

Contextual Ministry Profile: Generation Z

Since its beginning, the vision of Lightbearers has been to disciple students and fund missions. Millennials were the first group of college students that Lightbearers had the privilege of discipling. In recent years, however, we as a staff have noticed a shift in participants of the Lightbearers Discipleship Program. One of the reasons for this is that Millennials are graduating college and Generation Z is entering those same universities.

While Millennials and Generation Z can be misidentified as the same group, they do in fact have several significant differences. In order to better disciple these incoming students, the Lightbearers staff began to research Generation Z and discuss ways for us to make adjustments. As a result, we created a contextual ministry profile for a member of Generation Z. Our intent is that this profile assists in understanding Generation Z and how to better contextualize the Gospel in hopes of creating mature disciples of Christ.

Why would we create a contextual ministry profile? Isn't the Gospel enough? Yes, of course the Gospel is enough! Contextual ministry does not diminish the Gospel; it just allows the Gospel to be presented in the "language" of the receiver so that it is more easily understood. Just as a missionary to another country seeks to learn the local language and customs, we too must make an effort to learn the language and customs of Generation Z.

Disclaimer: This is an overview of trends as a whole for Generation Z. Individuals of Generation Z may not adhere to all of these traits. We encourage you to know the individuals within your care while continuing to grow in cultural awareness.

Helpful Resources

- Axis: www.axis.org
- *Meet Generation Z: Understanding and Reaching the New Post-Christian World* by James Emery White
- *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* by Barna

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Profile of Generation Z

- As of 2019, Generation Z makes up 26% of the population and is expected to grow to a third of the population within the next couple of years.
- Trans Generation is another name for Generation Z. They often no longer have only two options available to them when making a decision regarding society, economics, race, gender, sexuality, etc.
- They have been raised in a post-Christian society with many belief options available to them. Those beliefs, though, are loosely held, and 66% of Gen Z are open to their core beliefs being wrong.
- Generation Z learns truth through emotions and experiences. They also fear being perceived as judgmental, unloving, or intolerant. This has assisted in creating a culture of “you do you” rather than one with absolute truths.
- Because it is now more culturally acceptable in a post-Christian society to identify as an atheist rather than a Christian, approximately 13% of Generation Z identify as atheists.
- Generation Z is a post-9/11 generation. They are living in a world that is very focused on security. Bad news no longer shocks them, but it does cause them to be more anxious about the present.
- Equality is non-negotiable, and Generation Z prioritizes social justice issues.
- Generation Z tends to be individualistic. Many reasons contribute to that, including access to a personal smart phone and social media. Both have allowed an individualized experience catered to each person (i.e. recommended YouTube videos).
- Generation Z wants to convert hobbies into full-time job due to their desire to work for themselves and follow their passions.
- Generation Z prefers a cool product over a cool experience. Name brands have become more of a priority than in previous generations. In fact, Generation Z spends about \$44 billion every year, much of which is on those type of products.
- The idea of a “traditional” family structure is obsolete. Families are more diverse – ethnically, racially, and religiously – than half a generation ago. One-third live in a single-parent household. Multigenerational family households have doubled since 1980. Even with all these changes, though, Generation Z has extremely close ties to their families.

Practical steps in discipling Generation Z:

■ Community

- As one of the most diverse generations, Generation Z is extremely sensitive to ethnocentrism and racism. Our words and actions are watched closely and taken very seriously; take extra care in choosing them. Let this be an opportunity to learn from people from other backgrounds and to learn what it looks like to truly love one another.
 - Lightbearers must be intentional in seeking out students and staff members from diverse backgrounds. The demographics should be representative of the area in which we serve.
 - Lightbearers must continue to prioritize overseas partners who are nationals or are church planters with the goal of having it led by nationals.
- Generation Z is concerned with the community as a whole and expects unity in diversity. Examine the culture of your ministry or organization in regards to member care and gossip. With such a strong sense of support among their peers, point out the “let us” passages in Scripture and affirm our connection to the Christian community at large.
 - Lightbearers must constantly be aware of the atmosphere and culture within the organization and student life. Any signs of disunity, gossip, racism, or conflict (no matter how small) must be addressed promptly
 - The Lightbearers community should provide an avenue for students to practice the “let us” passages together, though never as a replacement for the local church. Lightbearers staff must be diligent in directing students to the church as their primary source of equipping.
- Generation Z often initiates relationships or friendships online but may have difficulty translating those friendships into face-to-face interaction. Invite members of Generation Z to come alongside you as you engage with other people. If mentoring multiple people, consider group meetings in addition to individual meetings.
 - Lightbearers should provide training for House Leaders in facilitating group discussions and fellowship.
 - Provide options for mentors to disciple multiple people.
- Generation Z views acceptance and affirmation as interchangeable. We must demonstrate that you can love someone (acceptance) while still disagreeing with them (affirmation).
 - Discuss with students the definition of terms such as acceptance, affirmation, love, hospitality, disagreement, etc. Use this as an opportunity to talk through a Biblical and cultural definitions.
 - Invite people – students, believers, and the unchurched – into your home.

