church’s mission and effectively doing so. This seems to affirm the fairly basic claim that, in order for churches to sustain their witness intergenerational, their sense of mission must actually entail a concern to do so.

### 8.3.3.4 Concern for Intergenerational Relations

**Another facet of the hypothesis being advanced here is that, if churches are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, their efforts to renew their mission must entail a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation.** This is so, in part, because a concern for reconciliation is native to the gospel message and, thus, integral to what it means for the church to mediate God’s kingdom purposes. However, it also has been demonstrated that relational issues are highly valued by Gen Xers. **The relevance of this point was affirmed widely by respondents.** When presented with the statement, “The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem to reflect a concern for relational issues (e.g., trust, belonging, love)” (Table 8.6), the average respondent seemed to find this to be a valid statement (mean: 2.39). In turn, most respondents indicated that their churches reflected a concern “to find more effective ways to help people of different ages relate well with one another” (Table 8.7; mean: 2.21). However, those churches that were not presently engaged actively in discerning a sense of mission (3.00) provided a neutral response to this statement, while those guided by a clear mission (1.91) and those that were engaged in clarifying their mission (2.20) submitted far more confident affirmations.



TABLE 8.6			
Statement 7: “The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem to reflect a concern for relational issues (e.g., trust, belonging, love).”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
All Respondents	2.39	.755	N/A

TABLE 8.7			
Statement 17: “Our congregation desires to find more effective ways to help people of different ages relate well with one another.”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
All Respondents	2.21	.852	N/A
Shared Mission (1)	1.91	.466	Comparison of Groups 1 & 2 against Group 3: .377
Clarifying Mission (2)	2.20	.933	
Not active (3)	3.00	.913	

### 8.3.3.5 Concern for Intergenerational Justice

The hypothesis being advanced here also entails the assertion that, if churches are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transition, their efforts at missional renewal must entail a commitment to intergenerational justice. As with intergenerational reconciliation, this concern is native to what it means for the church to mediate God’s kingdom purposes with integrity. However, it also has been demonstrated that issues of justice and fairness factor prominently in the life experience and values of Xers. **The important of this point seemed to be affirmed by respondents.** For example, respondents seemed to provide measured affirmation of the statement, “The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem sensitive to issues of fairness” (Table 8.8; mean: 2.42). Furthermore, when presented with the statement, “The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem to desire to make a meaningful contribution within the church” (Table 8.9), the average respondent provided an affirmative assessment (mean: 2.13). Those churches that contained a proportion of Xers equal to or greater than the community at large seemed especially attuned to the validity of this statement (1.98 vs. 2.35).

<b>TABLE 8.8</b>			
Statement 10: “The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem sensitive to issues of fairness.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.42	.784	N/A

<b>TABLE 8.9</b>			
Statement 9: “The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem to desire to make a meaningful contribution within the church.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.13	.736	N/A
Xers => Community	1.98	.629	.025
Xers < Community	2.35	.839	

When asked to indicate the level of their agreement with the statement, “Our congregation is working to promote the equal involvement of people of all ages” (Table 8.10), the average respondent actually demonstrated fairly firm agreement (mean: 2.11). However, a direct correlation is evident between how churches responded to this statement and the proportion of Gen Xers within their own congregations in relation to the community at large. Among those churches that involved a proportion of Gen Xer participants equal to or greater than that of the surrounding community, the average response (1.98) was notably higher than that of those churches in which the proportion of Xers was lower than the surrounding community (2.32). Nonetheless, both of these categories indicated a concern to promote the equal involvement of all ages. An almost identical result is achieved by comparing those churches in which the number of Xers had increased over a three year period (1.88) versus those that had either seen this number remain the same or decline (2.35). A comparison of churches with a clearly articulated sense of mission (1.78) with those who were in a process of discerning their missional vocation (2.22) and those that were not actively pursuing a sense of mission (2.62) reveals somewhat more pronounced distinctions.

**TABLE 8.10**

Statement 16: “Our congregation is working to promote the equal involvement of people of all ages.”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
All Respondents	2.11	.758	N/A
Xers => Community	1.98	.742	.047
Xers < Community	2.32	.748	
Shared Mission	1.78	.491	.001
Clarifying Mission	2.22	.722	
Not active	2.62	1.044	
Xer 3-yr. +	1.88	.544	.005
Xer 3-yr. =/-	2.35	.889	

Respondents also were asked to assess the statement, “Our congregation is seeking a way to reach young adults without alienating older, established members” (Table 8.11). The average respondent affirmed this statement (mean: 2.16). However, a comparison of churches with a clearly articulated sense of mission (1.97) and those who were in a process of discerning their missional vocation (2.06) against those that were not actively pursuing a sense of mission (2.92) reveals a statistically significant distinction in response. A direct correlation also is evident between how churches responded to this statement and the extent of Gen Xer participation within the congregation. Among those churches in which Xers constituted twenty-five percent of the congregation or more, the average response (1.91) was notably higher than that of churches with less than twenty-five percent Xers (2.43). Thus, while both of these categories indicated a concern to reach young adults without alienating the established members, it seems that those churches that included a higher number of Xers were more likely to be conscious of their own need to seek ways to effectively promote the co-existence of all generations. Furthermore, perhaps it should not surprise us to find a correlation between the possession of a desire to find meaningful ways to include new generations and effectiveness in doing so.

**TABLE 8.11**

Statement 18: “Our congregation is seeking a way to reach young adults without alienating older, established members.”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
All Respondents	2.16	.813	N/A

Xers 25%>	1.91	.648	.003
Xers <25%	2.43	.899	
Shared Mission	1.97	.740	.001
Clarifying Mission	2.06	.630	
Not active	2.92	1.038	

One might further expect that, if churches truly are committed to finding ways to promote the full inclusion of young adults, this will manifest itself in part through openness to seeing Xers assume positions of leadership. The average respondent claimed to represent a congregation within which Gen Xers were encouraged to assume positions of leadership (Table 8.12; mean: 2.22). While the average respondent indicated at least a measured optimism in responding to this question, among those congregations in which Xers constituted more than twenty-five percent of attendees, a higher level of agreement with this statement was registered (2.00). Those congregations in which the overall composition includes less than twenty-five percent Xers provided a more cautious assessment of this statement (2.45). Almost identical results are generated by comparing those churches in which the proportion of Xers was equal to or greater than in the community at large against those in which this was not the case (1.98 vs. 2.61). Conversely, the extent of optimism registered in response to this statement corresponds directly to the percentage of the congregation composed of pre-Boomers. The highest levels of agreement (1.89) were evident among those churches in which Silents and G.I.'s made up less than twenty-five percent of the overall number of attendees, while the lowest levels (2.59) arose among those churches in which pre-Boomers comprised more than fifty percent of the congregation. Those churches in which pre-Boomers made up between twenty-five and fifty percent of attendees, the score (2.39) was located almost in the middle of the other two categories.

Statement 24: "Gen Xers within our congregation are encouraged to assume positions of leadership."			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.22	.837	N/A
Xers 25%>	2.00	.671	.015
Xers <25%	2.45	.932	
Xers => Community	1.98	.714	

Xers < Community	2.61	.882	.001
Pre-Boomers <25%	1.89	.622	.003
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.39	.839	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	2.59	.959	

### 8.3.3.6 Impact on the Challenge of Congregational Confidence

The data reported throughout the preceding pages provides some evidence that lends credibility to the hypothesis under consideration here. As we have seen, there exists a cluster of churches that share in common the characteristics of striving to live in faithfulness to a shared sense of mission, reflecting the demographic makeup of their contexts, including a significant percentage of Gen Xers in their congregational life, and reaching a growing number of the members of this generation. Furthermore, as has been demonstrated above, these churches reflect statistically significant differences in values, attitudes, priorities, behaviours, and experiences when compared to the churches not bearing these characteristics. While this does not necessarily tell us anything conclusive or categorical about cause-and-effect relationships, it does help us to lend empirical credibility to our hypothesis that missional effectiveness in the post-modern transition will surely *entail* a concern for Gen X, for intergenerational reconciliation, and for intergenerational justice.

That being said, the hypothesis being tested here has been presented against the backdrop of a particular problem statement. As has been suggested in the preceding chapters, this problem frequently manifests itself through at least three focal points of anxiety: 1) the concern churches feel toward the impact of the cultural changes taking place around them; 2) the concern churches feel toward the intergenerational dynamics impacting their shared life and ministry; 3) the level of confidence of churches regarding their effectiveness at transmitting their faith traditions to the next generation. If the hypothesis being advanced here truly does provide a helpful response to this problem, we might expect that the churches bearing the characteristics and priorities promoted by this hypothesis to evidence lower levels of preoccupation with this problem. **If churches are proving effective at renewing their mission, incorporating Xers, and addressing intergenerational reconciliation and justice, they should demonstrate greater confidence in**

**responding to cultural changes, to the current intergenerational climate, and in passing their tradition to the next generation. Fortunately, the responses provided to this survey provide us the opportunity to test this assumption.**

**a. Confidence in Responding to Cultural Change**

What insights can be gained from this survey about the experiences of established churches in responding to cultural change? Does the evidence support the validity of the hypothesis being advanced here? When asked to indicate whether “[e]stablished members of our congregation seem to feel that changes within our society have impacted the effectiveness of our church’s ministry” (Table 8.13), the average respondent demonstrated cautious optimism toward this statement (mean: 2.71). Perhaps unsurprisingly, among those congregations in which Xers constituted less than twenty-five percent of attendees, a higher level of agreement with this statement was registered (2.46). Those congregations in which the overall composition included at least twenty-five percent Xers provided a more neutral assessment of this statement (2.97). Similarly, those churches in which the proportion of Xers was smaller than the community at large expressed greater agreement (2.27) in responding to this question than those with an equal or greater proportion of Xers (3.00).

<b>TABLE 8.13</b>			
Statement 3: “Established members of our congregation seem to feel that changes within our society have impacted the effectiveness of our church’s ministry.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.71	1.017	N/A
Xers 25%>	2.46	.996	.027
Xers <25%	2.97	.986	
Xers => Community	3.00	1.033	.002
Xers < Community	2.27	.828	

When posed with the statement, “Older members of our congregation respond negatively to the suggestion that our church has a need for change” (Table 8.14), the average respondent did not lend agreement to this statement (mean: 3.35). However, a comparison of churches with a clearly articulated sense of mission (3.72) with those who were in a process of discerning their missional vocation (3.26) and those that

were not actively pursuing a sense of mission (2.67) produces statistically significant distinctions in response. Furthermore, those churches in which pre-Boomers constituted twenty-five percent or more of the congregation seemed to reflect uncertainty in responding to this statement (25-50%: 2.95; 50%>: 2.91). However, among those churches in which Silents and GI's made up less than a quarter of participants, this statement yields rather conclusive disagreement (3.89).

