

Equipping the Next Generations to Speak Their Faith Aloud

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Mike is a thirty-one-year-old father of two, a priest's son who grew up in the church, and a quiet but faithful Episcopalian who helps out each week in the toddler class in the Sunday school of his parish church. For several years, this was the limit of his engagement; after all, life in a growing family is demanding and time-consuming, and too often church can feel like one more burden in an overburdened life.

But then Mike participated in a five-week series of sacred conversations with other members of his church who were under age forty, and he arrived at a growing awareness that his generation is responsible for the future of the church. "We the people under forty gathered in that room, we are the next generation of leadership and evangelism and potential for the church," he said. "The church is constantly renewing itself with each generation, and we are either part of that renewal or part of standing back and letting it fall. So it almost feels like a trust fall exercise for the church. The church is constantly falling into the arms of the next generation of people who are catching it."

The church is taking its trust fall into the arms of that next generation, and the numbers of arms extended to catch it are dwindling. The rapidly changing American religious landscape is one of increasing ignorance of and indifference to Christianity, and all the research points to post-Boomers¹ as the primary contributors to the numbers of the ignorant and indifferent, the rising core in the so-called "rise of the 'nones'."

But there *are* Generation Xers and Millennials who are faithful church members, and it is to these generations we must turn to discover and equip evangelists who can speak about their faith to their

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¹ Robert Wuthnow terms the generational cohorts born after 1964 as "post-Boomers." These cohorts are also more typically divided into Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979) and Millennials (born between 1980 and 2000).

peers. Post-Boomers—the majority of whom are *not* “nones” and *do* believe in God—might be the ideal evangelists to people in their own age group. However, neither the generational literature nor the evangelism literature speaks about specifically empowering and equipping members of this age cohort to evangelize their peers. Because these generations are “spiritual tinkerers,” as Robert Wuthnow observes, “piecing together ideas about spirituality from many sources, especially through conversations with friends,”² I have been testing the power of guided conversations about faith as a means of helping small groups of post-Boomers to talk about what they do and do not believe, helping them to find words and language for their faith, and offering them the opportunity to practice these kinds of conversations in a safe space. What I have learned from these groups will not prove to be a magic bullet to solve all the evangelical problems of the twenty-first-century mainline churches; however, these guided conversations on faith with small groups of post-Boomers have helped to surface both challenges and opportunities for proclaiming faith into the future, as that future now falls into the arms of those Xers and Millennials who do believe.

Challenges in Developing a Post-Boomer Evangelism

Challenges that face the post-Boomers of faith (particularly in the more liberal, mainline denominations like the Episcopal Church) as they learn the spiritual practice of evangelism are both cultural and internal. The conversations I have had with these older Millennials and younger Gen Xers revealed that the taboos against publically speaking about faith are strong, emphasized by both the wider secular culture and also by denominations that have neglected to foster and teach evangelism. The growth of the Evangelical movement over the last thirty years—with its cable television networks, high-profile preachers, conservative political activism, and megachurches—only serves to crush any desire among mainline, liberal Protestants to evangelize, because they fear becoming identified with that aspect of Christianity. The influences of the secular, postmodern, multifaith culture also deter evangelistic speech in post-Boomers. The forces affecting post-Boomer faith that have been noted by Richard Flory

² Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers: How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings Are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), 135.

and Donald Miller—including skepticism of institutions, tolerance of other faiths, rapid global access to a variety of ideas and “truths,” and a postmodern sense that all truth is relative³—all were actively in play in the group participants’ faith lives, and the research on these generations indicates that they are typical among their peers.

But the internal challenges are also powerful, and are perhaps more difficult to identify and address, partly when the topic of faith is frequently perceived as personal and private and is kept unspoken and unaddressed. Younger mainline Christians frequently observe or personally experience the ways that Christianity can be used as a club: one woman’s father told her that her mother was going to hell for being an atheist; a queer teenager’s neighbors asked her, “What church would *have you?*” A spiritually questing postdoctoral student had a lingering image of God as an ever-vigilant father figure like her own father, waiting to “whack you” if you messed up. A forty-year-old teacher reported that his Jewish friend was told she was going to hell for not believing in Jesus. A community college student who attended a Christian high school was taught about an almost bipolar God who was either “nice like Jesus” or about to punish her for sinning.

The possible shame of being judged by other believers and found wanting, or of possibly being identified as a judgmental Christian, or of being exposed as a person of faith when that faith was deep and tender, unspoken, and often unformed—all created a sense of profound vulnerability in the participants in these conversation groups when it came to speaking of faith. Thus, any approach to evangelism training with this age cohort must address this vulnerability and fear of being shamed, and must offer ways to build the “shame resilience” that shame researcher Brené Brown describes as necessary in order to live as vulnerable people.⁴ This sense of vulnerability was also fostered and influenced by the anxiety of living in a postmodern, multifaith world. These generations want to remain accepting of their peers of other faiths or no faith at all, without insisting that the eternal salvation of these peers depends on whether or not they become Christian. Thus, articulating Christianity as a truth claim seems closed-minded and judgmental to them.

