

# Whitepaper.

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## EMERGING TRENDS, ENDURING TRUTH

The Spiritual Attitudes of The New Generations

## The Research:

Most youth research is marketing research that attempts to uncover which advertisement, brand, or flavour will sell best. Some important attributes of the emerging generations: their life aspirations, spiritual interests, and attitudes to the church are rarely researched due to the limited commercial application of such findings. Due to the scarcity of such research, many church groups are making decisions based on anecdotal evidence, or past experience. Therefore this study focused on these little researched yet important areas. The discussion groups dealt with attitudes to spirituality, God, Christianity, and the Church.

**This study concurred with other Australian and overseas research which shows a generation of young adults more socially connected through technology, yet in search of authentic community, greater meaning in life, and spiritual connection. It also finds that traditional church, while offering real solutions in these essential areas is poorly perceived by the emerging generations.**

The focus group discussions found ways in which the church could adjust styles to better engage with this next generation direct quotes from the Gen Y respondents are included throughout this report.

## The Need:

There is a lack of solid Australian social research concerning young adults and issues of faith. In addition to this are misconceptions which abound regarding the younger generations. For example while it is true that the Baby Boomers (born from 1946-1964 as defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics) mark the highest birth rates, it is not the case that there are fewer young people today compared to the past.

The Australian birth rate has been in decline for decades, however it has been coming from a larger population base and there are actually higher birth numbers today than at the peak of the baby boom in the late 1950's and early 1960's. In 1960 Australia's population was just over 10 million with a fertility rate of 3.5. By 2009, the population had more than doubled to 21.5 million while the birth rate had slumped to 1.9 babies per woman ([www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)).

Description	Born	Age	(% of population)
Builders	prior to 1946	late 60's to 80's	14%
Boomers	1946-1964	late 40's to mid 60's	24%
Generation x	1965-1979	30's and 40's	21%
Generation y	1980-1995	older teens and 20's	21%
Generation z	after 1995	children and teenagers	20%

The worldwide demographics are even more staggering. In Australia those aged under 25 comprise 34% of the population while globally the under 25's comprise more than 50% of the total population. Therefore we now have the biggest generation of adolescents in history with 1.2 billion people aged between 10 and 19. There have never been more young people alive. Keep in mind that in 1960 the world population had just hit 3 billion, while by 2012 it will exceed 7 billion.

**Australia is simultaneously experiencing the ageing of the population and a mini baby boom. Our average age has never been higher (37) while the number of babies born per annum has never been greater (285,000).**

It is true that as a population we are ageing in that we are living longer: today boys are expected to live to 77.4 years, and girls to 82.6 years. A century ago it was 55.2 years and 58.8 years respectively. In 2042 it is projected to be 82.5 and 87.5 (*Intergenerational Report, 2007*). As a result, our median age has been

rising, from 29 in 1983, to 37 today. However the actual age demographics challenge the widespread perceptions of less young adults today compared to the past.

The need for the church to channel resources to better engage with today's generation of young adults comes not just because of their demographic size, but also because of their life stage, and the openness they have to spiritual issues.

The Australian research confirms this. The National Church Life Survey found that the "spiritual seekers" were mainly younger people: "While newcomers may be of any age, they are much more likely to be in their 20's and 30's" (Kaldor, Bellamy, Powell).

## Participants:

This project involved running a series of focus groups in Sydney and Melbourne. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 26 and ranged in life stage from Year 12 to those having completed post-secondary education and commenced a career. No participants were actively attending church although they varied in their church experience from no involvement to some past attendance.



This research project deliberately focused on urban rather than rural Australians as this is the national and global trend. In his book *Futurewise*, Dixon states that one of the “six faces of global change” is “the increasing impact and effects of urbanisation”. From the Australian perspective the results are also dramatic: in 1901 more than half of our population lived in rural areas while today less than 1 in 7 Australians live in rural areas.

**We are dealing with a very empowered group of Australians. Generation Y is accurately labelled Generation ‘why’. Articulate, sceptical, and not afraid to push-back, this low-compliance generation is entering a high-regulation society.**

## Findings:

### Empowered yet uncertain

#### Challenges of life in 21st Century Australia

“Life is far harder than I thought, it’s a real challenge”

“You just spend each day trying to make ends meet”

“I’m definitely looking for something more, an escape”

“You have freedom in that you have a car but that’s it”

“When you were younger you did what you wanted, and you had no responsibilities”

“There’s a lot of pressure (to succeed and to be responsible)”

The comments above from various participants in the discussion groups represent some common themes. While life today for young people offers limitless choices and opportunities, it also offers greater responsibilities and demands. The young people interviewed expressed that while they are empowered in society, they are not yet ready to make the big decisions and commitments of generations past.

The views we heard expressed in the groups show a cohort redefining the life stages. Adolescence is extended and the markers of adulthood, whether they be marriage, mortgage, children or career, are being delayed. Over half of Generation Y (a generation that extends into the late 20’s) still live with their parents. So meet the KIPPERS (Kids In Parents Pockets Eroding Retirement Savings).