<b>TABLE 8.14</b>			
Statement 8: "Older members of our congregation respond negatively to the suggestion that our church has a need for change."			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	3.35	1.230	N/A
Shared Mission	3.72	1.114	.032
Clarifying Mission	3.26	1.120	
Not active	2.67	1.557	
Pre-Boomers <25%	3.89	.832	.002
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.91	1.306	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	2.95	1.397	

Respondents also were asked whether or not "[o]ur congregation seems optimistic about its ability to respond effectively to changes within the larger culture" (Table 8.15). While the average respondent expressed agreement with this statement (mean: 2.60), a comparison of churches with a clearly articulated sense of mission (1.93) with those who were in a process of discerning their missional vocation (2.82) and those that were not actively pursuing a sense of mission (3.54) reveals pronounced distinctions. In addition, those churches in which pre-Boomers constituted twenty-five percent or more of the congregation seem to reflect uncertainty (25-50%: 2.86; 50%>: 2.95). However, among those churches in which Silents and GI's made up less than a quarter of participants, widespread, albeit modest confidence was evident (2.21). At the same time, perhaps unsurprisingly, among those congregations in which Xers constituted more than twenty-five percent of attendees, a higher level of agreement with this statement was registered (2.24). Those congregations in which the overall composition included less than twenty-five percent Xers provided a more uncertain assessment of this statement (2.95). Almost identical results are generated by comparing those churches in which the proportion of Xers was equal to or greater

than in the community at large against those in which this was not the case (2.36 vs. 2.97) or by comparing those churches in which the number of Xer participants had grown over a three year period against those in which Xer participation had either remained the same or decreased (2.24 vs. 3.00).

<b>TABLE 8.15</b>			
Statement 15: “Our congregation seems optimistic about its ability to respond effectively to changes within the larger culture.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.60	1.029	N/A
Shared Mission	1.93	.450	.000
Clarifying Mission	2.82	.999	
Not active	3.54	1.127	
Pre-Boomers <25%	2.21	.880	.010
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.95	.865	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	2.86	1.207	
Xers 25%>	2.24	.786	.002
Xers <25%	2.95	1.123	
Xers => Community	2.36	.965	.011
Xers < Community	2.97	1.033	
Xer 3-yr. +	2.24	.692	.001
Xer 3-yr. +/-	3.00	1.206	

## **b. Confidence toward Intergenerational Situation**

We can enquire, as well, regarding the experiences of established churches in responding to the contemporary generational context. For the purposes of this study, we can examine this from three interrelated perspectives: 1) the generalized experience of the church with intergenerational tension; 2) the level of intergenerational relational health perceived in the church, and 3) the presence of healthy intergenerational systems within the church.

### **1. Generalized Intergenerational Tension**

When asked to indicate whether “the efforts our church has made to reach younger generations have resulted in tension” (Table 8.16), respondents provided a fairly cool



assessment (mean: 2.98). However, among those churches in which pre-Boomers composed twenty-five percent or more of the congregation, a noticeably higher level of affirmation (2.64) was registered than among those churches in which Silents and GI's constituted less than one-fourth of participants (3.39). While this data may be helpful, it must be acknowledged as being of limited value. As has already been suggested in previous chapters, tension may not necessarily be a bad thing. The issue of what a church does with the tensions arising within its ranks is the more important issue. Does the tension cause the church to erupt in conflict or abandon efforts to change? Is the tension channelled in a way that is redemptive and productive? This leads to the next question posed on this topic.

<b>TABLE 8.16</b>			
Statement 1: "Some of the efforts our church has made to reach younger generations have resulted in tension."			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.98	1.331	N/A
Pre-Boomers <25%	3.39	1.315	.040
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.64	1.399	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	2.64	1.136	

When asked to indicate the degree to which "[r]esistance to change on the part of older church members has hindered our ability to minister effectively to younger adults" (Table 8.17), the churches in which pre-Boomers constituted twenty-five percent or more of the congregation seem to reflect tentative agreement in responding to this statement (25-50%: 2.62; 50%>: 2.68). However, among those churches in which Silents and GI's made up less than a quarter of participants, this statement yields rather conclusive disagreement (3.88). Correspondingly, among churches in which Xers constituted twenty-five percent or more of the congregation, this statement was met with a higher level of disagreement (3.53), while among those in which Xers made up less than a quarter of the congregation, respondents seemed to provide a more neutral assessment (2.84). Almost identical results are generated by comparing those churches in which the proportion of Xers was equal to or greater than in the community at large against those in which this was not the case (3.49 vs. 2.73), by comparing those churches in which the number of Xer participants had

grown over a three year period against those in which Xer participation had either remained the same or decreased (3.58 vs. 2.76), or by comparing those churches those guided by a clearly articulated mission (3.72) with those who were clarifying their mission (2.88) and those not actively pursuing their missional vocation (2.67).

<b>TABLE 8.17</b>			
Statement 14: “Resistance to change on the part of older church members has hindered our ability to minister effectively to younger adults.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	3.19	1.278	N/A
Shared Mission	3.72	1.143	.007
Clarifying Mission	2.88	1.166	
Not active	2.67	1.497	
Pre-Boomers <25%	3.88	.977	.000
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.68	1.287	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	2.62	1.203	
Xers 25%>	3.53	1.198	.017
Xers <25%	2.84	1.280	
Xers => Community	3.49	1.159	.010
Xers < Community	2.73	1.337	
Xer 3-yr. +	3.58	1.118	.004
Xer 3-yr. +/-	2.76	1.300	

## **2. Intergenerational Relational Health**

When asked to indicate the degree to which “[p]eople of different generations within our congregation seem to enjoy healthy relationships with one another” (Table 8.18), the average respondent demonstrated rather firm agreement (mean: 2.04). However, the extent of that agreement corresponded directly to the percentage of the congregation composed of pre-Boomers. The highest levels of agreement (1.81) were evident among those churches in which Silents and GI’s made up less than twenty-five percent of the overall number of attendees, while less firm levels (2.41) arose among those churches in which pre-Boomers comprised more than fifty percent of the congregation. Those churches in which pre-Boomers made up between twenty-five

and fifty percent of attendees, the score (2.05) was located almost in the middle of the other two categories.

<b>TABLE 8.18</b>			
Statement 20: “People of different generations within our congregation seem to enjoy healthy relationships with one another.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.04	.863	N/A
Pre-Boomers <25%	1.81	.822	.033
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.05	.722	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	2.41	.959	

Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which their congregations found it difficult to help people of different ages relate to one another meaningfully (Table 8.19). The average respondent did not express much concern on this point (mean: 3.44). However, when responses to this statement are compared on the basis of the percentage of the congregation composed of pre-Boomers, some intriguing results emerge. Those respondents representing churches in which these elders composed fifty percent or more of the total participants did not lend agreement to this statement (3.41). The same is true of those churches in which pre-Boomers constituted less than twenty-five percent of the attendees (3.78). However, among those churches in which Silents and GI’s made up twenty-five to fifty percent of attendees, greater uncertainty was registered in response to this statement (2.96). Similarly, those churches in which the proportion of Xers was smaller than the community at large also expressed greater uncertainty (3.00) in responding to this question than those with an equal or greater proportion of Xers (3.72), who registered rather conclusive disagreement. Similar results are generated by comparing those churches in which the number of Xer participants had either decreased or remained the same with those that had experienced growth over a three year period (3.19 vs. 3.70).

<b>TABLE 8.19</b>			
Statement 2: “Our congregation finds it difficult to help people of different ages relate to one another meaningfully.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	3.44	1.084	N/A
Pre-Boomers <25%	3.78	.989	

Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.96	1.107	.016
Pre-Boomers 50%>	3.41	1.054	
Xers => Community	3.72	.927	.003
Xers < Community	3.00	1.183	
Xer 3-yr. +	3.70	.989	.035
Xer 3-yr. +/-	3.19	1.126	

What might we conclude from this? While it is necessary to avoid unfounded conclusions, it might be fair to suggest that, among those churches in which elderly members constitute either a majority or a small minority of the total membership, the challenges of helping the generations to relate to one another simply do not become accentuated to a significant degree. Conversely, in those churches in which a diversity of generations coexist in relatively similar proportion to one another, it is reasonable to imagine that these challenges might become more readily evident. Regardless, while not overwhelming, the evidence strongly suggests that a greater commitment to healthy intergenerational relations exists among those churches that are committed to mission and that are actually incorporating Xers into their ranks.

### 3. Intergenerational Systemic Health

When asked to gauge the degree to which their churches find it difficult to provide ways for people of all ages to participate equally in the church's life, respondents did not generally seem to see this as a matter worthy of great concern (Table 8.20; mean: 3.28). The average respondent felt that "[g]enerally speaking, people of different generations within our congregation seem to be able to work together in a way that affirms the value of all age groups" (Table 8.21; mean: 2.08). However, a comparison of churches with a clearly articulated sense of mission (1.74) and those who were in a process of discerning their missional vocation (2.11) against those that were not actively pursuing a sense of mission (2.77) reveals a statistically significant distinction. Furthermore, the extent of the level of optimism expressed once again corresponds directly to the percentage of the congregation composed of pre-Boomers. The highest levels of agreement (1.81) were evident among those churches in which Silents and GI's made up less than twenty-five percent of the overall number of attendees, while the lowest levels (2.41) arose among those churches in which pre-

Boomers comprised more than fifty percent of the congregation. Those churches in which pre-Boomers made up between twenty-five and fifty percent of attendees, the score (2.09) was located almost precisely in the middle of the other two categories. In those churches in which the proportion of Xers was equal to or greater than the demographic distribution of the surrounding community, stronger affirmation was lent to this statement than in their counterparts (1.92 vs. 2.33).

<b>TABLE 8.20</b>			
Statement 6: “Our congregation finds it difficult to provide ways for people of all ages to participate equally in our church’s life.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	3.28	1.132	N/A

<b>TABLE 8.21</b>			
Statement 21: “Generally speaking, people of different generations within our congregation seem to be able to work together in a way that affirms the value of all age groups.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.08	.776	N/A
Shared Mission (1)	1.74	.445	Comparison of Groups 1 & 2 against Group 3: .000
Clarifying Mission (2)	2.11	.667	
Not active (3)	2.77	1.166	
Pre-Boomers <25%	1.86	.798	.031
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.09	.526	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	2.41	.854	
Xers => Community	1.92	.752	.020
Xers < Community	2.33	.758	

When asked to assess the more specific statement, “It seems that our congregation has implemented effective measures to include younger adults fully in its life” (Table 8.22), those churches in which the proportion of Xers was equal to or greater than in the community at large responded much more favourably than those in which this was not the case (2.34 vs. 3.06). Similarly, a comparison of churches with a clearly articulated sense of mission (2.03) with those who were in a process of discerning their missional vocation (3.06) and those that were not actively pursuing a sense of mission (2.85) reveals a statistically significant distinction. However, those churches in which the pre-Boomer population made up less than twenty-five percent of the

congregation seemed most confident in responding to this question (2.25). Those churches in which Silents and GI's constituted more than twenty-five percent of attendees reflected considerably greater uncertainty (25-50%: 2.83 and 50%>: 3.00).

<b>TABLE 8.22</b>			
Statement 22: "It seems that our congregation has implemented effective measures to include younger adults fully in its life."			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.62	1.079	N/A
Shared Mission	2.03	.967	.000
Clarifying Mission	3.06	.984	
Not active	2.85	.987	
Pre-Boomers <25%	2.25	1.156	.018
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.83	.887	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	3.00	.976	
Xers => Community	2.34	1.081	.003
Xers < Community	3.06	.929	

Above, it was suggested that the degree to which Xers were welcome to assume positions of leadership suggests something about the systemic health of a congregation. So, how have churches succeeded in seeing Xers assume positions of leadership? In responding to the statement, "Gen Xers within our congregation have assumed positions of leadership" (Table 8.23), the average respondent expressed affirmation (mean: 2.19). Despite this, a statistically significant distinction exists between the experiences of churches guided by a sense of mission (1.94) and those that were not (2.62). Furthermore, perhaps unsurprisingly, among those congregations in which Xers constituted more than twenty-five percent of attendees, a higher level of agreement with this statement was registered (1.93). Those congregations in which the overall composition included less than twenty-five percent Xers provided a more cautious assessment of this statement (2.45). Nearly identical results are produced by comparing those churches in which the number of Xer participants had grown over a three year period against those in which Xer participation had either remained the same or decreased (1.91 vs. 2.49). In contrast to this, the extent of optimism expressed in response to this statement corresponds directly to the percentage of the congregation composed of pre-Boomers. The highest

levels of agreement (1.78) were evident among those churches in which Silents and GI's made up less than twenty-five percent of the overall number of attendees, while the lowest levels (2.77) arose among those churches in which pre-Boomers comprised more than fifty percent of the congregation. Those churches in which pre-Boomers made up between twenty-five and fifty percent of attendees, the score (2.26) was located almost in the middle of the other two categories.

