Clergy, Congregations, and Today's Young Adults: Exploring the Church Through the Experiences of Generation Z Lutherans

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For decades, pastors, church leaders, congregations, and scholars have been concerned when a generation emerges into young adulthood—and for good reason. Ministry leaders encounter several unique challenges while serving the young adults entrusted to their care. For many young adults, leaving home for the first time and having the opportunity to choose their own house of worship removes an external compulsion to remain part of their family's faith tradition.[1] Many young adults also report seeing the Church as outdated and irrelevant in today's world, prompting them to question its value and role in their lives.[2] These and other factors have led to a historically challenging relationship between the Christian Church and young adult generational cohorts,[4] including high levels of young adult attrition from the Church.

These challenges are more pronounced when it comes to the latest generation to enter adulthood, Generation Z, which includes those born between 1997 and 2010.[3] According to Barna, only 42 percent of Generation Z identifies as Christian,[4] compared with 84 percent of the silent generation (born 1928–1946), 76 percent of baby boomers (1947–1965), 67 percent of Generation X (1966–1980), and 49 percent of millennials (1981–1996).[5] If trends continue—and there is no convincing reason to think otherwise—two-thirds of young adult Christians will drop out of the Church for at least one year between the ages of 18 and 22, with 69 percent not returning.[6] Additionally, "the percentage of Gen Z that identifies as atheist is *double* that of US adults."[7] As the number of practicing Christians continues to decline, Generation Z has not been raised with faith as a central focus, leading them to be called a "post-Christian" generation.[8]

These numbers demonstrate that ministering to Generation Z Christians poses significant challenges as they enter adulthood, as does reaching the substantial numbers

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of their peers who are not Christian. This article will examine these challenges and offer suggestions for Christian ministry and mission to Generation Z.

The approach taken in this article focuses on young adults' relationships with their pastors. When considering why young adults leave the Church, their individual relationships with their congregations and pastors is often cited. According to Lifeway Research, 73 percent of young adult study participants left the Church because of an issue related to their congregation or pastor.[9] In a study conducted by the Missouri Synod's Youth Ministry Office (YMO), 48 percent of young adults who left the Church identified their pastor as a negative influence, with 9 percent reporting they felt their doubts and questions had been pushed aside.[10] The YMO concludes,

> In many cases, the negative influences of pastors were the result of a series of encounters where the young people repeatedly felt ignored or dismissed. In other cases, there may have just been a single event that stayed with a young person. The young person did not even have to be directly involved for a negative experience to lead to broken relationships, struggle, and disconnect from the church. Pastors need to be aware that there are no meaningless interactions with youth, especially in times of heightened stress or struggle.[11]

It is clear that pastoral relationships with young adults are critical to their experience with the Christian Church. Sociologist Frank Newport, citing Gallup business research, asserts, "'…people leave managers, not companies,' and the same conclusion may be applied to organized religion. People may be leaving ministers, not churches."[12] As the Church seeks to serve emerging adult generations and help them remain connected, understanding their relationships with clergy is critical.

A significant lack of research exists that specifically explores this topic for Generation Z. My doctoral research aimed to address this gap, considering Gen Z young adults in congregations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS).[13] The overarching question guiding this research was, What is the lived experience for Generation Z young adults, specifically as it relates to their interactions with clergy in the Christian Church?

The answer to this research question was pursued by considering three sub-questions:

1. How do Gen Z young adults understand the role of Christian clergy?
2. How does Gen Z experience pastoral leadership in the Christian Church?
3. How does the understanding of and experience with clergy (specifically pastoral leadership) shape Gen Z's overall experience with the Christian Church?

While the study's primary research question focused on the role of the pastor in shaping a young person's relationship with the Church, this study's participants also spoke about their experiences with numerous aspects of church life. Because each generation has unique experiences and influences that shape their lives and worldviews (including their

views of the Church),[14] each generation offers distinct mission opportunities. No generational cohort is identical to those preceding it. Consequently, understanding and learning from the lived experience of *each* generation is vital for carrying out the Church's mission and engaging them in ministry. With these factors in mind, this study bears weight for *all* members of the Christian Church seeking to build up and support the entire body of Christ, including today's emerging adults.

