



## Generation Z – Who are they, and what can we do to help them stay in church?



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### Resymé

Denne artikkelen er basert på et innlegg holdt på konferansen *12th Consultation of Evangelical Lutheran Churches in East Asia* i Hong Kong i mai 2019. Temaet for konferansen var «Generation Z», og første del av innlegget tar opp noen karakteristikk ved Generasjon Z (de som er født ca 1997-2012) i Norge, som kan være relevant for å vite litt om hvem de er, særlig med tanke på formidling av kristen tro. Den andre delen av artikkelen tar opp unge kristne som forlater troen, og hvordan vi kan respondere på dette, for å kunne beholde dem i våre kristne fellesskap. Her nevnes blant annet forskning fra Barna Group i USA, som også er relevant i en norsk kontekst.

### Keywords

Generation Z, unge som forlater kirken, unge som blir i kirken, formidling til ungdom, kontakt mellom unge og eldre

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### Characteristics of contemporary youth as Generation Z and their needs in faith as young Christians in Church.

Some characteristics about the youth seem to be the same, independent of generations; like trying to find out who you are, what you want and how you want to live your life. Everyone who has been a youth has been through this. So, some things don't change that much.

### A well-adapted, active and home-centered youth generation

At the same time, we see in Norway and other parts of the West, that some things are changing among the youth.



A large and comprehensive research project (Ungdata) that has studied how today's youth generation in Norway is, gave this conclusion:

Gen Z is "a well-adapted, active and home-centered youth generation". They illustrated this with some facts:

The vast majority of the youth:

- are happy with their parents (84%)
- are happy with their friends (90%)
- are happy with their school (93%)
- have an active leisure time, where social media, computer games, training, organized activities (93%), schoolwork, and socializing with friends characterize their everyday life.

The majority have good physical and mental health, and most look at their future with great optimism.

There has never been a youth generation that makes less trouble, and because of this, Gen Z is often referred to as "Generation Achievement" or "Generation Obedient" ("*Generasjon Prestasjon*").

### **Mental health issues**

However, there is one obvious characteristic that appears on the statistics, that is not so positive, and deserves our attention. Even though most of the youth are doing very well,

there is an increasing number of young people who experience a great amount of pressure, so much that this is affecting their mental health. A few examples:

- 30% of girls in high school have serious symptoms of stress
- 40% in high school say that "everything is a struggle"
- 39% in high school are often disappointed with themselves

It is especially school pressure and body-image pressure that is mentioned as the main challenges, but pressure to be good at sports and to be popular among friends and in social media also play a role. And to be content with yourself, you should preferably succeed in all of these areas. A 17-year-old Norwegian girl says it like this:

"It's important to be the best. That's the proof that I'm good enough. I rarely feel good enough. If I feel that I have good looks, I am not good enough at school. If I feel that I am good at school, I am not good enough with exercising – or the opposite. I have to do well and stay that way to be proud of myself and feel good about myself."

Individualization and a great focus on self-realization are not something new. But Gen Z has taken this to the extreme, and has in many ways become a very self-centered generation. For many, self-realization has become the ultimate meaning of life. And when this is something they do not feel that they accomplish, this threatens the core of their identity. This gives them a feeling of being inadequate, and that they are not good enough. It may look as if they are ashamed of having human limitations.



### **A relativistic, hyperdigital, politically correct generation**

There are some other characteristics of the Gen Z in Norway as well, that are also worth mentioning.

The first is that they have grown up in a pluralistic and relativistic culture. They are taught to be critical of everything, to question everything, and that there are no absolute truths. It's not that important if something is true – the important thing is if it “works for me”.

Another characteristic of the Gen Z is that they have grown up in a hyperdigital culture. They are the first generation not to have experienced a life without the internet. A survey shows that 2/3 of Gen Z youth spend more than 3 hours each day in front of a screen (outside of school). Because of this, some even refer to them as “screenagers”.