**TABLE 8.23**

Statement 25: "Gen Xers within our congregation have assumed positions of leadership."

Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
All Respondents	2.19	.868	N/A
Shared Mission	1.94	.840	.051
Not active	2.62	1.193	
Pre-Boomers <25%	1.78	.485	.000
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	2.26	.752	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	2.77	1.110	
Xers 25%>	1.93	.648	.006
Xers <25%	2.45	.986	
Xer 3-yr. +	1.91	.526	.002
Xer 3-yr. =/-	2.49	1.070	

**c. Confidence in Transmitting Tradition**

The distinctions in response are evident not only in relation to churches' confidence toward cultural change and intergenerational dynamics, but also in their feelings of confidence toward their effectiveness in transmitting their tradition to Gen X, the first post-modern generation. The statement, "Our congregation seems to be proving effective at ministering among Gen Xers" (Table 8.24; mean: 3.04) yields some valuable insight into this issue. The most marked distinction in response is evident between those churches with a clearly articulated mission (2.38), those that were clarifying their mission (3.36), and those not actively pursuing their missional vocation (3.77). Clearly, while no respondents chose to portray their churches in an overwhelmingly positive light, those that were missionally engaged were considerably more confident.

Those churches in which the pre-Boomer population makes up less than twenty-five percent of the overall number of participants responded positively to this statement (2.61), while responses provided by churches in which GI's and Silents made up more than 25 percent are considerably less positive (25-50%: 3.50; 50>: 3.26). Among those congregations in which Xers constituted more than twenty-five percent of attendees, though somewhat measured, a higher level of agreement with this statement was registered (2.68). Those congregations in which the overall composition included less than twenty-five percent Xers provided a considerably less optimistic assessment of this statement (3.40). Almost identical results are generated by comparing those churches in which the proportion of Xers was equal to or greater than in the community at large against those in which this was not the case (2.70 vs. 3.58), or by comparing those churches in which the number of Xer participants had grown over a three year period against those in which Xer participation had either remained the same or decreased (2.67 vs. 3.41).

**TABLE 8.24**

Statement 23: "Our congregation seems to be proving effective at ministering among Gen Xers."			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
All Respondents	3.04	1.089	N/A
Shared Mission	2.38	1.008	.000
Clarifying Mission	3.36	.899	
Not active	3.77	.927	
Pre-Boomers <25%	2.61	1.103	.004
Pre-Boomers 25-50%	3.26	.964	
Pre-Boomers 50%>	3.50	.964	
Xers 25%>	2.68	1.083	.003
Xers <25%	3.40	.982	
Xers =/> Community	2.70	1.035	.000
Xers < Community	3.58	.958	
Xer 3-yr. +	2.67	1.017	.002
Xer 3-yr. =/-	3.41	1.013	

When presented with the statement, "I have confidence in the present effectiveness of our church in passing the faith to Gen Xers (adults 25-41 years old)" (Table 8.25; mean: 2.77), respondents representing churches with a clearly articulated mission



registered a markedly higher level of confidence (2.03) when compared to those who were clarifying their mission (3.15) and those not actively pursuing their missional vocation (3.54). In addition, churches in which Xers constituted less than twenty-five percent of attendees expressed greater uncertainty in responding to this statement (3.08), while those congregations in which the overall composition included at least twenty-five percent Xers seem to reflect a measured confidence (2.45). Similarly, those churches in which the proportion of Xers was smaller than the community at large express markedly greater uncertainty (3.33) in responding to this question than those with an equal or greater proportion of Xers (2.40). Even more pronounced results are generated by comparing those churches in which the number of Xer participants had either decreased or remained the same with those that had experienced growth over a three year period (3.39 vs. 2.28).

<b>TABLE 8.25</b>			
Statement 5: "I have confidence in the present effectiveness of our church in passing the faith to Gen Xers (adults 25-41 years old)."			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
All Respondents	2.77	1.245	N/A
Shared Mission	2.03	1.016	.000
Clarifying Mission	3.15	1.121	
Not active	3.54	1.198	
Xers 25%>	2.45	1.267	.026
Xers <25%	3.08	1.156	
Xers =/> Community	2.40	1.155	.001
Xers < Community	3.33	1.184	
Xer 3-yr. +	1.91	.526	.002
Xer 3-yr. =/-	2.49	1.070	

**Clearly, all churches demonstrate an appropriately serious awareness of the attendant challenges inherent in the present passage of history. Nonetheless, those churches that belong to the Positive Relationship Cluster consistently demonstrate higher levels of confidence toward how they are coping with cultural change, toward the challenges of intergenerational coexistence, and toward their effectiveness in transmitting their traditions intergenerationally. Truly, among churches that are proving effective at discerning their mission and**

**reaching Gen Xers, they also clearly do so with greater confidence than their counterparts not bearing these characteristics.**

#### **8.4 Some Secondary Factors**

In addition to the cluster of factors surveyed above, three additional characteristics appear to be significant in impacting the experience of churches: church size, the duration of the congregation's existence, and the worship style being employed. While these factors are of some significance, it is quite evident that their influence is less important than the cluster cited above. We will attempt to record the insights gained about these secondary factors and to provide some account of their relationship to the cluster of primary factors cited above.

##### **8.4.1 Worship Formats Employed**

Cross-tab analysis reaps the interesting insight that the churches that are experiencing the greatest growth among Xers consistently are employing a contemporary, blended, or multi-service approach to corporate worship. Among those churches that experienced significant growth, 22.2 percent employed contemporary worship, while 38.9 percent sought to cultivate a blended approach to worship. A considerable number, 33.3 percent, employed a multi-service approach. Among those that indicated a "slight" increase in Xer involvement, 41.7 percent were employing a contemporary style, while 47.2 percent described their worship style as blended. A smaller group, composing 5.6 percent of respondents in this category, were employing a multi-service approach.

It is important to note that the use of progressive approaches to worship does not seem to emerge as a guarantor of growth. Those churches that characterized the Xer involvement as "essentially the same" over a three year period were predominantly employing a multi-service (40%), contemporary (30%), or blended (20%) approach. Those that had experienced decline in Xer involvement through this same period included 37.5 percent that claimed to employ a contemporary style, twenty-five percent that had a blended worship style, and 6.3 percent that maintained multiple services.

While the data does not identify a relationship between innovation in worship style and growth, there does seem to be clear evidence of a relationship between continued use of traditional worship formats and decline. More than thirty-one percent of those churches that had experienced declining Xer involvement continued to employ traditional worship styles, while the same can be said of ten percent of those churches that had seen no meaningful change in Xer involvement in recent years. Conversely, among the two categories of respondents that identified their churches as having experienced growth, only 5.6 percent of churches in each category continued to emphasize a traditional approach to worship.

Statistically significant differences existed between those churches that employed either a traditional or blended worship style and those that employed either a contemporary style or multiple service formats in the responses provided to four statements in this survey.

1. First, in responding to the statement, “It often seems that our church is more concerned with a commitment to mission than with maintaining established patterns of ministry” (Table 8.26), those churches that had adopted a contemporary or multi-service format for corporate worship expressed a higher level of confidence (2.69) in this regard than their “traditional” and “blended” counterparts (3.42). This reflects the possibility that a commitment to mission is precisely what leads many churches to engage in innovation of worship style or perhaps that successfully launching a service was deemed a major triumph heightening a congregation’s esteem. Thus, while the missional framework promoted in the preceding chapters entails a critique of the tendency to reduce church renewal to a matter of *attractional* techniques such as the use of contemporary worship styles, it is clear that a choice to employ new approaches to worship may in fact be an expression of a renewed commitment to mission. However, cross-tab analysis does not provide any statistically significant evidence to suggest a widespread relationship between missional focus and the use of any particular worship style.

<b>TABLE 8.26</b>			
Statement 12: “It often seems that our church is more concerned with a commitment to mission than with maintaining established patterns of ministry.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Contemporary/Multi	2.69	1.123	.009
Blended/Traditional	3.42	1.108	

2. Perhaps unsurprisingly, in evaluating the statement, “Our congregation is searching actively for ways to minister to younger generations of people” (Table 8.27), a higher level of agreement is evident among the churches employing a contemporary or multi-service approach to worship (1.89) than those that retained a traditional or blended approach (2.36).

<b>TABLE 8.27</b>			
Statement 13: “Our congregation is searching actively for ways to minister to younger generations of people.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Contemporary/Multi	1.89	.786	.044
Blended/Traditional	2.36	1.058	

3. Closely related to this is the statement, “Our congregation seems to be proving effective at ministering among Gen Xers” (Table 28), which produced similar results. Those churches that employed a contemporary or multi-service approach to worship expressed modest agreement with this statement (2.50), while those engaged in a traditional or blended approach demonstrated considerable uncertainty (3.32).

<b>TABLE 8.28</b>			
Statement 23: “Our congregation seems to be proving effective at ministering among Gen Xers.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Contemporary/Multi	2.50	1.072	.001
Blended/Traditional	3.32	.996	

4. In responding to the statement, “Gen Xers within our congregation have assumed positions of leadership” (Table 8.29), those churches that had adopted a

contemporary or multi-service approach to worship were able to affirm a considerably higher level of agreement with this statement (1.86 vs. 2.36). While this might genuinely reflect a commitment to a broadly shared leadership culture in these congregations, we might also question whether the decision within some of these churches to offer multiple services enabled Xers to assume positions of leadership without greatly impacting the leadership that members of other generations were accustomed to exercising.

TABLE 8.29			
Statement 25: “Gen Xers within our congregation have assumed positions of leadership.”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
Contemporary/Multi	1.86	.591	.012
Blended/Traditional	2.36	.942	

**Distinctions in the worship styles churches have chosen to employ clearly are of importance. However, such distinctions seem not to be of primary significance. Rather, the effectiveness of choices about worship style seems to be a subordinate factor depending upon the more primary considerations explored above.** This is consistent with the recognition that innovations in worship style can actually be little more than a liminal attempt at changing a church’s fortunes and, thus, potentially of limited value to churches’ effectiveness in mediating God’s kingdom purposes within their communities.

#### 8.4.2 Duration of Church’s Existence

The sample of churches established since 1965 is not large enough to provide any truly conclusive statistical insight into the experiences of churches of this age. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that a comparison of churches founded before 1965 with those founded since that time produces statistically significant differences on four of the twenty-five questions examined in part two of the survey. In each case, those churches established prior to 1965 express a greater degree of difficulty. The following are the points of difference that emerge from such a comparison:

1. When asked to indicate whether “the efforts our church has made to reach younger generations have resulted in tension” (Table 8.30), those churches

founded before 1965 did not demonstrate a high level of agreement with this statement (2.78). That being said, the uncertainty reflected in their responses stands in stark contrast to the fairly firm disagreement expressed by newer churches (4.00).

<b>TABLE 8.30</b>			
Statement 1: “Some of the efforts our church has made to reach younger generations have resulted in tension.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Since 1965	4.00	1.080	.002
Before 1965	2.78	1.289	

- In responding to the statement, “Our congregation finds it difficult to provide ways for people of all ages to participate equally in our church’s life” (Table 8.31), the churches founded prior to 1965 seemed somewhat uncertain in their response to this statement (3.16). However, newer churches are able to submit more firm disagreement (3.92).

