

MEL WALKER'S BLOG

RESOURCES TO ENCOURAGE THE NEXT GENERATION



5 Reasons Why Generation Alpha Will Change the Future of Youth Ministry

in Family Ministry/Generation Alpha/youth ministry — by Mel Walker

New Generations Change Things

Most of today's youth workers are probably Millennials^[1] – the generation we were told would change everything. With the recent surge of immigration, this age group became America's largest generation^[2] – and has certainly emerged as the most influential population segment in this country's history.

In generational sequence, the Millennials were followed by Generation Z – which includes today's teenagers and college age students. Gen. Z'ers have become the most diverse, progressive, and financially-minded generation in recent US history^[3]. Older youth workers and other church leaders were told by some experts to “quit doing Millennial ministry^[4]” because this new generation would look, act, think, and behave much differently than their adolescent predecessors.

Now a new generation is looming on our youth ministry horizons. It is almost time for “Generation Alpha” to emerge. This moniker, coined by Australian marketer, Mark McCrindle^[5], nicknamed the globe's newest generation with the first letter in Greek alphabet^[6]. While there is no real consensus yet about what will become the name that sticks for this emerging generation, there is no doubt that like their generational forefathers, this new age group is about to change everything – including the way we do local church youth ministry.

So, it will soon be time to quit doing “Generation Z” ministry and concentrate on reaching and ministering to Generation Alpha instead.

Introducing Generation Alpha

Alphas are the kids born between 2010 and 2025 and will be the first generation to live entirely in the twenty-first century. Ironically, based upon current life expectancy rates, they will also be the first generation to see the twenty-second century. They are also likely to be the generation most affected by the lasting impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

The members of Generation Alpha have been featured on the internet their entire lives – from the “gender-reveal parties” thrown by their parents, to their own personal YouTube channels, and the TikTok videos they made during the pandemic. Because most Alpha’s are the offspring of Millennials, they are also more likely to be from non-traditional households – with older parents and fewer siblings than the recent previous generations before them[7].

The leading edge of Generation Alpha are today’s 11-year-olds[8]. In only two or three short years, they will be members of our church youth groups – and in ten years they will be the generation of young adults that everyone is talking about.

Alphas also have the potential to change everything we know to true about youth ministry – which means that it is essential for today’s youth workers and other church leaders to do all that we can right now to learn about this new generation and to anticipate the likelihood of sweeping changes we will need to make in our church youth ministries to reach this new generation[9].

Changes Alphas Will Make in Youth Ministry

- Generation Alpha will be the age group most impacted by COVID – and that means that church and ministry leaders will need to change the way they do ministry to truly impact this new generation.

The recent coronavirus situation will predictably be the defining moment for the members of Generation Alpha. Each recent generation in US history has been characterized by one seminal event or set of circumstances: for the “Greatest Generation”, it was the bombing of Pearl Harbor; for Baby Boomers, it was the assassination of President Kennedy, for Millennials it was the attacks of 9/11; and for Alphas it will no doubt be the global COVID-19 crisis.

Generational defining moments tend to be cultural “game changers” in that these events have lasting emotional or social effects on the age groups that go through these life-altering circumstances during the same stage of their lives. Church and ministry leaders must recognize that the structures of their ministries will need to change in response to a new generation having experienced this global pandemic together.

It is no wonder that we are hearing so much about the mental health issues that today’s children and young people are experiencing. Alphas are a generation that will need to learn how to cope with emotional responses such as fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. They have been told to be “socially distant” from their peers and from other adults. They have also seen their parents and grandparents react to significant financial struggles.

Church leaders cannot expect this new generation and their parents or other caregivers to come back to church programs that feature a “let’s get back to normal” approach. Their “new normal” will look quite different than what things used to be.

The COVID crisis, and this new generation's reaction to the experiences surrounding it, will be one reason why church and ministry leaders will need to change their methodologies to reach and impact this new generation.

- The majority of Generation Alpha in America are from non-traditional or hurting and dysfunctional households – and that means the way churches organize their ministries to households and families must change.

The stay-at-home culture that developed surrounding the coronavirus situation was not a positive thing for most members of Generation Alpha. Being at home for extended periods of time was not always healthy or even safe for some members of Generation Alpha.

