

Homecoming

Helping Xers move from alienation to conversion

John Mabry

IN APRIL OF 1999, KEN CANEDO, catechist and liturgical composer, stood before his bishop and congregation, introducing about forty teenagers, all of them candidates for confirmation. It was a time when uncertainty and fear about young people was running high. Just days before, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold had killed one teacher and twelve of their fellow students at Columbine High School before committing suicide. The sanctuary at St Monica's Roman Catholic Church in Moraga, California, was electric with expectancy and attention. 'In an age when it's so easy to choose violence and drugs and despair,' Canedo announced, 'these teenagers choose Christ.' Canedo was staggered by the standing ovation that followed. It lasted over four minutes.

St Monica's is not an unusual parish in many respects, but the fact that their confirmation classes draw teenagers from miles around indicates that they are doing something right. What is it about their approach that encourages young people to seek them out? What is it that St Monica's offers that differs from so many other parishes? Why is it that so many young people, the last wave of Generation X, are finding a home in the ministry of this Catholic church?

In this article we will be taking a look at the spiritual issues that confront the members of Generation X, the specific challenges faced by this group, and how churches, synagogues and other religious institutions can help them move from the margins into community and communion. Most of my own experience has been on the West Coast of the United States, and those I have interviewed are likewise located here. I am also almost exclusively dealing with Christian denominations, but much of what is said here will ring true for Xers (and the communities that long to welcome them) of all religious persuasions in most developed countries of the world.

The spiritual dilemma of Xers

Most sociologists identify the X generation as being born between the years 1960 and 1985. Xers are a unique breed amongst the generations alive today, and their needs, beliefs and attitudes are not well understood by those who have gone before them. They are a product of their times, and they have been some of the more tumultuous times in history.

Demon kids

Xers are the most demonized generation alive today. They were the first generation to know 'the pill', the first to be thought of as a burden rather than a blessing. Kids were 'like headaches, things you take pills not to have'.¹ Following publication of the biologist Paul Ehrlich's bestseller *The population bomb* in 1968, children were not only seen as inconvenient, but as an intolerable burden on the ecosystem. This era also saw the rise of a new horror genre that depicted children as demonic, from *Rosemary's baby* to *The omen* to *Children of the corn*. Never before were children depicted as so burdensome and dangerous.

Xers could not help but internalize these values and images. Their insecurity regarding their own worth was augmented by the unstable family life experienced by so many. While only 11 per cent of Boomers came from broken homes, nearly half of all Xers are the children of divorce. The stable home life taken for granted by previous generations is alien to most Xers.

Apocalypse now

Self-doubt does not exhaust the woundedness of Xers. Optimism and faith in others does not come easily for this cynical generation, either. Before Xers were out of diapers, they were faced with fears and uncertainties unknown to any previous generation. Being the first generation to be brought up under the threat of complete nuclear annihilation, they learned to 'duck and cover' during bomb drills in kindergarten. They despaired over the fate of the earth while they were in elementary school, watching the statistics on environmental catastrophe grow grimmer as they grew up.

As Buddhist Xer Lhasa Ray told one journalist,

We share a common sense of powerlessness or despair that has been with us since the very beginning. As early as I can remember, my parents would tell me about nuclear war and how it was this looming threat. I spent a lot of time in fear of these huge powers out there that I

had no control over and which were going to determine my fate somehow. So I didn't have a sense of a bright future on a global level.²

The nightly horror of Vietnam on the evening news just added to the apocalyptic shadow over Xers' childhoods. It was very clear that this was no 'Ozzie and Harriet' world we were born into. Instead, Xers experienced the world as fierce, dangerous and doomed.

Suspicion of authority and ideals

It is difficult to overstate the damage that the Watergate and Iran-Contra episodes did to Xers' trust in public figures. It is not surprising that Xers are intolerant of authority figures. And while many Boomers can relate to their distrust of authority, they are often impatient with Xers' pervasive cynicism. It is important for Boomers to realize that while they were themselves suspicious of authority, they also believed they could do better than their elders. Boomers criticized those in power, but also held a collective vision for a utopian society that they would bring about. Xers watched the idealistic dreams of their Boomer parents crash and burn in the 'Me-Decade' 1980s, and have no comparable idealistic visions. As one Xer put it, 'Boomers had a pot of gold at the end of their rainbow. We just have pot.'