³ Richard Flory and Donald E. Miller, *Finding Faith: The Spiritual Quest of the Post-Boomer Generation* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 7–10.

⁴ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 61.

At the same time, even when these active church members described their own Christian faith as important to them, they still did not know how to express it for a variety of reasons: fear of making exclusivist claims, discomfort with and ignorance of the Bible, and their own doubts and struggles with their faith. Participants from more evangelical backgrounds were better able to articulate the tenets of Christian faith, but much of their understanding of that faith was under massive revision and reclamation as they moved into a more liberal Christianity. Participants from mainline traditions or with little to no religious upbringing had the most difficulty articulating their faith, even when it turned out that they were better grounded in scripture and Christian theology than they had believed they were.

Catechesis is thus a crucial element in helping to form post-Boomer evangelists. But catechizing and forming these generations is a challenge. They no longer grow up in a single denomination or faith tradition. They are church hoppers and church shoppers, as Wuthnow describes,⁵ exposed willy-nilly to a variety of understandings of Christianity. Increasingly, they grow up in no faith tradition at all, and they may somehow stumble into it as they mature with no real background in the teachings of Christian faith. Yet this is the same generation that is leading the rapid decline in church attendance;⁶ therefore, reaching and catechizing post-Boomers through traditional church classes and sermons is becoming more difficult. It is possible they would actively seek education and formation—either in church or through books or online sources—if they knew what to seek, and if they were hungry enough for the knowledge. And so having an active and engaged faith, a sense of the presence of God, the longing for a closer relationship with God, and personalized catechetical support could motivate post-Boomers into seeking a deeper knowledge of the Christian tradition. Thus, beginning with those post-Boomers who are already engaged with a faith community—to help them nourish their own faith, sense of God's presence, and longing for deeper connections to God—is a logical starting point for any long-term catechetical or evangelical strategies with these generations.

⁵ Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers*, 114–116.

⁶ “Americans Divided on the Importance of Church,” Barna Group, March 24, 2014, www.barna.org/barna-update/culture/661-americans-divided-on-the-importance-of-church#.U-ZX4_ldVIY.

Opportunities for Developing a Post-Boomer Evangelism

This is where “sacred conversations” can help. To reach these generations, it is necessary to start farther back, as it were, not by beginning with teaching the tenets of Christian faith or the texts of scripture. Instead, we must begin where the data tells us post-Boomers live in regard to faith, whether or not they are churchied: in their basic connection to God and their struggles to discern how God matters in their lives and how their lives might matter to the world. The majority of post-Boomers are still spiritual, still believe in God, still pray, and still want to explore the difference between good and evil.⁷ But before you can catechize, you have to awaken the hunger for more knowledge. The “sacred conversations” I have been holding with post-Boomers seem to be able to accomplish this, aiding them to explore the faith they already held, helping them develop a sense of God’s presence in their past and in their present, an awareness of their faith as something alive, growing, and developing, and also a language to express that faith wholeheartedly, so they could rise above their fear of shame. In the process, they experience the presence and power of God, the support of Christian community, and a desire to engage more fully with their life of faith and with the life of the church.

The five-week conversation sessions I constructed to use with these age cohorts follow an arc that leads from exploring how one might know God to the articulation of an actual statement of faith in God. The first session begins with a time of group norm setting, moves to a discussion about why it is hard to talk about faith, and concludes with a life review exercise, where participants reflect prayerfully on how God has been present and absent, active and distant throughout their lives. The second session explores how we know God, and where we meet God in our lives. The third session asks “who is the God we know” and creates a chance to articulate an understanding of God and explore the persons of the Trinity. The participants do an exercise between this session and the next, called “Draw Your Faith as a House.” This provides the meat for most of the discussion in the fourth session, which also includes a time to talk about Christian practices and ethics. When participants leave the fourth session, they are sent with an assignment to write their own Baptismal Covenant: a personal creed,

⁷ Allison Pond, Gregory Smith, and Scott Clement, “Religion Among the Millennials,” Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life, February 17, 2010, www.pewforum.org/Age/Religion-Among-the-Millennials.aspx.

along with statements of how they would live in relationship with the God described in their personal creed. The final session is a chance to share these faith statements—the first practical, actual articulation of faith that most of the participants have ever done. This process served to fan the sparks of faith already glowing inside the post-Boomer Christians who participated in these conversations, and those sparks began to burn more consistently and intensely. Therefore, this approach might provide a model and a direction forward in working with seekers, spiritual tinkerers, and skeptical Christians who feel a hunger for the divine, but whose faith is still unformed, inchoate, and contingent.