Demographics reveal that Alphas are much more likely to be raised in non-traditional households than members of any previous American generation^[10]. The number of single-parent, co-habiting, same-sex, and multi-generational homes is growing significantly. The number of kids not living with both of their biological parents is also increasing rapidly. Plus, household violence and abuse are rampant. One writer put it this way, “When you look at a child in this generation, you never know what kind of family life they have experienced^[11].”

Churches can no longer expect that the majority of kids who attend their “kids’ ministry” will do so with supportive parents who are on the same page as the church leaders. That is most likely not the case anymore. In fact, many youth workers have told me that their experience is that many of today’s families do not even attend church or church functions regularly due to other commitments and priorities in their lives.

Youth workers who want to effectively reach Generation Alpha will need to understand that the days when most Christian parents are committed to being the primary spiritual influence on their own kids is probably over.

- Members of Generation Alpha are likely to be “tech creators” more than they are “tech consumers” – which means that churches and ministries must give this new generation space to create and connect online.

Generation Z was perhaps the first generation to truly deserve the label as “digital natives^[12]”. As the offspring of Generation X (the first generation to fully utilize computers and tablets as tools in their own work environment), most Gen. Z’ers literally grew up with their own iPads and iPhones.

This phenomenon is even more ubiquitous with Alphas. As Mark McCrindle puts it, “They are the most technologically literate generation to ever grace the planet!^[13]” Most of today’s children already grew up with their own technology – and then COVID hit and forced almost every elementary school in this country to utilize virtual or hybrid education^[14].

Using technological tools is not foreign to Alphas, but staying at home for school will perhaps prove to be another game changer for this generation. They didn’t have personal interaction with teachers or peers for several months – which is a long time in the life of a child.

There are likely to be lasting ramifications resulting from virtual or hybrid education, including the thwarting of children’s social skills and the increased development of kids’ use of technology. This new generation were already accomplished tech users, but the move to virtual and hybrid

education will probably motivate them toward becoming tech creators more than just tech consumers. One writer says, "... kids especially—should be able to create technology. If you can create the technology you want, you can create the future you want, too[15]."

In fact, it is estimated that 65 percent of today's children will end up working in a job as adults that doesn't even exist yet[16].

- Generation Alpha is growing up in a culture where the church is much less of a priority than it was for previous generations. This reality will mean that church leaders will be forced to demonstrate that church and church functions are vitally important for all generations.

The most pressing distinction of Generation Alpha is that the majority of that cohort will have had no connection with church at all[17]. As already mentioned, the members of this generation are generally the children of Millennials, the first generation who left "religion, and is not coming back[18]."

Alphas are not a generation who will make church a priority. Their parents aren't making a commitment to church, and neither will they. This will force church leaders to take new and different strategies to reach and effectively minister to them.

- There's no doubt that most Alphas are growing up with a "post-Christian" and "post-church" mindset – which means that it will be essential for churches and ministries to act like cross-cultural missionaries to reach and impact this new generation.

Pastor James White, in his groundbreaking book *Meet Generation Z*, notes "the most defining mark of members of Generation Z, in terms of their spiritual lives, is their spiritual illiteracy...They do not know what the Bible says. They do not know the basics of Christian belief or theology." This knowledge gap is the result of a massive cultural value shift from the sacred to the secular, and it has led to increasing numbers of students abandoning their faith and losing interest in the church[19].

If White's observations are true with the previous generation, one wonders how the next generation will act about church and organized religion. Alphas are definitely growing up in a post-Christian and post-church culture.

It is true once again that this emerging generation is likely to change everything – which means that **wise youth pastors and other church leaders should prayerfully strategize now how to change the look, structure, and focus of our ministries to students to effectively impact Generation Alpha.**

[1] Personal note: I am assuming that the average age of a youth pastor in the United States at this present moment is approximately 25 to 35 years old. If this statistic is true, it means that most of today's youth pastors would be Millennials.

