

Voices: Reflections of a Gen-X pastor—flee the devil, not the church

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In 1993, Kurt Cobain chanted lyrics that resonated with an entire generation: “All in all is all we are,” also heard as “All alone is all we are.” The chant occurs during the fadeout of Cobain’s wildly successful song, “All Apologies,” and it seemed to concretize the feelings of loneliness among many of us Gen-Xers. We were labeled the “latchkey generation” and the “MTV Generation” due to our supposed laziness and parental abandonment.



James Hassell Just to remind you about Gen-Xers, we primarily are people born roughly between 1965 and 1980. Our most vivid memories revolve around rapid technological changes, the Challenger explosion, being scared of AIDS, a short war in Iraq and an adulterous president.

Those of us who grew up going to Baptist churches also may recall tense moments and have the battle scars to prove it. Sometimes, the church looked nothing like Jesus. As we have advanced rapidly toward middle age,

some of us have found a home in other denominational groups or even outside of evangelicalism. Some have quit being part of a church altogether.

Being a Gen-X pastor, then, is an interesting proposition these days. Some of us still hear Kurt Cobain's lyrics loudly ringing in our ears.

Some flee



Let's face it: Research overwhelming reveals the majority of our generational peers view the local church as old, passé, fading, declining, irrelevant and kaput. Somewhere along the way, many Gen-Xers started to believe either that we do not need the church in order to look like Jesus or that the church does not need us. Consequently, many resolved with finality to flee the church in order to do kingdom work.

This issue of fleeing may be the most pressing one for Texas Baptists in the 21st century. Our response today certainly may impact even how things work among our fellowship into the next century. So, how do we respond?

Here is a Gen-X Texas Baptist pastor's attempt to provide some initial guidance:

First, a fresh engagement with the discipline of listening appears in order for all Texas Baptists, young and old.

I find ample biblical evidence to support the fact churches do better when they listen first and talk second. Some of us may be so culturally conditioned, however, that it's hard to hear the Bible, much less each

other.

Take, for example, the issue of homosexuality that seems to be the hottest button among Texas Baptists now. All of us must be wary of setting up a classic “us versus them” scenario in which your camp is defined as the one on the side of God and justice. Justice without love is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Ethicist T.B. Maston said we truly get on the side of justice when we pay attention to the restless masses, yet we should not neglect loving order. Such can only be done through careful, prayerful listening.

This issue is not, therefore, an “either/or,” but it is a “both/and.” We all—no matter our age—have a right to be wrong. Gen-X pastors may be particularly suited for moderating this conversation between some polarized generations in our churches. Kurt Cobain may be wrong about us after all.

Second, let’s remember the local church is a large part of God’s plan for us to edify each other and to equip one another to live as ambassadors of Christ in the world.

I think it a little odd when people try to do kingdom work without the church and vice versa—the danger being kingdom work, especially social kingdom work, easily can turn into an exercise in egotism for those not rooted in a local-church community. The local church, then, is a gathering of imperfect priests doing kingdom work together in a local context.

Mid-20th century theologian W.T. Conner said it this way: “The more we move away from democratic organization and government in the church, the more we cease to be Christian in our application of the Bible in the local church.” Conner was considered by some as a “progressive” in his day.

So, from a Gen Xer pastor to you: Please don’t forget the importance of local churches. They are outposts of the kingdom of God in Texas.

Abandoned outposts will come under attack and eventually turn into museums. Therefore, listen to one another, and keep cooperating. Flee the devil, not the church.

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