

Four Generations in English Churches

Phillip Escott and Alison Gelder

Abstract

In 2001, as part of the International Congregational Life Survey, a major survey of church life in England was conducted by Churches Information for Mission. Almost 2,000 local churches from 10 denominations / streams took part, and more than 100,000 adults completed questionnaires about their attitudes, experience and opinions. The survey covered the Anglican and historic Protestant denominations, but had limitations in terms of Catholic and newer or smaller groups. For the denominations where the sampling was statistically representative, the survey provides the most detailed information to date on those who worship.

The data is considered in this paper through the lens of age, allowing generational comparisons to be made across a number of different elements from the survey.

The paper covers the following topics for four generations of churchgoers:

- *Demographics (age and gender);*
- *How they spend their time;*
- *The model of church they have;*
- *The integration and retention mechanisms they experience;*
- *The influence of their church and/or faith on their lives.*

Une étude de la vie d'église en Angleterre fut faite en 2001, dans le cadre de l' ICLS. Elle considéra l'église anglicane et les dénominations protestantes historiques. Cette enquête relève les sujets suivants : démographie, activité des fidèles, genre d'église, mécanismes d'intégration et de rétention, influence de la religion ou/et de la foi sur la vie courante.

It is a commonplace that there are generational differences in the ways that people interact with churches, and that these differences are associated with the formative cultural influences experienced by each generation.

In this paper we consider four generations of churchgoers in England, in terms of:

- Their demographics
- How they spend their time
- The model of church they have
- The integration and retention mechanisms
- The influence of their church and/or faith on their lives

The generations, and the approximate birth years used to identify them¹ are shown in Table 1. The data is drawn from the Church Life Profile² 2001 (CLP), which was a major questionnaire survey of over 100,000 adults (people aged 15 and over) attending more than 2,000 churches. (Some questions were only asked of randomly distributed small sub-samples, as indicated in this paper where relevant.) The survey covered Anglican and historic Protestant denominations, but did not cover Catholics, and had some limitations in respect of newer or smaller groups. The responses have been weighted by denomination to make them as representative as possible. The results from the survey are presented here as a snapshot, rather than a detailed study. Other studies have taken place using the CLP data, and current and future projects will continue to use it.

Taking cues from Karl Mannheim³ and Wilhelm Dilthey, we can say that generations are determined not by date only, but also by ‘the dominant perceptions, ideologies and cultural movements around which they cluster, through which they construct their identity as generations, and in terms of which they “re-enact” their own place in the world.’ Dilthey used the term *weltenschaunng* or ‘worldview’⁴, illustrated in the fourth column of Table 1, while Mannheim showed the need for another variable, ‘social events’⁵, which is illustrated in the fifth column of the table.

The final column in Table 1 comprises a selection of ‘religious’ or church-associated events that might be considered likely to have affected each of the four generations in their formative years.

¹ The emerging generation, sometimes called Mosaics (born 1984 to 1992), is not considered here, since it forms too small a section of the sample to be meaningful.

² The CLP was undertaken by Churches Information for Mission, an interdenominational research agency, in partnership with NCLS Research in Australia, NCLS New Zealand, and the US Congregational Life Survey

³ Mannheim (1952), pp.281-4

⁴ Dilthey (1911)

⁵ Mannheim (1952), pp.286

Generation ⁶	Years of birth	% UK population 2001 ⁷	% Adult (15+) ⁸ Churchgoers	Typical Attitudes and Values ⁹	Social events ¹⁰	Selected Church / Religious Events ¹¹
Seniors	Pre-1927	8%	18%	Conformity Technological Innovation	Modernism World War I 1930s Depression World War II Scarcity Loss of Empire	1940s Membership Growth New UK Mission Agencies World Council of Churches 1950s Billy Graham Vatican II 'Death of God' debate
Builders	1927 to 1945	21%	35%	Sobriety Pragmatism Progress Management Transition	World War II Rationing / Scarcity Loss of Empire Cold War Nuclear threat Welfare State – Security Post-war affluence	1950s Billy Graham Vatican II Popular liberal theology 'Death of God' debate Jesus Movement (USA) Declining Attendance
Boomers	1946 to 1964	25%	32%	Permissiveness Political Activism Secularism 'Peace and Love' Emergent Post-Modernism New Age Spirituality Individualism Pluralism The 'Yuppie'	Cold War Nuclear threat Post-war affluence Sexual liberation - The Pill Accessible abortion Women in workforce Increased mobility Rock and roll The Beatles Recreational drugs Multicultural society	Vatican II Popular liberal theology 'Death of God' debate Jesus Movement (USA) Declining Attendance Rejection of Organised Religion Charismatic Movement in churches Early 'House Church' movement 'Spring Harvest' festival formed
Generation X	1965 to 1983	25%	14%	Free market ideologies Disillusionment/Resentment Hedonism Multi-faceted sub-cultures Post-Modernism Rejection of Grand Narratives Suspicion of Institutions	Child-bearing as choice Counter-culture Economic contrasts Punk movement Normative drug use AIDS Information revolution Uncertain prospects Multi-media communication	Declining Attendance Rejection of Organised Religion Charismatic Movement in churches Early 'House Church' movement 'Spring Harvest' festival formed ALPHA Course created New/Young Worship music Openness to alternative spirituality

Table 1: Generations, dates and influences

⁶ The names used are those employed by Brierley in *Religious Trends 3*, p. 5.6. They differ from those used in some other sources, e.g. Gibbs & Coffey.

⁷ This UK figure is not strictly comparable with the data for *English* church attenders, but is indicative.

⁸ CLP Figures: children (aged under 15) are not included in the data, so the percentages are indicative rather than strictly comparable with Column 3.