[2] <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/28/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers-as-americas-largest-generation/>

[3] <https://www.aecf.org/blog/what-are-the-core-characteristics-of-generation-z/>

[4] https://mymresources.com/2020/04/20/top-10-things-to-understand-about-generation-z/?fbclid=IwAR3hfCQ6B2731iAUcowZcTck0o396R360w8q282b9XXy6gDOnw68FEXUT_c

[5] “The of XYZ: Understanding the Global Generations”, by Mark McCrindle, published by the University of New South Wales Press, 2010.

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Generation_Alpha

[7] <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/05/27/as-millennials-near-40-theyre-approaching-family-life-differently-than-previous-generations/#:~:text=They%20are%20getting%20married%20later,28%20when%20she%20first%20wed.&te>

[8] <https://mccrindle.com.au/insights/blog/gen-alpha-defined/>

[9] Here is a link to a Zoom webinar I did, “Why Learning About Generation Alpha is Essential for Church Leaders?”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Torgru5cOTY&t=5s>, and here are the notes for that webinar: https://docs.google.com/viewer?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youthministryquestions.com%2Fs%2Falpha-notes_booklet_final.pdf

[10] <https://prsay.prsa.org/2019/10/17/what-pr-pros-need-to-know-about-the-worlds-next-age-group-generation-alpha/>

[11] https://www.huffpost.com/entry/generation-alpha-after-gen-z_1_5d420ef4e4boaca341181574

[12] <https://www.voanews.com/student-union/gen-z-born-be-digital>

[13] <https://mccrindle.com.au/insights/blogarchive/gen-z-and-gen-alpha-infographic-update/>

[14] <https://www.insidehighered.com/digital-learning/views/2018/08/22/hybrid-education-breath-future-and-death-teaching-we-know-it>

[15] <https://www.wired.com/brandlab/2015/12/why-its-critical-for-the-next-gen-to-be-tech-creators-not-consumers/>

[16] <https://www.primotoys.com/creating-with-tech/>

[17] <https://yfc.co.uk/from-z-to-a/>

[18] <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/millennials-are-leaving-religion-and-not-coming-back/>

[19] <https://www.kentuckytoday.com/stories/gen-z-is-spiritually-illiterate-and-abandoning-the-church-how-did-we-get-here,23397>

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GENERATIONS ALIVE TODAY

 <p>"GREATEST"</p>	 <p>SILENT</p>	 <p>BOOMERS</p>	 <p>GEN X'ERS</p>	 <p>MILLENNIALS</p>	 <p>GEN Z</p>	 <p>ALPHA</p>
<p>"GREATEST"</p>	<p>SILENT</p>	<p>BOOMERS</p>	<p>GEN X'ERS</p>	<p>MILLENNIALS</p>	<p>GEN Z</p>	<p>ALPHA</p>
<p>Pearl Harbor Avg. = 85</p>	<p>Communism Avg. = 70's</p>	<p>The 1960's Avg. = 60's</p>	<p>Scandals Avg. = 45-ish</p>	<p>9/11 Avg. = 25-35</p>	<p>Politics / Fear Avg. = Teens</p>	<p>COVID-19 ? Avg. = 11 -</p>

4 Reasons Why Our Ministries to Parents & Households Must Change

There are occasions in life when we know that it's time for a change. If my pants are too small, it is either time to get a larger size or go on a diet. If our car is in the shop almost every week, it may be time to trade that older one in on a newer model.

There are times in our ministry lives when we know that it is time to change things too. If we have more than 15 kids going on the retreat, it may be time to take two vans. If kids keep choking during game time, it may be time to quit playing "chubby bunny." If everyone falls asleep while I'm teaching, it may be time to switch methods or take some lessons in communication.

Some changes are warranted because of things that happen around us, too. I served in a church several years ago where the roof of our building collapsed due to the weight from a large snowstorm. A friend of mine ministered in a church that lost their building to a huge fire. Both churches were forced to change their meeting facilities to accommodate the essential functions of the church.

Cultural trends also provide a key impetus for change. One of the most powerful incentives for churches to modify the way they operate is when generational trends change the traits and behaviors of people the church is trying to reach.

Of course, the teaching and ministry emphases of Scripture must never change. God always expects His church to make mature disciples (Matthew 28:19-20) and equip believers to serve Him (Ephesians 4:11-16).

