

Gen X revisited: A return to tradition?

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [November 8, 2000](#) issue

A statistic: only about 30 percent of people born between 1964 and 1978— that is, 30 percent of so-called Gen Xers—belong to a church. Ubiquitous media reports say that's not because we aren't spiritually inclined. We are.

We're seekers. We meditate. We go to Sufi dancing on Tuesday nights. We read books like *Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up with Has Lost Its Meaning*. But we're famously hostile to institutions.

There's no shortage of Gen Xers testifying to that anti-institutionalism. Tom Beaudoin, in his much ballyhooed book *Virtual Faith*, says Xers are "uncomfortable" with tradition, obsessed with personal experience to the point of being solipsistic, and suspicious of institutions, especially organized religion. Writing in *First Things*, Sarah Hinlicky contends that Xers believe in little and feel nothing but contempt for "anything that smacks of the Establishment." (Curiously, perhaps, those two Xers seem happily settled into pretty institutional Christian lives—one as a budding Catholic theologian, the other a budding Lutheran minister.)

But if you meet some real, live Xers, you might find yourself wondering about that anti-institutional stuff. Geri Hampton, 29, didn't set foot in a church until she was 22. Raised by "aging hippies," she saw just about every spiritual tradition but the church by the time she was in high school. "My parents hung out with a Jewish chavurah, got real serious into meditation, practiced Tai Chi, went to a sweatlodge, had a Hindu guru for a while." When Geri headed East to college, she wanted nothing to do with her parents' "spiritual merry-go-round."

Then, her senior year, Geri's roommate was diagnosed with leukemia. "That really put things in perspective quick," she says. "I began to think that there had to be something more than just school and dates and parties and drinking and me!" But Geri didn't follow mom and dad's example. "I have a great deal of respect for my parents," she says. "But their way just doesn't make any sense to me. The minute

something seems tough or loses its thrill, they just switch. That would be like changing jobs every eight months, or getting married 18 times.”

So Geri began attending an American Baptist church. “My mother’s parents were Baptists, so even though I wasn’t raised in that tradition, I just felt like it was my tradition. I was baptized six months after I first heard a sermon, and, even though I haven’t always been thrilled with the church, I have stuck with it, and I will stick with it.”

Geri probably isn’t alone. “When it comes to spirituality,” says Michael Leach, head of Orbis Publishers, “young adults are connected to institutions, plain and simple.” (To capitalize on that connection, Leach is developing a line of books written by Xers for Xers, including a series of devotionals by Therese Johnson Borchard and a book by Jeremy Langford on the Catholic experience.)

It’s difficult to trace that trend in numbers, says the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch’s* Colleen Carroll, currently at work on a book about Gen X religion. “This is not an area that lends itself to statistics,” she says. But Carroll, whose book will “document and analyze a return to religious tradition in Gen X,” says that both “traditional morality and traditional religious devotion are up” among Xers.

Some numbers are available to bolster Leach and Carroll’s claims. According to a 1999 study by pollster George Barna, “baby busters” (Barna looked at those born between 1965 and 1983) are more likely to attend church on a given Sunday than their parents—42 percent to 34 percent. In a given week, only 30 percent of baby boomers read the Bible, edged out by 36 percent of busters. And 80 percent of busters, in contrast to just 70 percent of boomers, pray.

Church is only the tip of the Xers’ institutional iceberg. Xers are leading the way in what may be the most hyperinstitutional movement in the church today: the recovery of *lectio divina*, spiritual direction and other spiritual disciplines associated with that most institutional of institutions, the Roman Catholic Church.

That those practices are on the rise is no news. New York publishers are tripping over each other to turn out snappy prayerbooks. Christians increasingly speak of going to their spiritual director, as though it were as ordinary as going to the hair dresser.

Talk to the authors of those prayerbooks or the spiritual directors themselves, though, and they will tell you that their readiest clientele is under 35. Phyllis Tickle, author of a new breviary called *Divine Hours*, says that only in the last few years have many Christians begun to get the hang of spiritual disciplines and spiritual formation. “When one talks about the spiritual world as a landmass, a territory to be navigated, one is talking a very foreign kind of concept—not foreign to those under 30, thank God for Xers—but to those over.”

Randy Reese, coauthor of *Spiritual Mentoring: A Guide for Seeking and Giving Direction*, says that when talking to folks over 35, he is careful to talk about “spiritual friendship” and “spiritual mentoring,” not spiritual direction. “Younger adults are perfectly comfortable with spiritual direction, both the name and the practice. They are very receptive to it.” But with baby boomers and seniors, Reese says, “you can encounter some resistance that just isn’t there” with Xers.