<b>TABLE 8.31</b>			
Statement 6: “Our congregation finds it difficult to provide ways for people of all ages to participate equally in our church’s life.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
Since 1965	3.92	.862	.025
Before 1965	3.16	1.141	

- Similarly, while respondents seem to have provided measured affirmation of the statement, “The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem sensitive to issues of fairness” (Table 8.32), the churches established prior to 1965 seemed to demonstrate a stronger perception of the relevance of this issue than their newer counterparts (2.34 vs. 2.83).

TABLE 8.32			
Statement 10: “The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem sensitive to issues of fairness.”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
Since 1965	2.83	.937	.044
Before 1965	2.34	.735	

4. When asked to indicate whether “[r]esistance to change on the part of older church members has hindered our ability to minister effectively to younger adults” (Table 8.33), those churches established after 1965 expressed firm disagreement (4.25) with this statement, while older congregations were neutral (3.00).

TABLE 8.33			
Statement 14: “Resistance to change on the part of older church members has hindered our ability to minister effectively to younger adults.”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
Since 1965	4.25	.866	.001
Before 1965	3.00	1.250	

**Clearly, to a large degree, the older churches represented in this survey share many of the same struggles and successes as their younger counterparts. However, while this data lacks the statistical weight necessary for these observations to be deemed completely conclusive, older churches do seem to struggle more to provide an atmosphere in which all generations are able to co-exist equitably and without tension.** Once again, this reality merely serves to affirm the value of the study being undertaken here.

### 8.4.3 Church Size

Church size emerged as a factor in responses to only three of the twenty-five questions in part two of the survey. However, it was interesting to note a consistent pattern involving an extremely high degree of similarity between the experiences of churches of less than 150 and those belonging to the 150-400 category. There emerged significant statistical evidence demonstrating that churches of 400 attendees or *less* are having very similar experiences in many important respects. The

statistically significant differences that emerged were between these two categories and the larger churches. Unfortunately, the limited number of respondents from larger churches weakens the conclusiveness of this data. Nonetheless, the existence of this distinction is worth noting. The points of distinction include the following:

1. When asked to assess the statement, “I have confidence in the present effectiveness of our church in passing the faith to Gen Xers (adults 25-41 years old)” (Table 8.34), churches with an average attendance greater than 400 lent solid agreement to this statement (1.75). Churches of 150-400 and those of less than 150, while not registering a negative response, did reflect uncertainty (2.90 and 3.00, respectively).

<b>TABLE 8.34</b>			
Statement 5: “I have confidence in the present effectiveness of our church in passing the faith to Gen Xers (adults 25-41 years old).”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
400>	1.75	.622	.007
150-400	2.90	1.248	
<150	3.00	1.255	

2. A comparison of responses to the statement, “Resistance to change on the part of older church members has hindered our ability to minister effectively to younger adults” (Table 8.35), when examined from the perspective of church size, reveals that this is not a matter of particular concern. That being said, larger churches with an average attendance greater than 400 actually disagreed with this statement (4.00), while smaller churches reflected a much more uncertain view of this issue (150-400: 3.00; <150: 3.09).

<b>TABLE 8.35</b>			
Statement 14: “Resistance to change on the part of older church members has hindered our ability to minister effectively to younger adults.”			
<b>Group</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>Significance</b>
400>	4.00	.739	.055
150-400	3.00	1.366	
<150	3.09	1.264	



3. In response to the statement, “Our congregation is engaged actively in efforts to influence our community for the sake of God’s kingdom” (Table 8.36), churches of all sizes seemed to perceive themselves as striving to serve the purposes of God within their communities. However, larger churches with an average attendance of 400 or more were able to affirm this statement much more confidently than their smaller counterparts.

TABLE 8.36			
Statement 19: “Our congregation is engaged actively in efforts to influence our community for the sake of God’s kingdom.”			
Group	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Significance
400>	1.42	.515	.015
150-400	2.26	1.094	
<150	2.45	1.132	

The fact that some churches have grown to several hundred in size may itself be testimony that they already possess a vital commitment to mission and an ability to negotiate change successfully. Furthermore, larger churches clearly have greater resources at their disposal and, thus, can be expected to demonstrate confidence in their ability to undertake numerous ministry ventures simultaneously. As already has been mentioned, this may enable larger churches to appeal to multiple “pure markets”. **While the evidence gathered through this survey may of limited value in helping us to understand the experiences of these larger churches, it is significant that the churches of less than 400 largely share the same experiences. It is precisely such churches, those that are aware of their ability to engage only in a limited number of ministry endeavours and thus are most deeply impacted by the challenges of intergenerational ministry, to which this study is most directly related.**

### 8.5 Conclusion

This research project has been devoted to exploring a problem faced by many established churches in responding to cultural change within an increasingly complex generational context. It has been asserted that, as one consequence of this struggle,

many churches have proven ineffective at transmitting their faith traditions to Gen X, the first post-modern generation. Against the backdrop of this perceived problem, the hypothesis has been advanced that, if churches are to sustain their witness through this transitional period, they must engage in a process of missional renewal that encompasses Gen X. It has further been suggested that this process must entail a concern for intergenerational reconciliation and justice.

In this chapter, this hermeneutical rendering of the contemporary church's experience has been subjected to empirical evaluation. The results of the survey conducted among churches from five denominations have lent credibility to the hypothesis being advanced here. As we have seen, there exists a cluster of churches that share in common the characteristics of striving to live in faithfulness to a shared sense of mission, reflecting the demographic makeup of their contexts, including a significant percentage of Gen Xers in their congregational life, and reaching a growing number of the members of this generation. Clearly, most of the churches represented in this survey have demonstrated appreciation and concern toward the themes being explored in this study. However, those churches belonging to the Positive Relationship Cluster reflect statistically significant differences in values, attitudes, priorities, behaviours, and experiences when compared to the churches not bearing these characteristics. The testimony gathered from these churches has helped to affirm the assertion that effective missional renewal in the post-modern transition should be understood as entailing a concern for Gen X, for intergenerational reconciliation, and for intergenerational justice. With the hypothesis guiding this study having been tested empirically in this chapter, we now can proceed to the final movement of the practical-theological research process, that of formulating strategic proposal, with confidence. It is precisely to this focus that we will turn in the final chapter of this study.

## **9. STRATEGIES FOR THE MISSIONAL RENEWAL PROCESS**

### **9.1 Introduction**

Throughout this study, we have been carefully investigating the challenges experienced by many established churches as they endeavour to transmit their faith traditions intergenerationally amid the post-modern transition. In chapters six and seven, we provided a hermeneutical articulation of the following hypothesis:

If established churches are to perpetuate their witness through this transitional period, they must experience a process of missional renewal that encompasses Generation X. From both a sociological and theological perspective, this process must be seen as entailing a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice.

After developing this hypothesis at some length, in chapter eight, we subjected this interpretation to a process of modest empirical testing and discovered that these claims are borne out within the life of many established churches.

While, in the preceding chapters, we have affirmed the need for consideration to be given to the process by which missional renewal is promoted within the congregation, we have not developed this theme beyond identifying (1) the specific challenges to which a process must be sensitive and (2) the need for this process to make space for intergenerational reconciliation and justice to be fostered. In our survey of practical theology methodology in section 1.5, we gained an appreciation of the fact that this discipline takes the accomplishment of change as its eventual aim. This objective of change necessitates that the process of practical-theological research be taken a step beyond interpretation and evaluation. The formulation of a strategic response informed by those prior steps is necessary. This third movement in the research enterprise, which was described in section 1.5.3.3 as the “regulative cycle,” is concerned with the formulation of plans and the implementation of processes. In other words, its central concern corresponds with the very need that remains unmet within the unfolding of this present research project.

Thus, in this final chapter, we will conclude the practical-theological research process by briefly proposing a process by which established churches might pursue missional renewal, one that has the potential to promote good relations and equitable participation among the generations. Our purpose here is not to provide a complete

account of what the process of missional renewal might entail. That is a subject worthy of a complete study in itself, one that a growing number of exceptional writers fortunately have already begun to address (e.g., Branson 2004; Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006). Neither is it our purpose to advocate for a specific *model* of ministry to be implemented within established churches. The very concept of missional renewal should allow for such models to emerge progressively over time as churches endeavour to live out their missional vocation in relation to their own context. The focus of this study is not upon models, but rather about *process*. Thus, our purpose here is simply to provide a brief and basic overview of one process of missional renewal that is proving beneficial within many established congregations and to demonstrate some specific ways in which intergenerational reconciliation and justice can be fostered and expressed in the midst of this process.

## 9.2 The Missional Change Model

In chapters six and seven, we explored the concept of the congregation as a complex system. As we noted, patterns of relating and dynamics of power are embedded within the systems by which a congregation functions. This awareness is crucial for any leader endeavouring to promote change within an established congregation. As we have seen, there exists an inextricable interplay between the Spirit *within* the congregation and the spirit *of* the congregation. If the renewing work of the Spirit is to be permitted to come to bear on the corporate, structural dimensions of the church's life, careful attention must be given to the interplay of the systemic and spiritual dynamics. Thus, any process of renewal that we might propose must be sensitive to this interplay. Fortunately, some of the leading thinkers presently contributing to the missional conversation within the North American context have sought to develop and advocate for an approach to change that takes this relationship into consideration.

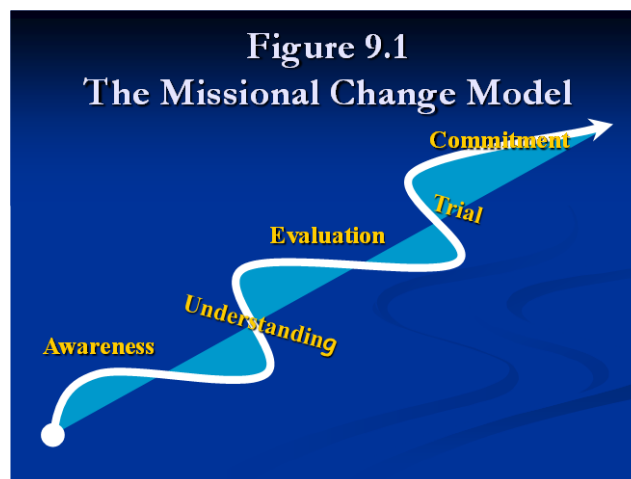
The change model to which we would like to give attention here has been described as "The Missional Change Model" by Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:79-108). A primary resource on which this model is based is *The Diffusion of Innovation* research conducted by anthropologist Everett Rogers, who has devoted much of his life to studying the question of how change takes place within cultures. Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:81) note that, while Rogers's research is far more extensive than can

be adequately summarized here, it does demonstrate “that innovation and integration of a new idea in a system happens according to a particular pattern.” This pattern entails a progressions consisting of five key movements:

1. Knowledge
2. Persuasion
3. Decision
4. Experimentation and implementation
5. Confirmation and reinforcement

(:82; Figure 9.1)

The neglect of any of these steps can subvert the entire process (:83). Thus, in an effort to understand the way in which each step contributes to the contour of the Missional Change Model, we will consider each of the five movements of the change process briefly below.