⁹ Adapted from Hilborn and Bird (2002), various pages.

¹⁰ Adapted from Brierley (1991), p. 97.

¹¹ Adapted from Hilborn and Bird (2002), various pages.

Many publications on generations have been undertaken from a business or marketing orientation, and a very influential model has been developed by Neil Howe and William Strauss¹². However, this model relates specifically to America (which has a very different historical and social context to Europe), and has significant limitations, not least its determinedly cyclical nature, which feels like such a good model that the evidence has to be carefully selected to fit it, as suggested by Hilborn and Bird¹³.

Mannheim had introduced the idea of ‘social generational units’, which comprise sub-groups that have much in common, such as chronicity and (some) social events, but which have responded in differing ways. This was clearly so in Mannheim’s time as some members of particular cohorts became politically what he called ‘romantic-conservative’, while others became ‘liberal-rationalist’ (p.35). Today the division into social generational units may be much greater, especially among young people who diversify into ‘tribes’ with very different attitudes and interests. This is a level of complexity that is masked by the simple analysis by generation as undertaken by Howe and Strauss. Similarly, important divisions within generations based on social class, economic strength, gender, ethnicity, education and so on are hidden by this simple generational analysis.

Demographics

The most obvious demographic is, of course, age, and this will not be considered here, since it forms the foundation for the paper as a whole. However, the second major demographic measurement is that for gender, as shown in Table 2.

Gender by Generation

	Generation				Total
	Gen X	Boomers	Builders	Seniors	
	%	%	%	%	%
Female	62	64	65	71	65
Male	38	36	35	29	35
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Church Life Profile 2001

Table 2: Gender

From Table 2 we can see that while the ‘typical’ church congregation in England consists of about twice as many women as men, this is partly an issue of age or generation. The exaggerated imbalance for Seniors might suggest that we should be looking for explanation to the higher average life expectancy of women. However, the gradually increasing proportion of men as we look down the generations suggests that there might also be a generational effect. This might suggest a slight increase in the willingness of younger men to involve themselves in what had previously been considered the ‘female’ aspects of life.

¹² Howe and Strauss (1991)

¹³ Hilborn and Bird (2002) pp. 85- 100

Callum Brown describes the tendency from 1800 to 1960 to locate Christian piety in femininity, and the dissolution of this gendered discourse in the post-modern cultural climate¹⁴. (He suggests that in the USA and possibly Canada, the discourse has retained a gendered nature, in which women have responsibility for the religion of their families.) Brown¹⁵ associates the change with several cultural changes, but particularly the increased involvement of women in the workforce (see Table 1). This trend may therefore be associated with declining involvement in religion, as Brown suggests, but it might also be associated with a slight increase in the proportion of men who are involved, since there is no longer a perception that church is the women's domain. Heather Wraight, reporting focus group studies, has found that the things that attract men to church are different to those attracting women¹⁶. She reports that men tend to focus on the spiritual life of the church, and are concerned with structures and roles, as well as shared activities. Women are more concerned with relationships, and, for them, roles, spirituality and practical issues are intertwined with relationships. This seems also to be more true for younger generations than for older, and therefore the gender divide among churchgoers might be reducing, while the divide between the majority population and the minority of churchgoers is increasing.

Time Spent

The key measure of how time is spent is shown in Table 3, which shows the frequency with which respondents attend church.

Attendance Frequency by Generation

	Generation				Total
	Gen X %	Boomers %	Builders %	Seniors %	%
First time	3	1	1	0	1
Hardly ever	3	1	1	1	2
< Monthly	3	2	1	1	2
Monthly	4	3	3	2	3
2/3 times Month	14	15	12	9	13
Weekly	58	61	62	70	63
> Weekly	15	16	19	17	17
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Church Life Profile 2001

Table 3: Church Attendance Frequency

¹⁴ Brown, Callum (2001) pp. 195-198.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Wraight, Heather (2003).

A very clear pattern emerges from this data. Seniors are by far the most likely to attend church weekly, and there is a tendency for frequency to decline with each generation. However, those who attend more than weekly are most likely to Builders. Boomers and Generation X are much more likely than older generations to attend church less than weekly but at least monthly. The complexity of life for people who are in the education or labour market, or who have young families, is likely to be greater than for mature or retired people, and the demands on their time will be much greater and more varied. There are two implications of this pattern. Firstly, those who attend frequently (Builders and Seniors) may see less frequent attenders as uncommitted, and be unwilling to trust them as members of the church. Secondly (as discussed below) the model of church that is held by different generations varies considerably. When relatively infrequent attenders do attend church, they hope to find their needs met, and their model of church affirmed in some way. If this does not happen, their attendance frequency may decline further.

There are generational (or possibly age) differences in the types of roles that people undertake in their churches. Seniors (i.e. people aged 74 and over) are relatively unlikely to have significant roles, though 18% are involved in leading worship services, 16% in pastoral care and 13% in church committees. Builders are most likely to be engaged in almost every role, except for music and leadership of activities associated with children and youth, in both of which Generation X followed by Boomers tend to play a major part.

The highest levels of involvement in church roles come from Builders and Boomers, with less involvement from Generation X and Seniors, so that on most measures, and especially on roles with leadership or management responsibilities, something approximating to an age-related normal curve could be envisaged. Seniors' involvement may be limited by age or infirmity, but the low level of involvement by Generation X deserves further investigation. Is it associated with an unwillingness by this generation to commit – or an unwillingness by older generations to pass on the leadership baton?

