

## **“Let X = X : Generation X and world mission”**

### **Introduction**

It is widely recognised that the West is experiencing a significant culture change. Estimates of its nature and importance vary, but it is undeniable that new generations are growing up with a worldview radically different to that of their parents and grandparents. The label ‘Generation X’ has been applied to those born since the early/mid-1960s, and by their attitudes and outlook, this generation shows itself to be the first to have been significantly shaped by postmodernity rather than modernity.

Anecdotal evidence of the personal experience of ‘Xers’ shows that we do not find it easy to fit into the culture and structures of much of the contemporary Western church, especially in its organisational forms, such as mission agencies. As postmodernity is a reaction against modernity, so much of the Xer outlook is a reaction against the ‘baby boomer’ worldview which preceded it, and which currently shapes much of the organisational form and culture of Western society, including the church.

This mismatch has been noted by many ‘boomers’ and older in the world mission community, and has led to some discussion of the ‘problem’ of Generation X, and attempts to ‘help’ Xers to fit into existing cultural norms and structures. But what if the ‘problem’ is not with the Xers? What if the ‘problem’ is with the culture of the existing structures? If mission agencies, in their structures, procedures and ethos, reflect the worldview of the generations which formed them, then these are not sacrosanct. Like all cultural forms, they are contingent, relative, and subject to evaluation by other cultural norms, and by the Bible.

If Generations Xers do world mission their way, again subject to evaluation by the Bible and by others, but in a way that is true to their own worldview nonetheless, what would it look like? Are new strategies, structures and methodologies needed? Can the existing structures be changed to allow the Xer worldview to exist alongside others, or are new ones needed?

### **“Motion but no growth”?**

One of my favourite stories is that found in the ‘Missing Chapter’ of Douglas Coupland’s book ‘Generation X’, a novel first published in 1991 which charts the life and outlook of 3 characters, Dag, Claire and Andy. The ‘Missing Chapter’, though excluded from the novel, was available on the Internet in 1998. This story is set on the asteroid of Texlahoma, where it is ‘always 1974’ (if you read the novel, it makes sense ..... really).

The story concerns the fact that a murderer is at large, “a gruesome murderer who liked to pick on children in particular”. The response to this was as follows; “So, naturally, people were upset, and seniors were doubly worried as the number of youngsters paying into their social security kitty was shrinking daily. They screamed for action”.

Texlahoman society begins to implode, but eventually, through a stroke of luck, the murderer is caught. However, the story ends with the following note; “in spite of the terror Texlahomans endured, and what they might have learned, it remains 1974 there, and it always will. There are no variables in Texlahoma’s equation that permit change. There can be motion but no growth”.

For me, the power of the story is to be found in noting how the power holders and vested interests of Texlahoma (the ‘seniors’) are threatened by (admittedly worrying) changing circumstances, and how power is used to maintain the status quo (even when these existing ways are sterile and perishing).

I suppose that many Christians and other observers of the West would accept that our status quo (Western culture) is sterile, even perishing. What does this mean for the Western church, and, in particular, what does it mean for our understanding and practice of world mission? How might the current ‘power holders’ of world mission (i.e. the mission agencies and training colleges) be acting like the ‘seniors’ in Coupland’s story.

## A Theology of Culture

I want to begin by developing a theological understanding of culture, which is the filter through which I will interpret the trends outlined above. I start with the issue of culture because there are lots of different attitudes within the church towards the desirability (or not) of engaging with the surrounding culture(s) in which the church fulfils its mission. So, given that there are a variety of opinions on the matter, it is important that I spell out my position on this issue. You may agree or disagree with things that I say, but it may be helpful for you to know WHY I make some of the comments I do, so that we can at least know exactly what it is we are agreeing or disagreeing about.

'Culture' is a word which describes the worldview, the beliefs, the values and the behaviour of a particular group of people. There are books and books written on how culture works, what it is, and how we should understand human identity in relation to it. For me, the easiest way is to understand that it is "the way we do things around here". It is finite and limited, it is deliberate and chosen, and yet it also exerts a controlling influence on what is acceptable (and unacceptable) behaviour, values and beliefs.

