



The **Methodist** Church

The Missing Generation

Your Response?

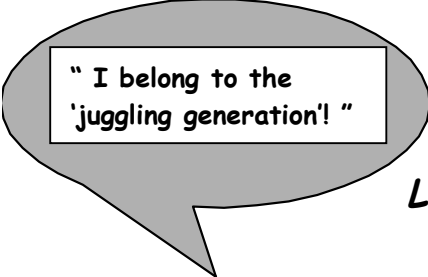
If you would like to make a response to what is contained in this report and how the issues might be addressed or if have your own views concerning *The Missing Generation* please make contact :

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***A report by the
Training & Development
Officers in the London,
Nottingham & Derby,
Lincoln & Grimsby Districts...***




**" I belong to the
'juggling generation!' "**



**" I want to
be used, not
utilised!! "**

***....concerning the 25-40 year
age group within the Church***



**" The Church is like Marks & Spencer used to be
- it's on every High Street but wasn't sure what
it was doing or where it was going. Look how
that's now changed!!"**

....an opportunity for you to respond!!

The Missing Generation

Introduction

Whilst undertaking a series of visits to circuits, the Training & Development Officers found that one of the main concerns within circuits was the fact that the age group 25 – 40 years was largely missing within many congregations.

In order to undertake further research into this, ministers were asked to suggest groups or individuals within this age range in their churches who would be willing to meet or make contact with us. We felt that their insights would be the most valuable starting point for exploring both what the Church needs to be and to do for them and why their peers are missing.

The response was good. In our visits we set out to listen and observe rather than collect extensive quantitative findings and the results are inevitably impressionistic. However the impact of what we learnt was such that we believe our findings accurately reflect the key issues facing the Church and provide a valuable source of information for considering appropriate responses to the '*Missing Generation*'.

We met with 11 groups totalling 102 people and received 15 written responses from individuals. Our information covers a wide range of backgrounds and situations across the Districts. On many occasions feelings were expressed with great strength. Often the concerns voiced pointed to underlying issues. What follows is our attempt to interpret the information we received as accurately and constructively as possible.

1. Urgency

Most of those spoken with or who responded are part of the established church. Very few are newcomers to the world of the Church. There is a feeling of tolerance to the present structures and attitudes, but a growing frustration. There is a belief that with, in effect, two unchurched generations within society, unless something is done soon it will be too late.

8. A Future Generation?

One of the impressive features of the visits was the quality of the loyal and committed members of the *Missing Generation* still active in the church often against the odds. Seven groups visited had formed around young and committed people whose Methodist family background, and the work of MAYC and MethSoc. kept them struggling on. This is a small but tremendously valuable resource for today's church and needs urgent support and nurturing. But, what is there apart from the local church after they have reached 25?

There is, however, a definite sense of denomination not being important for many. One person described herself as 'an ecumenical butterfly'. There appears to be a call for greater ecumenical integration, not necessarily in formal structures but in allowing distinctive styles of partner churches to grow, rather than middle-of-the-road congregations doing similar things under different badges.

In summary

1. **Worship:** to be diverse, flexible, high quality, relevant, with real continuity
2. **Belonging:** the importance of social groups that bring a respite from the work culture, and the need to support the loyal over 25s
3. **Leadership:** flexibility in structures that can enable participation and a sense of responsibility without unreasonable demands of time, energy and patience
4. **The older generation:** need to be more accepting and willing to explore how to share power
5. **Lifestyle:** need for more openness to people's life situations and a lighter touch in responding to them
6. **New Technology:** wider use in all ways, especially social contact, administration and pastoral care
7. **Beyond the Church:** it is probably a forlorn hope that a strategy can be put in place to address issues for those outside the Church. However by looking at these issues as we have begun to do for those inside the Church, a baseline might then begin to emerge for what can or should be done for others

The *Missing Generation* observes the ‘pettiness’ of older generations, and often feel it through the intolerance towards children, or attempts at creative worship or music. The *Missing Generation* still present in the Church is at heart very tolerant, otherwise they would not be there. Their peers have left. There is no doubt of the effort expended and the hurt felt, borne and expressed by younger people. Is there a work of penitence for the older generation to do?

The relative weight of numbers of the older generation gives them great power that they are not relinquishing. They appear to work with stereotypes of what young people are and what they are expected to do. They can give the impression of an inability or unwillingness to understand contemporary lifestyles and their pressures, and with it a tacit (or not) disapproval. There may of course be a ‘prophetic’ element about maintaining standards in this, but it inevitably alienates a younger generation. It can be so particularly when attention is focused in a negative way on sexual morality or family lifestyles rather than on justice issues.

7. The Missing Generation and the Missing Generation

When addressing the issue of what the Church should be doing concerning the *Missing Generation*, it is suggested the reason they are missing is because church is seen as ‘old-age, boring and irrelevant’. This may be so with regards to the Church but it does not mean there is no interest in things ‘spiritual’.

It was said that there are two groups of this generation. There is the majority who have no contact with the Church. It would never occur to them to go. Whatever the Church does will make no difference to them. It is not part of their life, thinking or being. The image of the Church image is poor. It was said that we have a ‘Marks & Spencer problem’ – the Church is prominent on all High Streets, but not sure where it should be going or what it should be doing.