The history of contemporary youth ministry however, chronicles the importance of church and ministry leaders understanding the generational characteristics and differences of particular age groups so that they can effectively reach each succeeding generation for Christ. That has been true since the *Baby Boomers* of the 1940's, through *Gen X'ers*, *Millennials*, *Generation Z*, and now America's latest cohort, *Generation Alpha* (those born between 2010-2025).

Culture clearly teaches us that each succeeding generation is quite distinct from the last. Each generation tends to look at life differently and has their own unique set of values and perceptions. Likewise, today's 11-year-olds and younger (members of Generation Alpha) will look at life much differently than their generational predecessors.

It will be imperative for youth workers and other ministry leaders to understand and appreciate these four reasons why our ministries to parents and households must change to effectively connect with our newest generation.

Their parents are probably Millennials. We have all read the statistics about members of the Millennial generation leaving the church and walking away from their relationship with God following active years in church youth groups. Some have reported that most Millennials fit in the "nones" category with no religious affiliation whatsoever. It will be increasingly important for youth workers to remember that members of *Generation Alpha* are likely to be the offspring

of Millennials – the generation that got married later in life, if at all, and had fewer children than previous generations.

Their household structure is changing. Current demographic trends reveal an ever-increasing number of non-traditional, hurting, and dysfunctional households. Youth workers and other church leaders should do their homework to look at the census information and other cultural demographics in their communities. There is no doubt that the number of kids today from those non-traditional households is growing exponentially. Youth workers must realize that the days when most parents are active supporters and advocates of the church youth ministry are probably gone.

They will have a post-Christian mindset. Another reality that today's youth workers must face is the dominating presence of a post-Christian and post-church mindset in contemporary culture. Even in America, there is a rapidly advancing mentality that questions and even denies the importance of religion, maybe even especially that of genuine Christianity. Too many of today's parents, guardians, and adult caregivers, it seems, would rather have their kids get a high-paying job, win a scholarship to college, or progress toward a highly respected career than have their children faithfully involved in the church's youth ministry. Of course, this attitude is not universal, but the trends indicate that it is becoming fairly ubiquitous in today's world.

They are not loyal to the local church. Church attendance and participation is not the scheduling priority it once was in American households. Work, school activities, and involvement in various sports often take precedence in the lives of today's households. It seems as if most youth workers struggle with significant numbers of "church kids" who do not show up regularly for church and youth group functions due to their over-scheduled personal calendars and commitments.

Considering the current trends, what should youth workers do?

These four cultural trends should compel us to seriously reconsider changing the structure of our ministries. Now is the time for a change. We can continue our program that was designed to reach *Generation Z* or even *Millennials*, or we can plan now to change our approach.

As President John F. Kennedy reportedly once said, "Change is the law of life, and those who look only to the past and present are certain to miss the future."

It is essential for youth workers and other ministry leaders to be aware of the cultural trends that will require us to change the way we do ministry in the future to make effective connections with a new generation.

BIO: Mel Walker is the president and cofounder of Vision For Youth (an international network of youth ministries) and is the youth pastor at Wyoming Valley Church in Wilkes-Barre, PA. He has over 45 years of practical experience in ministering to students and their parents. He has been a youth pastor, pastor, college professor, ministry leader, editor, writer, and speaker. Mel is the author of 13 books on various topics relating to youth ministry. Mel, and his wife, Peggy, have three adult children – all of whom are in vocational, career ministry – and they currently have 10 grandchildren. For more information visit: www.YouthMinistryQuestions.com. You can connect with him on Twitter: @vfyouth.

ADOLESCENCE

5 REASONS WHY YOUTH WORKERS SHOULD LEARN NOW ABOUT GENERATION ALPHA

MEL WALKER

May 11th, 2021

Time flies – that’s for sure!

It seemed like we were just talking about the Millennial Generation and their mark on culture, when Generation Z came along. Millennials were the ones who were going to change everything – especially the way we did ministry. But then we were told to adjust our strategies because the new generation, Gen Z, would see life differently, and it would take new methodologies to reach them.