This distrust of authority extends to the realm of ideas. 'If "grownups" aren't to be trusted, then how can we trust *anything* they say?' Xers ask. (Although most Xers *are* adults by this point, few *feel* like it.) Thus religious teachings and political ideologies all hold about as much water as the notion of the Easter Bunny. After all, Xers were lied to about *them*, weren't they?

The suspicion of anything beyond what they can actually see and feel runs deep. Xers are the first generation fully to internalize a postmodern world-view. No longer are there monolithic answers to the universe. While previous generations had faith that religion, and later, science, could determine universal truth, Xers are dubious. All things are relative, and subject to interpretation according to one's gender or ethnicity, for example. As Ronald S. Allen writes, for Xers,

the assurance that the human family could arrive at universal truth has given way to the recognition that all statements of truth contain significant interpretive elements that arise from the interpreter's education, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and nationality. Generation [X] is coming to maturity in a culture that is pluralistic and relativistic in its attitudes toward certainty. Different (and sometimes contra-

dictory) versions of truth exist side by side in the mall of human possibilities; people are free to choose which (if any) to follow.³

This of course creates a difficulty for religious institutions which have, for most of their history, been seen as the repositories of unassailable truth. For Xers, the alleged 'truth' offered by religions can no longer be taken for granted. Xers are suspicious of institutions, and even more suspicious of anyone claiming to have *the* answers. As the liturgist Kevin Yell told me, 'If one says in one's attitude or actions, "Congrats, you've found the right way", you lost them'.

Xers have certainly been born into an unenviable era. Following on the heels of the ultra-successful Boomers, they have found themselves marginalized and blamed for their own marginalization. They are insecure about their place in the universe, as all ideas have been relativized. As a result they feel powerless and suspicious of all authority, residing in a precarious existentialism.⁴

The spirituality of Generation X

All of this, of course, does not mean that Xers are unspiritual. In fact, in some ways, Xers are one of the most spiritual of all the living generations. It's just that this spirituality is expressed in forms that are not of a typically religious character, and may be difficult to identify by those of older generations.

Ambiguity

Attention to ambiguity is one aspect of Gen-X spirituality. In a world where there are no monolithic answers, Xers search for truth in the questions far more than in the answers. This creates a 'both/and' approach to their seeking rather than an 'either/or' approach. If someone were to walk into an Xer hangout (say, a coffee shop) and announce, 'Here's what I believe, and you need to believe it, too', a room-sized cold shoulder would quickly freeze out the speaker. But if that same person announced, 'Here's what I believe and what it means to me', the speaker would likely have the rapt attention of everyone in the room. An Xer can tolerate (and even welcome) another's 'truth' if it doesn't insist on negating truths he or she has already internalized or accepted.

Personal experience

Personal experience is very important to Xers. Since it is the experience of most Xers that what they have been told by 'authorities' is unreliable (or at least spun significantly to further the ambitions of

the teller), they place much greater stock in what they themselves can see, feel or touch. They are much more likely to be moved by something which is immediate and personal than by hagiographies. Since the Bible may be suspect as a source of revelation, many Xers feel closer to God at the beach or in the forest. The intimacy they share with their friends is a sacramental pointing to a deeply desired relationship with God. Artificial means of transcendence also have their appeal, and the popularity of ecstasy and hallucinogens at raves and other Xer gatherings attest to Xers' longings for a personal, albeit transient, experience of the Ultimate Reality.

Authenticity

Authenticity is a huge facet of Xer spirituality. Since Xers perceive preceding generations as disingenuous, it is of prime importance to them to be earnest and 'real'. During their childhood and adolescence, Xers developed a keen 'bullshit detector' that is applied to everything from TV commercials to political speeches and, yes, even sermons. If someone is coming across as inauthentic, Xers will have a hard time giving that person a chance, even if that person is holding out something which the Xer desperately wants. Since *everyone* is 'selling something', Xers are comfortable with marketing and even certain types of proselytizing so long as the marketer is up front about what is going on. Commercials are popular amongst this generation as a valid art form, and are more likely to be enjoyed than simply tolerated. But one whiff of a hidden agenda, and the marketers will find that they have lost Xers' trust and attention.