And those Xers are usually approaching spiritual direction and *lectio divina* within the context of church membership and worship—not as salad-bar add-ons to their yoga and Sufi dancing. MaryLynne Camden, a spiritual director in Westchester County, New York, says that her directees over 40 “are often unchurched, just exploring, and this is their exploration of the year.” But all of the Xers she directs “are committed members of a church community. It is a blessing to see. Direction can help a person pray even if she is not a member of a church, but it really makes the most sense as the saints conceived it—as part of an organic, committed Christian life.”

Not satisfied with recovering ancient prayer disciplines, Xers are also increasingly drawn to an even more outmoded concept: denomination. What could be deader than denominations? Who even remembers what the theological differences between Methodists and Presbyterians were, back in the days when folks argued over quaint issues such as sprinkling versus full immersion?

Harrington Bob, who leads the 20s-and-30s group at his Virginia church, says he sees a surge in “younger adults being really interested in the history of their given church, in wanting to know some of the theology behind it, what differentiates us Presbyterians from Lutherans or Methodists.” It is refreshing to see, says Bob, after years where “cartoonists joked that the only thing that separated one church from another is which had a swimming pool or which had better day care. Of course, there is still a lot of that, but it is exciting to reclaim our denominational heritage.”

Colleen Carroll has observed a return to “the traditions of a particular denomination.” Xers, she says, continue to cross denominational lines: young believers who are serious about their faith often find that they have more in common with theologically orthodox folk in other denominations than with liberals in their own church. But at the same time they are attracted to “practices of personal piety that may be associated with a particular tradition or denomination.” Young Catholics, she notes, are “getting into eucharistic devotion, wanting to pray the rosary. There’s not so much of an ecumenical feel.” Xers’ parents, she says, may have rejected those practices as meaningless ritual, but “since we weren’t raised with it, the rosary isn’t rote for us.”

So why the low membership figure of 30 percent? Why aren’t more Xers in church? Perhaps they are not so much wary of institutions themselves as wary of institutions that don’t do what they are supposed to do. Nathan Humphries, chaplain at the Washington Episcopal School in Bethesda, Maryland, and editor of *Gathering the NeXt Generation : Essays on the Formation and Ministry of Gen-X Priests*, puts it like this: “Many people will say I’m spiritual but not religious because their primary experience of Christian communities has been an experience of hypocrisy. Xers’ skin crawls when they meet boomers who water down the gospel and reduce it merely to a social justice message rather than integrating that message with the proclamation of Jesus Christ.”

Often, says Humphries, “a seeker from my generation will go to a church expecting it to be a Christian church, and the first thing they get is the PR message: ‘Oh, well, we’re Christian, but it’s not all that important.’ That was a marketing strategy that got Boomers into the church, but it’s counter to what Xers want.”

Carroll says that one piece of the media hype about Xers may be true: we were raised to distrust institutions. Like Humphries, Carroll sees that trait translating into a hatred of hypocrisy. “If you aren’t living it, don’t preach it,” she says, “and if I’m preaching it, I’m going to live it.” The flip side, then, of a distrust of institutions is a strong personal witness. “That is why young people take morality seriously,” says Carroll. “If they are going to say something in church, they are going to live it, too.”

If this analysis is correct, churches that want to lure Xers should give up their glitzy, poppy entertainment strategies and stick with the elements of tradition. Some Xers, of course, may like synthesizers and hymns that were written last week, but many Xers like what Geri Hampton calls “the comfort of something older. Even if you are

new to the church, and these hymns aren't familiar to you, you know the difference between something from the 19th century and something that sounds like elevator music."

Xers want the substance, not the packaging. If we want hip-hop, we can go to Tower Records, and if we want coffee bars, we can go to Starbucks.

Second, churches should question the conventional wisdom that people come back to church when they have kids. For good or for ill, Gen Xers marry later, and have children later, than their parents. Olivia Hunt, a seventh-generation Episcopalian, searched for a church for months before finding one she could stick with. She says she found that church activities for folks under 40 were geared toward families with kids. Hunt's not looking for church to organize a singles' bowling league—just to recognize that for many folks, there's a decade or more between graduating from college and having children. "Don't make us wait till we're 35 to come to church!"

Finally, churches can preach the gospel. Xers want their churches to be churches, not soup kitchens. People come to church, after all, looking for spiritual food—they shouldn't leave feeling like they have to go to an ashram to find it.

As Nathan Humphries says, churches that have catered to sociologists' accounts of what Boomers want (comfort) and what they don't want (doctrine) won't ever get Xers into the pews. "The churches have said, 'We'll just water ourselves down until the other person feels comfortable,'" says Humphries. "That's the boomer idea of hospitality. But that's not hospitality. It says that people are ashamed of what they are. An Xer sees that and says, 'You're watering it down. I guess you're ashamed.'"