Keifert also employs the Diffusion of Innovation framework in his description of “Partnership for Missional Church” in *We Are Here Now* (2006:39-59). This book was written at a level intended to be accessible to church lay leaders. In service to this objective, Keifert chose not to include footnotes. However, one unfortunate result of this choice is that Keifert frequently fails to identify the various primary sources whose ideas he employs. In addition to Rogers, Keifert’s bibliography demonstrates his indebtedness to secular thinkers such as Heifetz, Lakoff, and Paul Ricoeur, as well as the theological and missiological contributions of Newbigin, Bosch, Sanneh, and Schreier. While Keifert’s book has received strong endorsements by other key figures within the missional conversation (e.g., Brian

McClaren and Mark Lau Branson), these obvious omissions do cause his text to be of limited and somewhat questionable value within a scholarly context. Nonetheless, Keifert's text does reflect concepts that have been tested through more than two decades of consultancy work among 1,000 congregations, seventy-five national and mid-governing bodies, and two dozen denominations in seven countries and across all fifty United States. Thus, while it is essential that we acknowledge the limitations of this source, it does offer practical tools that are of value to the development of this thesis's *strategic* component. Thus, in the pages that lie ahead, we will appropriate insights from Keifert in our presentation of the Missional Change Model.

Before doing so, however, it is helpful for us to note that giving attention to Rogers's insights fosters an appreciation that the journey toward becoming a missional congregation is a difficult process, even if the destination seems to present an obvious advantage over the existing state of things. It is one that takes time and a concerted investment of attention and energy, one that is accomplished through small and intentional steps (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:64). Furthermore, this model helps us to grasp that change does not occur in a "straight line" (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:82; Keifert 2006:48-49). The "straight line" fallacy, which Keifert (:48-49) describes as the "gap theory," assumes that change is merely a matter of spanning the distance between present reality and envisioned future, between present behaviours and desired behaviours. It is precisely this fallacy that often creates trouble for congregational leaders in their efforts to promote change. In contrast to this approach, the logic of the Missional Change Model is not centred in the expeditious movement of the entire system toward alignment with some BHAG ("big hairy audacious goal"), but rather in the cultivation of cultural change and missional imagination within the congregation (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:56, 64). We will briefly explore each of the five key moments of this model.

### **9.2.1 Step One: Awareness**

Keifert (2006:52) suggests that, even though often "profound and disturbing," broader societal change tends to happen "without people being aware of it." This lack of awareness poses something of a challenge for our objective of promoting change within the life of the established congregation. Riddell (1998:89) similarly observes

that vision “does not fare well in a situation of universal contentment.” Indeed, “those involved may have a heavy psychological investment in keeping reality just the way it is.” Based upon their experience in working with vast numbers of such congregations, Frost and Hirsch (2003:191-192) similarly have gained an appreciation of the reality “that people must be convinced that there is a problem before they are interested in a solution.” These authors insist that people are not likely to change unless they come to recognize the need for doing so. They conclude that many leaders bring to a given situation a keen sense of what the solution might be, yet encounter resistance because of their failure to communicate the problem compellingly. As we discovered in chapters five and six, these struggles certainly are evident within many established churches.

This being so, the first step in responding to the changes occurring within culture is to become aware of what is occurring to us and around us. Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:87) note that, in reality, many of the people within established congregations are already grappling with many questions and feelings about what they are experiencing within a changing world. Many of them sense that something is wrong, but do not know how to express it. Leaders commonly make the mistake of attempting to address these feelings by moving directly to the provision of strategies, plans, or programs. However, if church members are not afforded a way to express these feelings and to be heard, they are likely to continue to be plagued by unarticulated anxiety.

Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:87) suggest that what is essential is that leaders learn to create “a listening space” to aid parishioners in becoming aware of what is happening “within and among them.” Indeed, this awareness requires the cultivation of an environment in which people are able to find the language for talking about what they are experiencing. Mead (1993:76) suggests that the provision of learning spaces necessitates the overcoming of the busyness and preoccupation that often prevents church members from learning from one another. In fact, this “busyness” is often an “escape mechanism” employed “to avoid the pain of learning and change.” Thus, the development of transitional learning structures becomes an integral part of the process of change and a critical means of investing in the ultimate success of innovative initiatives (Riddell 1998:98-99).

“Without words,” note Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:89), “people have little or no capacity to explain, understand, or begin to participate in shaping a meaningful response to the new reality.” However, as they begin to find new language to help them understand what is occurring, new awareness is fostered (:88-89). Furthermore, they are able to begin to look at the “others” in their context in a new light, to listen with new ears, and to see themselves through the eyes of these strangers (:89). This cultivation of awareness is crucially important in the earliest stages of the process for, as Roxburgh and Romanuk (:91) note, “Until they have gained awareness, people cannot commit to change.”

### 9.2.2 Step Two: Understanding

In and of itself, awareness can be a powerful force in fostering the conditions within which change can emerge. However, the process does not end there. Rather, it progresses from *awareness* to *understanding*. Mead (1993:52) expresses a desire to see congregations take intentional steps toward cultivating understanding:

[T]hese programs need to take very seriously a study of the social environment as a field of mission. For adults and children alike we need to develop ‘mission training’ to help each person to cross the mission frontier more responsibly. Case studies, story-telling, and community analysis need to become staples of religious engagement for church members. I would love to see congregations develop programs of ‘field work’ in mission—sending members out Monday through Friday conscious of being on a mission and using class time on the weekend to reflect and report or to share cases of mission they had attempted during the week.

Kew (2001:68) shares this concern for how local churches might discern what is going on with their contexts:

It is vital that we work hard to understand the changing demographics of our own neighbourhoods—and then set about learning how to be missionary within this setting. It is crucial that our clergy and lay leadership learn to read and understand local, regional, and national demographic trends—only then will they know how to strategize. As we study the figures, thereby discovering what is going on, we will be enabled to see the vast openings that will help us become missionaries to our own little world.

In the second part of the missional change process, the priorities advocated by these authors come into focus. During this stage, members are provided the time and the



space to develop deeper interest in and understanding of the change happening to them and around them.

As we have already suggested, the vast majority of people cannot simply jump into a new idea. Note Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:82), “They need time to build confidence in both leaders and process before being willing to trust change. Transition issues must be addressed before people are ready to act in a new way.” As we saw in the preceding chapters, many established church members struggle with a lack of understanding of the changes occurring around them and the missional endeavours being promoted by their leaders. As we have suggested, it is not necessarily the case that these individuals are mean spirited or averse to the working of the Spirit. Rather, it is often the case that they simply do not understand. Thus, attention to the cultivation of understanding becomes essential.

Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:92) note that the sort of further dialogue that brings together feelings and thoughts is needed “if awareness is to deepen into understanding.” They add,

[U]nderstanding occurs when awareness enables people to ask new questions about what is happening relative to what they have been feeling and thinking. This is a time when people need to gather additional information, try out ideas, and receive feedback so they can check and orient their growing awareness and develop a new kind of knowledge base for ongoing dialogue with others.

Roxburgh and Romanuk (:93) suggest that, as the participants move to a deeper level of understanding, this “requires a good deal of attentive listening for dialogue participants to hear the underlying questions and issues that people bring up.” This process likely will require a dialogue that goes over the same material as the previous step. However, through this continued dialogue, “the richness of the understanding deepens and broadens.” The hope is that, as a result of this deepening dialogue, a new explanatory framework will emerge.

Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:94) insist that true understanding goes beneath “the surface of what usually passes for dialogue and resist[s] the desire to jump ahead to the solution.” These authors emphasize that understanding cannot be completed in one meeting. It is essential that ample time be taken with this process. As they posit, “If the ground is prepared and the leader cultivates the proper environment, shaping a

space rather than forcing a strategy or play, the process of missional formation will encourage a congregation to organize itself and change will occur.” The hope is that awareness and understanding will be fostered of (1) what God is doing among the people of the congregation, (2) how the congregation can imagine itself as being engaged in God’s redemptive activity, and (3) what God is already doing within the congregation’s context (:31-32).

Keifert (2006:64) sees this as a matter of discerning “God’s preferred and promised future” for the congregation. In service to this objective, Keifert (:64-66) suggests that the congregation must be willing to look both backward to the past and forward to the future. This has powerful implication for addressing the *win/loss* dichotomies that often arise between those members of the congregation who value tradition and those who desire innovation. As Keifert (:66) insists, the congregation’s faithfulness must be seen as entailing both “faithfulness to God’s future” and “faithfulness to God’s past.” As he explains, “our God is a living, triune God who dwells in all times, and in the life of God all times are present; the church participates already but not yet in that once and future life of God. Thus the question of faithfulness is not past vs. future but finding a useable past for our faithfulness to God’s preferred and promised future.” Branson’s (2004) treatment of Appreciative Inquiry and congregational change can be a valuable resource in helping to facilitate this process.

### **9.2.3 Step Three: Evaluation**

In the third stage in the missional renewal process, “the congregation examines current actions, attitudes, and values in light of new understanding. People can now consider whether specific activities, programs, and commitments are congruent with their awareness and understanding of missional innovation and the context in which they find themselves” (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:95; cf. Keifert 2006:53). Well crafted evaluative questions become an essential tool at this stage in the process. Keifert (2006:64) offers several examples of questions that the congregation might choose to entertain:

- To whom and across which barriers is God sending us to be a part of God’s mission?

- What is our missional vocation as a congregation?
- How do we walk into and toward God’s preferred and promised future for us as a local congregation?
- What are God’s gifts in our local church?
- How do these gifts relate to what God’s mission is in our context?
- What is God doing within this context?
- How can we be positioned and postured to be a sign and foretaste of God’s preferred and promised future in relation to this context?

Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:96) caution that this is not the time for action and planning, but rather for discernment and decision making. It is essential that this stage in the process not be rushed. Rather, time must be taken to ask questions and to assess the current reality of the church and its context. Roxburgh and Romanuk (:96) also caution that, at this point in the process, the congregation is still likely to struggle with the temptation to develop action steps. However, they caution, “if a congregation does not take enough time for awareness, understanding, and evaluation then most solutions will yield only a short-term burst of hope and energy, but then the congregation will return to its previous state.”

This stage in the process is likely to generate anxiety. Thus, it is essential that leaders clearly and consistently communicate that the church is not going to be forced to embrace “wholesale change,” but rather that the congregation “is going to learn how to develop a missional future by taking small, significant steps” (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:96). Roxburgh and Romanuk insist that leaders must foster a “holding-tank environment” in which much of the church’s life continues as normal, while some experiments are also initiated that will demonstrate “another kind of future that may be developed.”

#### **9.2.4 Step Four: Experimentation**

Kew (2001:39) expresses gratitude toward the evidence he sees that Christians “are starting to get over our fear of talking about evangelism and the mission of the church.” In order to continue to make progress in this regard, he insists, “we have to

take the next step toward active strategizing and creative implementation.” The fourth movement in the missional change process constitutes precisely such a step. During this stage, people learn to put the innovation to use and participate in initiating new practices in their congregations (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:82). This part of the process entails the congregation testing “new ways of shaping its missional life.” McNeal (2003:61) notes that members of the congregation accustomed to the Christendom model of church are not likely to vote in favour of becoming a missional church. Thus, a culture of experimentation needs to be nurtured. When people practice and experiment with what they have been learning, real cultural change can be embedded in their lives as a congregation” (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:82).

Keifert (2006:53) notes that this stage allows those who are eager to make changes “to get moving on something.” However, it enables them to do so “in a manner that moves beyond simply technically improving their present way of doing things and toward truly addressing the depth of the cultural change needed to lead to a missional church.” Furthermore, this step provides opportunity for these “sprinters” in a manner that is sensitive to the “long-distance runners” within the congregation, “those who understand that this kind of change requires long-term, deep, cultural engagement that seldom produces or is even helped by quick fixes” (:87). In other words, this stage helps address the seeming polarity that often exists between “early victories” and “long-term change” and the “political realities of people who need quick success to be motivated to action versus those who are suspicious of quick success” (:85).

Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:98) emphasize that Heifetz’s distinction between *adaptive* and *tactical* change becomes particularly important at this point in the process. The goal of missional renewal, they note, “is to introduce a process that invites people into changing the culture of the congregation, not just its programs or organization.” Tactical change is a matter of taking action that improves what is already being done within the church or favouring actions that have always been used, but now are being applied to new challenges (:98). Adaptive change, by contrast, requires that new approaches be designed to address the new challenges being faced. Consistent with this description, Keifert (2006:88) describes missional change as being “about deep patterns of life and ministry in the local church culture rather than something they already know how to do, simply applying their existing competencies

to do it.” However, as Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:99) note, this is precisely the sort of change that congregations often resist. This is partly why, as we noted in section 6.5.1, modern models of strategic planning are not the best approach to bring about such changes.

In the process of adaptive change, the tendency of leaders to impose ambitious plans for change is often a significant reason that anxiety and conflict erupts within the congregation. Snyder’s (1989:267-313) examination of renewal movements reveals that attaching entrenched institutional patterns is *not* an effective means of fostering renewal. Furthermore, renewal often comes from the margins of an institution, rather than from a direct attempt to alter the centre (Frost & Hirsch 2003:194). Thus, rather than taking on “the whole system at once” (Keifert 2006:90), the Missional Change Model calls for “experiments around the edges” that do not overwhelm church members and that do not force them to change (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:99). As Keifert (2006:53) recommends, “Usually it is best to try out options that respond to the breadth and depth of the cultural change but do not try to change the entire system at once.” Keifert (:92) further describes this as an approach to experimentation “that engages the entire system without changing the whole system.” This may involve experimentation with “one or two pieces of local church life and work” that the church chooses to address as it encounters those whom they believe God is calling them to serve in mission (:84).

Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:100) acknowledge that this approach is challenging because, when church leaders evaluate what they should do, the only solutions many are familiar with are tactical, “such as command-and-control or strategic planning.” In contrast to these familiar models, emphasize Roxburgh and Romanuk (:101), the experiments undertaken during the experimentation stage “are not about creating permanent change.” Rather, they are about testing and discovering how the Spirit of God might be leading the congregation through the process of discovery. These experiments provide time and opportunity for the important work of reshaping the human system of the congregation in accordance with this new missional way of life (Frost & Hirsch 2003:210). It is essential that this formation of the human system be addressed before the activities of that system are fully engaged (:211).

Keifert (2006:90) insists that, as an integral dimension of this process, permission must be provided for failure. As he notes, this approach to change allows experimental endeavours to fail “without threatening the whole.” In fact, he suggests, “It may even be a necessary part of the journey of spiritual discernment to fail!” (:90). This step in the process will take time, patience, and courage, but also offers the powerful benefit of enabling new habits and values to become embedded in the life of the congregation. Indeed, assert Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:102), this step “makes long-term cultural change possible. Without the time for experimentation, there can be no missional transformation.”

### **9.2.5 Step Five: Commitment**

In this final stage, as people continue to practice the implementation of an innovation, “they grow in their ability to function with new practices” (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:82). Church members can begin to realize that they are operating in new ways. Positive outcomes become engrained in the life of the congregation as new habits. The confidence of the congregation grows as more and more people become involved in experimentation. In turn, “The innovation becomes a part of the deep values of the culture, and the congregation begins to carry on its usual business according to the innovation” (Keifert 2006:53). This step of adopting the innovation will have implications for the systems and structures of the congregation. Notes Keifert (:53-54), “Once the missional church innovation is adopted, social and organizational changes proceed much more quickly and are apparent to most of the people.” However, this can now be accomplished, not because it is being imposed or championed by a particular leader, “but because the people themselves have taken on a new way of being church together” (Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:102).

### **9.2.6 The Spiritual Dimension of the Process**

This model was introduced above as one that gives proper attention to both the systemic and spiritual dimensions of congregational life. However, in our description of the Missional Change Model, little has been said regarding the specific ways in which *spiritual* renewal might be fostered as an integral facet of the change process. As we advocated in chapter six, the Holy Spirit must be seen as *the* single most

crucial contributor to renewal within the life of the church. The Missional Change Model seeks to be sensitive and responsive to this reality in the approach taken to cultivating the congregation's renewal. As Keifert (2006:63) expresses, this process entails discovering "the most important partner for a missional church: God." Keifert (:64) further describes this process as a matter of "spiritual discernment," one that aids the members of the congregation in finding their place, both personally and corporately, within the mission of the triune God.

The proponents of missional change insist that certain corporate spiritual disciplines are valuable in helping to foster this sort of renewal. "Dwelling in the Word" is a discipline of listening to scripture that enables "the Word of God to use us rather than our using it" (Keifert 2006:69). This discipline invites the congregation to consider its relationship to the narrative of scripture and to become compellingly engaged by how the narrative of God's redemptive purposes provides direction for the church's life and ministry in the here-and-now. In addition, Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:153-155) note how some congregations employ the liturgical practices of the daily offices as a means of cultivating missional life. They recognize this as important for at least two reasons: (1) members are daily shaped in the imagination that life is a gracious gift of God to be embraced and "a vocation to be lived in the presence of God and others" (:154); (2) members are assisted in becoming conscious of "how easily and incessantly other demands and stories enter our own life, and the community's, recasting us in ways other than the gospel." The discipline of hospitality, "a way of practicing the eschatological future by welcoming the stranger to our table as honoured guests", is yet another powerful practice that helps to foster missional renewal (:157). Hospitality provides a space within which one is able to listen to the stranger and, thereby, come to a truer understanding of his or her identity. In turn, this practice contributes to the transformation of the host (:158).

The way in which the congregation cultivates a commitment to corporate prayer and worship also contributes to its missional vitality (Barrett et al 2004:xii-xiv; Roxburgh & Romanuk 2006:153). Through the formation that occurs through these practices and habits, the missional imagination of the congregation can be cultivated in a manner that enlivens its members to a passionate embrace of God's missional future. Indeed, it can cause them to recognize and act upon the reality that God's missional

future is already present in their midst by virtue of the indwelling Spirit's presence and activity (:146).

Keifert (2006:71) laments the absence of proper attention to such spiritual practices among the leaders of many established congregations. He furthermore recognizes the temptation to neglect these practices, even in the midst of change efforts, because of the demands and drivenness by which church leaders are plagued. Nonetheless, he insists, they are essential if God's will for the church is to be discovered: "We dissipate our lives into nothing, and, like cold water onto a hot griddle, our love and action evaporate into thin air if we do not order our loving by God's will" (:72). Apart from these practices, the church's leaders are not likely to be able to aid the church in focusing its missional vocation. Without proper attention being given to spiritual discipline, the prospect is heightened that the *systemic* dynamics of the congregation will subvert its *spiritual* vitality.

### **9.2.7 Attention to Readiness Factors**

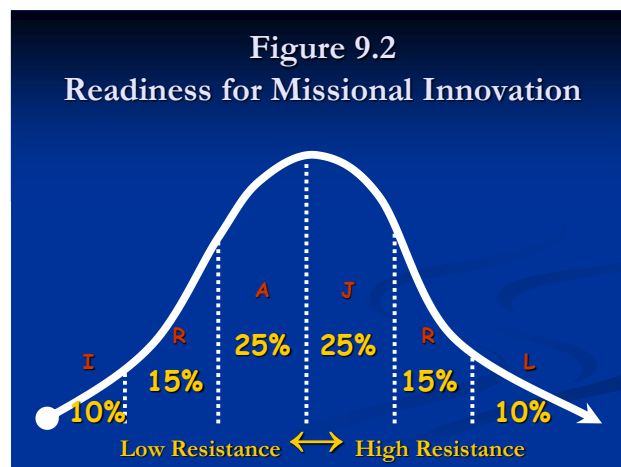
In addition to lending proper priority to cultivating the spiritual life of the congregation, the Missional Change Model also strives to be sensitive to the reality that not all members will possess an equal degree of readiness to embark on the journey of missional transformation. As Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:103) articulate, "an attempt to innovate missional culture in a congregation that tries to begin with universal agreement...is headed for failure from the start." In responding to this reality, the proponents of missional change have appropriated Rogers' concept of the diffusion of innovation *curve*. This concept recognizes that there are a number of levels of readiness for innovation represented within the ranks of any human system.

Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:103) provide the following characterization of the various groups represented along the diffusion of innovation curve:

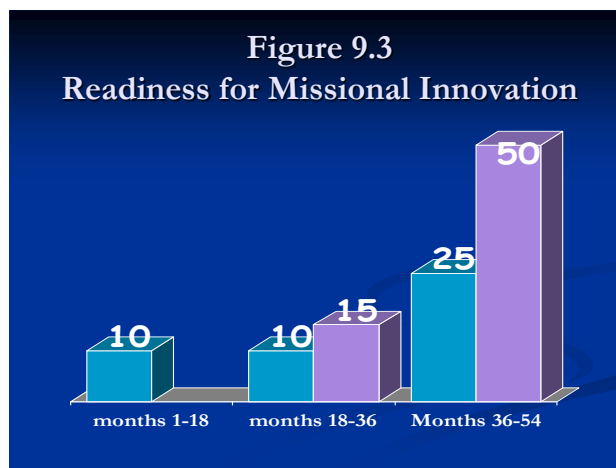
1. Innovators (10% of congregation): These people commonly possess a pre-existing readiness to participate in innovative endeavours. Keifert (2006:55) suggests that these "are the brave who take the risks when the cultural innovation is offered."

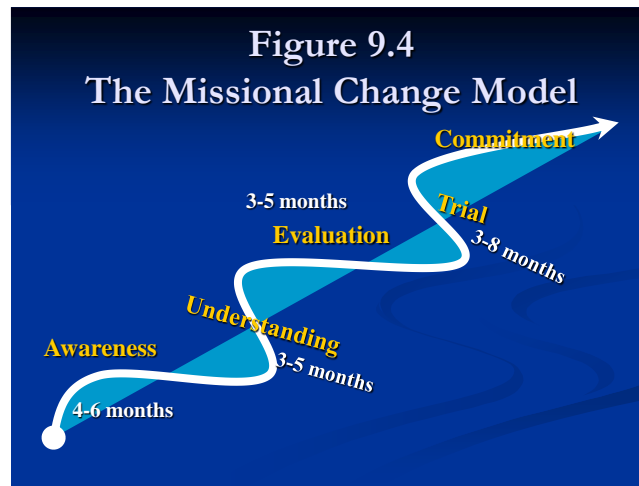


2. Responders (15% of congregation): These members are usually quick to recognize the relative advantage inherent in an innovation and to join the innovators in adopting it. Notes Keifert (2006:55), “They do not seek change for change’s sake...but they take a progressive view of life in general or at least life in the local church regarding innovating a missional church.” These members often are “influence brokers” within the congregation; their enlistment often causes the entire innovation process to gain momentum (:56).
3. Adapters (25% of congregation): These members are part of a “pragmatic majority,” the group that assumes a “wait-and-see” stance toward an innovation. However, this group constitutes an “early majority”, one that can be influenced positively by the credibility of the “responders.” Adapters frequently hold positions of governance within the congregation and, thus, have an affinity for an approach to change that reflects thoughtfulness and good process. Failure to engage this group often results in conflict within the congregation (Keifert 2006:56).
4. Joiners (25% of congregation): This “late majority,” often sceptical toward innovations and prone to a “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” mindset, are concerned especially with the long-range interests of the congregation (Keifert 2006:57). Keifert (:57) cautions that, while it can be exciting to engage this group, “it also creates a lot of anxiety for the local church system and can create considerable drama just before a plan is adopted and put into action.”
5. Resisters (15% of congregation) and Laggards (10%): This group simply does not want to change. Keifert (2006:57) characterizes these members as “caught in traditionalism.”