However, there are others who have had some contact with the Church but do not attend regularly. It is not that they do not want to, but rather find other things more urgent or attractive e.g. work, study, sport, children’s activities, shopping, DIY, catching up on sleep, visiting friends and relatives. What the Church offers does not reflect their tastes in music, language or culture. Many do not want to get more involved and fear being dragged in. If they decide to attend, certainly at the beginning, they want an unconditional welcome with no strings attached.

2. Worship

Worship is a key issue. It needs to exhibit four characteristics:

- Quality
- Relevance
- Diversity
- Continuity

Quality in and of worship is not easily described. Worship depends so much on what the individual is willing to offer. However, there was a feeling that, taking into account what is said below about relevance, diversity and continuity, the whole experience of an hour in church on a Sunday morning was often not awesome, uplifting, challenging and of quality. Instead it was humdrum, predictable and therefore in quality, poor.

Worship needs to be *relevant* in that it is framed around and speaks to the world of which these people are a part, not several generations past and one which longs for the clock to be put back. Relevance speaks not just to the content of worship but to the method or style of its conduct.

Diversity is always appreciated. Gimmicks need to be avoided because this generation is very sensitive to what does not have depth, integrity and quality. It is recognised that there will be a wide range of tastes in any congregation, and that positive tolerance is needed.

Continuity may appear to sit uneasily with diversity, but is in fact a response to a number of factors that are very significant for those who worship in our churches today:

- Attendance as we know is not likely to be weekly or even regular
- Life for the ‘juggling generation’ is so frantic that being able to count on something that has a routine is important
- If worship is to provide a ‘still point’ of celebration and mystery, a sense of confidence in the context and leadership needs to be built up. This cannot be done quickly.

At issue here is the crucial concern of helping people to develop a sense of belonging. This takes time and persistence on the part of the leadership. There does not appear to be much call for worship at different times of the week. Sunday morning with all its pressures is still preferred.

There is much criticism of Local Preachers in that many are of the past, out of date and irrelevant. Is 'hatred' too strong a word to describe attitudes to All Age Worship? Probably, but not by much!

3. The value of groups

Groups are vital. This was the one place where they were understood, could be themselves and were accepted. The groups described and envisaged were groups of a similar age, and they took off when they reached a 'critical mass'. Here the isolation of life in general and the life of a young person in the church could be overcome, they could find support in their struggles and recognition for their gifts.

The groups seem largely to fulfil a social need. Those that belong to them value the belonging as something that is not available elsewhere in society, which brings with it through association with the wider church an inter-generational setting which can support, challenge and nurture. The building up of social networks is important. The comment was made to a member of the *Missing Generation* that those in the church seemed to know so many diverse people within the community.

Groups and committees concerned with faith development and running the church were much less popular. We explored a number of reasons why this might be. One person said, 'I spend most of my life at work in meetings' with the clear implication that there was no more energy for anything but friendship meetings beyond that.

As far as faith development itself is concerned, this generation has grown up at a time when many were not challenged with questions of commitment, belief and faith. However, they have now reached an age when they are expected to take on commitment in many guises without having known what it was really about. They say there is a need for older teenagers to be nurtured 'not Billy Graham-ed!' in such ways so that when they reach twenty-five they are committed and ready to take things on. Some said they feel they have to go outside the local church (e.g. Easter People, Spring Harvest) for real faith development. Teaching material other than Alpha which are more relevant, shorter and available on a self-help basis were asked for. If time for faith development was to be found in the local church, then Sunday morning as part of worship was the preferred option.

4. Leadership and Responsibility

There are important issues around the way leadership and responsibility is developed with this generation. If it is being encouraged only to fill traditional roles, often to keep a creaky structure going, it is pointless. People want to be accepted as equals able to take major responsibilities in church as they do at work, not treated as beginners. They want time to discern what is needed and what they can do. They are happy to be 'used but not utilised'. One couple quoted having done thirty hours of church work in a week, and they both work full time. This generation is rightly described as the 'juggling generation' in terms of time and priorities. The Church needs to accept this, work with it and not ignore it.

5. Flexibility and Pastoral Care

Much was said about the need for the Church to be more flexible. It feels like 'one size fits all'. Times have moved on from there being a single model of church to fit all. The Church needs to wake up to this and act upon it. The Church needs to be flexible in the way it is organised, to react and interact to and with the world, flexible in the way it takes on board the demands of the 21st century. While there are 'core' areas without which it could not operate, in the area of pastoral care for instance, we need to address issues such as how to cope with people who cannot attend worship each week, who do want to feel valued and who when they are there do not want a 'we haven't seen you for some time' reaction so much as 'it's good you're here'.

There are key questions about how we keep in touch and make people feel valued not guilty. There needs to be greater use of modern technology, e-mail networks are used by two of the groups for staying in touch. Younger people can often suffer pastorally from unhelpful stereotyping – one young childless couple found this particularly difficult.

6. Living with the older generation

This is an acutely difficult area. There is a feeling that the Church is very conservative and unwilling to change or to address issues in a radical way. However here is a paradox. For many of the reasons identified above, the younger people feel unwilling to take on responsibilities, so who is left?