

Let Me Introduce You To Gen Z

Brittany Porch

Broad Street Presbyterian Church, Columbus, Ohio

Who are these 10 to 25-year-olds sitting in the pews (or not) on Sundays when you are preaching? How do we share the good news of the Gospel with them? How do we communicate belonging, and how can we be the church for a generation like no other? First, we get to know them and what makes them unique.

I have been in youth ministry for 15 years now, and the shift from Millennial youth to Gen Z youth feels big. Not that they are really all that different from Millennials, but the culture and world have shifted big time too, placing more and more demands on these young people. Their needs, values, and way of living are unique. And they are by far my favorite generation out there. I am biased because I love my job in youth ministry, but hear me out!

As a generation, they are marked by their strong ethics, work in social justice, openness to vast understandings of gender and sexuality, and concern about consent. They are digital natives. They don't just embrace rapid change; they expect it! They value education, and they care about integrity and authenticity. They are a very racially and ethnically diverse generation.

I love Gen Z.

But they also struggle more than any other generation with mental health, particularly depression, anxiety, and self-harm. They worry deeply about climate change and being a well-rounded person. They are really well-behaved statistically, with lower rates of driving accidents, teen pregnancy, and drinking and drug use. But that behavior is deeply connected to anxiety and the drive for perfection. They see the world as a broken place. In my lived experience, more than half of youth on a trip these days take melatonin to sleep. This generation struggles.

So, what does this all look like lived out in the church? How do we include Gen Z in worship and the church community? First of all, make space for a more expansive understanding of gender and sexuality. Gen Z invites us to see beyond the binary genders of male and female. Gen Z deeply cares about learning people's names and preferred pronouns. So much of our language is boys and girls, men and women, son of and daughter of, and it's time to embrace language that is more inclusive like ya'll or child of. Another way to honor this generation and their values is to change our spaces to welcome all genders in restrooms.

Gen Z is anxious. They need a safe space to not be anxious. They need relationships among their peers and other generations. They seek a place of hope. The church can be a place to connect with God, something bigger than themselves.

They expect change to happen immediately. Things that are slow to change will frustrate them. If things do not make sense, they will want to see change rapidly. This was true before the pandemic, so one can only imagine their openness to change now.

They care deeply about social justice and ethics, and the church can offer a way for them to express that calling in their lives. They are leaders of movements against gun violence, racism, and climate change. Let them lead in the church too. They are very engaged with the world, so in turn, the church and its preaching needs to be too.

This is a generation that deeply appreciates authenticity. They are turned off by the quest for performance and “perfect” worship, and they want worship leadership to be a little more real. Does a robe matter to this generation? Probably not. They are more drawn to stories than academic theological study. They want their pastors to feel like people they can eat dinner with.

I know Gen Z will change the world. We want these young people in our church pews and in leadership. Make space for them to come as they are, a generation like no other, uniquely needing the healing love and hope of God, and uniquely offering their caring, loving, true selves in return.