Relationship

Another piece to the puzzle of Xer spirituality is relationship. Because so many Xers come from families which were unstable, or in which they were seen as a burden, Xers create families of their own via networks of intimate friendships and subcultures. The television show *Friends*, while being a yuppified, and overly clean-cut portrayal, is nonetheless accurate in many aspects of its depiction of typical Xer intimacy and 'familial' structure. In this show a group of six friends live near each other and spend most of their spare time together, either in one apartment or another or in the nearby coffee shop. Even though the show frequently stumbles into typical sitcom situations, its exploration of Xer intimacy, boundary issues and 'pack mentality' is more often than not on the mark.

Like the *Friends* crowd, Xers often have small units of close friendships who frequently socialize, and even live together, long into

adulthood. Though members might come or go (Xers' clans have more permeable boundaries than traditional families), Xers will frequently maintain deep emotional connections with members long after they have moved away. Xer clans will usually share core values, particularly spiritual values, even if members are formally of different faiths.

Self-determination

Xers know that no one is going to do it for them. They weren't given meaning, so they must construct it. Xers weren't given solid families, so they must create them. They didn't experience authenticity, so they must make sure they are themselves authentic. Xers have no illusions about politicians giving a damn about them, any social security being around when they retire, or any saviour coming down from heaven to save them. Xers may as well be called 'the bootstrap generation', since the only way Xers will succeed is by self-determination and hard work. Contrary to popular belief, Xers are hard workers if the job is meaningful and fair to them.

All of these factors – ambiguity, personal experience, authenticity, relationship and self-determination – are important factors when we consider the question of conversion, and just what that means exactly for the typical Xer.

Varieties of religious conversion

Traditional conversion

The traditional definition of 'conversion' involves an intellectual assent to a specified series of dogmatic propositions. The Catholic dictum, 'I believe that I may understand', seems to be a decidedly backwards approach to Xers. Since in a postmodern world one's understanding of the universe is contingent upon the perspective of the observer, Xers are suspicious of any system which purports to be 'the' way. Surrendering one's critical thinking skills by force of will in the feeble hope that one may eventually actually come to believe one's chosen dogma belongs to another, and more ascetic, age. Xers would counter this by saying, 'Show me the money'.

Of course, I am speaking in gross generalities. There are plenty of Xers who are uncomfortable with postmodernity. Many have experienced such unsteady childhoods that continuing to live in ambiguity is simply too tall an order. This subgroup of Xers has 'run for cover' to the 'certainty' of fundamentalist religions. Adrift in a sea of postmodern uncertainty, the black-and-white world-view of many dogmatic religious groups offers the illusion of a steady rock to cling to. The

fact that these dogmatic 'rocks' are arbitrary, depending on the sect chosen, is irrelevant to the Xer disciples of these groups. In a storm, almost any port will do.

But these are the minority. Most Xers are too suspicious of ideologies, even religious ideologies, to surrender their will so easily. 'Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me', is a proverb well understood by this guile-savvy generation. The chance of conversion in the traditional sense for most Xers is slim.

When speaking of Xers, 'conversion *from*' is far more likely a possibility than 'conversion *to*'. Conversion from an ideology is a story they know well. They were converted *from* the belief in Santa Claus; converted *from* the belief that their parents were all-knowing or all-powerful; they were converted *from* the belief that the media have their best interests in mind; converted *from* the belief that churches are interested in telling them the truth. In fact Xers have been converted *from* nearly every belief they ever held.

Reinvesting their faith in any ideology or institution, or conversion *to*, is a tall order indeed. And since Christianity is a religion which defines its members in terms of belief, this creates a distinct problem for churches who are trying to attract generation X.

Conversion as homecoming

One major difference between Judaism and Christianity hinges directly on this point of defining one's affiliation based on belief, or intellectual assent. Whereas one defines oneself as a Christian based on what one *believes*, a Jewish person defines him- or herself as a Jew based upon his or her familial, or *community* ties. A gathering of Jews can include everything from Orthodox rabbis to atheist lesbians, yet all are still considered Jews. One is not outcast from the community, or circle of relationship, because of what one believes or doesn't believe; instead one belongs by the simple fact of who one is, by the relational ties that cannot be ignored or severed.

Christians can learn a lot from this comparison. While Xers may be repelled by dogmatic requirements imposed by some communities, they are likely to be attracted to communities in which relationship and authenticity are emphasized as defining factors. As Sr Rebecca Shinas, a Dominican sister who does spiritual direction with Xers, told me, for Xers, 'conversion doesn't have to do with intellectual assent, but with community and belonging – unconditional embracing'.