Who is Generation Z?

While drawing generational boundaries is an inexact science, defining a marker between cohorts is needed for research purposes. This study defines Generation Z (or "Gen Z" or "Z'ers") as Americans born between 1997 and 2010.[15] Gen Z comprises over one-quarter of today's American population,[16] making it the largest generational cohort in the United States.[17] As with all generations, Gen Z has been shaped by a series of cultural experiences that formed a collective worldview, affecting how they see themselves and the world around them—including institutions like the Christian Church. Understanding their generational identity is key to best reaching and serving Gen Z. Five key issues that have shaped Generation Z's collective identity, which must be recognized and understood by missional leaders, are as follows: diversity and identity, technology, safety and security, fear and anxiety, and spirituality and religious affiliation.

Diversity and Identity

Generation Z is the largest generational cohort in America, and it has also experienced the greatest diversity of any generation.[18] This is true in terms of race and ethnicity, and also in their diverse perspectives on issues of gender and sexual identity.[19] Selingo asserts, "Gen Z is the most diverse generation in modern American history, and its members are attentive to inclusion across race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity."[20] This exposure to diversity has formed within Z'ers a value for social relationships, acceptance, inclusivity, and individual expression. Gen Z desires diversity in institutions with which they affiliate, and, for many, inclusivity trumps a specific belief system or doctrine.[21]

Technology

Technological advances have uniquely shaped the daily existence of Generation Z. This is most evident in the fact that they live as the world's first digital natives: although previous generations have experienced some degree of digital connection, Z is the first cohort raised with virtually ubiquitous access to information via the internet.[22] As of 2018, ninety-one percent of Z'ers carried a smartphone, with 90 percent reporting they would be reluctant to sever their internet connection as it is prized more than most in-person engagements.[23] Although face-to-face connection is valued by Gen Z, the overall expectation is that organizational communication will incorporate modern technology in some manner. While a number of positives exist because of recent technology, there are downsides to this generation's constant access to information. For example, Z'ers have become proficient at consuming massive quantities of information quickly[24] and swiftly

switching between tasks.[25] Rue noted, however, that because the generation has been inundated with information, they often struggle to assess its validity to know what is real.[26]

Safety and Security

Challenges to personal and societal safety and security have shaped how Gen Z engages the world. Raised in an era of war, terrorism, mass and school shootings, and threats to national security,[27] Z'ers have never known a peaceful world. Consequently, many see the world as unsafe.[28] Their generational emergence also coincided with the 2008 financial crisis,[29] showing them the effects of economic struggle as they watched their millennial predecessors compete in a difficult job market and accumulate record student debt loads.[30] Issues of safety and security have led Generation Z to a more realistic, pragmatic worldview,[31] with many saying they are "distrustful of the future."[32] Consequently, many name happiness and financial success as the primary goals for their lives and continue searching for safety and security wherever they may be found.

Fear and Anxiety

High levels of anxiety are felt by many in Generation Z, as "inner battles with anxiety and fear often exceed levels of hope or optimism."[33] Three out of ten American Z'ers struggle with anxiety, with 39 percent of college students demonstrating signs of depression or anxiety and 11 percent exhibiting suicidal ideation.[34] There are numerous causes for this generational anxiety, including the physical safety and financial security issues described above. Additionally, technology—one of the generation's greatest assets—is also one of its greatest sources of stress. Kim and Koh found a positive correlation between smartphone addiction and anxiety, with teens self-reporting struggles with "nomophobia,[35] which Barna Group describes as "a feeling of anxiety anytime they are separated from their mobile phone."[36] The fear and anxiety felt by Generation Z is one of its most noteworthy attributes, and the Christian Church must take notice: "Depressed, anxiety-ridden screenagers hiding out in their bedrooms need an escape hatch that opens into the body of Christ."[37]

Spirituality and Religious Affiliation

In recent decades, American indifference to organized religion has increased dramatically in what White calls the "Great Decline" of religion's relevance in society,[38] leading to a "reduced cultural authority" for Christianity.[39] Of Americans under the age of thirty, 36 percent are religiously unaffiliated,[40] even though only 9 percent were raised outside of any organized religion.[41] Generation Z is considered the first "post-Christian" generation in American history, with 34 percent saying spirituality is a low priority and only 16 percent expressing a desire to grow in this area.[42] As noted previously, this generation's beliefs about the Church are reflected in its high rates of attrition from Christian churches.