The last characteristic I want to mention is that they are very politically correct. They want to say and think what is perceived as mainstream and commonly accepted and are afraid to say something that might offend anyone. It seems like they are thinking that the greatest sin you can commit is hurting or offending someone's feelings.

### **Creating God in their own image**

Knowing what Gen Z is like, is important for us to know, because these cultural characteristics are not necessarily something they put away when they come to church.

And there are some issues that we might need to know how to address. When the youth are used to thinking that truth is something you create for yourself, and you do not want to offend anyone, many young people might end up creating a god in their own image, choosing the things they like and ignoring the things they do not like. This is well illustrated by a young girl named Stine, who is asked about her faith:

“I think that I was constantly searching for something. I have always sought something that is bigger than myself. I almost feel that I have got some of all beliefs. I do. I almost make a Stine-faith out of it. Or something. If it's possible to say that.” (in the book “Religion og ungdom”, 2017)

### **Communicating grace and truth to Gen Z**

Fortunately, the church has been given a gospel that is relevant to all generations – and that can also meet Gen Z, exactly where they are and meet the challenges they face. A Bible verse that is relevant in this aspect, is John 1,14: *The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Two of the things Gen Z needs most is precisely this: grace and truth. In church, they can receive grace. Gen Z is perhaps the most merciless generation we have seen, especially against themselves, they have no mercy for their own shortcomings.



If they do not succeed in something, they feel that they are losing their value. Jesus came to show them that they are infinitely valuable, and that no matter how much they have sinned, there is a possibility for forgiveness and reconciliation.

In church they can also meet the truth. Both the truth about who *they are* and the truth about who *God is*. He who has created them, loves them with an unconditional love, even though he knows about all their weaknesses. He is a holy God, and he chose to come down to earth to show how much he loves them.

God chose to *come near to us* to demonstrate what grace and truth really are. And when we are working with Gen Z, this can be a good model for us as well. In their digital everyday life, where they are bombarded with different messages and people who want to influence them online, we may have to actually meet them, spend time with them, and take part in their lives. To show that we care about them, regardless of their achievements, thus pointing them to the grace and truth God wants to give them. It is difficult to communicate the grace and truth to them in any other way.

### **A sharing on the challenge of losing young Christians and your Church's responses to it.**

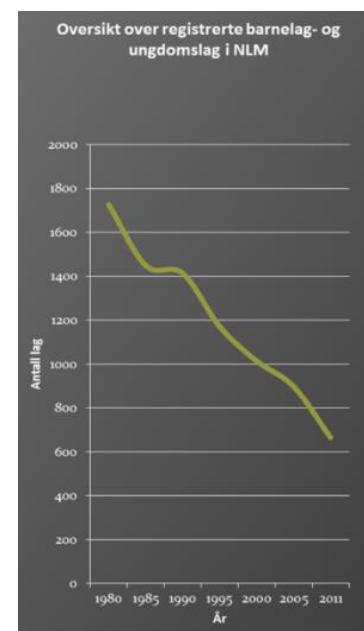
I can start by showing you some statistics from NLM's child and youth work. In 1980, this work was quite comprehensive, and we had almost 1800 different children's and youth groups, where they met regularly and heard the word of God.

But let us take a look at the situation 30 years later, in 2011. At that time, we can see that these numbers have dropped from 1800 to about 650. This means that 2/3 of all these groups disappeared in just three decades.

There are probably many different stories that explain this development. But what is very clear is that we failed in handing the gospel over to the next generation.

I am happy to tell you that this trend has started to change, and that now more groups are being created than those being closed down.

The trend we saw from 1980 to 2011 is not unique to NLM, this applies to many of the churches in Norway and also to other places in the West.





## **The youth who stayed in church**

In the US, a group of researchers (Barna Group) have studied this phenomenon more thoroughly than we have in Norway, and they have been looking for the differences between those who left the youth work when they got older and those who stayed in the church.

And they discovered four different factors that clearly distinguish between these two groups, and I believe these factors are also valid in a Norwegian context.

