

The Church and Gen F

Adapted by Ed Kruse from a blog by Gary Hamel on wsj; posted on Facebook by ELCA Bishop Mike Rinehart.

The experience of growing up online will profoundly shape the expectations of the church by “Generation F” – the Facebook Generation. Gen F folks expect the church culture to reflect the social context of the Web, rather than 1950’s bureaucracy, as is currently the case.

If your congregation hopes to attract the creative and energetic members of Gen F, you will want to understand their Internet-derived expectations, and reframe them to the relevance of our faith practices. It is dynamic now, but that won’t always be the case. In the future, any church that lacks a vital core of Gen F members will be perceived by this group as irrelevant.

Here are Hamel’s 12 relevant characteristics of online life, plus three more of my own. Hamel calls them “post-bureaucratic realities.” These realities will not impose themselves on anyone. And yet they are available to everyone – pastors, lay leaders, and congregation members. Some of these realities are timeless; and we will learn which are timeless and which will be cast off the island. These realities help inform our congregations how relevant they are to this group. The congregation may ignore it all, and does so at its own peril.

This short list is merely a beginning. Other emerging realities will continue to create opportunities to respond with the Gospel of Jesus Christ in ways that create God-pleasing values that transcend the post-modern ones; and systematization will be dynamic rather than static. These fifteen characteristics focus only on what may be the more significant shifts from the current practices of today’s organized church. In effect, some of them are historically consistent with the Reformation tradition.

We invite you to discern what wisdom resides in each characteristic and what value it might have in extending God’s kingdom. Online residents discover will new proverbs and develop tomorrow’s conventional wisdom, and we in www.HealthierChurch.org want to have a role in that exploration.

If a characteristic bothers you, let it go. It is not an issue, but an experience. You may discard any characteristic that doesn’t connect for you. We suggest, however, that God will use some of these characteristics to enrich those who ring doorbells, and when doorbells become obsolete, they will enrich the new ways of connecting with those in the world God wants us to reconcile to God through Jesus Christ. So consider these characteristics without anxiety; they may be built upon; and new characteristics may be co-created. Perhaps the more we are bothered by these characteristics of Gen F the more we may need to let them go. After all, some of them may not be realities for long.

Our bias is that they will impact every aspect of stewardship and evangelism. Here they are:

1. **All ideas compete on an equal footing.** On the Web, every idea has the chance to gain a following, or not. No one has the power to dictate an idea or squelch a debate. No one can force an issue. No one can control others. Freedom of choice resides in a paradoxical domain that

is both non-biased and non-neutral. It occurs on a sinner-saint playing field, with strictly enforced boundaries. Values are vital. They may be both strongly held, yet never imposed. Ideas gain traction based on their perceived holistic merit, rather than on the political power of the sponsors.

2. Contribution counts for more than credentials. When someone posts a video on YouTube, no one asks if the person went to film school. When some writes a blog, no one cares whether the writer has a journalism degree. No one degrades another's position, title, or academic resume, nor does anyone worship it, or give it more weight. Status differentiation does not carry weight. There are some absolutes, such as being connected, which is the doorbell. Being connected opens the door to contributing. Another absolute on the Web is participation. Participation trumps apathy and leads to making a difference. Our bias is that God will certainly use this, and perhaps in a way that transforms congregation members to become more involved in the ministries of the congregation.

3. Hierarchies are natural, not prescribed. In a Web forum, some individuals receive more respect and attention than others; however not because of position or office held. It is accurate to say that, as a natural result, such people make more of a difference than others. However, these individuals have not been appointed or elected. In a childlike way, no one cares if someone is Vice President of Whatever. No one is judged unfit or condemned or criticized. Clout reflects the freely given approbation of peers. What leads these people to make more of a difference is the value that is given to the ideas that are presented. On the Web, authority trickles up, not down. There is no mandate except what is prescribed by the group, yet never requiring a vote; it is organic. It is not community organizing; in the mind of the participants it is community.

4. Leaders serve rather than preside. Online, every leader is a servant leader; no one has power to command. No one has power to sanction. In fact sanctions do not seem to be needed. Leverage emerges from evangelical selflessness, credibility, and expertise. These values leverage the current understanding of productivity, although productivity may be reconsidered and redefined at any moment. What gets done, gets done through others, collaboratively. It is vital for every participant to know the boundaries; they are unforgiving. Forget this online, and followers will soon abandon the virtual leaders and group. If leaders of nations or tribes or congregations are too slow to grasp this reality they risk the possibility of residing in a desert to choke on the dust of their own regret, or even face the risk of overthrow.

5. Tasks are chosen, not assigned. The economy of stewardship on the Web is opt-in, not shoe-horned in. No one is pressured to join, attend, or do. Anyone can contribute to a blog, work on an open source project, or share both nonsense and wisdom in a forum. Sometimes what begins as nonsense morphs into wisdom. No one is recruited; everyone chooses to work on their passions, with their gifts. Everyone is an independent contractor. Don't bother trying to create an itch; it's futile. Everyone owns their own itches, and scratches them. Scratching each other's back takes on a holy meaning; and becomes transformational.

