

Raising Up Workers For the Harvest From Amongst Generation X

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Why Focus on Generation X?

Looking around at most LCJE conferences, a non-scientific, visual survey immediately reveals that our ranks are swelled with Boomers and Builders, the generations preceding Generation X. Relatively few of the Xers, those born between 1965 and 1981 and also known as the Busters, have joined our ranks.

This represents several problems for the future of Jewish evangelism, which may be obvious, but which bear mentioning if only for the sake of those who haven't thought about the issue. First and most obvious, all movements must replenish their workers with each generation. No movement can afford to skip a generation.

Some imagine that the small number of Busters in vocational ministry is due to problems with the generation itself. After all, aren't Xers known to be apathetic, turned off to Christianity, lazy, and self-absorbed? Our theology helps us answer this objection. People are known to be apathetic, turned off to Christianity, lazy, and self-absorbed. Before the Jesus movement of the 70's, I'm sure that such epithets were applied to the very hippies who now serve in leadership in ministry.

But Xers can be reached and led into productive ministry. Some are seeing remarkable success in working with young people. Dieter Zander, founding pastor of New Song Church in Southern California, started a work aimed at Busters who were into the punk rock scene in 1986. As soon as he realized that the vision was not just to reach punk rockers, but all people of Generation X, his ministry blossomed. By the end of 1989, his church's attendance reached 400, and by 1990 the attendance soared to over 1,000 with a median age of 26. It's as if God is affirming, "Yes, every generation of sinners can be reached." We cannot afford to skip Generation X.

Besides, even if we did skip this young generation, why would we expect that the next one, sometimes called Generation Y, the Millenials, or the Boomlets, will be any easier? Preliminary indications are that the Boomlets are very similar to the Busters in outlook.

Why focus on Xers? The second reason is missiological. Xers are best suited to reach Xers. It may hurt the pride of some to admit that they have lost touch with young people, but we must face the truth. A Boomer or Builder reaching out to Busters must cross cultural boundaries. But Busters reaching Busters follows the missiological principle of indigenous outreach.

How serious is the divide between Boomers and Busters? It is quite serious indeed, according to those who study and work with Generation X. Kevin Graham Ford, son of Leighton Ford, explains the divide between Busters and Boomers in his book, *Jesus For a New Generation*. Below is a summary of leading reasons:

1. Busters see their world as having been broken by the Boomers and handed down to them to deal with. Busters blame Boomers for the failure of Social Security, the institution of marriage, governmental integrity, and economic security.

2. Busters distrust the drive in Boomers to influence and transform the world. Busters look to make a difference on a smaller local scale and have seen global idealism fail in every way.
3. Busters distrust Boomers because their parents are Boomers. These Boomer parents over half of the time divorced one another and made life a living hell for their children.
4. Busters distrust the Boomer work ethic, which may have started in the hippie generation, but which was epitomized by the greed of the 1980's. Busters don't want to work for maximum money, but for a balanced, happy life. Eighty hour work weeks given as a sacrifice to earn top dollar do not appeal at all to Busters.

Realizing this cultural divide and this generationally seated mistrust, we must realize that Xers will best reach Xers.

In Jewish ministry specifically, Xers from Jewish and half-Jewish families are a unique challenge. The whole world is changing, but the Jewish world in America all the more so. Inter marriage, which is the majority situation now, and relative freedom from the community-cohering anti-Semitism of the past, Jewish assimilation is moving at a staggering pace. The new prototype of the half-Jewish family must be studied again and again so that we can find ways to make connections with the gospel. Generation J, a webzine as well as a print magazine, is an enlightening resource for anyone wanting to encounter Judaism amongst Xers. But for all the studying that Jewish mission agencies and congregations can undertake, there is no replacement for Jewish Xers, Messianic Generation Jers, reaching their own peers.

