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Study guide

Gen Z and the church

By Robert C. Blezard

Many congregational leaders are concerned that members of “Gen Z”—those born between 1997 and 2012—are dropping out of church life. Though leaders can take consolation knowing that the trend isn’t exclusive to the ELCA, but rather experienced across all denominations, it doesn’t prevent them from worrying about the future. But there are some helpful and hopeful signs!

EXERCISE 1: GEN Z AND YOUR CONGREGATION

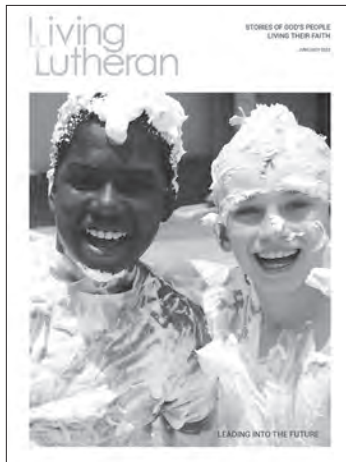
Looking over your congregation’s membership rolls over the last 10 years, analyze how your church is doing in keeping members from 10 to 25 years old.

- How would you characterize the data? Which of the following words fits best: encouraging, not bad, so-so, poor, disastrous. Explain.
- To what can you attribute the results?
- How does the information in *Living Lutheran* assist you in understanding the results?
- How has your congregation worked to help keep Gen Z members active and involved?
- From the article, what are you doing right? What could you improve on?

EXERCISE 2: “WHAT WE WANT”

Gen Z members have identified four qualities they desire in a church: relationships, mentors, authenticity and political engagement. For each of these terms, discuss:

- In what way has each quality always been part of church life? How are they part of your congregation?
- Does your congregation’s traditional approaches for each quality work with members of Gen Z? Why or why not?
- What does each quality mean to you? To members of your generation (if you are not Gen Z)?
- What does the quality mean to members of Gen Z? How do their perceptions, experiences and expectations differ from yours?
- How well does your church do in providing or encouraging this quality for all members? For those in Gen Z?
- How could it do better?



Study guide: **Gen Z and the church** *continued*

EXERCISE 3: INVITATION

According to the article, people of Gen Z crave relationships and desire to be invited into a space created for them. Discuss:

- How do you understand “craving relationships” and a “desire to be invited into a comfortable space”? In what ways do these desires fit into the universal human longing for relationships, connection and belonging?
- How does your congregation help people to connect, build relationships and belong? How could it do better?
- What would a good invitation to gather and form relationships look like? Does your congregation extend that kind of invitation? How could it do better?
- If your congregation has created a special space for Gen Z members, how well does it achieve its goal? How could it be improved?
- If your congregation doesn't have such a space, where in your facility might such a space be carved out? What would it take to make it special, welcoming and attractive to Gen Z members?
- Put together an “action list” of how your congregation could more effectively invite people, especially Gen Z, to gather for relationship building, and for how your congregation can create space for everyone, especially Gen Z, to gather. Give it to your pastor or congregation council for consideration.

EXERCISE 4: ALARMING RESULTS

The Barna Group's 2018 survey of Gen Z revealed some surprising results:

- 59% find the church irrelevant to them personally.
- 48% believe they can find God elsewhere.
- 28% believe they can teach themselves what they need.

For each bullet point, discuss: What are your thoughts? What does this mean? What does this mean to members of Gen Z? How can this information inform and guide your congregation in crafting a meaningful faith formation ministry to members of Gen Z?

Brainstorm some ideas and give them to your pastor or congregation council for consideration.

EXERCISE 5: PRIORITIES AND BUDGET

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how much of a current concern is it for your congregation to attract and/or retain youth and young adult members? Explain.
- Has that concern grown or shrunk over the years? Why? Explain.
- How is that concern for youth and young-adult ministry reflected in the congregation's priorities? Can you give concrete examples?
- Do you agree that an organization invests money in the things that matter most? Explain.

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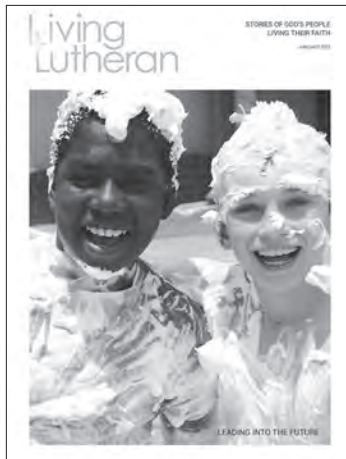
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Study guide: **Gen Z and the church** *continued*

- Looking at your congregation's current budget, how much money is earmarked for youth and young adult ministry? Does it adequately reflect the congregation's concern and priority for youth and young adults? Explain.
- Has the budget for youth and young adult ministry been cut over the years? If so, why?
- If money were no object, how much should your congregation devote to youth and young adult ministries? Why?
- If money were no object, how would your congregation invest in youth and young adult ministry?