■ Communication

- Discipling Generation Z will take lots of time and lots of conversations. Prioritize brief, spontaneous moments of everyday interaction (i.e. grocery shopping, folding laundry, taking your kids to a playground) over longer “traditional” discipleship meetings.
 - Train mentors to follow this model rather than the model of “traditional” discipleship meetings. Give them ideas on what they can do with their student(s).
 - Be creative in ways to have various touchpoints with the students throughout the month.
- Hard stances can be seen as bullying, so creating a safe space to discuss hard truths or topics is crucial. Tone, body language, and approach are all extremely important. Be patient in building trust in order to have those conversations.
 - Consider having fewer Institute speakers more frequently in order for students to trust what is being taught.
 - Seek to have relational time with the students before addressing deeper issues or hard truths.
- Hard questions often come with a personal reason (i.e. they have someone in mind) rather than from a generalized stance. Don't give an abstract answer. Be honest but caring in your response.
 - Ask questions such as “What makes you interested in knowing the answer to this question?” or “Have you had a situation where this question has come up?” in order to better understand the motive behind the question.
 - Build your relationship with the students to demonstrate that you do care about them, their friendships, and questions. As mentioned before, trust must be built before Generation Z will be able to share their questions without fear.

■ Canon

- Although Generation Z is more aware of different beliefs and worldviews, it does not mean that they fully understand each one. Take some time to assess their level of understanding of the Gospel and Scripture. Build off of that foundation.
 - It would be worth spending time at the beginning of the relationship, school year, or Institute to understand where each individual and/or group are in regards to understanding the Bible.
 - Familiarize yourself with other worldviews or religions to better engage in conversations with students about their beliefs.
- The attention span of a member of Generation Z is a mere 8 seconds. Just as the church primarily used visual aids (i.e. stained-glass windows, liturgy, sacraments) during times of low literacy rates to present the Gospel, we too must become visual in our methods.
 - Consider using short, engaging videos to convey the Biblical truths to students.
 - During Institute, utilize opportunities to share graphs, fill-in-the-blank outlines, and learning activities.

- In an individualized culture, personal stories have great impact on Generation Z. Use that to your advantage to share your testimony. When studying Scripture, show how each story plays a role in the metanarrative (the big story) of the Bible. Compare the differences between Scripture and personal experiences. Discuss how they relate and if one is more important than the other.
 - Develop ways to better capture stories (i.e. Alumni videos, mentor podcasts, student quotes) so that potential students see the value of Lightbearers.
 - Walk students and mentors through how to share their testimony with others.
- Generation Z desires true authenticity. This authenticity has created an avenue for Generation Z to be more open to confessing sin, but they tend to be slower in true repentance and change.
 - Equip mentors in addressing sin issues in students' lives. With God's grace, this should include defining sin, a model of Biblical confession, and lifestyle of repentance and obedience.
 - Discuss with students which is more important: obedience to God or victory over sin.

■ Culture

- With social media being primary nature to Gen Z, consider utilizing it to initiate or maintain a connection with them. Love them in their entirety, not just what is displayed online, all while pointing them to their Creator who knows every detail of their being.
 - Continue developing an online presence for Lightbearers on social media platforms in order to better engage potential students.
 - Encourage students to be fully known by select people within their community (i.e. mentor, close friends) and to truly be authentic with other people.
- Due to constant and immediate access to the internet, Generation Z no longer has to use intermediaries to gather information. What they often lack is an ability to critically think through and wisely evaluate said information. Asking open-ended questions and providing insightful wisdom are small steps you can take to help them in this process.
 - Be aware of cultural issues or recent events in order to better engage with students by asking them questions about it.
 - Discuss the advantages and dangers to having so much information readily available with few limits.
- Discuss identity – racial, sexual, virtual, religious, interests – with them. Our primary identity should be in Christ; all others come secondary. One way to explain this is to consider Christ and the Gospel as a diamond in an engagement ring. Our secondary identities are the prongs that are holding up that jewel; they are part of the ring but not the primary focus.
 - Ask students what their top identifying factors are and how those affect the way they live.
 - Find ways to affirm their identity in Christ and how it is one that is completely secure.

- With high levels of depression, anxiety, and suicide among Generation Z, be aware of symptoms and when to direct towards professional counseling. Since depression looks different for everyone (i.e. can't get out of bed, feel lonely in a crowd, foggy thoughts), ensure you understand what they are experiencing. Encourage them to be honest about the hurts and trials of their life. Gently and firmly call them out of sin and selfishness. Encourage them to keep doing the things that bring life to them (e.g. community, exercise, worship). Disciple each person toward reconciling their whole self (head and heart) to God, themselves, and others.
 - Steps for addressing anxiety: 1) Notice it 2) Thank God and your body for producing said emotion 3) Honor your emotion and invite it in for a meeting 4) Organize its pieces 5) Talk through it with someone with whom you feel emotionally safe 6) Make a plan
 - Create a plan for staff and students in how to deal with suicidal situations.

■ Career

As Generation Z enters college and the work force, they can often prioritize activities that allow for career advancement out of fear of economic instability. While hard work in and of itself is not a bad thing, spiritual development often is avoided or forgotten.

- Encourage members of Generation Z to not neglect their faith journey but to seek out growth opportunities through church involvement, discipleship, and deep relationships with other believers.
- Disciple students in how to balance responsibilities and rest well.
- In a world of fear and anxiety, Gen Z avoids suffering at all costs. Demonstrate to them the value of suffering, conflict, and difficulties in our sanctification process.
 - Invite students to meet with people who have experienced suffering and allow them to hear their stories.
 - Discuss at the beginning of the year that living within community may create some suffering due to sacrificing your own preferences and needs.
- Generation Z has a stronger sense of justice and wants to bring restoration to the world. Encourage them in their pursuit of social justice and restoration. Show them how to best do this in alignment with the Gospel.
 - When looking at career choices, suggest the question of “What does the world need?” first and then follow it up with “What job or career path should I choose?”
 - Go through passages of Scripture together that demonstrate justice or care for the needy.