

Ministering with Gen Z

Think Generationally

Whether you're a Boomer, Gen Xer, Millennial, or Gen Z, your generational identity influences the way you see the world. Instead of letting these differences be a source of tension, we want to learn how to cross generational cultures in order to build deeper connections with each other. By doing so, we can effectively minister together with our current and future campus demographic—Gen Z.

Three Distinctives of Gen Z

Gen Z (sometimes referred to as "iGen" because of their heavy usage of devices like the smartphone) are distinct from previous generations for these three reasons:

Individualism

Gen Z tends to be less communal than previous generations. They are creative and embrace difference through slang, fashion, social media usage, and artistic expression. However, this does not necessarily make them a more independent generation. Like Millennials, they'll enter adulthood later than their Gen X or Boomer counterparts.

Safety

Gen Z cares a lot about making sure others feel safe. Part of this is due to having grown up in an increasingly diverse society as well as seeing violence and terrorism unfold live online and even in their schools. Underneath the value of safety is a desire to see everyone valued and included. When correctly exercised, this can be a gift in ministry.

Mental Health

Mental health issues such as depression and anxiety seem to be higher among Gen Z. The rise of social media and prevalence of smart phones may be powerful contributing factors. Yet, Gen Z is also more self-aware and likely to name and address mental health issues than previous generations.

Putting Generational Theory in Practice

Because we want to reach Gen Z students and faculty with the Gospel, it's important to adapt our methods of outreach, discipleship, and leadership. What worked for a previous generation, may not work for this one. How does this look practically?

- **Kill the Bait-and-Switch.** Trust is important to Gen Z. Don't lure them to your ministry with free food without being upfront about who you are. Honesty will go a long way.
- **Ask Safe and Brave Questions.** Gen Z appears to be a more sensitive generation. Still, you shouldn't be afraid to challenge them. They are less religious than any previous generation, but they long for meaningful connection. Create safe spaces without compromising the power and beauty of the Gospel.
- **Prioritize Self-Care.** Be open and encourage openness with your Gen Z students and faculty. Ask them to share their struggles and check in to see how they're doing physically, emotionally, and spiritually.
- **Be Directive.** While Gen Z is very individualistic, they are not as independent as other generations. When leading them, make sure to set clear and specific expectations. Even though

they may need more guidance in the beginning, your extra support will eventually help them thrive.

Trends in the University World

In the last few decades, universities have bulked up their services dedicated to mental health, and the terms “safe space” and “trigger warning” are a part of everyday language. These are real indicators that this generation has very different needs from the ones before it. Having said that, our ministry has a great opportunity to meet those needs.

Reach out to a campus administrator and let them know that you’re supporting and mentoring students and faculty. Ask how you can help the university care for students and faculty. Offer to buy them lunch or to pray for them.



Coaching Gen Z

Both affirm and challenge. But affirm first.

- **Affirm Gen Z in their strengths.** Too often in the media or in popular literature, Gen Z is caricatured with negativity and criticism. We don’t think these depictions are true nor are they helpful in coaching Gen Z. Affirming and honoring their strengths is a great place to start.
- After you affirm them, **don’t be afraid to also challenge** them also to release hyper-individualism in favor of healthy community and to step into difficult conversations, even when it feels uncomfortable.

Ask Gen Z students and faculty questions that will honor their strengths and values like:

Who is missing?

This question will utilize their strength of inclusivity to welcome more people to community.

How are you doing, really?

This question will honor their value for self-care and mental health.

Ask other generations to think deeply about what they can learn from Gen Z, as well as what they can teach Gen Z. This will help to foster intergenerational curiosity and appreciation.

Related Resources

- [iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us](#) — Jean M. Twenge PhD
- [Real Life: A Christianity Worth Living Out](#) — James Choung

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