

Gwen Riggs

January 22, 2023

Generation to Generation: Gen Z

I am very tired. Tiredness is part of why I'm not usually at church on Sundays. I work Tuesday through Saturday every week, so getting up early at the start of my weekend isn't something I love doing. However, I do love my Mother, so you'll still see me here on some occasions. Although in some ways, loving my mother is another reason I don't regularly attend church, because people being rude to her doesn't make that somewhere I want to be. And my generation doesn't really believe in "respecting our elders" in the traditional sense. We're more than happy to show people respect, but only if they're willing to do the same for us.

So, what does my generation think respect from our elders is about? Respect is being willing to listen. Being willing to be wrong and learn, instead of insisting that what you taught as a child is the only way to be right. Being willing to admit that you've done things you shouldn't have, instead of saying that the younger generation is just "too sensitive" because we're not willing to put up with being mistreated. Accepting that times have changed, and the fact that we can't get by just "pulling up our bootstraps" doesn't make us lazy.

On that note, let's talk about work. Most of my generation grew up with both parents working full time in order to support a middle class family, despite them having college educations. For my generation, even those who have college degrees are often working multiple jobs just to pay rent and student loans. Unlike my grandfather, people of my generation can't pay their way through college playing piano. And, the cost of living has been rising since my parents entered the workforce, and wages still have yet to rise enough to match it. Personally, despite working full time in health care making over \$20 an hour, I can't afford to move out of my parents house. And, thankfully, they aren't asking me to, which makes me luckier than many of my peers. So, why does my generation "not want to work?" Because we're overworked by companies that keep us understaffed to avoid paying more workers, while they're not even paying the ones they currently have enough to live in the area they work. So even if we like our jobs, we have to work ourselves to exhaustion until we hate them. We work to not be homeless, and to maybe have enough money left over to spend on the hobbies that give us just enough joy to keep us from going crazy. At least, for those of us who can get jobs, instead of being constantly turned down due to our age and lack of experience. Since when did an entry level job mean "5+ years experience and a bachelors in an applicable field?"

Meanwhile, the world is ending around us, and those with enough money to do something about it just make it worse in order to make more money that they don't even need. They just hoard it so they can brag about having the most to their other rich friends.

That's part of why we're always on our phones, because without that constant distraction we're forced to confront the fact the world is ending, and we're working so hard to make enough to survive that we don't even get to enjoy it before we're gone. Yet somehow, people still don't get why we're all depressed and anxious. But, hey, cute animals wearing hats! Our phones also help us keep connected with other people our age, since we're all too tired from working and depressed to actually hang out.

But if we're so lacking in community, why don't we come to church? Because most churches are full of those people who tell us that "we don't even have it that hard," and "how can you be depressed, just look at how good you have it!" And, we need our precious days off (well, those of us who get Sundays off) to try and rest enough that we don't work ourselves into getting sick, because we can't afford to take sick days even if we're lucky enough to have them. The reason we don't look as much for community outside of our generation is similar to everyone else's; no other generation grew up in the same environment we did. And we're tired of having our issues invalidated just because we can look things up on google instead of having to go to the local library. Yes, we didn't grow up hiking to school through 6 feet of snow, but we are expected to come to work regardless of whether it's safe to drive, because if we don't we'll get fired once they find someone who will. We don't stay at jobs long term because we don't want to put up with toxic work environments that we aren't paid enough to even pay for the therapy they'd make us need. Also, if you've ever told a young person "well I went through worse and I was fine," then I've got to break it to you: you're not fine, and you also need therapy. Suffering should not be an expected part of everyone's lives, and if anyone ever told you otherwise, I sincerely feel sorry for you. No one should be expected to get through traumatic events like nothing happened, and that's something my generation is putting a lot of work into not passing on.

So, now that we've talked a lot about why we don't come to church, let's talk about why we would want to. Like I said, we *do* desire a sense of community. A lot of our communities take place online, where people can connect with those all over the globe about shared interests, hobbies and identities. But we also like connecting

with people in person, when we have the chance. And we do like connecting with other generations, *when* they're willing to listen. So, what can you do to help bring young people into the fold?

You've already done one of the important steps towards making your church more welcoming to people of my generation, by being a reconciling congregation. A lot my generation, especially our local population, identifies in some way with the LGBTQ+ community. Being a reconciling church shows that you're willing to make changes to make us feel more comfortable, that you think it's important to show us that we will be safe here. But, this is only the first of many changes.

So, how do you let the young people know that you're willing to change? Well, you remember those phones we're always on? Get yourself on our screens. Make sure your website is functional, get on social media, advertise upcoming events with the reminder that all are welcome. And be open to letting young people use your space for their own events. Young people appreciate opportunities to bring their communities together, and giving them those opportunities makes them more likely to interact with your community. Even just not chasing away teenagers hanging out in your parking lot is a way to open that door. Yes, even if they're smoking, or skateboarding, or swearing. A lot of young people feel they're constantly being pushed out of spaces for the comfort of their elders, which is part of why so many communities only meet online. Older people have long created the stigma that young people are always up to no good when they're hanging out as a group. That they're going to steal, or vandalize, or be a nuisance. Fun fact: teens that do steal, tend to do so from large evil corporations who don't need the money, and use that money to fight against our rights. Most of them have no intention of stealing from your local mom-and-pop stores, because we do in fact understand how capitalism works.

What else? Be willing to throw events that aren't geared towards yourself. Something like Messy Church, a church program geared towards all ages that tells the gospel through activities and crafts that parents and kids can do together, rather than expecting young children to sit still for an hour of service. And, in my experience, these events do tend to be fun for all ages! Who doesn't like making edible bible crafts?

And, accept the fact that not all young people are going to be as spiritually inclined as you. Because of the negative experiences so many young people have had with churches, many are disconnected from religion, but that doesn't mean they aren't

willing to be open to it if you don't try and force it on them. And our religious experience may differ from your traditional ways of worship, but that doesn't make it any less spiritual. Personally, the most spiritual part of attending church for me is having a community, not sitting in a service and singing hymns. (Not that I personally have anything against church hymns, some are really catchy.) Let people experience God in their own way, even if it's non-traditional.

Also, connecting with the community you already have around you. Your neighbors, local schools and businesses. People are a lot more open to supporting your community if you're willing to support theirs.

Something else we like? People being polite. Don't tell people they're not dressed appropriately for church unless you don't want them to come back. Same with comments about our body weight, what we do or don't eat, makeup, being on our phones. Also, talking to a bunch of strangers who we have no idea whether they actually want us there or not, is scary. If you want to approach a young person, jokes relating to appearance aren't the way to go. Welcome us, maybe give us a compliment (but don't force yourself, because we can tell). Don't talk about how "interesting" someone's facial piercings are, or how "bold" their makeup is. And older men, just don't comment on younger women's appearances, and don't call us cute if we're not an actual child. No matter how well intentioned it is, it's always going to come off as creepy, sorry.

Also, if you can learn people's names, you can learn people's pronouns. It's okay to make mistakes, but when you do, don't complain about how hard it is to keep track of all these "new things" Pronouns are older than any of us are. Just apologize and move on, same as you would if you forgot someone's name.

I know this is a lot of information at once, and nobody expects change to happen instantly. Change takes time, and you'll make mistakes. But making an effort is just as important as the actual changes themselves.

I'm looking forward to the Q&A session, on zoom at 5:30pm tonight, as my mom has requested me to remind you; because I don't know what questions, or complaints, this group is going to have about my generation and what I've said today.