Conceptual Framework, Methodology, and Data Collection

My research explored the phenomenon of Gen Z's experience with the leadership of Christian clergy in terms of the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory.[43] LMX views leadership as a series of one-on-one, dyadic relationships between leaders and followers (or "members"). According to this theory, these exchanges help to create the culture within an institution as the health of each dyad affects group-level processes throughout the entire population. Healthy relationships increase member trust, commitment, and organizational citizenship, while unhealthy relationships have the opposite effect. With these factors in mind, this study's research questions focused on the individual perceptions and experiences (or "exchanges") members of Gen Z had with Christian clergy and their effect on the young person's engagement with the Church.

To best understand this phenomenon, the voices of Gen Z'ers were critical for this study. Consequently, a qualitative approach was utilized in developing this research. This study incorporated a phenomenological methodological approach, which seeks to construct the meaning of personal experience.[44] Phenomenology is regarded as "well-suited to studying affective, emotional, and often intense human experiences,"[45] making it an optimal choice for research on a person's religious beliefs and experiences.

Data for this study was collected through interactions with young adult church members of Generation Z.[46] The chief data collection method was semi-structured interviews with Z'ers who have recently participated in an LCMS congregation using a modified version of Seidman's three-interview format.[47] The first round of interviews explored each participant's personal history with the Church and their understanding of the pastoral role/office. The second round of interviews examined each participant's experience with Christian clergy. Finally, the third round of interviews offered each participant the opportunity to reflect on how these experiences have affected their lives, specifically their faith and involvement with the Christian Church. Each interview was approximately sixty to seventy-five minutes. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and logistical restrictions, the majority of interviews were conducted via Zoom, with two participants engaging asynchronously via email exchanges. In total, this method yielded nearly thirty hours of interviews, in addition to the email interviews. Data were coded using Creswell and Poth's six-step method.[48] Four primary types of coding were utilized: in vivo, emotion, value, and causation. Data was collected to the point of saturation and sufficiency, rather than through the establishment of a pre-determined number of participants.

This study was conducted and presented with approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Drake University (Des Moines, IA) to ensure adherence to ethical standards. Informed consent, member checking, peer examination, and audit trails were among the practices utilized to ensure the study's validity. All participants, congregations, and clergy names were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality, and congregations were identified using generalized geographic regions rather than specific locations.

Participants

In phenomenological research, participants are critical—so critical they have been referred to as "co-researchers."[49] Ensuring participant's experiences align with the study's

purpose is of the utmost importance. Consequently, a purposeful sampling method was selected for this study.[50] Participants were required to meet the following criteria prior to selection for the study: (1) eighteen to twenty-three years old at the time of the study, (2) currently living in the United States, and (3) a member of an LCMS congregation at some point within the last three years.

Participant selection incorporated maximum variation sampling, along with a combination of snowball and opportunistic sampling. Additionally, sample size in a phenomenological study may vary widely. For this study, Seidman's criteria of sufficiency and saturation were utilized.[51] Table 1 offers a list of participant demographics, and Table 2 shares information about the study participants' congregations.