Understanding Generation X

Even a small list of factors that have shaped the psyche of Generation X is enough to give older generations a sense of revelation. The prototypical Buster attitudes which make little sense to Boomers suddenly make tremendous sense when you understand the effects of:

1. The latchkey experience
2. The fractured family
3. Boomer parental experimentation
4. Pop-culture immersion
5. Fragmentation and atomization of society
6. Economic despair

Unprecedented numbers of Buster children grew up with little or no parental supervision after school. These "latchkey" children came home from school to empty homes, with the television as their robotic babysitters. Tom Beaudoin says, "The latchkey childhood of my generation was central in establishing our deep relationship with pop culture" (p.5). According to Kevin Graham Ford, son of Leighton Ford, this experience also resulted in a Generation X obsession with relationships (p.46). An additional result, observed by Bruce Tulgan, is that Xers tend to problem solve on their own expect to be treated as innovators (p.31).

Fractured families are a factor related to the latchkey experience, but transcending it. Not only did Busters often come home to a parent-less house, but many dealt with blended families as well as a phenomenon that might be called "visitation migration". Tom Beaudoin cites his own experience:

One of the great mysteries of my childhood was why so many of my friends left town every other weekend. My naivete was dispelled one day when a gentle 'room mother' explained divorce informally to our class. I slowly realized that all of my friends who were away on the weekends were not vacationing in the Ozarks; they were visiting their father or mother (p.8).

One honest Xer told Kevin Ford, "When I visit my parents at holidays and spring breaks, I have to worry about their feelings because they're divorced" (p.44). The fractured family shapes Busters into a different way of thinking about family and especially into a hope that they can do better.

Even when parents were present for Busters, they often experimented with new ideas about parenting. The model presented to Boomers by their parents was shunned in favor of the "buddy" approach to parenting. Parents were peers with their children, rather than authority figures (Ford p.39). They revealed their flaws and allowed children to call them by their first name (p.39). The result was a lower sense of security for the Buster children and a greater sense that they would have to do life on their own.

The immersion of Xers in pop culture is perhaps their defining characteristic. Sure, Boomer parents were into the Rock and Roll scene and watched television and movies. But Busters can quote lines from episode numbers of television shows, especially reruns. Many Busters prefer the reruns of old shows, representing a world that is only fantasy for them – stable families, clear moral choices, and straightforward roles of authority and submission. The effect of pop culture on the thinking, especially the religious thinking, of Xers is the focus of Tom Beaudoin's book, *Virtual Faith*. His conclusion, in a nutshell, is that pop culture is the religion of most Busters, and it is a religion that devalues rigid standards and absolutes in favor of pluralism, experience, and tolerance.

Another factor in the uniqueness of Busters is the fragmentation and atomization they experienced in life. As Bruce Tulgan puts it:

More than any other generation, Xers use answering machines to screen calls, have food delivered, shop in catalogues, rent videos instead of going to the movies (and know how to operate the VCR – no "flashing 12:00 jokes here). Xers use television as a periscope on the outside world and cannot wait for virtual reality (p.51).

The result of this atomization is a sense of isolation. Xers are obsessed with relationships on the one hand, but are pure individualists on the other. Looking to relationships to fill the void in their lives, Busters are nonetheless doomed to solve their own problems and find their own answers.

A final factor is the economic despair that shapes the Buster outlook. The comment of one Generation Xer to Kevin Ford is telling:

All I can imagine about the future is the stuff that won't be there for me. Like I look at the FICA line on my paystub and do the math and I think, 'Jeez, I'm working a whole month out of every year to pay someone else's Social Security – and Social Security won't even be there when I retire! I mean what a rip! How am I supposed to foot the bill for the rest of society and for me too (p.44).

The "greed decade" of the 1980's seemed to hold great promise for the Busters, but economic slowdown in the early 1990's combined with the trend to corporate downsizing created a new term for Xers: the McJob. A McJob is a service industry job that pays poorly but expects little commitment. This is the primary job opportunity available. Some Xers embrace the McJob, rejecting the career-minded mentality of their parents.