Two further singularities of Generation X are worthy of comment. Firstly, for Builders and Boomers, 26% of respondents say they have no role in their church; for Generation X this is much higher at 37%. This seems to indicate a wasted resource, and explanations should be sought. Secondly, only 4% of Generation X churchgoers say they have a role in pastoral care (compared with 10% of Boomers and much higher levels in older generations). This could be a matter of concern for the churches concerned, since it is a resource that is not used, but it may also indicate that Generation X *experiences* a low level of pastoral care, since few in the peer group are so engaged.

We asked respondents whether they were involved in outreach activities (evangelistic or community care) undertaken by their congregation. Most people (ranging from 55% of Builders to 67% of Generation X) are not involved in such activities. However, a very clear divide emerges from the data. 27% of Builders are involved in community service aspects of outreach, with almost as many (22%) of Seniors (despite the limitations of their age) also having some involvement. These generations are much less likely (17% and 11% respectively) to be involved in evangelistic outreach. Conversely, only 18% of Boomers and 14% of Generation X are involved in community service, while 20% and 19% respectively are involved in evangelistic outreach. The reasons for this difference are not yet clear, and they may revolve around practicalities such as demands on time, or the times when each type of activity might take place. Alternatively, they might be associated with generational (or age) differences in the perception of appropriate outreach activities.

We asked a small sub-sample (n = 360) to tell us how often they spent time with particular groups of people. Seniors (who are virtually all retired from full-time work) spent time with friends, with people at church and with people in social clubs more often than any other generation, as might be expected (for example, 80% spend time every week with friends and 35% spend time weekly with people in social clubs). Generation X has a very robust social life, with 65% spending time weekly with friends and 14% meeting socially each week with co-workers; they are, however, less involved with social clubs, although almost 40% meet in this way at least monthly. Boomers seem to spend less time with people in any of these ways: 49% meet friends weekly, only 3% meet co-workers socially each week and 35% are involved at least monthly in social clubs. The differences might be associated with life-stages, with Boomers in the thick of career development and family responsibilities, leaving relatively little time for social life. However, it could also be indicative of a different mind-set, with a higher proportion of Boomers perceiving themselves in an individualistic way, or of a real need, as significant numbers of Boomers may feel very alone, without appropriate or acceptable forms of group support.

Finally, in considering time spent, we asked a sub-sample of respondents (n = 586) to tell us whether they belonged to, or worked for, any voluntary organisations or groups. The highest level of belonging was found in the Builders, where only 32% belonged to no such groups. Across older generations, around one in three said they belonged to church-related groups, though only one in four of Generation X said this was so. Groups associated with professions had the highest level (one in five) amongst Builders and Boomers, falling to about one in eight among Generation X. As might perhaps be expected, sports and recreation groups are most popular with Boomers and Generation X, and these generations are also most likely to be involved with youth or school support activities, though this might be associated more with life-stage than with generational culture. It is deeply striking that there is a declining interest in women's groups with each generation: 32% of Seniors belong to such groups, 20% of Builders, 7% of Boomers and 3% of Generation X. We did not ask them to specify the nature of the groups, and they could have in mind groups of all kinds, including sewing circles and coffee mornings, as well as radical feminist activist groups. It seems, however, significant that younger women have much less room in their lives for single-sex organisations of this kind.

Alongside the very strong, though obvious, fact that far fewer people are sufficiently committed to work for voluntary groups, rather than merely taking out membership, most results show a similar generational pattern for organisations worked for. The major exception (though the numbers are low) is found for organisations or groups concerned with the environment. Here, one in ten Builders and about one in 17 Boomers and Seniors belong to such groups, while this is true of only one in 30 Generation X. The reverse is true for workers. Only one in 50 Builders and Boomers engage in work for environmental groups, but one in 20 Generation X does so. This seems consonant with the suggestion that the generation is culturally suspicious of institutions (including environmental organisations), as shown in Table 1, but willing to work for a cause.

The Model of Church

It is clear from much of the survey data that there are some very different mental models of church that seem to be associated with generations. Some are very obvious and predictable, such as the finding that out of a given range of styles of worship music (from which respondents could pick up to two), about half the Generation X responses were for praise music and choruses, which were selected by one in three Builders and one in four Seniors. The Boomers (who grew up with rock and roll) were very close to Generation X in this respect, though half of this generation also liked traditional hymns, which were the preferred style for eight out of ten Builders and almost nine out of ten Seniors.