Roxburgh and Romanuk (2006:103-104) suggest that sensitivity to this curve should be factored into the progression of the journey of missional transformation. The key, they insist, is to begin with the roughly ten to fifteen percent of the congregation who are innovations (Figure 9.3). The first eighteen months should be devoted to helping this group progress to the commitment stage (Figure 9.4). This is likely to entail four to six months of cultivating awareness, three to five months of creating understanding, three to five months of evaluation, and three to eight months of experimentation. During a second eighteen months, the innovators guide the responders through the five movements of the process. As a result, after three years, approximately twenty-five percent of the congregation will have progressed to the commitment stage. During a third period of eighteen-months, an additional fifty to sixty-five percent of the congregation, the adapters and joiners, are invited to journey through the stages toward commitment. Roxburgh and Romanuk (:104) caution that this will be unsettling to the laggards and resisters; as a result, some of these people may leave. This will make it essential for leaders to manage their own anxiety and conflict issues. Fortunately, however, this process has the potential to help prevent a great deal of conflict that might otherwise occur.





### 9.3 The Intergenerational Component

Thus far in this chapter, we have surveyed a process for the promotion of missional renewal within established congregations. At first glance, this Missional Change Model may appear to be of considerable value for the larger theme being explored within this study. Nonetheless, because our central concern is with exploring intergenerational dimensions of the renewal process, it will be important for us to consider briefly the interplay of these intergenerational objectives and the model outlined above. Fortunately, several authors have offered practical insights that may help to promote the values of intergenerational reconciliation and justice within the local church. Bearing in mind the things articulated in sections 9.2.1 through 9.2.5 regarding the main objectives of each step in the Missional Change Model, we will briefly consider the interplay of these practical insights and the steps of this model.

#### 9.3.1 Awareness, Understanding, and Evaluation

The framework provided by the Missional Change Model offers a wonderful opportunity for the cultivation of intergenerational dialogue within the congregation. Rather than attempting to respond to the challenges posed by young residents of the post-modern world by moving swiftly toward action, a framework such as the one described above provides congregational leaders the opportunity to nurture a culture of intergenerational learning (Rendle 2002:139; McNeal 2003:61; Hammett & Pierce 2007:152). As we also noted above regarding missional innovation, “the shift from

doing something about our differences to learning about our differences requires a different space...where reflection and learning are possible” (Rendle 2002:119). As Benke and Benke (2001:87) insist, if understanding is to be achieved, it is likely to come as a result of a process of educational preparation.

As we have seen in preceding chapters, helping the generations to arrive at a shared understanding of the implications of missional renewal for their particular tradition is one of the most profound challenges of the missional renewal process. In a given situation, if the members of diverse generations are to arrive at anything resembling a shared interpretation of their tradition, this will require dialogue and the exchange of ideas and concerns (Carroll & Roof 2002:209; Hammett & Pierce 2007:166).

Essentially, suggest Martin and Tulgan (2002:40), leaders within a multigenerational context must endeavour to bridge the “understanding gap.” This requires a conscious effort to use generational labels as tools for learning about differences, rather than as weapons (Raines & Hunt 2000:45-46). The point is not for the generations to attempt to change one another, but rather to understand their differences (Twenge 2006:8).

There is no simple formula for accomplishing this (Carroll & Roof 2002:212).

However, while doing so may seem counterintuitive to many leaders, it actually is necessary to entertain the tension between the generations in order to fully capitalize upon the opportunity for learning (Rendle 2002:5). As Rendle (:8) suggests, this may be a mark of good leadership.

Williams and Nussbaum (2001:216-217) note that intergenerational contact programs frequently have failed to produce much in the way of positive results. The key observation to be drawn from their discovery is that greater attention needs to be paid to helping the generations communicate more effectively. As we noted in section 7.2.4.3, this may be precisely the means necessary to aid the generations in “building bridges” to end stereotypes (Lancaster & Stillman 2003:17). Furthermore, as Rouse and Van Gelder (2008:96, 99) note, the development of healthy communication practices actually frees the congregation to focus its energies on God’s mission.

Angrosino (2001:51), in the context of writing about multicultural interaction, offers some guidelines that are of value for intergenerational communication within the church:

1. Acknowledge discomfort
2. Know your own culture first
3. Get to know the culture of the other
4. Be aware of power inequities and histories of discrimination
5. All participants must develop intercultural competence
6. Personal commitment is crucial

Gambone's (1998:27-103) step-by-step guide to planning and facilitating "Intergenerational Dialogue" events can be a valuable resource in helping to foster effective intergenerational dialogue. Gambone outlines practical instructions regarding how church leaders can cultivate the conditions and provide opportunities for this kind of intergenerational interaction.

If the missional change process is to involve committees or task forces, care must be exercised in assuring that the composition of these groups serves the process well. When developing intergenerational teams, leaders often choose individuals who seem most representative of their respective generations' central tendencies (Whitesel & Hunter 2000:131). The challenge inherent in this, however, is that such people often have the hardest time transcending their own generational preferences for the sake of communicating and working effectively with one another. Recognizing this, Rendle (2002:130) recommends that "edgy people" be chosen to serve. These people "live close to the edge of their own value preferences and overlap with individuals who live close to the edge of the competing value system." As a result, they are able to understand, appreciate, and express their own value system without being narrowly tied to it. Martin and Tulgan (2002:115) suggest that such people are "Gen Mixers." Lancaster and Stillman (2003:36) describe these individuals as "cuspers" and insist that they are the best people to serve in an intergenerational context. Note Lancaster and Stillman (:39, 40), "Because Cuspers stand in the gap between the two sides, they become naturals at mediating, translating, and mentoring...Cuspers can provide a voice for those who aren't being heard." Careful attention to this consideration is very important.

Church leaders must surely play a crucial role in helping to facilitate intergenerational understanding. Leaders must be careful to model the sort of communication that they hope to see occur among their congregations. Notes Rendle (2002:123, 125),

When leaders are dealing with generational differences in the congregation, they must work carefully to be descriptive, and they must model descriptive statements for others...A great deal of power rests in describing simply and accurately what occurs in the congregation as an expression of normal and normative generational behaviour.

Throughout the process, leaders also will do well to be intentional about overtly articulating their affirmation of the generations represented within the church (Hammett & Pierce 2007:153). Leaders also can build morale and support through steps such as involving older members in research devoted to understanding the needs of young adults within the emerging culture (Hammett & Pierce 2007:143). When nurtured well, the shared activities of gaining perspective and engaging in evaluation can go a long way in nurturing intergenerational reconciliation and justice within the congregation.

### **9.3.2 Experimentation**

The experimentation stage of the Missional Change Model enables the congregation to make strides of progress in acting upon its deepened intergenerational perspective. As Raines and Hunt (2000:46) suggest, “The next, and far more important steps, involve finding ways based on what we know about generations to make things better by adapting, challenging, experimenting, and changing the way we do things.” The experimentation stage invites those members of the congregation who are ready to participate together in intergenerational ministries “that cross barriers of style and preference” (Miller 2004:82). Raines (2003:44), reflecting upon her extensive experience as an intergenerational consultant within a corporate setting, notes that she has seen many intergenerational teams learn to celebrate their differences and to work together effectively. However, consistent with what has been articulated above in section 9.2.4, Zahn (2002) cautions that, instead of “complete overhaul”, the activities of such teams should be a matter of “small, experimental forays into inter-generational ministry” ([www.christianitytoday.com](http://www.christianitytoday.com)).

At the same time, allowance should be made for young adults to engage in their own experiments and to develop their own forms (Hammett & Pierce 2007:149). Essentially, this is a matter of what Frost and Hirsch (2003:175) have described as a “fit and split” approach to congregational life. As they explain, the term *fit* refers to

that which binds an organization together in unity. It is the group's common ethos and purpose. *Split* happens when an intentional allowance is made for a diversity of expressions within the team. Law (1993:79-80) suggests that it is important for monocultural (for the purposes of our study, mono-generational) groups to have opportunity to find their own identity and "to do homework together." At the same time, he notes that it will be important for the diverse groups within the congregation to have times and places to encounter one another and to be challenged "to step beyond [their] cultural boundaries." In essence, the experimentation stage provides powerful opportunities for the congregation to practice both intergenerational reconciliation and intergenerational justice as integral dimensions of the process of missional renewal. Hopefully, this also will enable the generations to move together toward commitment in a way that reflects the kingdom values of reconciliation and justice and that helps the congregation to embrace its missional identity within the post-modern transition.

#### **9.4 Conclusion**

This study was designed to respond to a specific problem with which the church in the United States is concerned:

As American society journeys through the post-modern transition, many established congregations struggle to respond faithfully to cultural change within an increasingly complex generational context. The resulting ineffectiveness of these churches in transmitting their faith traditions to Generation X, the first post-modern generation, threatens the ability of these churches to sustain their witness through this transitional period.

Chapters three through five of this study were devoted to a hermeneutical exploration of this problem. As we have seen, this reality has come about as a result of significant changes that have occurred within society and within the church as it strives to mediate God's purposes in relation to society. We have noted the impact of the shift from Christendom to post-Christendom, the shift from modernity to post-modernity, and the profound changes in intergenerational life that have unfolded alongside these changes. We have considered how these realities have shaped the formative experience of Generation X and the ways in which this rising generation has chosen to respond to the world in which it finds itself.

In response to this problem, we have advanced the following hypothesis:

If these established congregations are to sustain their witness through the post-modern transitional period, they must undertake a process of missional renewal that encompasses Generation X. From both a sociological and a theological perspective, this process must entail a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice.

Chapters six and seven of this study have been devoted to developing this hypothesis from a hermeneutical perspective. In chapter six, we explored what it might mean for established churches to experience missional renewal. We noted that the involvement of the members of Generation X constitutes a crucial aspect of this process. However, we also noted that both the members of this generation and the members of other generations within established churches are hindered by sensitivities that make it difficult for them to cooperate together in the pursuit of God's mission. These realities helped us to emphasize the importance of *process*. As we noted at the conclusion of chapter six, healthy processes within the church will give attention to both the spiritual and the sociological dimensions of the congregation's existence.

Chapter seven built upon this foundation by identifying intergenerational reconciliation and justice as essential dimensions of the missional renewal process within the post-modern transition. This chapter demonstrated that reconciliation and justice are clearly marks of God's reign. Any genuine effort to live in faithfulness to God's mission will call the church to strive to embody reconciliation and justice. In addition, we have demonstrated that these themes address some of the fundamental values and concerns of Generation X. A commitment to reconciliation and justice heightens the church's credibility in the eyes of this generation. Furthermore, while our primary focus is upon Generation X, we have noted that a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice also offers a range of benefits to the members of older generations.

In chapter eight, we subjected our hypothesis to a process of empirical testing. Drawing upon the responses from congregations representing five different denominations, we discovered solid evidence of a positive relationship between a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice and congregational effectiveness in reaching Generation X. In addition, we discovered a positive relationship between a congregation's commitment to intergenerational reconciliation



and justice and its level of engagement in discerning its own missional vocation. The evidence provided in this chapter, while somewhat modest, does seem to affirm the central hypothesis of this study. Within the experience of many churches, a commitment to intergenerational reconciliation and justice is integrally linked to the church's experience of renewed missional vitality within the post-modern transition and is contributing positively to the church's effectiveness in ministering among the members of Generation X.