These are the people we have to be recruiting. Even the potential recruits who have grown up in Christian families that spared them a great deal of this potential angst are shaped by their peer group. The Gen X experience has created a flood of individualistic, relationship obsessed, authority rejecting souls in need of a mission, of security, and of enablement.

Recruiting Generation X

What a tragedy it would be if Jewish mission agencies and Messianic Jewish congregations are greatly reduced in scope because we fail to raise up leaders from the up and coming generation. Could this tragedy actually happen? In the church at large, Generation X is the least reached group by far. To prevent this trend from slowing the growth of Jewish faith in Jesus, we have no choice but to be proactive in recruiting Xers into our organizations. To fail to do this would be to bury our one talent in the ground and say to Jesus, "But at least I didn't lose the talent you gave me."

Recruiting Busters into your ministry organization requires an understanding of the issues that energize and motivate Busters. Organizational loyalty is definitely out. Bruce Tulgan summarizes this anti-institutional trend:

Xers have grown up during an era marked by substantial deterioration in the constancy of social, religious, political, and business institutions. We have never witnessed the fortitude which institutions once offered their would be constituents. With good reason, Xers start out with low expectations for what personal benefits are made available to us by various institutional relationships.

Having a ministry with a name and a reputation will not attract Busters.

In an informal survey for the preparation of this paper, I sent out a survey by email to Xers currently in Jewish ministry. I received eight responses. Several of the questions directly addressed the issue of recruiting. The most telling was, "What could another employer offer you that might cause you to leave your present ministry and go with them?" One did not answer the question, one said nothing would make them leave, and one other replied that a different career field might interest them. But five of the eight responses were telling.

One was looking for authenticity, a sense that the leaders really lived the life they teach. Two were looking for freedom to innovate, rather than being plugged into traditional ways of doing ministry. One would be motivated to join an organization that

had a strong team or family type of organizational culture. And one would look for an organization with thorough and exciting training opportunities.

Authenticity in leadership, freedom to innovate, a team approach, and excellent training are all things that would motivate the current crowd of Xers working in Jewish ministry to work for you. Perhaps, then, we should look at how not to recruit Xers. Just meet with them and explain the wonderful history of your organization. Make them feel that there is a real tradition from the past that sums up the mission and core values of your organization. Let them see that there are defined ways of doing ministry through your organization that they can plug into. Bring them to a training workshop that is boring and irrelevant. Assure them that your ministry, with its longstanding history, offers certainty for the future. Expose them to your organizational culture and let them see a bunch of individuals competing for ministry statistics. All of these will virtually guarantee failure.

Rather than fail by emphasizing institutional loyalty, tradition, and individualized motivation, try a different approach. Think about teambuilding in your ministry, with individuals working together for a common good. Think about mentoring as a part of the training that you offer. Think about allowing young people to innovate. When speaking to recruits, say (and really mean) things like, "We're looking for young people to add to our team. We need energy and insights from your generation to reach people from your generation. We'll mentor you, work with you as a team, and we'll encourage you to try new things."

Perhaps the greatest pull for Xers is the chance to have an impact in our world. Unlike Boomers, however, Xers are less likely to be motivated by a Don Quixote, save-the-world approach. Rather, local, tangible action inspires the young generation to act. Global issues don't appeal to Xers because we have seen all global crusades fail. But global pessimism doesn't diminish the desire in Busters to make a difference in the world. One Jewish Generation Xer put it this way, "Of all the important facts, figures and lessons I learned in Azerbaijan, the immeasurable impact that we have on the lives of countless individuals on a daily basis is the one that truly endures" (Tracy Makow, www.generationj.com, February 2000 edition). Showing potential recruits the impact that they can have is a great drawing card.

Team-building, exciting training opportunities, mentoring, and creating potential for impact will all help recruit Generation X. The young leaders of tomorrow are there on college campuses, in Messianic congregations, in seminaries and Bible colleges, and can be involved as volunteers and in training programs. And these young people might consider ministry over other careers if we can show them the relevance they can have in people's lives and if we can attract them into a family of ministry.