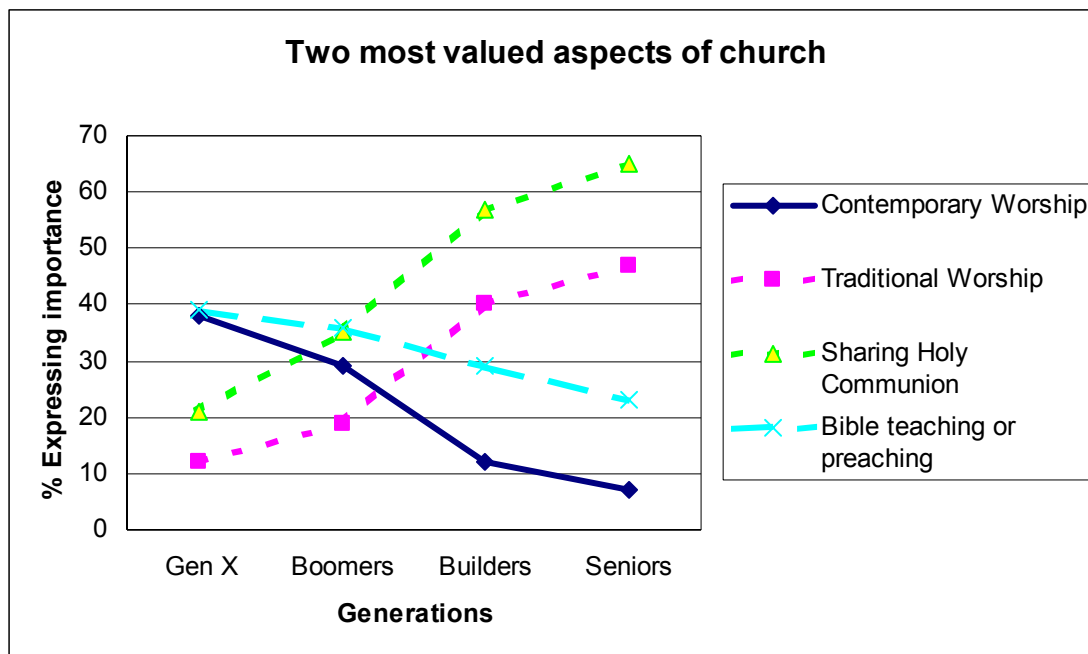


Figure 1: Valued aspects of church

Similarly, as shown in Figure 1, four out of ten Generation X and three out of ten Boomers said that contemporary worship was one of their two most valued aspects of their church, compared to 12% of Builders and 7% of Seniors. The reverse was true of traditional worship, which was one of the two most valued aspects for five out of ten Seniors and four out of ten Builders, but only two out of ten Boomers and just over one in ten Generation X. Probably related to this is the rating given to 'sharing Holy Communion', which was valued by 65% of Seniors, 57% of Builders, 35% of Boomers and 21% of Generation X. A reverse pattern is seen for the value given to Bible teaching and preaching, which is important to younger generations and less so to those who are older. However, this trend may also be associated with the trend towards evangelical and charismatic approaches to faith, discussed further below.

A number of issues concerned with the model of church held by each generation cluster around denomination or faith traditions. We asked a small sub-sample (n = 426) to tell us whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, ‘Christians should remain loyal to one denomination throughout their adult lives.’ More than half (56%) the Seniors agreed (or strongly agreed), and only 21% disagreed. One in four Builders agreed with the statement, while half (49%) disagreed. One in ten Boomers and Generation X agreed with the statement, but three out of four Boomers disagreed compared to under half the Generation X; a similar proportion expressed neutrality on the issue – which perhaps means for them it is so irrelevant that it is not an issue at all. Denominational loyalty is different from faith approach (discussed below), though the two issues are related.

The high proportions of Boomers and Generation X who say they do not identify with any faith approach are probably unlikely to see a need for denominational loyalty, while some who hold a specific approach may be quite flexible about denominations in which that approach is supported. There is, perhaps, an indication here of a tendency towards individualism and relativism, in a quest for personal authenticity, rather than institutional absolutism and authority.

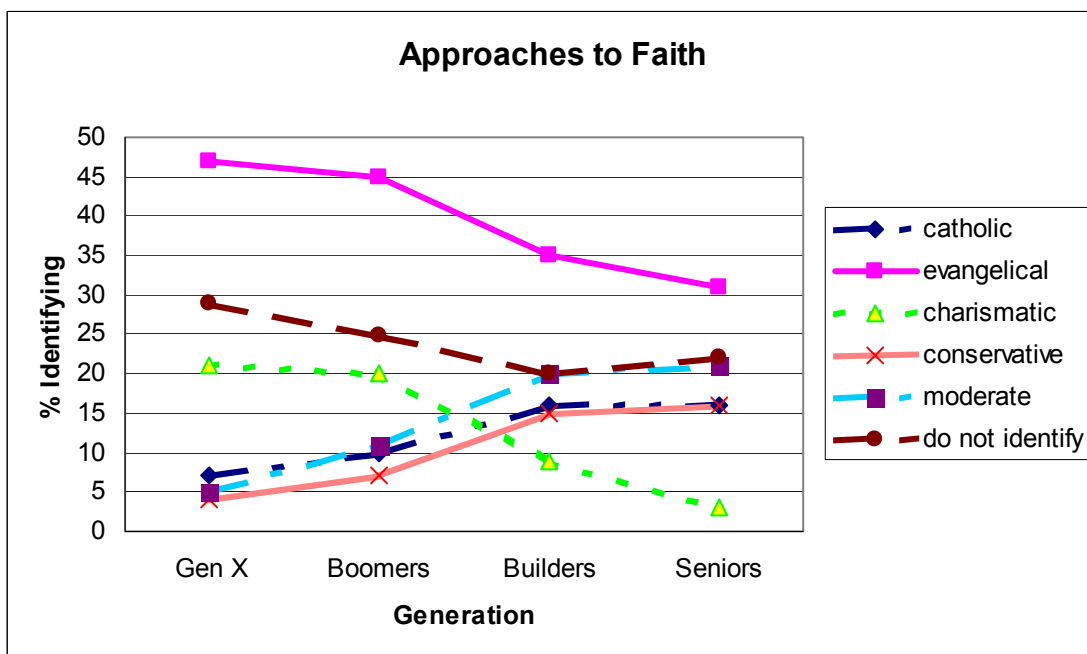


Figure 2: Faith approaches

These conjectures are supported by data on the ‘faith approaches’ with which churchgoers identify. We asked respondents to choose up to two faith approaches¹⁷ from a list of twelve. Major differences are shown in Figure 2, and from this it is apparent while conservatives, moderates and catholics are more prevalent in the older generations, the number identifying themselves as evangelical and/or charismatic is much higher amongst Boomers and Generation X. However, so is the proportion who say they don’t identify with any of these faith approaches – again, this may be indicative of the post-modern rejection of *les grands narratives* and of institutions.