EXERCISE 6: SPIRITUAL, NOT RELIGIOUS

Like a growing segment of our population, many Gen Z members consider themselves "spiritual but not religious." Discuss:

- What do you make of the term "spiritual but not religious"?
- How would you define "spiritual"? "Religious"?
- In defining themselves as spiritual but not religious, what distinction are people making between the two terms? Are they mutually exclusive? Should they be? What would be the ideal relationship between the two concepts?
- As a committed churchgoer, how would you describe yourself?
- Why might Gen Z members of your church not find your congregational life sufficiently spiritual for their tastes? Why might people of other age groups?
- How does your congregation foster a healthy balance between religiosity and spirituality? Does it do enough?
- What are some ideas to bridge the gap in your congregation between "spiritual" and "religious"? Make a list and give it to your pastor or congregation council for consideration.

EXERCISE 7: POLITICS

Political engagement is one of Gen Z's desired attributes for the church. But many congregations whose members comprise a diversity of political viewpoints avoid politics, lest it divide everyone and cause trouble.

- What are the risks of a church becoming politically active? What are the benefits?
- If your church is politically active, how? What effect does the engagement have on congregational membership? How has your congregation handled the risks?
- If your church is *not* politically active, why not? If your church started to become engaged in politics, which issues would it take on and on what sides? Would it be the kind of political engagement that a Gen Z member would favor? Explain.
- Describe how a congregation could become politically engaged while managing the risks of dividing the membership.

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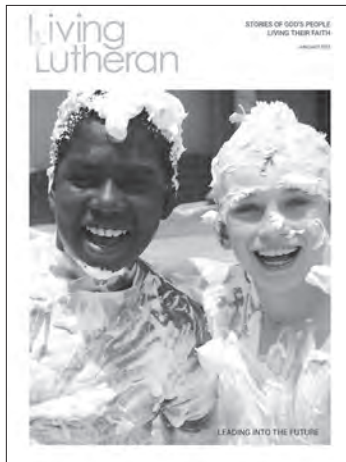
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- How might a congregation empower its Gen Z members to be politically engaged on issues of concern to them?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Gen Z is the first generation that has always had access to computers, cellphones, the internet and social media. How has this shaped their experience of the world? Their experience of church? How might close familiarity with digital technology affect their experience of church worship? Why?
- The Springtide Research Institute reported that 52% of young people affiliated with a religious tradition had little or no trust in organized religion. What has led to this distrust? What would be the marks of a trustworthy church? How has our church and your congregation worked to gain, build or maintain trust, especially among Gen Z? Is it enough? What more could/should be done?
- David Kinnaman, president of the Barna Group, reported in 2019 that two-thirds of 18- to 29-year-olds who grew up in a church have dropped out. What do you make of this assertion? Has that been the case at your congregation? What can we do about it?
- Most of the members of Gen Z were born after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and as a result have never seen a time of relative peace. Between climate crisis, political gridlock, police violence and the pandemic, it's been one crisis after another. How might this affect their worldview? Their opinion of their elders and institutions that have either caused or been ineffective in handling these issues? How might this affect their opinion of church?
- Referring to the crises in the above question, Rachel Alley, former ELCA program director for youth ministry, commented that Gen Z is inclined to finding solutions. "They are the change in the world," she said. How might your congregation harness their passion for fixing the world's problems, and harness it in ways that could help them reconnect with church?
- The pandemic has disrupted many aspects of church life. How has it affected your congregation's outreach to and retention of those who fall into the Gen Z age bracket?
- Some Gen Z members report that their lives are too hectic to squeeze in worship on Sunday morning. Do other groups find this to be true? What might be possible solutions? Discuss the pros and cons of a worship service that is not held on Sunday morning.