Table 1
Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Setting/Region	Status	Congregation	Years Attended
Graysen	23	Female	Metro/Midwest	Working	City Church	2
Aidan	22	Male	Rural/Midwest	Working	St. Paul's	15
Natasha	21	Female	Suburban/South	College	Hosanna	21
Saylor	22	Female	Suburban/Midwest	Working	First	22
Rebecca	22	Female	Suburban/Midwest	Working	Christ	10
Matthew	19	Male	Metro/Rocky Mtn.	College	Zion	8
Bryn	21	Female	Suburban/South	College	Hope	21
Trevin	18	Male	Suburban/South	College	Hosanna	18
Paige	19	Female	Suburban/Midwest	College	Trinity	8
Sam	18	Male	Metro/West	High School	Redemption	6

Table 2
Congregation Information

Congregation	Setting/Region	Year Founded	Member-ship	Pastor(s) Discussed	Pastor Since
City Church	Metro/Midwest	2007	2000	Pr. Dan	2015
St. Paul's	Rural/Midwest	1959	1300	Pr. Dave	1992
Hosanna	Suburban/South	1986	1200	Pr. Jeff	1991
First	Suburban/Midwest	1847	85	Pr. Greg	1991
Christ	Suburban/Midwest	1980	200	Pr. Adam	2010
Zion	Metro/Rocky Mtn.	1965	1400	Pr. Jack	2005
Hope	Suburban/South	1948	400	Pr. Matt	2005
Hosanna	Suburban/South	1986	1200	Pr. Jeff	1991
Trinity	Suburban/Midwest	1876	2000	Prs. Sheldon & Leo	2012 & 2017
Redemption	Metro/West	1882	4600	Pr. Ian	1993

Findings

Using leader-member exchange theory to examine the relationships between ten LCMS young adults and their pastors, four key themes emerged to help answer the study's primary research question, What is the lived experience for Generation Z young adults, specifically as it relates to their interactions with clergy in the Christian church? Themes include the duality of the pastor's role, treatment as outsiders, pastoral positivity, and it's not (all) about the pastor.

Theme 1: The Duality of the Pastor's Role

Participants understood the pastoral office as a blending of two roles: spiritual authority and shepherd. Most study participants found their pastors functioning primarily in the role of spiritual authority: ensuring right theology and doctrine while practicing Word and Sacrament ministry. They experienced the pastor as one who ensures that members and congregations stay on a correct theological path and who creates a unified theological viewpoint in the church. Accordingly, their language for describing pastors tended to describe their spiritual authority, focusing on theology, doctrine, and programs of faith formation. They used terms and phrases like "preacher," "teacher," "lead worship," "lead confirmation," and "direct faith formation." While there was nearly unanimous agreement regarding how participants had experienced the work of the pastor, this view of spiritual authority was seen more as a reality of the relationship rather than as the desired interpersonal dynamic between participants and their pastors.

For participants, the second pastoral role—the pastor as shepherd—was experienced less frequently but was more highly prized. When asked about the attributes a person should possess if they are to successfully serve as a pastor, participants most frequently described *relational* attributes. Responses centered on words of interpersonal and emotional intelligence such as "relatable," "connecting," "welcoming," "inclusive," "understanding," "friendly," "personable," "thoughtful," and "selfless." Participants expressed a desire for clergy who were able to connect with and understand them, along with serving as a leader for their people. Each participant expressed a view that the pastor should be the principal leader in a congregational setting, offering clarity, vision, strategic guidance, and organizational direction.

Many participants struggled with this duality, commonly experiencing the role and work of their pastor as that of spiritual authority while desiring more encounters with their pastor as shepherd. For Generation Z, humble service from a shepherd is critical to the work of Christ's mission; today's young people are more willing to follow to a leader exhibiting the attributes of a servant leader than one positioning themselves solely as an authority figure. The two visions of the pastorate offer insight into the young adult's understanding of and experience with clergy, and they affect the way Gen Z understands its place in today's Church, as demonstrated in Theme 2.