So, in summary, it seems that Boomers and Generation X are more inclined than older generations to a model of church that is contemporary in music and worship style, that provides quality teaching or preaching and (particularly the Boomers) participative. Boomers and Generation X are less inclined than older generations to feel that there is value in denominational loyalty, and they increasingly prefer not to identify with institutional labels – though many more than of the older generations see themselves as evangelical or charismatic.

Integration and Retention

Related to the issue of the model of church is that of the reasons why people join a church. We asked respondents to select from a list of ten factors (plus ‘other’) the first prompt that led to them joining their current church. For Seniors and Builders, the most frequently selected factor (33% and 28% respectively) was that it was the local church of their denomination, followed by the proximity to their home (12% and 10%). For Boomers (18%) and Generation X (23%), the most frequent response was ‘an invitation from a friend or family member’ (not the spouse, which is a separate response, eliciting about 4% of responses in each generation).

We asked about respondents’ friendships, and found that there were distinct generational differences. About one in four Seniors, and one in five Builders, say that most of their friends attend their church, but this is true of fewer (17%) Boomers and Generation X. About half of the Seniors, Builders and Boomers have close friends in church and elsewhere. However, while only 6% of Seniors, 8% of Builders and 11% of Boomers say they have little contact with people at church, except for church activities, this is true of 16% of Generation X. This is, according to some, the ‘Friends Generation’ (after the TV programme), but it seems they are less likely than older people to make friends in their church.

A similar pattern emerges from response data on welcoming new arrivals and on caring for people who seem to be drifting away from the church. Generation X is much less likely than others to be active in these ways. This might be related to the looser relationships discussed in the previous paragraph, but it could also be linked with a respect for the individual, so that intrusion is avoided, or with a fear response – most children and young people are taught not to talk to strangers, so why should they start doing so at church?

¹⁷ These were deliberately selected to be ‘flavours’ or types of Christianity, rather than denominational names. The only one on the list that seemed likely to be difficult was ‘catholic’ (no capital) which as it turned out was not ambiguous, since the Catholic Church as a denomination did not participate. Although ‘catholic’ was chosen by respondents from most denominations, it is predominantly associated with the ‘Catholic’ aspect of the Church of England.

We asked about involvement in decision making, and found that here there were both patterns and anomalies. The pattern is familiar: Builders and Boomers are the generations who often or occasionally participate in decision making for their churches (about half of each generation participates in this way). The proportions are lower for Seniors and for Generation X. However, it is curious that the highest frequency of responses for Generation X is for those who say ‘I usually have no opportunity, and this is fine with me’. This may suggest apathy, but it could also be associated with the post-modern distrust of institutions, leading to unwillingness even to take part in running them. This possibility seems to be similar to the often reported unwillingness of young voters to cast votes in governmental elections.

A similar result is found from the data on the respondents’ perceptions of the extent to which their gifts and skills were used in their churches. About three out of four Builders and Boomers said that their abilities were used to a great extent or to some extent. Almost as many Seniors felt this was so, but significantly fewer (67%) Generation X agreed. A substantial proportion (14%) of Generation X said their abilities were used ‘not at all’, while even more (19%) didn’t know – which may mean they are still waiting to find out what their gifts and skills are, or whether their church will use them.

Influence on Life

There are substantial differences between generations in the ways in which churchgoing interacts with other aspects of life, some of which we have already discussed in relation to (for example) how time is spent. We asked whether respondents had experienced moments of conversion or faith commitment, with the results shown in Table 4.

Conversion/Commitment by Generation

	Generation				Total
	Gen X	Boomers	Builders	Seniors	%
No, as long as remember	19	23	42	61	36
No, gradual process	29	29	29	21	27
Yes, a moment in last 5 years	8	3	2	1	3
Yes, a moment > 5 years ago	25	29	17	9	20
Yes, several moments	12	12	8	4	9
Don't know/NA	7	4	3	3	4
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Church Life Profile 2001

Table 4: Conversion or Commitment

The most striking difference is that older generations are much more likely than younger to say they have had faith as long as they can remember, while younger generations are more likely to say they have experienced specific moments of conversion or commitment, either recently (in the last five years) or in the past, and including those who have experienced several such moments. The difference is associated with the trend towards an Evangelical or Charismatic faith approach in younger generations, but is not wholly explained by this.

When asked about inviting other people to worship events at their church, 41% of Boomers and Generation X say they have done so during the past 12 months, compared to 37% of Builders and 31% of Seniors (both of these generations saying they have invited people to their church, but not in the past year). The patterns of friendship groups and the ways in which respondents spend their time may suggest that the older generations are less likely to have appropriate networks of people who don't already attend church, and that they consequently have fewer opportunities to invite others. Respondents were asked about their reasons for not inviting others to church, and the most frequent reason given by Seniors (21%) was that their friends or contacts live too far away, which perhaps reflects a mobile society in which roots can be quite shallow. Additionally, it may be that many Seniors are relatively immobile, depending on others for transport to church (and elsewhere), which would make it difficult to invite others. The same reason (friends living too far away) was given by Generation X (19%), but the explanation here may be more complex, involving mobility for work and study, long-distance commuting and virtual communities. The most common reasons given by all but the Seniors, and in every case the frequency with which the reason is given increases with each generation, are 'lacking confidence' (ranging from 6% of Seniors to 16% of Generation X), 'those invited may not be interested' (from 17% of Seniors to 27% of Generation X) and 'they may not like the style of worship' (from 10% of Seniors to 17% of Generation X).

One measure of the impact of faith on people's lives is the way in which they use their money. We asked several questions about this issue, but have selected just one to provide an indicator of generational differences. We asked which of a series of statements best described the respondents' giving to their local church, with the results shown in Figure 3.