Xers require a new definition of conversion. To convert usually involves throwing in one's lot with a group, and Xers are likely to throw

in their lot with a community which accepts them exactly where they are on their spiritual path, where their journey can be supported and validated, even as it grows and changes. Xers are looking for a welcoming spiritual home where their needs for intimate relationship can be met, and where their demands for authenticity can be honoured. I call this variety of conversion 'homecoming'.

Feathering a welcoming nest

Kevin Yell, a creative liturgist who worked for many years at St William of York Roman Catholic parish, in Forest Hill, South London, told me, 'My experience has been with "edgie" churches, where young people have said, "if it weren't for this parish, I wouldn't even be looking at the Roman Catholic Church"'. What makes a parish like St William of York, or St Monica's in California, an attractive 'home' for Xers?

It is certainly not brand-loyalty. Xers are attracted to various communities not by dint of their spiritual pedigrees but by what they have to offer them in the here and now. As Kevin Yell went on to say in our interview, 'Young people have much more *power* than they used to. They don't buy into the guilt trip. They know how to say "no". Instead of rebelling, they just walk away. Why expend the energy? It's not worth it.'

Presbyterian writer Jay Hudson agrees. In his article on Generation-X worship, Hudson writes:

Boomers defined their identity over against the institutions of the day. It was necessary to have institutions as a foil against which to define a new way of being . . . Gen X does not need institutions for identity. They do not care if institutions, including the church as we know it, die or survive.⁵

It is tempting to say that the churches need Generation X more than Xers need the Church. But the truth is that while the churches could benefit immeasurably from the spiritual gifts of Xers (if they would only allow them to be exercised), Xers also need the mentoring, wisdom and connection with the past offered by historic faith communities. What do Xers need to overcome the 'signal-to-noise ratio' being emitted by traditional faith communities?

Acknowledgement of Mystery

Xers are born mystics. While they cannot intellectually invest in traditional dogma, they nonetheless have an abiding intuition that 'something' is 'out there' that is larger than themselves, that there is indeed meaning in the universe, even if they cannot themselves perceive it. The ancient scripture of China, the *Tao Te Ching*, states that 'The God [Tao] who can be expressed in words is not the real God'. This is a truth which Xers know intuitively. The spiritual journey for many Xers is a slow crawl towards the ineffable. Whether they will find the ineffable Presence in our churches is up to us.

Since God cannot ever be fully 'known', let alone described in words, mentors can help Xers initiate and nurture their relationship with 'Holy Mystery'. While it is tempting for some to say, 'If God cannot be known, why even try?' it will be much more rewarding if mentors can provide a model of living in relationship with Mystery, and can encourage Xers to 'live the questions' instead of offering pat answers.

Tolerance of irreverence

Since the true God cannot be expressed in words (including creeds and dogmas), Xers are drawn towards images that are at turns traditional (such as rosaries, crucifixes, altars and holy cards) and profane (such as tattoos, nudity, or other bodily or even offensive or irreverent imagery). The recent movie *Dogma* is a fine example of this ambivalence. In the film, God is played by a (female) pop singer, confined in a human body by a coma, rescued by an ordinary woman by a merciful act of euthanasia. This juxtaposition of the holy and profane creates a cognitive dissonance that transcends the preciousness of traditional piety, and points at something not yet grasped. This betrays an abiding faith that has as yet gone unrecognized in Xers, and is a source of religious inspiration as yet untapped.

Churches can help Xers feel welcome by being tolerant of the levity Xers bring to their spirituality, even when their artistic and liturgical expressions border on the blasphemous. For those who have eyes to see it, Xers are performing a dance with the divine which, if nurtured, can flourish and deepen.

The freedom to explore

Since God is primarily mystery, Xers intuitively come at the 'problem' of God from various angles, many of them seemingly heretical. What is not often acknowledged, however, is that even these 'heresies' are tentative. Xers rarely expound heresy dogmatically.

Instead, a myriad of heretical 'lenses' may be tried on for size, to view the spiritual dimension from as many perspectives as possible, in order to accumulate as much data as possible.

