Missing the signs: The church and Gen Y

by Bradley N. Hill in the April 5, 2011 issue

We've all seen classic signs outside eateries. One might have a giant arrow, outlined by lightbulbs, pointing at the restaurant (sometimes some of the bulbs are missing or burned out). Plastic letters form words like "Eat at Joe's" or "Good Eats" or "Free Fries with Burger."

The proprietor believes that people will drive by, see the sign and be enticed to come in and spend their money. Occasionally he changes the words to announce a Wednesday special or a featured flavor. But if someone were to ask him, he probably couldn't verify whether anybody ever stopped and came in because of the sign.

Behind this viewpoint is a conviction—one that is largely unspoken. The proprietor believes with all his heart that he is offering something that people really want and need and that if they would only see the sign and come in and taste his burgers they would be satisfied.

For Christmas he adds a border of alternating red and green lightbulbs. For Halloween he uses black lights and strobes. He tries moving the sign closer to the road and uses larger letters so it will be easier to read.

Then one day a truck stops and the driver comes in.

"Joe? Saw your sign out front and thought I'd try your burger."

At last! Joe has hard evidence that the sign works. That sign is now there to stay—no one will ever persuade him to take it down. Joe tells the story over and over to his family.

Over the ensuing years, Joe has trouble making ends meet. Eventually he closes the restaurant. As he locks up and walks away he notices that the sign out front is still on. He walks over and unplugs it. The sign goes dark. He pauses and thinks, "Thanks to the sign, we hung on a little longer." He removes a bulb as a souvenir and leaves.

I served a church that had that sign out front. It didn't advertise burgers, but it did advertise bake sales and dramas, Christmas pageants, Halloween alternatives, concerts, worship services and prayer meetings. The members believed that if people would just see the sign and come in, they would find their spiritual needs met. Occasionally they repositioned the sign. Once they changed the size of the letters. Sure enough, a neighbor came in one day because of the sign.

"That damn sign makes it hard to see the oncoming traffic!" he said. "Can you move it away from the road?"

Almost all churches have the equivalent of Eat at Joe's signs. The signs may not be made with plastic letters, but they're doing the same job. Yellow page ads. Community zip code mailings. Posters in shopping malls. Electronic reader boards out front. And now churches are scrambling to make sure they have sparkling websites, blogs and Facebook pages. Yes, there is good information there, but the central idea is the same: advertise religious services so that people will stop, look, come in and taste what is good. In other words, our congregational worldview is the same as Joe's view of the restaurant business.

These signs are imperative in nature. They command us to eat here and not there. They illuminate the one way to get to the food.

The Eat at Joe's sign represents an attractional view of church, a view that attempts to persuade people to act in a certain way. It is also centripetal in nature—an effort to funnel people from the surrounding community into the church where they will discover, Lord willing, the desires of their hearts. "If only we had better banners on the walls, . . . if only the music were more relevant and the preaching were done more conversationally. . . . If only the coffee shop offered espresso and the

PowerPoint presentations were animated . . . then people would see us, stop and enter—and of course they'd stay."

Occasionally the attractional approach works. Many of us have a story about someone who stopped, looked, listened and came in. That person is now chair of the church council. But there's a danger here: when a story becomes an anecdote to justify a strategy, it soon becomes a deterrent to congregational efforts at becoming truly missional. The few who are attracted by the sign reinforce the church's behavior. They are like pigeons pecking on a lever that rarely rewards them with a grain—but all it takes is one grain in a thousand pecks for them to keep pecking at that lever.

The youth of the church where I serve as interim pastor invited me to talk with them about various issues. (By the way, the older a church is, the broader the term *youth* becomes. Youth at this church includes everyone from junior high through college.) The main question on their minds was, "Why is everything funneled into the church? Why isn't the church going out *there*?" I answered, "Because we want to engage society on our terms, not theirs." (Full disclosure: I had been told ahead of time that this issue might be on their minds.)