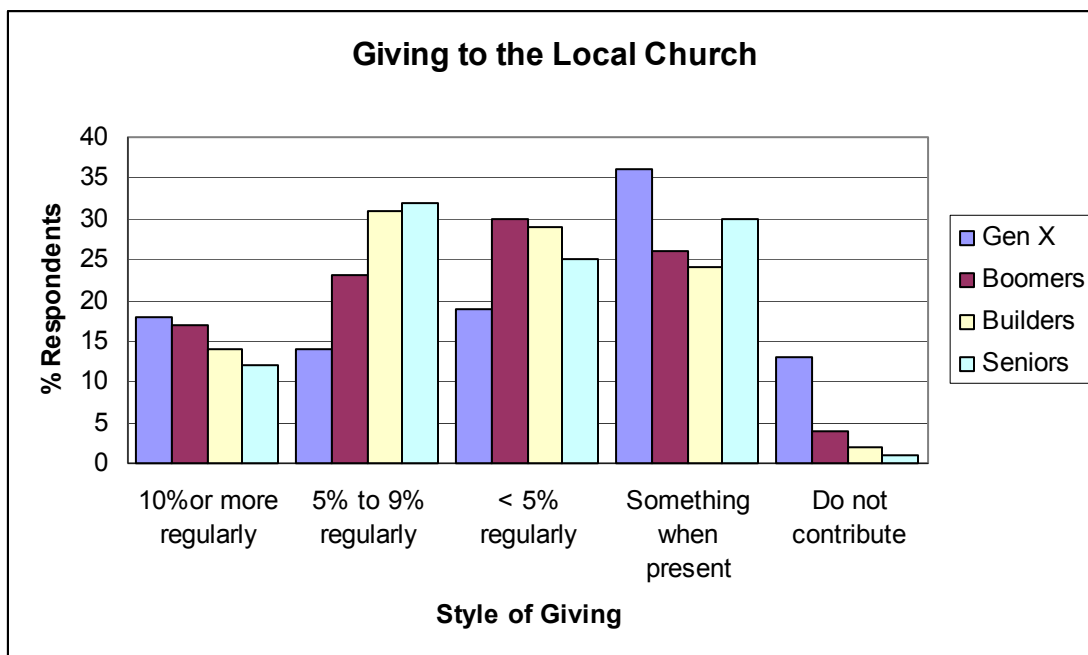


Figure 3: Giving to the local church

Boomers and Generation X are more likely than older generations to give at least 10% of their income regularly. However, Generation X are more likely than any other generation to either give irregularly or not give money at all. This may reflect their own economic situation in their life-stage, in that some (particularly students) may have little or no substantive income, remaining wholly or partly dependent on their families or on loans to finance their studies. However, the generation now extends well beyond student age, and there may also be a question of generational attitude, since giving to the church could be construed as supporting an 'institution'. While Generation X makes up a substantial section of those who tithe (give 10%), in general it is true that older generations tend to be more regular in their giving, although the proportion of their income is smaller.

We also asked respondents about their giving in other ways, such as through donations to charities, during the past 12 months, with the results shown in Table 5.

Social Capital Acts by Generation

	Generation			
	Gen X	Boomers	Builders	Seniors
	%	%	%	%
Lent money	36	20	11	6
Cared for sick	17	22	24	18
Charity donation	75	84	85	82
Contacted public official	36	44	38	25
Help through crisis	42	46	36	22
Hospital visit	48	55	68	62
Gift to person in need	38	43	35	27
Cared for elderly relative	10	22	22	11
Helped substance abuser	13	13	7	3

Source: Church Life Profile 2001

Table 5: Social Capital actions

Many of the apparently generational differences shown in this table might be better or partially explained by life-stage; for example, caring for someone who is sick or for an elderly relative is more likely to be the experience of people in their middle years with family responsibilities. However, some differences between churchgoers do seem to be better explained by generational attitude. There is an increasingly greater experience of lending money among younger generations, although the reasons for this need further exploration. Conversely, although three out of four Generation X have given donations to charities, this is significantly less than all other generations. Is this difference associated with a distrust of institutions? Presumably it is not explained by having less available money, since money is available to lend. Boomers and Generation X are much more likely than others to feel that they have helped someone through a crisis other than sickness, which might be associated with a generational shift towards openness and communication about such issues – an abandonment of the traditional British 'stiff upper lip'. About one in eight Boomers and Generation X say they have tried to help someone abusing alcohol or drugs, while this is true of only half as many Builders and still fewer Seniors. This difference is inevitably associated with other variables. The Seniors and Builders are more likely to have social circles that are confined to the church, where such abuse, though not unknown, may be less frequently found (or openly admitted). However, there is probably also a

generational shift, in that the widespread use of recreational (and generally illegal) drugs became more general as the Boomers were reaching maturity, and has continued in other ways with the development of Generation X. Members of these generations are more likely than others to have wider social networks, and also contemporaries who are experiencing difficulties with alcohol and drugs.

We asked a small sub-sample (n = 373) to choose from a list three principles that they felt were most important in guiding their lives, with the results shown in Table 6.

