

Worship by generations

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

Willow Creek Community Church, originator of the famous “seeker service” model of outreach, has been fabulously successful at wooing members of the baby-boom generation. But it never reached too many people born after 1968. So in 1994 Willow charged Dieter Zander with the task of reaching out to Gen Xers. Zander says that Bill Hybels, Willow’s founder, and other church leaders realized that there was “a growing gap” between the time people graduated from high school and when they got connected to the church. “Every year the gap got bigger, and the median age of the church got one year older. There was a sense that what [we] were doing for boomers wasn’t translating real well to the next generation.”

So Zander founded Axis, a ministry specifically designed to attract Xers. In 1998, after Zander left Willow Creek, the ministry was taken over by Nancy Ortberg, who says Willow remains “committed to carving out a place in the church where each generation can experiment with how it interacts with God. Each generation knows that God is not simply going to repeat what he did in the generation before, but do something new.”

Axis has its own Sunday evening services, which coincide with the two main Willow services. “Axis services are led by Xers for Xers,” says Ortberg. And you would know if you landed, by accident, in an Axis service: Axis worship is louder, “almost a club-like feel,” with the lights down low. “The service is more interactive, and there is a less polished feel,” says Ortberg.

Zander himself has moved away from generation-specific ministry. Now helping to start new ministries in San Francisco, he urges churches to reconsider pouring resources into such projects. Putting all the Xers in their own auditorium, says Zander, allows us to maintain a semblance of tradition in one part of the church, while dabbling in something new in another part of the church. Xers won’t learn from their forebears, and graying folks won’t learn from the next generation. “I think we are shooting ourselves in the foot in the long run with Gen X, Gen Y and then Gen Z services. The segmentation could kill the church.”

Couldn't the church, Zander proposes, offer seekers something radically different from the larger culture? "Wouldn't the most compelling picture to a seeker be a church that is diverse—economically, racially and generationally—with people loving each other despite those barriers? Isn't the reality of the gospel powerful enough to overcome generational divisions?"

Ortberg says Willow's approach to Gen X ministry has moved a little closer to Zander's vision. "When Axis was founded, it was almost a church within a church. We are moving to more integration." The church, Ortberg says, must find ways to weave generations together. "Although Axis worships separately, we serve side-by-side. We are creating a mentoring program, and many older members of the church open their homes for small groups of Xers to meet."

But Ortberg still insists that the church needs some special place where Xers can "explore and experiment, and figure out how they're different from their parents. You can't just integrate. You have to create space for that."