Of course, there is something particularly important about staying culturally relevant. Youth workers, maybe more than other ministry leaders, must understand the cultural influences that our students are experiencing while staying true to the teaching and practice of Biblical principles.

Our youth ministry forefathers led the way for us. Robert Raikes, the founder of the Sunday School movement in the 1700s, looked at what was happening in society and launched a ministry to reach kids by teaching them the Bible. Visionary leaders like Jack Wyrzten and Percy Crawford in New York City and Torrey Johnson in Chicago rented stadiums to host youth rallies in the 1940s to reach an emerging youth culture with the Gospel. About the same time, para-church organizations like *Young Life* and *Youth for Christ* began to connect with kids in America’s communities and public schools.

Christian colleges offered youth ministry majors and churches hired vocational youth pastors. Curriculum publishers produced youth materials and books, and youth ministry organizations, like *Youth Specialties*, became a part of a new youth ministry movement with the grand purpose to reach a new generation.

But times changed and teenagers changed. Baby Boomers were replaced by the members of Generation X, who were followed by Millennials and then Generation Z. Now it's time for youth workers to realize that a new generation of young people is on the cultural horizon.

The leading edge of "Generation Alpha" (their name coined by Australian researcher, Mark McCrindle) are this year's 11-year-olds. They are the age group born between 2010–2025, and will be the first generation to be born entirely in the 21st Century. Alphas are likely to be the generation most affected by COVID-19 and are growing up in a world quite different than any other previous generation.

Today's youth workers are facing a new opportunity to develop culturally relevant and Biblically-based ministries for a new generation of students. In three short years, the first wave of Generation Alpha will be teenagers. In ten years they will be young adults and will be the generation everyone is talking about. It is imperative that youth workers understand that they need to learn all they can now about our newest generation.

Why Learn About Generation Alpha Now?

Here are five reasons why youth workers must make it a priority to learn about Alphas now:

- 1. Today's children will grow up.** This sounds too obvious, but it's true. One of the most important reasons to connect with pre-teens is because it is easier to reach them while they are young. If we do not build positive relationships with them now, there is a real likelihood that they will grow up without an important Godly influence on their lives.
- 2. Many kids make lasting spiritual decisions when they are young.** It has been true for several generations. Most people make spiritual decisions while they are young. One researcher says that nine out of ten Christians accept Jesus before the age of 18. Church leaders would be advised to develop intentional and culturally relevant ways to creatively share the Gospel with today's kids.
- 3. Generation Alpha is part of your congregation now.** Too often youth leaders ignore their church's ministry to children until they get to be teenagers. Of course, many youth workers are busy and don't need anything else on their plates. But strategically, it is important to understand that today's youngest generation is already a key target group for your youth ministry in the near future.
- 4. Reaching kids helps churches connect with today's households.** Today's children are growing up in a rapidly changing culture. Demographics reveal a growing number of non-traditional and dysfunctional households. Taking the initiative to share the Gospel with kids might give churches the opportunity to connect with those households in our communities.

5. **Children are trend-setters and are great predictors of the future.** Maybe the most important reason for today's youth workers to learn all they can about Generation Alpha is that kids are trend-setters with the ability to influence the future. Advertisers understand this and are targeting children now with a wide range of products and services. Real leaders understand the importance of being able to anticipate upcoming trends and develop ways to connect with people as time progresses.

Before we know it, a new generation will be a part of our ministries. Like other age groups, Generation Alpha has the potential to make a significant change in culture and in our churches. Youth workers should be observers of cultural trends and should be visionary leaders who see the importance of developing relevant and effective ways to reach Alphas now.

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MEL WALKER

Mel Walker has invested his life in the next generation. He is uniquely positioned by God to have a leading voice in today's youth ministry. He has over 45 years of practical experience in ministering to students and their parents. He has been a youth pastor,

pastor, professor, administrator, ministry leader, editor, writer, and speaker. Mel has visited approximately 30 churches each year for over 30 years – and he is the author of over 13 books on various topics relating to youth ministry. Mel, and his wife, Peggy, speak to hundreds of young people, young adults, church leaders, and youth workers each year in a wide variety of events and venues. They are also the parents of three adult children – all of whom are in vocational, career ministry – and they currently have 10 grandchildren.

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