However, this is not a paper about the relationship between theology (and the church) and culture in general. I want to address questions raised by one specific culture (Western 'postmodern', or 'post-whatever', culture) and the implications for the purpose for which the church exists, i.e. mission. By 'mission' I do not wish to imply some mystical doctrine of salt water, i.e. that 'mission' only happens once you have crossed over some 'clear blue water'. Mission is not a geographically-defined activity. It is the church reaching out with God's love in Christ to a fallen world. However, the focus of Global Connections (for whom I work) is 'world mission' (i.e. cross-cultural mission), so much of my reflection has been developed with this, and its current structures, in mind.

My starting point for understanding human cultures is Gen 1:26-28a.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground".

So God created man  
in his own image,  
in the image of God  
he created him;  
male and female  
he created them

God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it"

All cultures are made by human beings, who, being made in the image of God, share (among other things) in his creative capacity. All cultures, through their beliefs, values, and permitted and proscribed behaviours, are attempts to bring some kind of order and understandability to the complex and chaotic world that we encounter. They are attempts to make sense of the cacophony of reality (control and order is implied in the 'rule' / 'subdue' language of these verses). As such, human cultures are good, and the human propensity to create culture is a fulfilment of our created identity.

However, we are no longer simply created in the image of God. Gen 3 contains the story of human fallenness. Through sin, humanity is now cut off from God, compelled to wander (like Cain) in the cosmos, looking for a home.

However, although sin is a corruption and a twisting, it has not eradicated the image of God in humanity. The creation mandate for human multiplication, to 'fill the earth', given to humanity in Gen 1:28, is reiterated to Noah in Gen 9:1. Cain and his descendants built cities and developed agriculture, the arts, and technology (Gen 4:17-22) despite the judgement of God upon their ancestor. Humanity is still creative, sharing in that aspect of the divine image, even while fallen.

Thus human cultures are both good and bad, all mixed up together. Just as human beings are both made in the image of God, and also 'totally depraved' (which does not mean entirely evil, but instead corrupted throughout by sin, even our good bits), so are human cultures. Some try to separate cultures into elements that are 'good', 'bad' and 'indifferent', but, just as in my own case, where my weaknesses and failings are so often the flipside of my strengths, so it is with human cultures. It would be much easier if we could separate out the various elements, embracing the good and rejecting the bad, but, fortunately for our sakes, God doesn't do it that way. Jesus' parable of the so-

called “wheat and tares” (Matt 13:24-30) shows that God will allow good and evil to co-exist until his final judgement, and the reason Jesus gives for this is “while you are pulling up the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them” (v29). Trying to make the separation now may result in rejecting something that is good.

Thus we have not only to live with the different culture(s) of the world; we also have to accept that what seems bad to us (because it is different, or a threat) might actually be good. For example, postmodernity has undermined the hubris of modernity, which in turn was (and is) no particular friend to the Christian faith.

### **Why is contemporary culture change so important?**

Every generation is tempted by the delusion that theirs is a unique one. Perhaps the reality is that every generation is unique, moulded as they are by the life circumstances and challenges that face them. This theory certainly underlies most of the work done on generational demography, whether by theorists like Don Tapscott, Bill Strauss and Neil Howe, or in the seminal article on this issue and the implications for world mission written by Kath Donovan and Ruth Myers, published by WEF Missions Commission in ‘Too Valuable To Lose’.

I don’t make any claims that Generation X is unique in the sense that we are special or more privileged in our understanding of life. However, perhaps we are unique in that we are different.

Management guru Peter Drucker wrote, “Every few hundred years in Western history there occurs a sharp transformation .... within a few short decades, society rearranges itself - its worldview, its basic values, its social and political structure, its arts, its key institutions. Fifty years later, there is a new world. And the people born then cannot even imagine the world in which their grandparents lived, and into which their own parents were born. We are currently living through just such a transformation”

So how should we understand this transformation? I would suggest that we can learn a great deal from reflecting on popular culture as reflected in the media. The media may be great creators of cultural trends, but they are also good reflectors of such trends as well, market-driven as they are.

