

What Hillary Is Learning About GenXers—and What Your Church Must Know

Hillary Clinton thought she had the full support of young American voters last year. She got high-profile endorsements from singers Pharrell Williams and Christina Aguilera. She appeared in a goofy skit on Saturday Night Live in which she praised herself for having a “young, cool vibe.” She even brought in pop star Katie Perry (sporting Hillary Clinton campaign fingernails) to sing her signature anthem “Roar” at a campaign event in Iowa.

But now, just a few months later, 68-year-old Clinton is scrambling to convince Millennials and GenXers that she is their candidate. She even opened a Snapchat account and put her 35-year-old daughter, Chelsea, on the platform. But the latest polls show that, among Democrats, a majority of young voters are choosing Bernie Sanders, the ultra-liberal, “democratic socialist” senator from Vermont—who is six years older than Clinton.

The reason? Young voters have told *CNN* and other news outlets that they don’t trust Hillary. They think she’s dishonest. And they believe she is too tied to the Wall Street/Inside-the-Washington-Beltway establishment. They detect something fake.

We’ll see how all this plays out in Iowa and New Hampshire in a few days. Meanwhile, I hope the church can learn a few lessons from politics. The truth is that Millennials and GenXers don’t have much trust in the Christian “establishment” either. Here are a few things the church must learn fast if we want to win the trust of the younger generation:

- 1. Quit being phony.** Young people today want authenticity. They can’t stand anything fake or pretentious. We are way past

the time when preachers can afford to be cocky and unapproachable. Ministers who arrive at church in limousines or who view ministry as a business venture might as well forget about attracting the younger crowd. Youth today cannot stomach the swagger of a slick televangelist who has been stuck in a 1980s time warp. If you genuinely care about taking the gospel to the younger generation, get rid of anything that comes across as fake. (And that includes pushing people to the floor when you pray for them.)

2. Stop preaching a money-focused gospel. Today's young people will go to the ends of the earth with you if you preach a message of humility and sacrifice. They want to heal the sick, stop child slavery and crush injustice. They despise corporations that oppress foreign workers and governments that exploit people. So if you spend all your time taking offerings for a private jet or manipulating people to give in your "first fruits offering," young people will yawn, roll their eyes and find a better cause to support. They can spot a religious con artist more quickly than many adults who have been in church for years!

3. Cultivate real relationships. Today's young people don't place a high value on church attendance or religious routines. Part of the reason they stay away from programmed events is that they genuinely want to connect; they are not interested in keeping a chair warm just so you can fill your new sanctuary. They are relational. And some are starved for love because their own families split apart. They don't want to just listen to a preacher; they want to hear what you have to say and then have a coffee with you afterward. Churches that are successfully reaching young people create a true family environment of love and connection.

4. Offer assurance and encouragement—and follow through. Some of the young men I mentor were horribly disappointed by parents or spiritual leaders. Some were abandoned by their dads; others were verbally abused by pastors. For that reason,

they expect older adults to fail them again—yet they thrive when a true mentor steps in to offer affirming words and caring hugs. But remember: If you tell a young person you will help them, keep your promise. Make the phone calls, send the texts and take them to lunch when possible. You are making a priceless investment.

5. Stop being religious and judgmental. Many of the young Christians I meet today are more passionate about their faith than their parents. They spend their summers on the mission field, get involved in 24/7 prayer efforts and forfeit cars and careers to serve the Lord. But when they walk into some churches they are instantly judged because they have scruffy beards, metal piercings in their noses or tattoos on their forearms. Then they listen to self-righteous Christians who bash sinners rather than model compassion. Is it any wonder that so many Millennials and GenXers have checked out of church?

It is possible to close the generation gap in the church, but this won't happen until older Christians start caring less about maintaining the status quo and more about loving and empowering younger believers. Let's make the necessary changes by slaughtering our sacred cows, embracing new music, learning new technology and welcoming a fresh wave of the Holy Spirit's power.{eoa}