### *1. Close relationship with God*

The first factor that seems to be decisive for whether young people stay in church or not, is that they are led to a close relationship with God. There is a huge difference between those who have learned how to practice their faith – to pray and to read the Bible themselves, and those who have not. This was the most important factor in the study.

### *2. Close relationship with an adult Christian*

The second factor is that those who remained in church seemed to have a close relationship or friendship with an adult Christian. They want someone who is there for them. Someone who wants to talk to them. Who can help them grow? Older people can mean something to the youth, and older youth can mean something to younger youth. What they say they want is someone who listens to them without being judgmental. Someone who allows them to come to other conclusions than them, and who shows interest in them. One of the best places to create and build such relationships is at youth camps. But another and maybe even better option, is to engage as a local football coach or the like. Then one can also build relations in other arenas than the church, and one can meet and be available more often and in different contexts.

### *3. Make a difference to the world*

The third factor is that they can see that they make a difference to the world. That their Christian faith is not just about themselves, but it makes an actual difference. And this should be good news for mission organizations like us! It's really about understanding the meaning of life. They are ready to make a difference. An example is a research project at Fjellhaug International University College that looked at the effects of short-term mission trips. Many of the young people who participated in a mission trip experienced an increased commitment to mission, and as well as to their church and their own faith. For about half of those who had been attending such trips, this was crucial for the education and jobs they chose later.

### *4. Leadership responsibilities*

The fourth factor that was of decisive importance to whether young people stayed in church or not, is if they get to contribute in the work of the church. We often think that the best thing is that *we* (the adult Christians) should talk and do all the work, while the younger people can be passive and just listen. But the clear advice from the people who did this research, is to turn this way of thinking upside down. Instead of doing all of the preparations and the talks in church ourselves, maybe we can challenge the youth to do some of it and include them in the work and guide them. It looks like it is



the young people who got leadership tasks and responsibilities who stayed in church. Those who did not get leadership tasks seem to have disappeared from the church in a much larger degree. So, we should maybe try to give all the youth some kind of leadership responsibilities at some level.

#### *5. Equipped to face their own culture*

Having worked with this topic in NLM Young, I also want to add a fifth and final factor. And this is about equipping the youth to face their own culture. Many young people lose their faith in the transitions in life, like when they move away from their parents, or when they start university, because they do not seem to be properly prepared for their next stage in life. There may be issues such as the tension between faith and science, and new and critical

questions from their fellow students, and that they do not know how to be Christians in a new context with new challenges.

This was evident in a survey conducted in Norway recently, among more than 1,000 Christian students. 90% of them said that they had somewhat been hiding their Christian faith from those around them. They are not prepared for what it is like to be a Christian in a new context, and they have not been given enough training in how the Christian faith can be practiced in an unknown context.

#### **More curious about Christian faith?**

There are also some other interesting changes that we see among Gen Z, compared to earlier generations. When I started with youth work, and also when I was a youth myself, many young people had a very negative attitude towards Christians and Christianity. But it looks like this is somewhat changing. They now seem to be more open and curious about Christianity than before, probably because they do not know much about it. And this may open some new opportunities if we dare to take them.

Many young people around us are thinking quite a lot about the big questions in life, but they have no one to talk to. They say that questions like what happens when they die are important to them, but at the same time they say that they do not think others care about these kinds of questions. Therefore, they do not dare to talk to anyone about issues like this. So, we need to teach the youth we have in church to talk about this and show that it is okay to ask such questions.

#### **NLM Young's Leadership program**

In NLM Young we have just finished developing a quite comprehensive leadership training program ("ungLeder Norge") that can be used in groups all over the country, and with close follow-up of those who participate in this. The program is for young people from 15 years of age and older.

In this program they get to develop their faith and their leadership skills, they get to know themselves on a deeper level, and get a chance to talk about difficult topics. We believe this is important for our church, both to keep the youth in church, but also because the lack of leaders is an important reason



why much child and youth work have been closed down. We want to give the young people in our church responsibilities at an early stage, but with good follow-up from older Christians.