### **“Stay true to what you try to be - your individuality”**

This line, from a song by current British teen pop sensation S Club 7, is a good starting point. An article in the Observer newspaper in April 1999 spoke of the rise of an “I-Society” in Britain, i.e. a generation which has rejected the ‘me’ culture of the 1980s for one which values “individuality, independence, identity and interactivity”. I believe that it is the issues of individuality and identity which are at the core of the questions that contemporary culture, and in particular Generation X, is asking. The question of identity is found in a lot of current contemporary music, e.g. “Some day I will find, the one who lives inside my mind” (‘Dazed, Beautiful and Bruised’ by Catatonia)

Of great importance in creating these issues, is the shift to a postindustrial society. In the highly-successful British film ‘The Full Monty’, a change in lifestyle is forced upon the protagonists by the closure of the steelworks in which they had previously worked. Philosophers, theologians and preachers of all kinds need to be aware that people’s beliefs and values are often shaped by their behaviour and lifestyles, rather than vice versa.

So how might we characterise postindustrial society? As the change from manufacturing industry to service sector jobs; the change from the factory gate to the shopping mall; the change from production line to workstations in cubicles; the change from machine tools to information technology; the change from terraced housing to executive homes.

Life is becoming more diverse, more fragmented, more individualistic (note the mirth that accompanied the news that Hillary Clinton’s 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party in 1997 was attended by her 500 ‘closest personal friends’), and so the outlook shaped by postindustrial society is one which focuses, as we noted above, on identity, on who we are.

In a consumer society, our self-definition comes mainly from the products we buy, and the brands we identify with (Pepsi or Coke, Gap or Levis?). Since we are now looking for individuality, ‘our’ own unique identity, ‘our’ genetic blueprint, then we don’t want to look and be the same as everyone else. We want to be distinct, ‘us’. This means that we live in a day, not of mass-production, but of mass-customization.

Henry Ford, credited with the invention of mass-production, famously said of his Model T, "you can have it any colour you want, as long as it's black". I recently visited the Ford UK website, which showed that it currently offers 9 different cars for sale in the UK (Ka, Fiesta, Escort, Focus, Mondeo, Puma, Cougar, Galaxy, Explorer). Taking the Ford Focus alone, you can have a choice from 4 body shapes (3, 4, 5 door saloon, plus estate), 4 levels of specification (CL, Zetec, LX, Ghia), and 5 different engines (1.4, 1.6, 1.8, 2.0, 1.8tdi), in one of 11 colours. So there are 880 different Ford Focus options, before even beginning to think about interior seat trim or optional extras)

Adverts for the household paint Dulux show a woman stealing some lilac underwear from a neighbour's washing line, or cutting a patch from a yellow hooded top worn by a shaven-headed bodybuilder sat in front of her on a bus. In both adverts, we then cut to shots of the same woman just finishing some interior decorating, with the room painted in exactly the same colour as the stolen item. In other words, if you can't find the colour you like from the hundreds already on offer in your nearest DIY megastore, then they will mix up another, just for you.

A recent article in 'The Face' magazine focussed on household appliances, furniture, and clothing which build on the concept of 'beanbag' culture, i.e. objects that mould to your body shape (or lifestyle). However, unlike the original beanbag, the Memo Chair doesn't just adapt to your perfect shape, it retains your imprint. So does the AVO mobile phone, with a shell of rubber which moulds to your grip. Gel shoe insoles have been developed, which adjust to the shape of your foot, and as your foot gets warm, the gel hardens, so leaving an imprint.

This is the key theme of much marketing in the West - whatever suits 'you'. Personal individuality, and customization to that individuality, are the order of the day.