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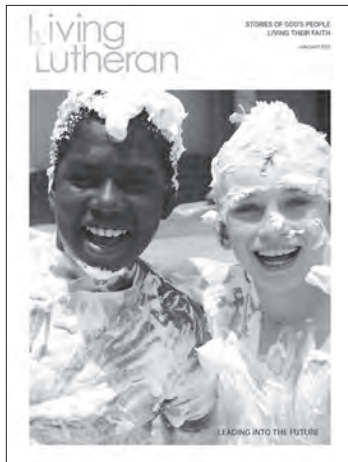
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FOR ACTION

- Arrange a listening session with as many members of Gen Z as you can invite. Serve them a meal and engage them in a discussion of how God is working in their lives. Appoint someone to take notes and a facilitator. Listen carefully to their answers as you ask about their experiences of church, where they see God, how they express their spirituality, what they would like to see in the church, etc. Compile the findings into a report for consideration by your pastor or congregation council.
- Based on the article and study questions, come up with a comprehensive list of ideas, suggestions and solutions for your church leaders to consider.
- Look for partners in your community or area with whom you can work on creating space, time and programs for Gen Z folk. Include not only Lutheran churches and those of our ecumenical partners, but also schools, scouts and other organizations that serve young people.



Photo: Erik Mathre

Gen Z and the church

For them, it's about connection, authenticity, feeling seen

By Stephanie N. Grimoldby



Students gathered for the 2021 ELCA Youth Leadership Summit in Minneapolis.

Young people in the church today know what they want from faith-based institutions.

If a church offers relationships, mentors, authenticity and political engagement, they'll stay, often becoming leaders who will take to the streets to fight for what they believe. But if those pieces are missing, members of "Gen Z"—born between 1997 and 2012—report that they will either change the dynamic of the institution or find another one that provides what they need.

"Gen Z is a generation that does not give two weeks' notice," said Nicolette Marie Peñaranda, ELCA program director for African Descent Ministries. "With Gen Z, if this job is driving me crazy, I'm done. ... This is toxic? I'm not going to do this."

Hannah Limbong, a senior at Louisville (Ky.) Male High School and a member of Christ Lutheran Church, Louisville, agreed.

"We've seen how we can stand up for ourselves or go against the grain," she said. "That can be a [bad] thing, but it can be a good thing because we're not just accepting everything. We have our own agency of thought. We can take our own initiatives instead of being handed something and being told, 'You do this.' We ask, 'Why are we doing this?'"

"It's not necessarily [from] a lack of work ethic; we've realized that we're able to take control of our lives and get out of a situation we don't like."

This dynamic is inspiring to some but worrisome to others.

Research from Barna Group's 2018 study "Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation" shows that young adults are less likely than older ones to see church as important: 59% report that church is irrelevant to them personally, 48% believe they can find God elsewhere and 28% believe they can teach themselves what they need to know.

Some church leaders have seen a decline in young adults attending church and seek to remedy the situation. Others see empty pews as a response to years of disinterest shown to young adults but not necessarily an indicator that the greater church body is losing its youth. All agree on the importance of the church stepping up and reaching out to Gen Z.

In fact, the ELCA churchwide organization last year implemented the Future Church design, which includes a goal to engage 1 million new, young and diverse people by the end of the decade.

"I think it's really important, right now especially, for the church to take action," Limbong said. "I feel if people my age understood what Lutherans stand for and what the church has done to solve problems around the world, they would want to stand with the

"I think it's really important, right now especially, for the church to take action."

church. The youth don't know there is a church that is trying to help them and back them up."

Who are Generation Z?

Generation Z report craving relationships and the feeling of being truly invited into a space created for them. Several factors have molded this generation into a group that's increasingly willing to seek out those relationships and spaces instead of passively accepting what is given to or expected of them.

"Our generation has never known what it's like to not live in crisis," said Claire Embil, a 2021 graduate of the University of Wisconsin–Madison who has been heavily involved in young adult leadership in the ELCA for most of her life.

Most "Gen Zers" were born after the domestic terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. In their lifetimes, they've experienced a climate crisis, a police violence crisis, unprecedented presidential elections and a global pandemic.

And they've never lived without the internet. "We can't turn it off," said Embil, who doesn't currently belong to a congregation. "We grew up on the internet, so if it happened, you will see it. It will be on TikTok, it will be on your device. I think we, as Gen Z, have gotten tired of sitting and watching crises happen to us."

That's exactly what Rachel Alley, ELCA program director for youth ministry, sees.

"Gen Z seems to be coming along to fix those things," she said. "They're coming up with ideas and innovations. Millennials will state, 'There's a problem here, and it needs to be fixed.' Gen Z, what I see, they're coming along and are finding the answers. They are the change in the world."

One recent example of Gen Z's resourcefulness was the creation of the ELCA's Abide program (elca.org/abide), an online small-group ministry formed in 2020 by Embil and other young adults in collaboration with Savanna Sullivan and Daniel Kirschbaum, the former and current program directors, respectively, for ELCA Young Adult Ministry (elca.org/youngadults).

A joint venture of Gen Zers and millennials, Abide has drawn nearly 2,000 participants, ages 18 to 35, to share meaningful conversations and connect with others during the pandemic.