6. Groups are self-defining and self-organizing. On the Web, you choose your partners. There are no Internet officers, constitutions, by-laws, budgets, or committees. In an online community, anyone can link up with some ideas and ignore others, or share deeply with some participants, and not at all with others. No one assigns tasks. It is by invitation, “Come follow me.” No one forces another to work. No one asks another to hang out with a rigid-thinker, but everyone is free to be one at their own risk. Post-hierarchical bunches of people become groups; and groups have power. The power comes from the mission.

7. Resources get attracted, not allocated. In traditional organizations, resources are allocated from a limited account. In online life the participants never say, “It’s not in the budget, because there is no budget. Missional stewardship generates unlimited resources. On the Web, energy and effort flow toward ideas and projects that are look attractive, enjoyable, and/or have perceived missional value. In the online community all can decide, moment by moment, how to share, save, and invest their time, talent, treasure, and experience. Attention span matters, whether it is momentary or lasting commitment.

8. Power comes from information that is shared, not hoarded. The Web economy is one of giving. It is nearly free of barter and cannot take advantage of others. Greater receiving results from greater giving. Giving influence, status, and respect is reciprocated. Giving grows in direct relation to the kind of giving that expects nothing in return. There is little procrastination, no delay. The credo is “DIN” – “do it now.” If you don’t, someone else will beat you to the punch, or the situation will get worse; and the cost of not acting is usually greater than the original price for taking action. Online there are unspoken incentives to share, without commercials. There is no message that connects to accumulation. The principle is that there is always enough. If one is connected they will be invited, and that is what matters.

9. Opinions complexify grandly and decisions are peer-reviewed. On the Internet, truly wise ideas gain a following rapidly. The more an idea complexifies the more solid the resulting consensus decision. No one says, “That is a dumb idea.” Discernment flourishes. Ideas are sorted according to the perceived greater good of the community, even the ideas that are disruptive at first. The Web is a near-flawless medium for discerning the wisdom of the community. No resolutions, no amendments. No parliamentary procedure, no formal infrastructure. Online people are resolute, free to amend and become infrastructure, and their desire is welcomed. They are merely constituted informally. The voice of the community can challenge entrenched institutional interests; and it is precisely out of these ashes that the phoenix of renewal emerges.

10. Users can veto most policy decisions. Online users are opinionated, and their opinions are easily pigeon-holed. Online residents quickly attack any decision or policy change that seems harmful to the community. They do not claim to be right, nor do they claim to be community leaders. They believe in transformation, though they may never have learned about it. They are obsessed with developing community. They keep users loyal by welcoming differences and the freedom to express them. Everyone that shows up has a say in decisions. Others may have built the community, but the Gen F members own it, not unlike the body of Christ. Thought resonates with

“you can’t fight city hall” being a myth, and finds unlimited hope because “with God all things are possible” and “in Christ everyone is a new creature,” though they may never say those words. And God may muse, “Creating people in my image is going to work out after all.”

11. Intrinsic rewards matter more than money and recognition. The web is a testament to the power of intrinsic rewards, like “sowing and reaping.” Software is open source; advice is freely given. Human beings give generously of themselves when they are invited to contribute to something they really care about. Money is good, but there is no love of money, and it is not allowed to fill the non-position of second master. The joy of making a difference is good, and Gen F participants love it. Appreciation is abundant. It’s just that appreciation is not needed to motivate someone to get connected.

12. Hackers are heroes and agitators are appreciated. Online communities embrace those who think outside the box. Organizations are exposed when they make life uncomfortable and they are welcomed back when they return in humility. Online communities usually embrace those who have anti-authoritarian views. Malcontents may be celebrated, but primarily when they crack a code that has been interfering with others’ digital freedom. Paradox is real. One-sided views gain little traction. It’s “both-and,” “x’s” and “o’s;” sinner-saints, clergy-lay, Law and Gospel, ordained clergy and priesthood of all believers.

13. Consensus decisions are faith-based. Online residents live in faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” As Dietrich Bonhoeffer, when one’s beliefs calls one to follow, Gen F members see themselves as “called to die for those beliefs if necessary.” They believe that “there is no greater love than this, to be willing to lay down your life for those you care about.” They do not seek martyrdom, but they understand its vitality and importance. It is God-like governance in decision-making. It is amazing grace. It is transformational leadership.

14. Implementation occurs organically. The Internet winnows ideas. Online residents integrate them naturally into a body of knowledge that is always in flux and always available to everyone who is connected. Being baptized means being connected. Being connected means freedom and purpose. Being baptized forbids being uninvolved. The power of love and caring is the greatest gift, and the church has everything at its disposal to slosh the love of God in Christ on everyone. The Spirit is omnipotent as wind; you can’t quarantine the wind.

15. The world is worth saving. This premise is the beginning as well as the intended outcome. The idea originated with God, even though the world continues to practice destroying itself. Gen F thrives on implementing world-changing ideas without fear, yet with many mid-course corrections. It is a spirit, not a program, and this spirit may well have been written into our DNA. How might God use these ways of being to create a managerial DNA in the church? It may happen in a congregation; it may happen in worship, “for the sake of the world.” We may see God’s “face” book more clearly through online lenses.