This mass-customization of society moves beyond products that we buy, to the information and knowledge we receive. Talk of an 'information explosion' is common, through the development and expansion of satellite/cable/digital TV, the now-ubiquitous CD-ROMs, and, of course, the Internet. In response to this, we see the development of tailored communications. 'Old' media such as newspapers and music producers are having to adapt to the demands of the consumers of the 'new' media, such as the ability to interact with websites, and to personalise both the services and content received (thus the Time Warner - AOL merger comes as no great surprise). Similar 'tailoring' can be seen in the propensity to talk of 'narrowcasting' rather than 'broadcasting'; in direct-marketers working with smaller and smaller segments of the population; and in the use of Internet 'cookies' which allow websites to identify return visitors, to retain your personal information for future use, and to offer services such as those provided by the Amazon.com website, such as 'recommendations' (based on your previous buying patterns), and 'people who bought this book also bought ...'.

In this analysis, I suppose I have to make reference to the word 'postmodern', even though the word is slippery, and hard to define (note the now-famous quote in the Independent newspaper in 1987; "the word has no meaning. Use it as often as you can").

The commonly accepted definition is "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Jean-Francois Lyotard) He noted how the leading ideas of Western thought (Marxism, democratic liberalism, Keynesian economics, Christianity), while claiming to offer universal 'salvation', offered it in practice only to the few. The as-yet unrealised emancipation of all humanity led in each case to the desire to 'conquer' others to its point-of-view. Thus the freedom offered was not universal and inclusive, but limited and exclusive, and implicated in violence.

I prefer the description used by the comedienne Lily Tomlin. She has a character called Trudy the Bag Lady, who is helping some aliens from outer space to determine whether, in their search for intelligent life in the universe, Earth might be a likely location to find it. Trudy is not sure it will be. Commenting on her own madness, she says ...

I refuse to be intimidated by  
reality anymore.  
After all, what is reality anyway? Nothin' but a  
collective hunch. My space chums think reality was once a  
primitive method of  
crowd control that got out of hand.  
In my view, it's absurdity dressed up  
in a three-piece business suit.

I made some studies and reality is the leading cause of stress among those in touch with it. I can take it in small doses, but as a lifestyle I found it too confining.

So how does all this affect our view on life? What happens when the postmodern disintegration of reality meets the mass customization of lifestyle and the information tsunami? How is this reflected in the 'Generation X' worldview?

### 1. Individuality

We get a major focus on and concern for individuality and identity (who am I?). Since this can be created, it leads to insecurity (if reality is nothing more than "a collective hunch", then my place in that 'reality' is in doubt, for how do I know who I am?). This diversification and fragmentation of lifestyle and of society leads to situations where we have more acquaintances but fewer friendships (hence popularity of 'Friends'-type TV programmes).

### 2. Flexibility

We see a paradoxical unwillingness to commit too deeply to any one identity. We allow for the concept of self-reinvention (in 'Close Personal Friend', a film produced in 1995 to accompany the promotion for his book 'Microserfs', Douglas Coupland comments that "humans are the only animals who can say 'I'm going to move to San Diego, lose 20 pounds, and grow my hair'").

Likewise, we don't just deal with information overload by customizing the information to our needs. We 'surf' the Internet (don't go too deep, or you will get drowned by the information), or we channel-hop while watching TV (a type of parallel-processing or multitasking).

### 3. Scepticism

Since all metanarratives, or constructions of reality, are used by the powerful to maintain their own interests and extend them to the detriment of others, postmodernity encourages a scepticism towards authority-holders.

## **So what about Generation X?**

Why is the culture change that we have looked at so important? Because it reflects the culture of an increasing proportion of the population of the West, and it will shape the way that the Western church 'is' and the way it 'does' mission in coming years.

### Critique or accept?

The following question will have arisen in some people's minds; "Do we just accept the culture change you have described, and go with it? Shouldn't the role of the church be to provide a biblical critique of these trends?"