Keeping Xers Once You Hire Them

It may come as a shock to you that Xers have a natural tendency to disloyalty to their employers. Nothing has been permanent in family and social lives for Busters. Marriages don't last. Corporations lay people off. Economic conditions move in cycles that change with the times. Leaders have public falls that lead to disillusionment. Even massive governments crumble.

Yet the wise employer can take steps to develop Busters into loyal employees. The greatest resource available to help achieve this purpose is *Managing Generation X* by

Bruce Tulgan. His most amusing chapter is "How Not to Mange Generation X". In the chapter he describes an African-American woman who was not promoted at a bank based upon her achievements, but was held behind white males on the corporate ladder. Being a typical Buster, she saw a crusade of local action in the making. She went to law school at nights while working at the bank. After finishing law school she quit her job at the bank and began taking cases suing banks for discriminatory lending practices (p. 152). This story is certainly the extreme example of the dangers of mistreating Generation X, but its moral is nonetheless worthy of heeding: use Generation X's talents or your ministry may suffer when those talents are taken elsewhere.

In the mismanagement chapter, Bruce Tulgan points out a common problem in managing Busters. Since managers assume that Busters are slackers, apathetic and lazy, they often hold them to a higher standard and expect them to work harder and longer than other employees. Micromanaging is another error that riles the average Buster, such as one who said: "When my manager controls my every movement and won't let go of my work for even a minute, it isn't long before I stop caring altogether about the whole thing" (p. 74). Other managers treat Busters like children, yelling at them and belittling them by speaking with condescension. For those of us in ministry, it would do us well to remember that many great figures in Christian history, such as a John Calvin, were leading mass movements in their twenties.

Yet the greatest errors in managing Xers involve the Xers perpetual quest for community and security. Many employers offer long-term benefits, in keeping with old corporate thinking about lifetime careers. Busters rarely plan to work for a ministry for a lifetime. Out of eight Xers in Jewish ministry surveyed, six answered 'no' when asked, "Do you plan to work for your current ministry organization until retirement age?" Only one said 'yes'. Short-term incentives work best with Busters. Frequent affirmation and constructive criticism are the needed ingredients.

On a similar note, Busters want to innovate. Especially in areas involving technology, marketing, or ministry to their peers, Xers will resent being forced to use outmoded methods from the past. Again, because of environmental factors in Buster development, this generation has had to learn to innovate and to find niches in crowded career fields. As Bruce Tulgan says, "Xers are conditioned to sort and evaluate information quickly, define and solve problems independently, take creative risks, and seek safety in innovation" (p. 199). In my informal survey of Busters in Jewish ministry, five out of eight were allowed to innovate on the job.

Finally, keeping Xers in our ministries will mean creating communities. Xers are looking for families, many because they have not had a stable family growing up. Even Xers from stable homes tend to get into this longing for community because of their relationships with less fortunate peers. Ministries that want to keep young people will focus on team-building and making the workplace a second family. One fortunate company had this evaluation from an employee:

We have a team approach and a very high quality atmosphere. We have scheduling meetings, so that everyone knows what everyone else is doing and we all help each other on all levels. Everyone's goal is to get the project done. I feel very supported on this team, like I can do the job I need to do and make a contribution that is going to matter in the end (Tulgan, p. 171).

When asked if their ministry was run more like a team, family, or business, four out of eight Busters in Jewish ministry answered "business". Only two seemed to really feel that the office was completely a family or a team.

Summary

The Jewish missions and congregations that will thrive in the future will understand the needs and motivations of the up and coming generation. Organizations that emphasize team approaches to ministry and learning will excite and appeal to Generation X. Leaders who build communities in their missions and congregations, rather than a business environment, will see self-sustaining enthusiasm resulting from these relationships. Mentoring will be the most effective kind of training and will produce greater loyalty than programs. Recruiters who can show specific local opportunities to make an impact will spark interest. Supervisors who allow their employees to innovate and take risks will see employees taking ownership and responsibility. Employers who offer short-term incentives will decrease turnover.