This final chapter has sought to provide one process that can enable the church to engage in strategic action. The Missional Change Model has been introduced as a process that enables cultural change to occur progressively through time. As we have seen, this process provides the congregation the opportunity to learn and experiment. It allows missional innovation to become embedded in the congregation's culture in a way that promotes adaptive change. It provides an opportunity for both the systemic and the spiritual dimensions of the congregation's life to be engaged. Furthermore, it enables the diverse generational groups within the church an opportunity to practice the kingdom values of reconciliation and justice as they endeavour to experience missional renewal together.

This study has been concerned with the intergenerational challenges being posed by the church within one particular culture. However, there is little question that the issues explored within this study are of tremendous importance to churches throughout the world. As Esler (1971:38) notes, during the twentieth century, the emergence of youth cultures became "a global mass movement." Raines (2003:17-18) provides the vital observation that, as one consequence of this, "generation gaps do exist worldwide." Raines adds to this the clarification that generation gaps "vary from country to country" and that "the generations and their differences are unique to each country." At the same time, Raines insists that her research has revealed that "global patterns clearly exist." By no means is she alone in this assessment. Several of the sources employed in this study, such as Hilborn and Bird (2002; UK) and Codrington and Grant-Marshall (2004; South Africa), illustrate the reality that churches in many corners of the globe are grappling with the challenges of the contemporary intergenerational context. This being the case, while this study has focused upon the particularities of the American context, it also has been guided by

the hope that the insights produced here will offer something of use for churches in a variety of contexts.

Bolinger (1999:105) predicts that the sort of intergenerational challenges surveyed within this study will only continue to intensify. McManus (2001:136) shares this concern and expresses that these challenges are likely to have a profound impact on our religious institutions. Recognizing this prospect, may established churches everywhere grow in their embodiment of reconciliation and justice as they strive to live by the power of the Spirit in renewed faithfulness to God's mission. As they do so, may we see a vital faith being transmitted from generation to generation.

Furthermore, may we delight in seeing God continue to receive glory "throughout all generations" (Eph. 3:21).

## APPENDIX A: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

**For each question in this section, please mark the box that most closely describes your experience.**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <p>1. What is your role within your church?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Senior Pastor</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Youth/Young Adult Minister</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other Ministerial Staff Member</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other _____</li> </ul> <p>2. To what denomination does your church belong?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> American Baptist</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Evangelical Lutheran</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> North American Baptist</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Reformed Church in America</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> United Methodist</li> </ul> <p>3. What is the current average weekly worship attendance of your church?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Less than 150</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 150-400</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 401-750</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> More than 750</li> </ul> <p>4. During which of the following periods were you born?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Before 1945</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between 1945 and 1964</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between 1965 and 1981</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> After 1981</li> </ul> <p>5. Which music styles currently are being employed in your worship services?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mostly traditional music</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Mostly contemporary music</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> A blend of traditional and contemporary music</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Two or more services with distinct music styles</li> </ul> | <p>6. What percentage of your congregation is composed of people who are 62 years of age or older? (provide your best estimate)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> More than 75%</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between 50 and 75%</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between 25 and 50%</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Less than 25%</li> </ul> <p>7. What percentage of your congregation is composed of people between 42 and 61 years of age? (provide your best estimate)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> More than 75%</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between 50 and 75%</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between 25 and 50%</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Less than 25%</li> </ul> <p>8. What percentage of your congregation is composed of Gen Xers (adults between 25 and 41 years old)? (provide your best estimate)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> More than 75%</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between 50 and 75%</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between 25 and 50%</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Less than 25%</li> </ul> <p>9. Which of the following would most accurately describe your congregation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Age demographics similar to those of the community in which it is located.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The percentage composed of Gen Xers (adults 25-41 years old) is noticeably higher than in the community at large.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The percentage composed of Gen Xers is noticeably lower than in the community at large.</li> </ul> <p>10. During which of the following periods was your church established?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Before 1965</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Between 1965 and 1990</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> After 1990</li> </ul> |
|--|---|

**(Please note: This survey continues on the back of this sheet)**



11. Which of the following most accurately describes the number of Gen Xers attending your church over the last three years?
- The number of Gen Xers has decreased.
  - The number of Gen Xers in our church has remained essentially the same.
  - The number of Gen Xers in our church has increased slightly.
  - The number of Gen Xers in our church has increased significantly.

12. Which of the following most accurately describes the sense of mission within your congregation?
- Our congregation is guided by a clearly articulated, shared sense of mission.
  - Our congregation presently is engaged in a process of clarifying its mission.
  - At the present time, neither of the two above answers is true of our congregation.

To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (for each question, check one answer only)		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Some of the efforts our church has made to reach younger generations have resulted in tension.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
2	Our congregation finds it difficult to help people of different ages relate to one another meaningfully.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
3	Established members of our congregation seem to feel that changes within our society have impacted the effectiveness of our church's ministry.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
4	Our congregation is actively exploring how we can participate in God's mission within our community.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
5	I have confidence in the present effectiveness of our church in passing the faith to Gen Xers (adults 25-41 years old).	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
6	Our congregation finds it difficult to provide ways for people of all ages to participate equally in our church's life.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
7	The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem to reflect a concern for relational issues (e.g., trust, belonging, love).	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
8	Older members of our congregation respond negatively to the suggestion that our church has a need for change.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
9	The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem to desire to make a meaningful contribution within the church.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
10	The Gen Xers with which our church has interacted (whether in the past or presently) seem sensitive to issues of fairness.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
11	Older members of our church express a desire to reach the younger generations.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
12	It often seems that our church is more concerned with a commitment to mission than with maintaining established patterns of ministry.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK

(Please note: This survey continues on the next page)



To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (for each question, check one answer only)		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Don't Know
		1	2	3	4	5	6
13	Our congregation is searching actively for ways to minister to younger generations of people.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
14	Resistance to change on the part of older church members has hindered our ability to minister effectively to younger adults.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
15	Our congregation seems optimistic about its ability to respond effectively to changes within the larger culture.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
16	Our congregation is working to promote the equal involvement of people of all ages.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
17	Our congregation desires to find more effective ways to help people of different ages relate well with one another.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
18	Our congregation is seeking a way to reach young adults without alienating older, established members.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
19	Our congregation is engaged actively in efforts to influence our community for the sake of God's kingdom.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
20	People of different generations within our congregation seem to enjoy healthy relationships with one another.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
21	Generally speaking, people of different generations within our congregation seem to be able to work together in a way that affirms the value of all age groups.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
22	It seems that our congregation has implemented effective measures to include younger adults fully in its life.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
23	Our congregation seems to be proving effective at ministering among Gen Xers.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
24	Gen Xers within our congregation are encouraged to assume positions of leadership.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK
25	Gen Xers within our congregation have assumed positions of leadership.	SA	A	N	D	SD	DK

## APPENDIX B: THE CONTRIBUTION OF STRAUSS AND HOWE

The reader familiar with the contemporary literature examining generations may be aware of the widespread influence of William Strauss and Neil Howe upon this body of literature. To a certain extent, it is difficult to engage in a discussion of the contemporary generations apart from an acknowledgement of the recent influence of these two authors. At the heart of the contribution of these authors, articulated most systematically in two books, *Generations* (1992) and *The Fourth Turning* (1997), lies the concept that history (particularly that of the U.S., to which they limit their examination) involves a cyclical pattern of subsequently emerging cohort types that repeats every four generations. They support this claim with a fascinating survey of other thinkers from throughout history who have argued similarly regarding the existence of a four generation cycle within the movement of history (1992:450-453).

Specifically, Strauss and Howe (1992:74) argue that every generational cycle involves the sequential emergence of four distinct generational types according to the following pattern:

1. A dominant, inner-fixated IDEALIST GENERATION grows up as increasingly indulged youths after a secular crisis; comes of age inspiring a spiritual awakening; fragments into narcissistic rising adults; cultivates principle as moralistic mid-lifers; and emerges as visionary elders guiding the next secular crisis.
2. A recessive REACTIVE GENERATION grows up as under-protected and criticized youths during a spiritual awakening; matures into risk-taking, alienated rising adults; mellows into pragmatic midlife leaders during a secular crisis; and maintains respect (but less influence) as reclusive elders.
3. A dominant, outer-fixated CIVIC GENERATION grows up as increasingly protected youths after a spiritual awakening; comes of age overcoming a secular crisis; unites into a heroic and achieving cadre of rising adults; sustains that image while building institutions as powerful mid-lifers; and emerges as busy elders attacked by the next spiritual awakening.
4. A recessive ADAPTIVE GENERATION grows up as overprotected and suffocated youths during a secular crisis; matures into risk-averse, conformist rising adults; produces indecisive midlife arbitrator-leaders during a spiritual

awakening; and maintains influence (but less respect) as sensitive elders. In developing their argument, Strauss and Howe draw extensively upon evidence from throughout American history, reaching back to the earliest years of the Colonial era, in an effort to demonstrate the veracity of their system. What is problematic, however, is their insistence that this model can be used as a predictive framework to anticipate future “turnings” within our society.

As has already been indicated, the model proposed by Strauss and Howe has captured a very prominent position within contemporary generational studies. Particularly on a popular level, but also within many corners of academia, almost no recent author addressing issues of generational culture has attempted to do so without reference to their work. Among Christian writers, many have chosen to employ this cyclical framework rather uncritically, some even treating it as though it is an accurate description of reality and faithful predictor of the future (e.g., Regele 1995; Zimmerman 1995; Rendle 2002). Many of these authors choose to employ this theory at the heart of their proposals for the ministry and renewal of the church. At times, Strauss and Howe seem to have reached such canonical status that the subsequent writings of other authors offer little more than an unimaginative restatement or superficial sanctification of their claims.

In light of the prominence of these authors, one may be surprised to find that their theoretical framework is not being employed within the contours of the present research project. In explaining the reasons for this, it must be stated that, while presenting an intriguing conceptual structure for the study of generations, the model of Strauss and Howe is not without its detractors. Indeed, within the theological community, the limitations of this model have been effectively highlighted by Hilborn and Bird (2002:85-100). Furthermore, the unpublished Th.M. thesis of Lachman (1999) provides a fairly compelling theological, philosophical, and historical critique of Strauss and Howe, as well as an eye opening compilation of criticisms posed by reviewers from throughout a host of academic disciplines. Thus, in light of the weight of evidence and the thorough treatment afforded this issue elsewhere, the choice has been made not to adopt the overarching theoretical framework of Strauss and Howe as the guiding principle for this examination of generations, nor to devote a great deal of space to articulating or defending the reasons why. By this point, the numerous

citations employed throughout this study should make it clear that the voices of these authors have been fully welcomed within the dialogue advanced here. That being said, it must be pointed out that any material from Strauss and Howe included in this study has been measured critically.

Regardless of the conclusions one draws regarding the model proposed by Strauss and Howe, it must be acknowledged that the basic point they strive to make about the ebb and flow of generational culture does provide a significant qualification to anyone seeking to contemplate the future of intergenerational dynamics. As Howe and Strauss (2000:10) explain, “Americans habitually assume that the future will be a straight-line extension of the recent past. But that never occurs, either with societies or with generations.” Thus, the legitimacy of the “cyclical” model of Strauss and Howe aside, we can draw from their contribution the vital observation that it is possible for future generations to depart from, even to lend correction to, a perceived trajectory of “decline”. In response to the temptation to look upon the generational situation at any given point in history with thoughts of “doom and gloom,” we can draw hope from the realization that tomorrow may be better than today. This should be an energizing and enervating prospect to the church as it struggles to negotiate its way through a complex generational context.



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