I have a number of problems with this particular question:

1. As we noted earlier, cultures are both good and bad (both made in the image of God, and fallen), and these elements are not easily separable (but are often the flip sides of one another).
2. The language of 'critical contextualization' usually ends up focussing on the 'critical' part, and not giving too much attention to the contextualization.
3. I don't see too many comparative critiques of the existing culture of the church, and the influence of modernity thereon. After all, there are no objective viewpoints, and too often a critique of postmodernity by Christians is made largely on modernist assumptions rather than especially-biblical ones (e.g. the defence of concepts like 'facts' and 'absolutes').
4. A critique of my culture is inevitably a critique of me.

I would accept that Generation X, and the changes happening within Western culture, do need to be carefully evaluated, and that this will include a biblical critique. Perhaps this should not however be our starting point, nor the priority within the global mission movement for the time being. Left to ourselves, Generation Xers are more than capable of critiquing themselves and their cultures. This is, however, not the goal of this paper, but it does not mean that I am unaware of the need for this as well.

I would suggest that a better starting point is to ask what it is that God offers us - a critique, or salvation? Of course, judgement is implied in the latter, for if there were no problems with a culture, a worldview, or a person, then they would not be in need of salvation.

This might provide a fruitful line for reflection of how best to undertake mission in a postmodern culture. Ask what its deepest questions and needs are, and consider which biblical / theological themes could bring salvation ('shalom' or wholeness) to those questions.

### The generation gap

However, I want to focus here on the question of how Generation Xers might do mission, rather than how to do mission to them. We might want to begin by asking why contemporary culture change is so threatening to the 'power-holders' in the Western missionary movement. I suspect that it comes down to a conflict of values. As a result of all we have considered so far, the 'generation gap' is wider now than it has ever been.

For example, in an article in Details magazine in 1995, Douglas Coupland noted the baby-boomers' unease with the Xer attitude .....

"One would think that the boomers, coming of age in the 60s, would be thrilled to see the notion of individualism adapting itself to a changing world. Instead, all they see are monsters."

Likewise, Xers are not too keen on the world being bequeathed to them by older generations.

"Imagine coming to a beach at the very end of a long summer of big crowds and wild goings-on. The beach bunch is sunburned, the sand shopworn, hot, and full of debris - no place for walking barefoot. You step on a bottle, and some cop cites you for littering ..... much like River Phoenix in *Running On Empty*, GenXers have had to cope and survive in whatever territory the boomers have left behind" (Howe and Strauss, *Generations*, p321).

Whether environmental degradation, or mortgaging the future to pay for the present, Xers will have to pay the cost of the consumption inherent in today's lifestyles, without having enjoyed the primary benefit. As the article by Douglas Coupland mentioned above begins,

"you were born in the 60s. Does that mean you'll have to pay for it the rest of your life?"

Please don't patronise us either. There's a lot of talk about GenXers' need for pastoral care, as if our 'problems' can be solved through understanding and patience, until we become more like you.

Maybe we are monsters. But maybe we're good monsters, like Godzilla. Coupland ends the article just mentioned with the following:

Andy Warhol once said that he liked sci-fi movies where the monster lays an egg at the end, because it guarantees a sequel. Well, I'm thinking of millions of monster eggs out there sometime in the future, all hatching small, slimy, horned babies crawling towards some form of truth, tirelessly, en masse, waging war against the forces of dumbness. So please, be a monster".

Maybe we are just what the Japanese have called *shin jin rui*, a 'new kind of human being'. Maybe we just see the world differently. If so, how will this affect the world mission involvement of the Western church in the coming years?

There appears to be a lack of awareness by many in the current mission-sending structures (i.e. the mission agencies) of the culture-bound nature of these structures. The assumption is that because they are the norm, they are OK, even biblical (although it may be more accurate to say that it is largely modernist, with a few generational tweaks, sprinkled with a biblical overlay). Yet from this vantage-point, they judge postmodern and Xer behaviour by their own values. But surely it is cultural sin to judge the behaviour and attitudes of one culture by the values and beliefs of another. How would we react if we heard someone say to an African or Latino, "don't live according to your culture, it's 'worldly'. Live in my 'biblical' way"? Let's be honest, some missionaries did say that in the past, but would we dare to now? Yet that is often how Xers are made to feel. We have noted that scepticism, individuality and flexibility are characteristics of the Xer worldview. How might this affect our world mission involvement?