Yet, not all organizations will see these trends. Inevitably, some will continue to operate on the standards that motivated the older leaders in their day. Appeals to the long and respectable history of an organization will continue to be used as a recruiting tool. Hierarchical management will stay in place as "the way we've always done it." Individualistic approaches to ministry will continue. Recruiting pitches will continue to show images those we are not primarily reaching (the Hasidim) and a sense of global need will be used as the bait for recruits. And these organizations will shrink and cease to exist.

There is no reason for us to bury the talent that the master has given us. In the parable that Jesus told, two faithful servants invested their talents. They took a risk by trading them in various commodities. But the risk they took paid off, for the one who had been entrusted with two talents made two more and the one entrusted with five also doubled his allotment. Change is risky. Allowing young people to innovate is risky. But where is there great gain without risk under the sun?

Results From Survey of Xers Presently Working in Jewish Ministry

- Do you expect to be with your current ministry organization until retirement age?
1 Yes, 6 No, 1 Maybe
- Do you feel that your current employer understands your talents and goals?
2 Yes, 6 No (One said "They don't have a clue.")
- Do you have relationships at work that are valuable and sustaining?
5 Yes, 1 No, 2 In between
- Are the people you work with more like a family, a team, or a business?
3 Business, 1 Family, 1 Team, 3 In Between
- Are there incentives, in addition to your relationship with God, for you to excel in your job?
4 Yes, 4 No
- Do you feel that you are making an impact on the world through your job?
6 Yes, 2 Somewhat
- Are you allowed to innovate on your job?
4 Yes, 2 No, 2 Somewhat
- Does your employer question your commitment to work?
2 Yes, 6 No
- Do you have a problem with the number of hours you are expected to work?

1 Yes, 7 No

- Were you recruited primarily through a personal relationship with someone at your workplace?

4 Yes, 4 No

- Were you recruited through media advertising by your employer?

8 No

- Were you recruited through a training program or conference?

2 Yes, 6 No

- Did you seek out your employer or did they seek you out?

2 "I did", 3 "Employer did", 3 "Both"

- Are you micro-managed on your job?

1 Yes, 7 No

- Would you be willing to give more time and energy than you are giving now if your impact on people's lives began to increase?

7 Yes, 1 No

- What most motivates you to excellence besides commitment to God? (a) employer praise, (b) the feeling of making a difference, (c) increases in pay and benefits, (d) family and team-like relationships at the office, (e) the feeling that I am building career security, (f) being allowed to innovate, (g) the feeling of responsibility, (h) Other (specify): _____

4 b, 1 c, 2 f, 1 g

- Does your ministry value your needs and your growth?

4 Yes, 3 No, 1 "Perhaps"

- Are you provided with adequate training and personal improvement opportunities?

4 Yes, 4 No

- What could another employer offer you that might cause you to leave your present position to go with them?

"Evidencing Spirit-led living and ministry in the life of the organization – not just religious language, but actual implementation."

"An opportunity to receive much needed training to make me an effective missionary to the Jewish people."

"Freedom, trust to create and to be able to learn, allowing me to fail in the process as long as I'm in it for the long term."

"A sense of ministry being done in a team effort and with much more passion."

"Greater potential to maximize my dreams and accomplish my goals; greater likemindedness in communications strategies with believers and unbelievers; more authority; and a team environment in which to serve."

2 Nothing

1 A different type of career

- Do you believe it is reasonably possible for you to be in leadership or the leader of your ministry organization in the future?

4 Yes, 3 No

- Is your ministry doing anything substantial to reach young people with the gospel?

3 Yes, 2 No, 2 Somewhat

- Is your ministry adequately reaching young people?

2 Yes, 4 No, 1 Somewhat

- Is your employer actively recruiting Xers?

5 Yes, 2 No