Theme 2: Treatment as Outsiders

Most participants exhibited signs of feeling treated as *outsiders* in young adulthood, both by pastors and their congregations. Eight out of the eleven relationships described by participants would typically be considered "outsider" treatment according to leader-member exchange theory. In describing their current interactions with their pastors, these participants noted that following the conclusion of confirmation instruction, their primary interactions revolved around the Sunday morning worship service, with their only regular interaction being a handshake and brief small talk with the pastor at the end of the service. Participants also recounted stories of feeling unheard by their pastors based on the general tone of their conversations about personal decisions and beliefs. These young adults reported feeling unheard, lectured to, and voiceless in their interactions with the pastor. The way young people view their interactions with pastors not only affects their one-on-one relationships; it changes the way Z'ers view their place in the LCMS: as the relationship with the pastor goes, so goes the young person's feeling of belonging (or lack thereof) in the Church.

Overwhelmingly, participants expressed frustration from the feeling that there is not a place for young adults in today's LCMS. A general lack of programming for young adults, coupled with the overall absence of young adults themselves, raised concern for study participants. While all of these young adults have remained active in their churches, they continue watching as many in their generation walk away, leaving them longing for Christian community within their age group. One participant even shared the belief that their generation is often ignored by members of the clergy and older congregational members. Yet, despite feeling "on the outside" with these groups, as another participant stated, these young adults were all still part of the LCMS. While the first two themes help explain the experiences of young adults; the themes that follow help describe the meaning they have made from those experiences.

Theme 3: Pastoral Positivity

Despite feelings of disconnection with pastors and congregations, the Z'ers in this study still expressed positive feelings overall toward their pastors. Of the eleven pastor-member relationships discussed in the interviews, ten were characterized as positive by participants, with each participant affirming that their unique relationship with their pastor is important to them. While the specifics of each relationship differed, three key ideas emerged from listening to those who expressed the greatest fondness for their pastors.

First, the engagements pastors facilitated with young adults *outside* of the worship service were reported as the most positive and of greatest significance to the Z'ers. Simple comments made in passing helped the young adult feel seen; using shared interests to spark conversation made participants feel understood; showing up at major life events (graduations, confirmation parties, etc.) helped the Z'ers feel cared for. Several participants also reflected on how service opportunities with the pastor or getting to know him and his family outside of the congregation (through babysitting, for example) deepened the bond these Z'ers felt with the pastor—not just as a spiritual authority, but as a person. A few participants added that a pastor's use of technology offers the potential to enhance their

relationship with young people. Given Gen Z's propensity for technology use, this is an avenue by which the pastors who utilized technology were able to "practice presence" with the young adult, even when they were physically unable to participate in the congregation.

Another means by which pastors were able to develop rapport with participants was through taking the initiative to build relationships with young adults. By learning what was important to their members, reaching out to the young person during particularly trying circumstances, remembering and celebrating big life events, etc., the young people felt affirmed and loved. Overwhelmingly, participants in this study noted that they are not likely to initiate building a relationship with the pastor, even though they believe doing so is important, because of the power differential with the pastor as an authority figure. Part of what these young people expect from a pastor is to prioritize relational development and "take the first step" in connecting with church members.

A third sub-theme involved pastoral longevity. Eight out of eleven study participants have known their pastor for at least eight years. Many of these participants continued referencing the pastor's consistent presence in their lives—in some cases, since birth. This longevity was frequently cited by participants as leading to a more positive relationship between pastors and young adults due to the volume of interaction these years offered. The consistency of pastoral presence allowed many participants to maintain their positive view of their pastor, even in times of diminished communication.

Theme 4: It's Not (All) About the Pastor

When asked what effect the pastor had on their continued participation in their congregations, only three explicitly stated their pastor played a role their decision to remain active in that setting. It is important to consider that participants noted positive feelings for at least one of their pastors, as shown in my discussion of Theme 3. This positivity is critical: although their pastors were not named as primary factors in their decision to *stay*, each study participant held their pastor in high enough regard that they did not *leave* their church because of his presence. Several other influences, however, did surface throughout the interviews that helped keep the young adults engaged: family, secondary (commissioned/auxiliary) workers, and events outside of worship.

The majority of study participants were raised attending a Christian church, and family remained a principal consideration when deciding to remain active or follow many in their generational cohort in leaving the church. Seven out of the ten study participants listed family as a primary factor for their engagement with the Christian Church today. For some, fear of disappointing their parents played a part. Most, however, valued the time to worship with family and the bonds church participation helped them build with parents, siblings, and extended family members.