### Scepticism

In "Generations", writers William Strauss and Neil Howe note that the key difference between GenXers and their preceding generational cohort, the baby-boomers is that of scepticism replacing idealism. There are a variety of reasons for this.

Generation Xers grew up with TV, so were exposed to advertising at a very early age. The latest Royal Mail advert in the UK tells us that we are now exposed to 1500 adverts a day; I read elsewhere recently that Americans are exposed to 3000 adverts per day. As a result, we have learned to be sceptical. We can see through hype, and we subject all truth claims to sharp-eyed evaluation. More recently, advertisers have become aware of this, and have tuned their adverts to this new situation. For example, the following voiceover on an advert for Nike sportswear, "Don't insult our intelligence. Tell us what it is. Tell us what it does. And don't play the national anthem while you do it". Coca-Cola have marketed their Sprite soft drink in the following way, "What soft drink do the world's best snowboarders drink? The same one as the world's worst snowboarders. Image is nothing, Thirst is everything. Obey your thirst". They don't con us by doing this, but we appreciate the irony.

Xers also grew up experiencing the the reality of disappointment. It has been noted that in 1969 our parents' generation saw Neil Armstrong step out of Apollo 11 and walk on the moon, whereas in 1986 we saw primary school teacher Christa McAuliffe blown to pieces in the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster.

How will this scepticism affect our view of world mission? I suspect you will see a lack of enthusiasm for ambitious programmes to complete the evangelization of the world. We've heard it all before, and we expect that we'll hear it again. What we're looking for is low-key, sustainable, grass-roots mission involvement. A friend of mine has just left his post as a director of a large evangelical relief and development organisation, to work in a small church-planting ministry in an inner-city area. Here's how he describes himself;

"an unashamed evangelical, reformed, Calvinistic, conservative, strong on the authority, centrality and sufficiency of the Bible; but craving obscurity, trusting in small communities connected organically in an ad hoc manner, and uninterested in hierarchy, organisational power, and grand strategies"

So don't try to bamboozle us with talk of 'the big picture'. Whatever 'big picture' you develop, it will be wrong. The world is too complex, life is too changeable, and God is too mysterious, for us to get fired up by that kind of language.

Also, being sceptical of authority, we have a strong sense of the need for justice, and an awareness and hatred of injustice. We will be stirrers, both within the church and without. I'm afraid you might just find us 'rocking the boat' a little.

### Flexibility and individuality

Frustration with Xers is usually expressed in terms of a lack or loss of commitment. My father has worked for the same company for 30 years. For him, that represents security. For me, it sounds like a life sentence.

In their paper "A Generational Perspective on the Future", published in "Too Valuable to Lose : exploring the causes and cures of missionary attrition", Kath Donovan and Ruth Myers demonstrate how the working patterns and values of each generation of missionaries has been shaped by their culture.

For example, the group they refer to as 'boosters' (elsewhere referred to as the GI and Silent generations)(born between 1920 - 1950) had their consciousness shaped by the experiences of the Great Depression and WW2, and so we see core values of personal sacrifice, flexibility, and commitment to a common cause. Many of these GIs and Silents became missionaries, and their outlook has shaped the spirituality that is often associated with missionary service.

By contrast, the 'baby-boomers' (b 1950 - 1965) grew up in the prosperous 1950s (the so-called 'Eisenhower' era; the British prime minister of the time famously remarked 'You've never had it so good') and 1960s (a time of freedom, questioning and individualism). As a result, their core values are clustered around individualism, self-development, and work; in contrast to their preceding generations, boomer missionaries feel more able to change mission agency or country of work, but feel more constrained to remain in the area of ministry in which they are skilled and practiced.