Roman Catholic Xer theologian Tom Beaudoin writes,

Offending the canons of religion and psychology, posing as infidels, Xers practice a type of religiosity that experiments with heresies as new forms of faith. Trusting in betrayal as much as in a benevolent God, we erode stringent dichotomies between the orthodox and the heterodox. We search for faith in the midst of profound theological, social, personal, and sexual ambiguities.⁶

Ken Canedo relates that his confirmation students 'came to life' when they began to explore world religions. Xers are eager to hear how people view God from various perspectives. All are food for thought, all add more pieces to the puzzle. And none is to be taken too seriously.

Julie Graham, the Program Director for the Episcopal Diocese of California's Department of Youth and Youth Adult Ministries, has spent a great deal of time trying to untangle the knot of Xer spirituality and its relationship to the institutional Church. When asked how she gets young people to think about religion in reference to their own lives, she relates, 'The best thing I could do for a 13-year-old is to say "create your *own* religion. Write the rituals, figure out what helps you get in touch with God". They went to camp – but they aren't at camp any more – they can't seem to find the god-in-them.'

By allowing young people the room to explore, and giving them permission to think outside the box, mentors can help Xers figure out what spirituality means to them, and can help them begin a spiritual journey which, although it may never be complete in this lifetime, can be sustained over a lifetime.

Ownership of tradition

Contrary to what one might think, there are many aspects of tradition that are attractive to Xers. Kevin Yell says, 'Xers like tradition – they love lighting candles – they are comfortable connecting with something that has roots, that is organic'. Tradition provides a sense of permanence that is too greatly lacking in Xers' lives. It also provides images and ideas which are helpful, even if they are not necessarily perceived in traditional ways. While Xers are sceptical, they are also teachable, and tradition is one of the many sources of wisdom to which Xers intuitively turn. They may not be willing to sell their souls, but

they are eager to open their minds. 'Selling out' to an ideology is not an option, but taking what is useful from a variety of sources is.

Nonetheless it is possible for Xers to ground themselves comfortably in a single tradition if such an alignment can be made on their own terms, feeding their need both for connection to the past and for self-determination. Xers are intrigued by tradition and long to be part of a community. But how Xers can embrace a tradition without feeling swallowed by it is a difficult question.

For Ken Canedo, the starting place for his students is finding something within the tradition that they could relate to. St Francis' kinship with all creatures is an attractive facet of the Catholic tradition for Xers, who have internalized the postmodern awareness of the interrelatedness of all things. For Ken's students, conversion, or 'homecoming' to the Catholic tradition, happens when students are able to interiorize aspects of the tradition on their own terms.

This is the experience of the Festival of the Holy Names as well. A community of people from many generations (though predominantly Xers) in Berkeley, California, the Festival provides a 'laboratory' for people who feel estranged from the Christian tradition to reconnect with it. The Festival has no leaders, recognizes no clergy, and affiliates itself with no institutional religious body.

Members of the Festival wanted to create a eucharistic community where every aspect of tradition could be explored and experimented with, from scriptural interpretation and liturgy to issues of leadership and authority. Operating on a strict consensus model, the Festival broke the entire Catholic mass down into its various parts, and then asked of each part, 'What was this originally intended to convey? Why doesn't it mean that for us any more? How can we make it meaningful again?' Over several years the Festival created a number of eucharistic prayers and other liturgies which redefined and remythologized the tradition.

Many members were drawn from a nearby seminary. One seminarian broke down at the open sharing time (which the Festival uses in place of a sermon). She didn't know what she was doing in seminary since she didn't know whether she could even call herself a Christian. Festival members assured her that in their community, anyone who read the words of Jesus and found them helpful in their spiritual lives qualified as a Christian. The seminarian became an active member, and reconnected with the Christian tradition (and specifically her own Lutheran version of it) in profound and creative ways that would not have been possible had she not found a 'home' to facilitate her 'conversion'. When she was ordained and assigned her first church,

Festival members laid hands upon her and sent her out with their blessing.⁷

Sr Rebecca Shinas has found that in her experience, as well, Xers make peace with tradition when they can be engaged with it, when they are invited to play with it, experiment with it, and make it truly 'theirs'.

'Xers need to *own* the tradition as belonging to *them*, and to feel free to add to it, to improvise,' she says. 'Whenever a new sister comes into the community, if they make a change, they belong. One sister who was new to our community suggested a rearrangement of the furniture in our common room. The sisters liked the suggestion and implemented it. That acceptance of her idea made all the difference to the novice. Once her idea was accepted by the established group, she felt "in".'