While only three participants specifically mentioned pastoral influence as a factor in their continued activity within their church, six of the participants discussed relationships with a secondary (commissioned/auxiliary) worker as key. Vicars, directors of Christian education (DCE), DCE interns, deaconess interns, and lay youth workers were specifically referenced as positive influences. The idea surfaced that, for many young people, direct

contact with the pastor diminishes following the completion of a confirmation program, but students are often "handed off" to these workers for the high school and college years. Consequently, their level of influence on the student's congregational activity was heightened during this critical time of life.

Finally, participation in events outside of the worship service were listed as key for these Generation Z'ers. A host of activities were noted that helped participants connect with others in their generational cohort, more broadly within their congregations, and the Church as a whole. Youth trips (LCMS Youth Gathering, summer camp, service trips), educational opportunities (Bible studies, confirmation), and other "special" events that varied by region or congregation were key factors for these participants. It is important to note, the events in which participants engaged were not pivotal because of their attractional value; they were catalytic to participant relationships. Through these events, young people connected with others in their age range, committed and caring adults, and other parts of the Church at large. Consequently, these opportunities hold tremendous potential for helping Z'ers reframe how they see their Christian vocations and place in the Church, as was the case for this group of young adults.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Based on existing research on Generation Z, along with the data collected in this study and its emergent themes, the following recommendations are suggested for current pastors, those preparing students for pastoral service, and members of the Church at large. These recommendations also offer the opportunity for missional leaders to consider their missional thinking and action with the Generation Z members of their congregations and communities.

For Current Pastors

1. *Initiate continued relational development, specifically seeking opportunities outside of the worship service.* A relationship with a pastor can be difficult for a young person to pursue, particularly when they see the pastor as an authority figure. By connecting with young adults in settings outside of the worship service, pastors can help redefine their role from simply being one of authority to serving as a shepherd to Generation Z. Investing time outside of the office (e.g., visiting coffee shops, participating in community events, etc.), for example, allows the pastor to be visible beyond the walls of the church building and allows for engagement on a "neutral" site—or even on the "home field" of the Z'er. This is important for your members, and critical for those outside the Church who may never step foot in a church building. In serving Gen Z, a focus on relationships over programs will often yield the most positive results.

2. *Utilize technology and digital communication in ministering to Generation Z.* Technology use is not a preference for Generation Z; it is an expectation. Hill et al. found that digital communication increased positive communication across

organizations and helped build higher quality exchanges, including in groups that were not always physically present.[52] Young adulthood has always been a particularly transient time of life for many people, and they are not always able to be physically present. Pastors can utilize technology to connect with young adults beyond the walls of their church buildings. This can include Z'ers in general, not only members of their congregations. Technology affords opportunities to find and engage with Gen Zs who have left the Church or who are unchurched.

3. *Listen to the youth.* Study participants often felt unheard and voiceless in the Church. To better understand what is happening in the lives of young people and how they may best be served, it is critical to listen to them. Find ways to hear the hopes, desires, fears, concerns, goals, and dreams of your Gen Z members. It is, as Greenleaf notes, the response of the true servant leader to listen first.[53]

4. *Pastors don't have to do everything.* Pastoral ministry is a gift and blessing, but it sometimes carries a heavy weight. As Theme 4 illustrates, however, this weight need not be carried solely by pastors—particularly in serving Gen Z young adults. While it is critical for the pastor to serve all their members, forming a team that can help "share the weight" of this work will bless both pastor and members. The reality that Christ's mission is given to the whole Christian Church must be continually upheld and promoted; missional leaders should seek ways to engage the priesthood of all believers in service to this mission rather than attempting to handle the ministry on their own. Invest in helping parents fulfill their God-given vocation as they raise their children. Empower congregational members to serve the young adults in their midst, outside of the typical congregational systems and structures. Work with congregational leaders and parents to help ensure every Z'er has a "team" of adults praying for and supporting them, particularly during their transition to young adulthood.