48% believe they can find God elsewhere.

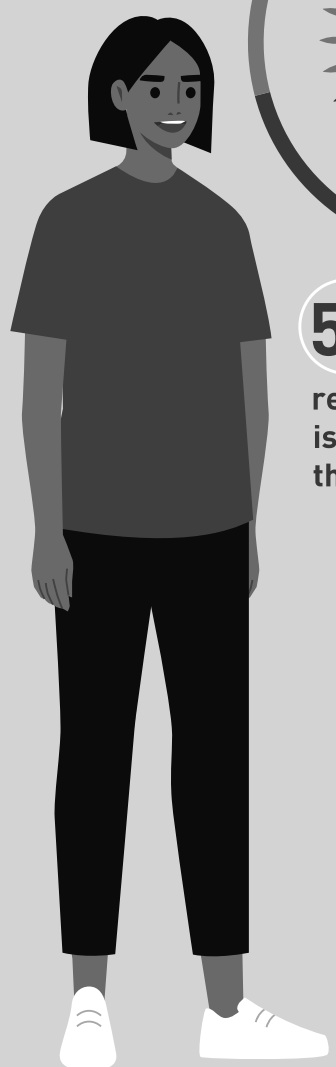
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59%

report that church is irrelevant to them personally.



Source: Barna Group's 2018 study "Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation."

The program was born out of “frustration by not being listened to,” said Embil, who serves as Abide’s social media coordinator. “I’m seeing young adults realize they are empowered to build their own experiences and build church in the way they want to see it.”

What do Gen Zers want?

Whether Gen Zers suffer from pandemic-induced isolation or simply crave face-to-face encounters, they want to be seen and heard and to have a space of their own.

“Gen Z are looking to form new, meaningful connections with people but sometimes struggle with how to start,” said Hope Johnson, a senior at Lane Tech College Prep High School and a member of Pilgrim Lutheran Church in Chicago.

Embil believes the church can reach Gen Zers by giving them that place to start. “Before we even get to what we preach in the pulpit, making space for young adults is first and foremost,” she said.

She asks leaders to look at the existing systems congregations have in place. “Do the things you already do make space for young adults? If your Bible study is at 10 on a Tuesday morning, I don’t know anyone 18 to 35 who can attend that,” she said. “[There’s a difference between] ‘You can come if you want to’ versus ‘I want you to be there.’ That’s what young adults are looking for.”

Young people who have stayed involved with church into adulthood often share similar reasons for doing so: they feel seen, supported and validated.

Kendyll Ward, a senior at Haverford (Pa.) High School, said her plan to become a pastor stems from the positive affirmations of her congregation, Trinity Lutheran in Havertown, and the service opportunities it has given her.

“One of my first leadership opportunities was to get involved in vacation Bible school,” she said. “But I’ve been able to do everything. I’ve led worship. My church is in transition, and I supply-preached for two Sundays. ... My pastor gave me leadership opportunities that led me to expand my abilities.”

Kelly Reese, a sophomore at Penn State University, State College, Pa., also feels that the opportunities and relationships her home congregation, Tree of Life in Harrisburg, Pa., afforded her have helped her maintain a connection to it. “My youth group has always been an incredibly active group, and we have a lot of opportunities for synod activities and involvement. I have attended church camp since I was in sixth grade, and I have formed relationships that will be lifelong, no doubt.”

To explore diverse expressions within the ELCA, Peñaranda created the ELCA Black History Month

“Gen Z are looking to form new, meaningful connections with people but sometimes struggle with how to start.”

video series “Talks at the Desk” (see also page 40). Several Gen Zers were featured in the project, including two boys, ages 10 and 11.

“The 11-year-old has been preaching since he was 4,” Peñaranda said. “He talks about what this church and ministry and mentoring has meant to him. ... The 10-year-old is a very good artist. He really speaks about the glory of God in his life; he talks about how wonderful it feels to be supported by his church. [They show us] how important it is for us as elders to not only be listening but be affirming and supportive of our youth.”

Investing in young adults also means putting our money where our mouth is.

“In a church budget, a lot of times, Sunday school, faith formation, those are the places you cut before you cut other areas,” Alley said. “What does that say? You don’t care about me. A young person sees that, but as well, families see that. Families have said, ‘Well, the coach cares more about me—they’re spending time and money on me.’”

Why aren’t Gen Zers attending church?

To learn why more young adults aren’t attending church services, leaders often look to data. In *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... and Rethinking Faith* (Baker Books, 2011), Barna Group President David Kinnaman reports that 59% of young adults ages 18 to 29 with a church background had dropped out of church in their 20s.