It is important to begin “farther back,” with these generations or with any of our church members interested in becoming more articulate about their faith, because we cannot assume that most of them are mature Christians, grounded in their faith, deeply engaged with the worship, preaching, and teaching of the church they attend. Barna Group offers a sobering discovery:

Although people cite their primary reasons for attending church as growing closer to God and learning more about him, Barna Group finds such closeness is a rare occurrence. Fewer than two out of ten churchgoers feel close to God on even a monthly basis. Additionally, while almost two-thirds of those who value church attendance go to learn more about God, fewer than one in ten (6 percent) who have ever been to church say they learned something about God or Jesus the last time they attended. In fact, the majority of people (61 percent) say they did not gain any significant or new insights regarding faith when they last attended.⁸

People are attending church without feeling a connection to God and without learning something about God or Jesus. (One wonders why they come at all.) The need to awaken all of the faithful, help them connect to God, and then lead them to catechesis is important. But it may be particularly crucial and challenging for post-Boomers, who all too often are not likely to be rote attendees at churches that do not inspire or educate.

We might also expect post-Boomers to be far less comfortable in the inner circles of the life of a developing, growing faith, as outlined

⁸ Barna Group, “Americans Divided on the Importance of Church.”

by John Westerhoff in *Will Our Children Have Faith?*⁹ In Westerhoff's four-stage faith development theory, people begin with an *experienced faith*, as children or new adult converts, when the sights, sounds, and practices of Christian worship construct their faith lives. In the next stage, *affiliative faith*, Christians define their faith by identifying with and participating in a specific faith community or denomination, finding spiritual comfort in a shared personality and history to which the individual can also contribute.

While post-Boomers might appreciate the acceptance and love of a faith community that is characteristic of experienced faith, their distrust of authority, combined with a sense that truth is relative, will mean that they might not be comfortable in a faith community too strongly identified with a clear sense of identity, history, and authority. This will make affiliative faith a difficult posture to sustain. The post-Boomers we find in more liberal, mainline churches will be far more likely to move quickly into the third stage Westerhoff describes, a place of *searching faith*, a time of doubt, questioning, and critical judgment, when people test the community's faith-story and practices against their own experiences, learnings, and ideas. If Gen Xers and Millennials are already practicing their own, internal, privately-held and privately-constructed faith, combining religious traditions and teachings for themselves, then the traditions and practices of all kinds of faith communities are already on trial.

A few years ago, Rachel Held Evans's blog post, "Why Millennials are Leaving the Church," went viral, as it outlined post-Boomers' frustration with the rigid, authoritative teachings of evangelical churches. Her list of complaints reflected a generation already working through the stage of searching faith:

We want an end to the culture wars. We want a truce between science and faith. We want to be known for what we stand for, not what we are against. We want to ask questions that don't have predetermined answers. We want churches that emphasize an allegiance to the kingdom of God over an allegiance to a single political party or a single nation. We want our LGBT friends to feel truly welcome in our faith communities. We want to be challenged to live lives of holiness, not

⁹ John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, third revised edition (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse Publishing, 2012).

only when it comes to sex, but also when it comes to living simply, caring for the poor and oppressed, pursuing reconciliation, engaging in creation care and becoming peacemakers. You can't hand us a latte and then go about business as usual and expect us to stick around. We're not leaving the church because we don't find the cool factor there; we're leaving the church because we don't find Jesus there.¹⁰

How a Christian moves from searching faith to the fourth stage in Westerhoff's theory—*owned faith*—is important. Owned faith comes when the individual claims for oneself a faith that has been tested and questioned. Owned faith creates mature Christians, ready to live out their faith in their daily lives with passion and commitment. Thus, it becomes increasingly important for these post-Boomer generations, which will not rest for long in the early circles of developing faith to find communities willing and able to guide them through these stages of faith development into a mature, owned faith. These “spiritual tinkerers” will build their own faith that matters uniquely to them if they do not discover their faith awakening and growing in traditional Christian communities.

As these generations encounter people of faith and work out their own salvation in fear and trembling, they may follow the evangelical process that David Gortner describes: a process that begins in remembering joy and gratitude, moves to speaking and telling stories of that gratitude, and then turns to meeting people and listening for the Holy in their lives.¹¹ All Christians, but particularly post-Boomers, with their questioning, idiosyncratic spirituality, need to do this remembering with one another, under the leadership and guidance of individuals familiar with the tradition. If these post-Boomers are already in the stage of searching faith, then they are coming to ideological consciousness, as the literary critic and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin outlined it. They need dialogue and conversation. They need other voices to help them distinguish between the authoritative word of everything they have been taught or experienced and the internally persuasive discourse emerging in their own consciousness in dialogue

¹⁰ Rachel Held Evans, “Why Millennials Are Leaving the Church,” CNN Belief Blog, July 27, 2013, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/07/27/why-millennials-are-leaving-the-church/>.