For Those Preparing Students for Pastoral Service

1. *Ensure future pastors are being taught about leadership, not just theology.* LCMS pastors are highly trained theologians, which is vital as they oversee all function of Word and Sacrament in their congregational settings. However, within the Christian congregation, the pastor is often viewed by their members as the primary leader of the organization. Consequently, those training future clergy for their public ministry ought to ensure students are trained in areas of clarity, vision, strategic guidance, and organizational direction in congregations. At the same time, students themselves must recognize and appreciate this dynamic as they prepare for ministerial service. This will help clergy better understand how members see them and navigate (even balance!) the duality expressed by participants in Theme 1.

2. *Understand and support the role of the family in faith formation.* As family remains a primary influence in a young person's engagement with a Christian congregation, training pastors to understand this dynamic and respond accordingly to equip parents for their work as spiritual caregivers is critical. By continuing to train future pastors to acknowledge and honor the role of parents in faith formation, the Church will increase the potential of effectively teaching, serving, and retaining Gen Z young adults.

3. *Help future pastors develop a posture of learning about generational differences.* Every generation is unique, yet we often minister to all adult cohorts in the same manner. Help those training for pastoral ministry understand generational differences and how they affect the ministry of today's Church—particularly relating to dynamics of church membership and attrition. Aid future pastors in their ability to view those broader generational dynamics in light of their local context so they may develop a plan to best serve both the churched *and* unchurched young adults in their midst.

For Congregations At Large

1. *Prioritize secondary (commissioned/auxiliary) workers and spiritual formation events in the allocation of resources.* Some of the themes that surfaced in this study require support beyond the pastor. It is up to *all* members of a Christian congregation to demonstrate their support for Generation Z. Theme 4 highlights several factors that positively influenced retention of young adults in the LCMS. Certainly, not every congregation will be able to call a new worker or develop a host of new programming opportunities, but every little bit helps. Increasing resources that support Generation Z shows this generation that they matter to the congregation, which is critical to the mission of the Church.

2. *Recognize and address the transience of young adulthood.* As previously discussed, young adulthood is a transient time during which many young adults walk away from the Christian Church. It can be quite easy during this time for congregations to "lose track" of their young adults as they move to college, join the military, move out on their own, or engage in any number of other life transitions. Develop and implement plans to continue the relationship your congregation has with young adults, even when they are not physically present.

Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of this study is that all participants remain connected to LCMS congregations. Their stories matter and can help shape how congregations may best serve the young people in their midst. However, it does not help us understand the history of Gen Z members who have *left* the Christian Church. Replicating this study with Gen Z young adults who are inactive or completely separated from Christianity is vital for a holistic understanding of Gen Z's engagement with clergy and the Christian Church.

A secondary limitation involves the overall scope of this study. As every denomination has a unique culture, it was logical to bind the study within one denomination (the LCMS). However, the scope of Christianity is broad, and learning what is happening across denominations may help as church leaders work to best serve Gen Z. Conducting a similar study with young adults from across Christian denominations would offer new insights for the Church at large.

Conclusion

Exploring Generation Z's understanding of and experience with Christian clergy leadership led to the emergence of four key themes. Despite the challenges faced by young adults in the Church today, these Z'ers remain active in their congregations, each caring for their church and desiring that it more effectively serve their generation. Their commitment is a beacon of hope and inspiration for the future of the Church, and their experiences help point the way to a better shared future. In telling their stories, they use their voices to help the Church better work toward its mission, specifically as it relates to the unique mission field offered by Generation Z as they help us understand what matters most to their generation and what they need from the Christian Church. Their experiences will help more people be served well by their pastors, and ultimately, by the Gospel of Christ.

This article presents a summary of this study and its results; the full study report may be found in Dr. Lewis's dissertation, *Tend My Sheep: A Phenomenology Exploring Generation Z's Understanding of and Experience with Christian Clergy Leadership.*

ENDNOTES

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