Eight years later, Kinnaman’s book *Faith for Exiles* (Baker Books, 2019) shows that the young adult dropout rate has not only persisted but grown. Nearly two-thirds of 18- to 29-year-olds in the United States who grew up in the church had “withdrawn from church involvement as an adult.”

Peñaranda said dwindling church attendance isn’t new, so the blame can’t be placed solely on Gen Zers. “The church has been in decline for years. I think a lot of that is the parents. Think of how many Gen X parents have left the church or have stopped prioritizing that. It was our boomer parents who held on to the Sunday morning thing.”

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Source: *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church ... and Rethinking Faith* by David Kinnaman (Baker Books, 2011).

Nathalie Rawlins, a senior at St. Ursula Academy in Toledo and member of Lutheran Church of the Master in Perrysburg, both in Ohio, said that generational shift plays a big factor in the lives of Gen Zers. “For every 200 church services I went to growing up, 175 of them were with my grandma and grandpa; the other 25 were with my mom and dad.”

The struggle to find balance in a relentlessly busy world leads some young adults to skip a Sunday service in favor of something else. “Balance is probably one of the biggest issues with getting Gen Z into church,” Rawlins said. “For me, it was all-day Saturday basketball. Sunday was off. If Sunday is your one day off, shameful as it might be to say, you don’t want to wake up Sunday for church. I might not make church Sunday morning, but I might make it to youth group at 4 p.m.”

Embil said she knows many people who grew up in the church but stopped attending when they were old enough to make the decision on their own.

She’s noticed two themes. First, many Gen Zers consider themselves spiritual but not religious. Second, she believes many Gen Zers are Christians who believe in the Triune God but are turned off by organized churches. “They are still Christian,” she added, “but they are tired of systemic injustice in organized Christian churches—and that’s across all denominations.”

That lines up with recent findings from Springtide Research Institute, which reported in 2020 that 52% of young people affiliated with a religious tradition have “little to no trust in organized religion.”

Mary Winsor, a junior at Cottey College, Nevada, Mo., and member of Nativity Lutheran Church in Palm Beach Gardens, Fla., believes that trust can be built, in part, by creating spaces where doubts and questions are not only accepted but encouraged.

“I think a lot of young people have doubts about [whether] God is real, if my religion is the ‘right’ one, if a higher power even exists, if it’s OK for me to practice a religion that has a bad history,” she said. “These questions can be really scary and unnerving, and when there isn’t anyone to explain to them that these types of thoughts are completely normal and human ... [they come to] believe they aren’t meant to practice a religion.”

For the politically engaged Gen Z, Embil said, staying connected to a congregation can be hard “when church is not ready to be political.” In other words, Gen Zers want to know the church is walking the talk.

“What is important to us is authenticity and a commitment to really following through with your beliefs,” Embil said.

“Balance is probably one of the biggest issues with getting Gen Z into church.”

What should the church do?

“Gen Z pursue what is meaningful to them in more ways than one—they don’t sit in only one box,” said Dan Beirne, program director for Young Adults in Global Mission. He argues that fewer young people attending Sunday services doesn’t necessarily mean they’re leaving the church—they’re simply finding different avenues to pursue their faith.

“It really is more a matter of metrics right now that paints that false narrative that young adults aren’t involved in church,” he said. “Many young adults have been injured by the church and have good reason to be wary to walk in the doors of a church building, so ... they’re engaging in other ways. It’s still within the ecology of the ELCA, even: working with immigration, advocacy, climate justice and more.”

Reengaging young people isn’t a simple matter, but it might be easier than we think, said Eric Wolf, pastor of St. John Lutheran Church, Sudbury, Mass. Wolf has worked for more than 20 years in youth ministries, including serving as assistant to the bishop for youth and young adult ministry in the South Carolina Synod.

Wolf circles back to what Gen Z is craving in the first place: “The answer is relationship.”

“It’s doing the hard work of engaging with people,” he added. “It’s recognizing that people can’t always attend worship on Sunday. Maintaining that relationship reminds them they feel comfortable, they feel valued, so when worship makes more sense for their lifestyle [again, they feel welcomed back].”

Limbong agreed. Creating a connection with someone provides a way for God to work through them, she said, noting the importance of maintaining a welcoming relationship.

“Instead of pushing people and saying, ‘You have to be here. What have you been doing?’ [step] away from the pointed accusations, more like, ‘Church is here for you; I’m here for you; God’s here for you. What can we help you with? You have a space where you belong.’ I think that’s a really important step that often gets overlooked because it’s so simple.” †

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