Yet this is not a generation refusing to grow up or take on responsibility. Rather much of the “downaging” is due to uncertainty and financial insecurity. Staying in the family home or remaining on the educational conveyor belt provided a degree of certainty and stability. Insecurity was a key theme: fear of their financial future, terrorism, whether they will be married and have children, and most often mentioned: whether they will make the most of their life.

The opportunities being offered today come with the downside of greater expectations, as shared by Gen Y Joanna, “We celebrate limitless choices so we think we ought to have achieved so much, and when we don’t it is depressing and we feel like failures”.



## Life balance not bank balance

### Priorities in Life

“We are bombarded with advertising messages today and it’s all hype”

“I’ll definitely work less and do more”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to buy a house anyway so yea”

“Financially it’s a stress for sure but there’s so much more to life”

“There are so many choices today compared to my parents... we have more options”

“There are so many unreal expectations of what can be done in a day”

Beyond these comments, a look at their employment patterns shows that they value life balance and are searching for something beyond the earnings. As one Gen Yer stated in a focus group: “work is important - but it’s not my life, just a part of it”.

The people of this generation are sometimes referred to as Slackers, Busters, or Post Boomers- yet these labels misunderstand their

work ethic. The perception of an unreliable and lazy generation was not borne out in this research - they just approach life differently.

The corporate world has responded to these yearnings. From workplace giving programs and social justice advocacy to personal development courses, and life coaching; many organisations have morphed from a company into a movement.

**Today’s young people are post-categorical. Convergence in technology allows the mobile phone to double as a camera and web browsers. Similarly convergence in life sees their work life merge their social life and even their spiritual life.**

There was no discernable difference in the work aspirations and financial expectations of men and women in the groups. Churches will need to deal with this seismic restructuring of the role of women in society. The demographic data shows the shift: today there are 2.5 times more women employed than there were in 1970 (ABS Labour Force Cat 6202).

# Social Yet Lonely:

## Friendships and family

“You think there's going to be more freedom as an adult but there's less - the school days were great”

“Yeah, the friendships at school, those were the days”

“At school it was automatic with friends, but now you have to make an effort”

“My parents were married with kids at my age, I can't imagine that” (23 years)

“Life gets busy and you actually lose contact with friends”

This generation is technologically connected like no other cohort, from texting and blogging to twittering and instant messaging. They are logged in and linked up. Technology has been a social enabler and a social risk reducer. It has allowed them to fill a social need yet while some have used the technology as the lifeblood of offline friendships for others their Facebook community has been all too one-dimensional. There was expressed a real sense that such connections haven't met their social needs and they are looking for authentic community. In their book *Inside the Soul of a New Generation*, Celek and Zander sum up the angst felt by this disconnected generation with 3 points “They feel alone, they feel abandoned, they feel alienated”. They then contrast them

with the Baby Boomers by stating that today's young adults “don't want to conquer. They want to connect with other people. They want community....They choose relationships over raises, and maintaining community over climbing the corporate ladder. They clearly value community over conquest”.

While there is a yearning for community and relationship, there is also a reluctance to commit to it. The latest Australian Census results show that the average age of first marriage for women has shifted from age 22 (Boomers), to age 28 in one generation. The older Generation Yers were the first generation of children to experience widespread divorce. Divorces increased from 8% as Boomers were growing up, to 42% today. Last year in Australia there were just over 100,000 marriages and there were almost 50,000 divorces.

**There was a sense that blogging, messaging, and twittering was more about posturing and positioning than belonging and being. There was a longing for a community where they didn't always have to be 'on'.**

One third of these divorces came after less than five years of marriage, with the average divorce coming after just 9 years of marriage. Today the solo person household is not necessarily comprised of an elderly person. Indeed the biggest increase in home-aloners over the last decade has been among those aged 20 to 50.



So the church is a viable option as a place for connection and community today because of this timeless social need. In her book about today's young adults, Wendy Zoba clarifies the issue: "We Millennials do long for the deep, accountable relationships that the word

*community* implies. But we also fear them. The truth is that we want the semblance of community without the risk or the cost. We want to be surrounded by friendly acquaintances, but we don't want to be entangled, whether in a job, a marriage, or a church." (*Generation Y2K*).

## Searching for more

### Searching

"I'm 23 and I still don't know what I want in life"

"I'm not sure what I want to do - I've got short term goals... but nothing beyond that"

"Heaps of my uni friends are studying but don't know if they'll even work in that field"

"We've been given so much from the youngest age (but) it doesn't make you happy"

"My friend had it all.... today he is a real mess"

Today's young Australians, having benefited from the last 18 years of economic growth are the most materially endowed generation ever. Yet despite this -or because of it- they are actively searching for more. Particularly after this economic party has ended, the young people we spoke openly discussed their spiritual interest.

Yet this interest in spirituality is different to church attendance: The Census figures show that Australians have a low affinity to religion. In 1970 the number of Australians identifying as Christian was just short of 90% while today it hovers around 60%.

## Spiritual not religious

"I hope there is something more than this"

"I'm a spiritual person for sure.... not religious though."