Almost every Western church is lacking one or two generations—members of Gen Y, known also as millennials, echo boomers and the Net generation, those born between 1976 and 2000. (See *The American Church in Crisis,* by David T. Olson, or a recent Barna report.) The usual assurance is that "they will come back to the church when they get married and have babies." But this line is heard less and less frequently—for one simple reason: it's not true. As Douglas Coupland says, "This is the first generation raised without God." So there is nothing for this generation to return to.

Extensive data on church attendance and Gen Y reveal an unmistakable trend: disengagement with the institutions of Christianity. The *Christian Science Monitor* featured an article announcing the "coming evangelical collapse." Within two generations, the article predicts, evangelicalism will diminish by half. In 2009, *Newsweek* editor Jon Meacham declared the end of Christian America, and in *The Bridger Generation,* author Thom Rainer says that the number of Gen Y members who "reached for Christ" is about 4 percent.

Everyone is eager to add that Gen Y is very spiritual. Gen Yers tell us that it's not Christ they object to but the church that—arrogantly, in their minds—claims that it's his church.

In *American Grace,* Robert Putnam and David Campbell present data and conclusions that support this description. They report that church attendance by the 18- to 28-year-olds has dropped off dramatically since the mid-1950s. "Among twentysomethings the rate of decline in church attendance was more than twice the national average. . . . It is hard to imagine a more clearly defined generational phenomenon." They also report that 30 percent of twentysomethings call themselves "nones," or those with "no religious affiliation." (Only 5 to 7 percent of preboomers identify themselves as "nones," and only 15 percent of boomers.) "Nor is there any evidence . . . that as the younger generations age, they are becoming more attached to organized religion." The good news (or not so bad news) is that the new nones are "not uniformly unbelievers, and few of them claim to be atheists or agnostics. Indeed, most of them express some belief in God."

The result, in any case, is that the church has few if any Gen Yers. Why? There are many complex and overlapping reasons for their absence. Here are four of them.

First, Gen Y does not even notice our Eat at Joe's signs. For them, an advertisement is just part of the background white noise of our culture. No impersonal website or advertisement, no program or event flyer, poster or radio spot will entice an unchurched, secular, raised-without-God Gen Yer into church. No matter how amped-up and cutting edge our promos, these young adults are not likely to notice our attractional evangelism, and if they do notice it, they will just go on by. They are technologically savvy but "Teflon-coated." Most are not tuned into Christian radio or familiar with the top 100 songs on CCLI (Christian Copyright Licensing International) lists. Even the youth in my church don't listen to Christian radio. They are intensely relational but impervious to anything they see as a sales pitch.

Second, friends are the final factor. In some ways this reality is not dissimilar from what I experienced in working with groups and tribal cultures in Africa. Though on occasion an African may break from the clan and form an alliance with a church, this rarely happens. More often, whole families and clans move together into the church. The attractional model, in contrast, is individualistic. It seeks to lure the single driver who passes on his or her way to work. This won't work with Gen Y; the only way to reach these young people is to be with them, to enter into genuine spiritual

friendships and allow the flow
to follow the natural terrain to Christ and, we hope and pray, to his church. Of course, if one establishes relationships with several of them, one may find oneself admitted to a whole new crowd of friends!

Third, Gen Yers are suspicious of metanarratives, those stories that seek to give universal meaning and purpose to existence. For them, metanarrative is a mask for an agenda of power, self-legitimization and coercion. In the same way, they are highly suspicious of church invitations. They think: "The church is offering a free rock concert, but it is after something else." Or as one said to me, "Your church is offering a tutoring program only as a means to convert us." They're right. We in the church are always asking ourselves, "How can we get them in here?" and devising endless plots and schemes to do so. One church I served sponsored a Halloween maze event. It was a huge success in that a thousand kids went through the maze, saw the cool evangelistic video and received the brochure at the end. I venture to say they all knew this was going to happen and opted to tolerate the pitch in order to enjoy the maze. Their force shields were up—and as far as I know not one of them connected with the church because of the maze.