Three Principles for Guiding Life by Generation

	Generation				Total
	Gen X	Boomers	Builders	Seniors	
	%	%	%	%	%
Spiritual Life	46	48	46	36	45
Exciting life	3	2	6	3	4
Meaning in life	46	62	45	36	49
Wealth	1	2	2	2	2
Being helpful	19	27	35	40	30
Enjoying life	24	19	8	6	14
Being successful	14	9	3	0	7
Family life	77	62	80	69	72
True friendship	59	52	63	65	59

Source: Church Life Profile 2001 (L40)

Table 6: Guiding Principles for Life

Family life was considered to be the most important principle in all generations, though this was least emphatic for Boomers, who were equally likely to say that finding meaning in life was important. This is a particularly interesting finding for Generation X, since this is the first generation raised in a culture in which families are frequently fractured. Helping other people seems to decline in importance with each generation, while enjoying life (effectively, hedonism) seems to follow a reverse trend, as observed *en passant* by John Drane when he attempts a taxonomy of contemporary cultural styles¹⁸. This fits the wider analysis of characteristics of generations, shown in Table 1, demonstrating that churchgoers are likely to be affected by the same influences and *esprit du jour* as anyone else of their generation.

Spiritual life is considered least important by the Seniors, which again may be linked with the severely practical circumstances of their developmental years (total wars, the great depression, scarcity), and with the traditional British culture of repressing emotions. Almost half the respondents in other generations considered spiritual life to be important to them.

One principle which barely changes across generations – and which may be noteworthy for this very reason – is the desire for wealth (clarified parenthetically as ‘material possessions, money’). Only about 1% of all respondents considered this an important principle for their lives. Unfortunately, since the CLP was a survey of churchgoers, we are unable to produce comparative results for other people, and it would be very interesting to know whether this level of focus on materialism was perceived by the wider population or was unique to, or particularly associated with, people who go to church.

¹⁸ Drane (2000), p.63.

We asked a small sub-sample (n = 364) to rate the importance in their lives of work, family, friends, leisure time, politics and 'your faith'. Work was 'quite important' for six out of ten Boomers and Generation X, and for three out of ten Builders. This matches life-stage, since those who are of working age might be expected to give work a higher rating than those who are retired. However, it is interesting that relatively few (a maximum of 28% for Boomers) say that work is 'very important' to them. Family received a very high rating across all generations, but was overwhelmingly so (98%) for Generation X, which raises questions about the relative effects of church and wider culture, since Friends receive the highest importance rating among Seniors (68% say 'very important'), followed by Builders (61%), Generation X (59%) and Boomers (49%). The very different result for Boomers requires further exploration to discover why they give friends a lower rating than other generations, but it could be associated with issues of definition (activities with friends at church might be perceived as focused activities, rather than as relational activities), or with conflicting demands on time. Leisure time receives a 'very important' rating from 38% of Boomers and 34% of Generation X, but from only 27% of Builders and 26% of Seniors. The respondents' faith was considered 'very important' by 83% of Builders, 78% of Boomers, 76% of Seniors and 65% of Generation X. The 'quite important' response follows a reverse pattern, so that if the two are taken together, they almost balance, with 98% or more in the older three generations saying faith is either 'very important' or 'quite important'. Generation X (90%) is different: 8% say their faith is 'not at all important', and 2% say they don't know or the question is not applicable (presumably meaning they do not have faith). This may be because they are still in their developmental period, determining what is important to them, but it could also or alternatively be indicative of the 'disillusionment' 'rejection of grand narratives' or 'suspicion of institutions' shown in Table 1.

This hypothesis is supported by the responses to the question 'How important is God in your life?' Reassuringly for a sample of church attenders, only 1% in each generation say that God is not important in their lives, and around 22% in each generation say that God is less important than most things. However, for more than four out of ten Generation X (46%) and Boomers (43%) God is described as 'the most important reality in my life', while this is true of slightly fewer (39%) of Builders and Seniors. It therefore seems that Generation X (and, to a lesser extent, Boomers) give God a high importance in their lives, even though some don't perceive this in a formal way as 'my faith'.

Conclusions

There are distinct characteristics of each generation in England that mean they relate to church in different ways. This has implications for church leadership.

Seniors (born before 1927) are likely to be overwhelmingly female, to attend church weekly or more often, but not (or no longer) to have significant roles in church. They spend time with friends, at church and in social clubs, and they are more likely than others to belong to voluntary groups and (if women) to belong to single-sex groups. Their model of church is one that gives high value to traditional worship and to sharing Holy Communion, and they see denominational loyalty as important. Many were attracted to their current church because it belonged to their denomination. They are more likely than others to see themselves as conservative or moderate in their approach to faith. A conversion or commitment experience is relatively rare for Seniors, and they are less likely than others to invite others to worship (possibly because of circumstances). They either give money regularly to their church, though in small quantities, or they give only when present. They are active in forms of social capital, primarily through

donations to charity, though unlikely to lend money, give to individuals or help people with substance abuse. Seniors are less likely than others to place a spiritual life high in their priorities, and while their faith is important to them, they are a little less likely than younger people to say that God is the most important reality in their lives.

Builders (born 1927 to 1945) have a ratio of two women to one man. They are more likely than others to attend church more than once a week, and almost all do so more often than monthly. They often have responsible roles in their churches, including decision-making, and where they are involved in outreach, this is likely to take the form of community care. They are the generation most likely to belong to voluntary organisations, though few engage in work for such groups, and (if women) a substantial number belong to single-sex groups. For many Builders, their model of church emphasises traditional worship and sharing Holy Communion, though a substantial minority also values Bible teaching and preaching. Far fewer Builders than Seniors see denominational loyalty as important, though the denomination was important in their choice of their current church. The proportions identifying themselves as evangelical or charismatic is much higher for Builders than for Seniors, and few say they don't identify with any of the listed approaches. About one in four Builders (many more than Seniors) have had a conversion or commitment experience, though more than half of these happened more than five years ago. They are willing to invite friends to church, but may have few friends outside church, and most have not invited anyone recently. They tend to be regular (but relatively low) in giving money to their church. Their acts of social capital are similar to those of Seniors (though more frequent), though they are more likely to contact officials or to be active in helping individuals. This generation places a higher value than others on family life, but they are also more likely than others to say their faith is important to them.