Now this pattern is not necessarily a bad thing. It's actually OK (and indeed inevitable, if we accept the reality our cultural conditioning, and its origin in our created nature). Each generation is called to

work out what it means to live for Christ in its own era. But it is not called to make any such answer it may find, to be normative for all succeeding generations. Why not allow Xers the freedom to do mission their way, based on their understanding of who they are in Christ, which is formed in the context of the culture which shaped them?

The following is taken from a letter written by an Xer, sent to us at Global Connections in November 1999;

"Today's world is a temporary place. There is hardly a job that comes with long-term security these days, but mission agencies still talk in terms of 'long-term' and 'short-term', with 'short-term' as somehow lesser. (But) people live in an environment in which they are expected to move on after a time, otherwise they are seen as no longer fresh, in touch, cutting edge. It is seen as necessary movement in order to gain more experience, to be more employable, more relevant to the work. I make no judgements on this state, but feel that we should at least acknowledge it as a fact. Shouldn't we be encouraging mission agencies to support people into longer-term service (by) allowing them to complete short-term contracts, without then feeling the pressure of either owing the agency or failing the agency. There is a view that says those interested in mission today are not as committed as previous generations because they will not offer their lives in long-term service. I believe this to be incorrect, and see many who are committed to living out one day at a time for God, reflecting the temporariness of life and its situations. This could actually be seen as a healthier, more honest commitment".

This doesn't mean that every Xer doing mission will be an inexperienced learner. Instead, they will be able to bring their experience with them, contribute and learn, and maybe then move on, taking that experience elsewhere. As with the letter-writer quoted above, I don't see a lack of commitment to mission among Generation X. What I see is a lack of commitment to staying with a single organisation, or staying within structures that feel alien and outmoded. And why should that be wrong? Organisational commitment, and commitment to Christ, are not synonymous.

This personal flexibility and concern for individuality will affect other core values and concepts currently cherished by the missionary movement. Our motivation for mission will be different, as will our understanding of what mission actually is. We will be able to accept different visions, goals, styles, and so on, from different people, and aim to combine the strengths of each into a wider whole.

Our communication about mission will have to be tailored more explicitly to the needs and context of each person. I suspect that as evangelicals we have a tendency to overcommunicate (this article is probably a good example of that). Perhaps we should aim to be more like Jesus of Nazareth, whose judicious use of stories and parables provide a welcome relief to the information explosion we're experiencing today.

The structures through which mission is undertaken will probably change a lot. Structures and hierarchy hold little or no appeal, and a strong desire for a relational way of living will have to be reflected in our work methods. One might ask whether Xers will change, or simply abandon, traditional sending structures such as mission agencies? The answer is probably 'both' (since both these trends are in evidence). The inertia inherent in human nature and cultures will ensure that the organisations stick around, even if Xers don't form the creative heart of them, but express their own creativity elsewhere.

Since Xers don't want to limit their options, they find it difficult to commit to one organisation. Few are staying with one mission organisation for a long time - the attitude of "stay a short while, contribute what you can, learn what you can, move on", mentioned above, is widespread. I have noticed the perhaps-unfair-but-genuine question, "Couldn't you do anything else?", being directed towards someone who had spent 25 years working for the same organisation

Perhaps the core questions are management ones. How do you manage a group of individuals, who like to be flexible? How do Xers like to lead, and to be led? I find it ironic, even sad, that more effort is being put into answering this question in the human resources literature than in the church, which seems to be more keen to hold on to its old ways of doing things, rather than asking whether new situations require new ways of working. A starting point for reflection on this can be had by visiting the following websites:

<http://www.growingupdigital.com>

<http://www.rainmakerthinking.com>

<http://www.generationsatwork.com>

## **The remaining challenge**

Of course, GenXers will not be the only group doing mission in the foreseeable future, Older generations like the baby-boomers, the 'silents', and the 'veterans', make up the major portion of the church. The next generation, the 'millennials' are on the way. The challenge that we face is to retain some kind of unity (or, even better, to try to find some kind of generational synergy) in the midst of this diversity. It won't be an easy task .....