¹¹ David Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008), 48.

with others. This is no light task but “an intense interaction, a *struggle* with other internally persuasive discourses. Our ideological development is just such an intense struggle within us for hegemony among various available verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions and values.”¹² This is the struggle in which post-Boomers of faith find themselves in this pluralistic, relativistic, secular society.

The faith communities where they have found spiritual connection are where these conversations need to happen. And this is why evangelistic speech must eventually lead to an invitation to join such a community. Gortner distinguishes between the danger of viewing a specific church—with its building, people, and programs—as a promised land and the potential of seeing it instead as a refuge, a way station, a spiritual outfitter that can support and strengthen Christians who are on their own pilgrimages through life. The invitation of evangelism can then be not “join my church—it’s so cool,” but “come with us on a journey to learn and experience more on the Way, to see God with others who are seeking.”¹³ But any church can only be as powerful a guide or teacher as the people who comprise it. Therefore, it is vitally important for congregations to create a strong “holding environment” where existing members can make their own journey from affiliative faith to owned faith. It then becomes equally important for role models and faith mentors who exhibit owned faith to be trained and equipped to facilitate these kinds of conversations in actual congregations.

This is an opportunity for the Episcopal Church to create these kinds of mentors in these sorts of faith communities. In many ways, this denomination is well-equipped to provide the kind of spiritual outfitting that post-Boomers are seeking on their pilgrimages. The Episcopal Church affirms and teaches the faith of the ages—in 2009, the General Convention even enshrined it in the Charter for Lifelong Christian Formation¹⁴—while still inviting inquiry and independent thought. To invite post-Boomers into a pilgrim’s journey in the Episcopal Church is to invite them into a tradition where they can discover the scaffolding of tradition and scripture upon which to stand as they

¹² M. M. Bakhtin and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1981), 346.

¹³ Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism*, 149.

¹⁴ The Charter for Lifelong Christian Formation may be found at www.episcopalchurch.org/sites/default/files/downloads/formationcharter_8.5x11_f.pdf.

build their own faith, using their reason and experience to construct that personal credo they will insist upon, yet building it upon the teaching of two thousand years of Christianity. However, even with these inherent strengths, the Episcopal Church will not be able to meet the challenges of evangelizing and catechizing these postmodern seekers without also building communities where a significant number of members—regardless of generational cohort—have moved to owned faith. Congregations made up in large part of people comfortable in an affiliative faith will not be able to support the enquiring and complex spiritual development of post-Boomers.

In faith communities where many members have an owned faith—along with fellow spiritual travelers who are already deep into their own pilgrimages, and who can act as guides and mentors—post-Boomers engaged in sacred conversations can, in essence, evangelize themselves as they learn to identify the Holy in their lives with the particularly Christian vocabulary and theology that will help them understand and name these experiences as God, Christ, or Spirit. Only by talking it through in conversation, listening to one another and also to the movement of the Holy Spirit binding them into the body of Christ, can they become, as Gortner describes, evangelists “like the early Christians, who were passionate about Jesus, flexible in translating the gospel to meet people where they were, open to the Holy Spirit’s transformation in their lives, committing themselves to the living God, willing to go anywhere people gathered . . . and engaging in personal conversations regularly with others.”¹⁵

The church is already taking its trust fall into the arms of the next generations, the faithful post-Boomers. What they will do with the church, or with Christian faith apart from institutional churches, is still unseen; the church is still falling into the future. We can only share our faith with them as we know it, and help them to give voice to the faith already alive within them.

Walter Brueggemann presents the transmission of God’s blessing through Abraham and his family as a paradigm of this mystery that lies at the heart of evangelism. Brueggemann says that the archetypal stories of Abraham and his descendants expose the danger and the drama of handing on our faith. It is, quite simply, outside of our complete control, and we must trust God will guide and sustain our

¹⁵ Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism*, 49–50.

attempts to share faith with the next generations. What will happen then is veiled from us, as Brueggemann writes:

In every generation, the transmission of the blessing is not only problematic, but laden with mystery. The process of transmission into the next generation is not fully accomplished through human intentionality. Thus Isaac comes late to his blessing. . . . I find these stories important models for our own intergenerational work. They affirm to us that the arrival of the blessing is well beyond our control. One cannot dictate the shape of faith to the next generation. . . . There is a freighted mystery between the generations which cannot be penetrated.¹⁶

¹⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storyed Universe* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1993), 108–109.