Boomers (born 1946 to 1964) have a gender balance that is only slightly more equal than that of Builders. They are more likely than older generations to attend church with a frequency that is at least monthly but less than weekly. They are likely to have roles and responsibilities in church, with a emphasis on music, children's and youth work (in which they are similar to Generation X). Where Boomers are involved in outreach, this is most likely to take the form of evangelistic activities. Boomers have less purely social connections than other generations, though the reasons for this difference are unclear. They may be involved in voluntary organisations, but primarily for those (e.g. children's, youth, school or professional) that offer benefits to themselves or their families, and which might therefore be linked more with life-stage than with generation. Relatively few are involved in single-sex groups. Their model of church is quite mixed, with some shared characteristics with Builders, and other shared views with Generation X. However, a substantial move has taken place towards contemporary worship and emphasis on Bible teaching and preaching and against traditional worship and sharing Holy Communion. Denominational loyalty is not important to most Boomers, and while most identify themselves as evangelical, there is also an increase in the number who see themselves as charismatic or who do not identify with any of the listed approaches. Many have chosen their current church because of an invitation from a friend or other contact. While half have always had faith or have come to faith gradually, almost half have had a conversion or commitment experience, though most of these happened more than five years ago. They are more likely than older generations to have invited friends to church recently. Their pattern of giving is very mixed: they range from a relatively high proportion giving at least 10%, through those who give smaller proportions regularly to a number who give only when present. However, the largest group is those who give regularly but in small amounts. They are very active in terms of social capital, contributing to society in each of the listed ways, except for lending money. Boomers (who are generally still in

child-rearing years) are less likely than other generations to see family life as the most important guiding principle in life, with as many seeing it as important to find meaning in life (which may be understood as self-fulfilment). Boomers are more likely than older generations to see God as the most important reality in their lives.

Finally, we turn to Generation X (born 1965 to 1983). Although the gender balance remains skewed, it is less so than in all other generations. Generation X people have the lowest attendance frequency, so that although most attend weekly, a very large minority attend less often or irregularly. They have few roles and responsibilities in their churches and are particularly unlikely to be involved in leadership or pastoral care, though they make a substantial contribution in music, children's and youth ministries. Their involvement in outreach is, like the Boomers, likely to be through evangelistic groups rather than community care. Apart from recreation and sports groups, they are unlikely to be involved in voluntary organisations, and are particularly unlikely to join single-sex groups. Their model of church favours contemporary worship and Bible teaching and preaching, rather than traditional worship and sharing Holy Communion. They have very little interest in denominational loyalty, and the denomination is largely irrelevant in their choice of church, which is much more influenced by invitations from friends or by upbringing. The proportions identifying themselves as evangelical or charismatic are slightly higher than for the Boomers, and much higher than for others, but the largest increase is in the group that do not identify with any of the listed faith approaches. Generation X are often less integrated into the church through friendship networks than other generations. They are very likely to invite others to their churches, but are less likely than others to offer a welcoming greeting to newcomers in church. Many people in Generation X have experienced conversion or commitment moments, and of these a high proportion have done so recently (in the past five years). Their financial giving to their local church is least systematic. While the generation is more likely than others to give 10% of their incomes or more, they are also most likely to give only when present or to not contribute at all. Their social capital actions are less frequent than Boomers, and in some respects less frequent than Builders or Seniors. In particular they are least likely to give to charities, though they are more likely than all others to lend money. Leisure is very important to Generation X, while they are less likely than others to say their faith is important to them, but more likely than others to say God is the most important reality in their lives.

It isn't always easy to discern where difference is associated with generations and where with life-stage. Here, it seems that in their attitudes to church and faith, and in their religious experiences, there are some distinct differences forming a pattern that conforms to what might be expected from the descriptive terms in Table 1. There seems also to be a larger pattern that goes beyond generation, and this may be better associated with a culture shift at the point where post-modernity becomes salient. Seniors and Builders have more in common in their experiences and outlooks than either has with Boomers or Generation X, which in turn share many features. Power and responsibility in churches seems now to be mainly held by Builders and Boomers, with Seniors and Generation X being relatively excluded. However, 'normal church' in many denominations and local churches seems to be based on the model of church that fits Seniors and (especially) Builders, while models that would fit Boomers and Generation X are less easy to find. The culture shift seems to be in some sense a fixture, and models of church that fit the needs of passing generations seem likely to contribute to continuing decline. On the other hand, those churches that address the lifestyles, needs and aspirations of Boomers and Generation X might be able to take advantage of the strengths (including willingness to invite others to church) of these generations to lead to regeneration.

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The Authors

Phillip Escott took his doctorate in Religious Studies at the University of Stirling, and has accumulated several other degrees, diplomas and certificates. He has worked in local church leadership, education, training and consultancy. Phillip is an associate lecturer with the Open University, and as research officer of Churches Information for Mission, Phillip was responsible for the design and analysis of the Church Life Profile 2001. He is currently working with NCLS Research of Sydney NSW on the international analysis of data from four countries. [email: phillip.escott@blueyonder.co.uk]

Alison Gelder has business experience at senior management level in corporate strategy, market research and marketing. She has degrees in Law and Theology and research degrees in Information Science and Ethics. As chief executive of Churches Information for Mission, Alison was responsible for the Church Life Profile 2001. She is now a full time consultant and researcher working with many Christian churches and organisations across the UK. [email: alison.gelder@blueyonder.co.uk]