Writing in the context of cultural diversity, The Observer journalist Simon Caulkin, commenting on Neil Kinnock's task of streamlining the work of the European Commission, noted that "the trickiest, and most interesting, issue of all is a cultural one. Although some companies have tried it, one thing that can't be internationalised is organisational culture" (25<sup>th</sup> July 1999).

In his book on organisational culture, "The Gods of Management", Charles Handy says something similar, "the first essential, then, of organisational efficiency, is cultural purity. To each his own god. Harmony is health. It is when the gods compete within one activity that confusion results, for then the law of cultural propriety is infringed" (p68).

Robert Flood and Norma Romm note, "diversity is *desirable*, but ....complementarity is not obviously theoretically *feasible*" ('Diversity Management', p14, their italics)

And yet there is something in the gospel that says that this cannot (or it must not) be the case. For the gospel is about reconciliation between God and people, and between people themselves. And if God in Christ accepts us as we are, then we too must accept one another as we are, modern, postmodern, premodern, or whatever.

And reconciliation does not come about by forcing people to fit into one particular mould. We must surely agree with the observation of French postmodern philosopher Michel Foucault, that to simply establish norms of being and behaving is not an adequate solution to diversity, for as soon as a norm is established, it alienates those who do not conform, and conforming is not enough.

Complementarity, finding unity in diversity, is essential. For unity is central to the effectiveness of our mission (note the much-quoted Jn 17:23 in this regard; "*may they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you have sent me....*").

This is not an issue of which the biblical writers were unaware. In the OT, both Ruth and Jonah provide stories which illustrate God's concern for the apparent 'outsider', who didn't fit the 'norms' of God's people, and who could thereby have easily been excluded.

In the NT, we see the issue arising in one of the earliest crises to afflict the primitive church, i.e. the demand (by some) that Gentiles must be circumcised as a condition of salvation in Jesus Christ. The Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, decided that non-Jews should be allowed to become Christians without first submitting to circumcision and the law of Moses. Yet, at the same time, James introduced some provisos (Ac 15:19-20), so that the exercise of freedom in Christ should not become a hindrance to fellowship and unity. Paul developed the same theme himself to help overcome problems of disunity and broken relationships in the churches at Rome (Rom 14).

And so this may provide us with a theological starting point to develop unity in the context of diversity, and not just to 'manage' or cope with diversity, but to see it as a strength, and to allow each generation to bring its own unique strengths and gifts to the task of mission.

Unity has to be more than simply an affirmation of what we have in common (which can so easily reduce to the lowest common denominator). Unity in diversity welcomes and needs the input of each (*à la* 1 Cor 12), not just despite ethnicity, gender or generation, but because of them. We need the specific insights and perspectives of each, for otherwise we are impoverished.

## **Conclusion**

My concern in this paper has been to focus on Generation X, to present a perspective of understanding towards us and our idiosyncracies, and to make a plea that we let X = X and that we be allowed to find our place in God's church and God's mission. At the WEF Missions Commission consultation in Iguassu, Brazil, in October 1999, some of the 'seniors' of the world mission movement were very supportive of our right to find our own answers to our own questions. However, other responses to these issues ranged from asking if we were speaking rhetorically, through believing that we were 'sincere but misguided', to just plain 'heretical'; i.e. anything but allowing that we might

actually be right. However, I believe that we can make space for diversity, so allowing each generation to contribute from its strengths, and to have its weaknesses compensated for.

The biggest mistake that the Western missionary movement can make is to act as though it is on the asteroid of Texlahoma, and that it is always 1974. Over a quarter of a century on, the world is a different place. In another 25 years, it will be a different place again. Only as we respond to and embrace the changes in our culture, and accept the strengths and gifts of each generation, can the church truly be a place and a messenger of reconciliation, for all generations, in a changing world.

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