Sr Rebecca also relates the story of a young Xer woman who was considering joining her parish in Fremont, California. 'What made her feel she could join us was when I invited her to be part of a ministry called "Healing Hands". She's an aromatherapist. She is now teaching twenty to thirty people using aromatherapy in liturgy. Our tradition made room for her creativity and *who* she was. Old was wedded to new, and there was a new entity. She found a way to be part of the institutional church in a way that changed *us*.'

Shared power

Xers are extremely sensitive to power issues. Most will not tolerate a group government that does not offer them voice and vote. If they feel they are not being listened to or that their point of view is not being considered, they will simply walk. They are used to that kind of treatment, and will simply go elsewhere.

Xers who are intentional about their spiritual lives may find themselves forming their own spirituality groups. The boom of women's spirituality circles is a fine example of people (and many of them Xers) taking ritual and spirituality into their own hands. This affords participants a great opportunity to explore and 'own' one's tradition.

Churches can nurture Xer spirituality groups by providing space and support for groups without exercising control of the groups or subsuming them. Good relationships between consensus ritual groups and traditional churches can only be beneficial to all parties, as cross-fertilization and mentoring takes place.

An emphasis on relationship

Xers are profoundly sensitive to community and community dynamics. They thrive in groups, and yet do not see themselves as

'joiners'. In other words, they do not join a group because they 'believe in' what the group stands for or is doing, but instead will 'hang' with a group in which some very basic needs for intimacy, reciprocity and respect are met.

Likewise, theologically, few Xers can wholeheartedly recite the Nicene Creed, but most Xers long for a relationship with the divine. Their desire for religious experience is not one that is mediated by an institution, but is immediate and experiential. They want to be God's friend, not a corporate shareholder. They are also less likely to be restricted to a single religious perspective, but will befriend God wherever God may be found. As Kevin Yell says of his experience in working with Xers, 'They want a relationship with the living Jesus *and* they don't necessarily limit the actions of the Christ to the Jesus they have a relationship with. They *get* being part of the mystical body of Christ. They really *get* the divine within.'

And it is at this juncture that Xers bring the most genuine challenge to the Church. 'Show me how to connect with the divine in a mystical, authentic way,' they are asking. But most of them *aren't* experiencing God in our congregations. As Julie Graham told me, 'The best youth ministry is to encourage authenticity – the authentic, divine part of you. We in the Episcopal Church have a great tradition to hide behind, we don't have to be authentic. It's not real, it's boring! Parents are afraid of the authenticity that kids have.'

Churches that want to be attractive to Xers must model authentic, experiential, relational faith that puts more stock in the here and now than in the hereafter. In other words, we shouldn't *tell* Xers about God's love, but demonstrate it; we shouldn't just *talk* about unity in Christ, but invite even the outcast to experience that union on a daily basis. The ascetic model which says, 'I sacrifice myself for the good of others', is backward and alien to Xers. Instead, they follow the example of the Buddha, who said, 'Take care of yourself first, then you will be around to share compassion with others'. Xers are quite familiar with unhealthy relationships, and have no desire to participate in them any more. 'Xers may have found a community that is life-giving,' says Kevin Yell, 'but they'll drop it just as quick as they took it up if it stops being that.'⁸

Conclusion

Xers are used to being marginalized. They are seen as the slackers, the underachievers. They have frequently felt like outsiders even within their own families and spiritual communities. Spiritual communities

which can model Jesus' own acceptance of the marginalized, welcoming all to the table regardless of what they look like, who they hang out with, whom they love, or what they believe, will go a long way towards creating welcoming places for Xers to 'come home' to.

Many churches want young people as part of their community, but are not willing to face the significant issues which relationships with Xers inevitably raise. Julie Graham relates: 'When people say, "We want a youth ministry program", I say, "Why? Why do you want this? Is it to keep kids from having sex? From using drugs? Because that's not what it's for." Churches *say* they want it, but it never seems to work out. If they want it that bad, why doesn't it work? They don't really want it.' Xers ask the questions nobody wants to answer, and challenge the way 'things have always been done'.