"I don't like the formal church structures (of spirituality)"

"My parents went to church but I'm probably more spiritual"

There was a strong connection with spirituality in the discussions, and a quick dismissing of religion. Mike Riddell gives some insights into this trend: "Before Christians get too excited about the renewed interest in religion, it is well to note that the emerging culture's exploration of spirituality is in many ways a reaction against institutional Christianity as it has been experienced in the West"



# Sceptical yet hopeful

## Views on the church today

“It is a big business - you can tell that from the buildings”

“It’s too exclusive. It’s like a club”

“You’re not supposed to think for yourself or step out of the crowd”

“They should just accept you as you are, and let you develop at your own pace”

“One day I might go back (to church)”

The church did not get a great review from the young people interviewed. Their perceptions were of a big structured institution rather than a community of people with a passion and a purpose. Coming of age in this incredible 21<sup>st</sup> Century has created "expectation inflation". Many had visited the virtual worlds like SecondLife and found them wanting, and in a Web 2.0 world of MySpace and YouTube where the strap line is to “broadcast yourself” there was a yearning for Someone or something bigger than themselves. It was expressed that the defining challenge of their generation was supposed to be climate change but for many it was more cause célèbre than a personal passion.

Yet the church was not viewed as the place where this spiritual yearning would likely find resonance.

**This more educated, entertained and endowed generation have experienced so much so young that they aren’t amazed anymore. They live in a culture without awe and transcendence.**

## Views on Christians

“They’re like the mafia doing everything together”

“Hypocrites... if they actually read their Bible they’d see...”

“Don’t they know God said ‘Do not judge’”

“They speak for God too much: ‘God told me to do this’”

“They put you on a guilt trip”

“I think they (church-goers) are a bit naive”

When discussing Christians and church, one word was mentioned in every focus group: hypocrisy. While a stereotype, their demands for integrity are justified.

Rabey in his book: *In search of authentic faith: How the emerging generations are transforming the church* traces the history of recent church evangelism models, and how they look to the new generations.

He notes that this mass-market effectiveness is a cause for criticism. “The glorious Gospel becomes a commodity sold and delivered to the doorstep like a brush or a bar of soap... Jesus Christ didn’t commit the Gospel to an advertising agency; He commissioned disciples...The Gospel is not a Big Mac, and Jesus did not die as the first step in a marketing plan”.

## Views on church services

“It’s really cheesy”

“You’re forced to sing along”

“They say ‘Everyone raise your hands’ - I hate that”

“It’s too clean cut”

“The music is like 80’s synthesizers.... it doesn’t connect”

“I like hearing someone’s story.... their own experiences”

As Rabey puts it, “This is a generation that has rejected the church, but it hasn’t rejected Jesus. The world and this generation are desiring a dialogue with a church that won’t listen. This generation is falling through the cracks of Christendom”.



## Applications:

In reviewing the research findings, it became clear that these post-modern church critics make some important points that the church should take note of. They expressed a desire to explore issues of truth and spirituality, but with others and in a structure that was real, relevant, and relational.

In *Church Next*, Coffey and Gibbs define such true relational models in their chapter: "From generic congregations to incarnational communities". The point is that young people don't want to join up, or attend (congregations) but rather do life and be a part of something (community). And it can't be a general, generic small group, but rather a real, relevant relationship. It is self evident that each generation lived through different formative eras, was shaped by different events, and so had different experiences and expectations:

The generation gaps are obvious, and the

cultural gaps between the church and Australian youth continue to grow. Making church relevant for young adults today is not just a good idea-it's essential.

**Clearly it is ineffective to design it for them and push it on them. Rather we need to design it with them and communicate it through them. It is about engagement and involvement. Leading yet responding. As the best educators say, 'if they don't learn the way you teach - then teach the way they learn'.**

	<b>Baby Boomers - experiences in the 1960's and 70's</b>	<b>Generation X - experiences in the 1980's and 90's</b>	<b>Generations Y &amp; Z - experiences in the 21st century</b>
<b>Core values</b>	reliability, respect	freedom, life balance	identity, connection
<b>Belief systems</b>	absolutes, historical	some absolutes, some factual	few / no absolutes, observable
<b>Influences</b>	authorities, advancement	experts, achievement	own-community, self-discovery
<b>Communication and language</b>	auditory, monologue	visual, dialogue	kinaesthetic, multi-sensory
<b>Apologetics and tone</b>	presuppositional, negative	evidential, negative	incarnational, positive
<b>Focus</b>	traditional, prescriptive	technical, descriptive	experiential, participative
<b>Learning style</b>	formal, structured	relaxed, effective	spontaneous, collaborative
<b>Learning environment</b>	classroom style, quiet atmosphere	round-table style relaxed ambience	unstructured, interactive

Issue	Insight	Summary
Preaching	An educated generation: looking for hope not hype.	Substance and clarity and not just stories and emotion.
Worship	Rational and visceral: wanting to be engaged both head and heart.	Meaningful and reflective as well as participative and reflective.
Community Life	A real community of acceptance and inclusion yet with authenticity and boundaries.	Not just another social network but a community with whom they can do life.
Mission	They are looking for a defining cause and active involvement.	Short-term and experiential and not just send and support.

**By definition the church,  
like any organisation, is just  
one generation away from  
extinction.**