Fourth and last, Gen Yers fail to see the relevance. They think they know what "Joe" is offering, and they don't particularly like Christian burgers. They live in a world of pluralism, relativism, quantum theory, chaos theory, evolution, diversity, choice, energy and auras, karma and dharma, self-definition, social and environmental concern. Impervious to pitches, tribal, suspicious—when you think about it, it's not their absence that is surprising but the fact that any of them are present at all.

Many of the qualities I've described are qualities that we should applaud. We moderns have been all too gullible when it comes to story lines. We are too individualistic, too mechanistic and too content to live within closed systems. We have sought to "bring them in" and get them to be like us when Christ's clear mandate is to "go out there" and be like Christ. Who knows what new wineskins will be required, whether it be emergent church, "liquid" church, house church or some form of ancient/future church.

One couple got it. In the heart of Ann Arbor, Michigan, they gave up on the "eat here" sign and went "out there"—opening up space in an old bar, posting flyers and setting up a sandwich board (back to low tech!) with an invitation to conversation scheduled for a Sunday afternoon because some of the people they hoped to reach

might be hung over in the morning. A topic was posted, which changed weekly: peace, sex, anxiety, politics, the environment. A crowd began to gather, drawn by the idea of stimulating and spiritual conversation with strangers and neighbors. It was no secret that Jeremy, the facilitator, was a Christian, and folks naturally began to ask him what Christians believed about the week's topic. Jeremy would lead the conversation—and only later share a biblical perspective on the topic.

The Sunday gatherings were called Kaioen—meaning "to burn within"—and this prechurch of inquisitive visitors began to burn with enthusiasm and curiosity. It also began to grow. People began to stay longer, moving from curiosity to inquiry to seeking. Some seekers became finders as they confessed faith in Christ Jesus and began to take communion.

Another alternative to the attractional approach was taken by Alive Covenant Church on Washington State's Olympic Peninsula. The church says, "No perfect people are allowed." Alive Covenant calls itself a "personal, get your hands dirty kind of church," and asks, "What will God do in and through you?" Members believe in redemption, relationship, getting hands dirty and having fun, and they've structured their services accordingly.

On the first Sunday evening of the month, members meet for combined worship, but for the rest of the month they gather in smaller groups in house churches. During the second week of the month, they study, discuss scripture and hang out. The third week each house church decides to assist someone in the surrounding community who needs help. The fourth week is about having fun—party time. People can become a part of the service project without being part of the larger church. Participants get the word out: "If you know of someone we can serve, please contact us."

In Seattle, the Church of the Apostles is an "intentional eucharistic community." Its "urban abbey" is a sanctuary and a brewery. Located in the art center of Seattle in the Freemont district, the members display art and also offer "discernment groups" for people facing large life choices. A mission congregation of both the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the Episcopal Church, it subscribes to the Nicene Creed. Vicar Karen Ward writes that "serving the reign of God calls us to help God renew, restore, expand and enrich human community for all people, so there is something for everyone at the abbey: religious, nonreligious, agnostic, atheist, friends, neighbors, artists, dancers, DJs, filmmakers, yoga instructors, musicians,

poets, kids, seniors, people of all races and cultures, everyone!"

Perhaps the place to start turning our signs around is with the Gen Yers who are still in churches. They are the ones to make the connections and the invitations. However, in *Almost Christian,* Kenda Dean warns that we have done "an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe; namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people focused primarily on 'folks like us.'" Our link to Gen Yers may be even weaker than we think.

A critical question for any church is "for whom does the church primarily exist?" To the degree that the answer is "for those in the church," the next generation is already lost. To the degree that the answer is "for those yet to know Christ," there is hope. The turned-around sign then needs a new message. Instead of saying, "Eat at Joe's," it will say, "Joe is asking, where do you want to eat? What do you want to eat? Let's talk."