Too many churches demand that if Xers want to join, they must do so on the church's terms. One priest told Julie Graham that he wants Xers 'confirmed, so that they'll *conform*'. According to Graham, this is an all-too-prevalent attitude. According to her, many Boomers say, 'We'll let young adults in if they fit our mould'. Such attitudes exclude the possibility of true relationship, where both parties are listened to and respected, and can blind church members to the true spiritual gifts that Xers can bring to spiritual communities.

It is possible for religious institutions to create welcoming spiritual homes for Xers, but it is not easy. There is a significant generation gap that separates Boomers and Xers which many Boomers are loath to acknowledge, and until they do, Xers will be quite content to find their spiritual homes elsewhere. The ultimate challenge of Generation X to the Church is a vital question: 'Have you yourselves come home?' Are there those in the Church who are at home in God, who have had an authentic experience of the divine? The insistence by Xers on divesting the Church of its trappings, calling it forth naked to be seen and known and ultimately judged is perhaps a major reason the Church has not found more ways to welcome this generation. But the believer, the group, the congregation that is willing to endure this kind of scrutiny and willing to participate in the paradoxical path of the Xer, may also find itself.

'Xers are looking for a home,' Rebecca says. 'They will not be satisfied with the kingdom of heaven. They are looking for a home here. If there is something out there that loves them, accepts them, unconditionally, they're *there*, whatever it is. When a spirituality makes room for them, conversion happens. Conversion is a change in

my heart, in my life – a sense of coming home.’ Perhaps it is not Generation X that needs to be converted. As Sr Rebecca says, ‘Our churches need to be converted; to embrace and bring in the Xer’.

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NOTES

1 Neil Howe and Bill Strauss, *Generations: the history of America's future, 1584–2069* (New York: William Morrow/Quill, 1991), p 328.

2 ‘ZenX: a prescription for despair: Tricycle talks with twentysomethings’, *Tricycle* (Spring 1997), p 71.

3 Ronald J. Allen, ‘Preaching to different generations’, *Encounter* (Autumn 1997), p 393.

4 For more on the sociological forces which shaped Generation X, see my article, ‘Rebels without applause’, at <http://www.apocryphile.net/jrm/articles/rebels.html>.

5 Jay Hudson, ‘The thirteenth generation: demographics and worship’, *Reformed Liturgy and Music* vol 30, no 2 (1996), p 43.

6 Tom Beaudoin, *Virtual faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), pp 121, 122.

7 The Festival has continued to redefine itself. Abandoning the practice of regular eucharist after two years, the group now meets regularly in a variety of venues for several very different experiences: a protracted study of the Gospel of Thomas; a gradual video-viewing and discussion of Wagner’s *Ring* cycle; a monthly ‘spiritual salon’, in which a presenter shares individual knowledge, talent or ideas with the group; and a new dream group. Insisting on variety, authenticity and sensitivity to the needs of its members, this Gen X-driven group continues to explore the limits and meaning of community and tradition. Visit the Festival website at <http://www.apocryphile.net/festival/>.

8 For more on ministering to Generation X, see my article, ‘The gnostic generation: understanding and ministering to generation X’, at <http://www.apocryphile.net/jrm/articles/genx.html>.

I TURNED THIRTY THIS YEAR. I've found it a significant zero to be marking in this year 2000. It has not failed to make an impression on me that I am the same age now as Jesus was when he began his public ministry. With my peer group of friends in ministry we are the contemporary equivalents of Jesus and his first disciples. Was Mary Magdalene about my age when she first preached Jesus resurrected, I've wondered?

It is strange to be thinking thoughts like these when in most Christian circles I have moved in over the last ten years I have frequently been the youngest, or near-youngest, member of any group. Christian ministry has seemed so often to be the preserve of people many years older than I am. At times I get puzzled and confounded by this state of affairs and can't help finding the Church a difficult place to 'grow up in'. Strangely, for a young lay woman trying to find ways to go forward into ministry, the route can seem poorly signposted. It's nearly two thousand years since other young men and women began to walk it. However, I've learnt from experience to enjoy the truth found in the line: 'Traveller, there is no path. Paths are made by walking.'

If I had to name three things among the many which remain to give me hope personally then they would be (in no particular order) the internet, New Wine – my women's support group – and Vatican II. New forms of communication, deep sharing in relationships, and vision. The existence of these three in the world and in my own particular Catholic world, give me great hope for an exciting journey.

Colette Joyce