

# Technology

by Dr. Janet L. McMullen

## Closing the Gap Between the Millennial Generation and the Modern Church

As a professor of communication for nearly 20 years, I have studied the effects of media on young people with great interest. We know that media technologies can determine not only how a message is presented but what can be presented and how an audience connects with it.

In his classic book that discusses the affects of television on public discourse, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985), Neil Postman writes, “You can’t do philosophy with smoke signals.” He posits that written words offer logical, linear, and very specific concepts, whereas visual images are less specific and much more emotional.

Interactive technologies such as video games and the Internet are more involving and increasingly impactful than the technologies of the past. As churches strive to build their congregations, expand community, and come together as the Body of Christ, we’re seeing that, for the younger generations, eliciting greater involvement in a way that is relevant to the current culture is the key.



### Different Generation

Young people today, beginning with the Millennial Generation (born from 1981 to 2000), expect to use new technologies. They approach communication very differently than those of us born before 1981; they don’t recall a time before video games, the Internet, e-mail, instant messaging or cell phone text messaging. Those of us who remember when the VCR and cell phones were “new” technologies may struggle with this landscape where technology is at the center of everyday life. We may use our cell phones, but have no idea how to use its “extra” features.

Those “extras” may seem like unnecessary frills, and perhaps something else to complicate our lives, but the younger generations not only know how to use these “frills,” they rely on them completely. Whether text messaging, downloading music and podcasts, or taking part in online social communities, this group relies on multiple forms of technology for their everyday connections to the people they care most about—and can’t imagine a world without immediate information and 24/7 connectivity.

Those in leadership positions within the church must recognize the basic differences in communication styles and expectations of younger generations in order to adequately reach them. Although the human tendency is to keep doing what works well now, if churches do not begin to include and adapt to these new technologies, they will not be prepared for the younger generations, and therefore will not be able to impact and retain the attention of these groups into the future.

Young people see technology as a primary means of communication; they want to connect when they want to connect. They want to make that connection from where ever they happen to be. To them, it’s not necessary to go somewhere, be face-to-face, or even hear someone speak in order to have meaningful conversations. They do it all the time, any time, anywhere—thanks to technology.

Recent events at Virginia Tech demonstrated this reality. Immediately after the shootings that took the lives of 32 people, students were blogging. They were creating and posting messages on Facebook, MySpace, personal Web sites and university Web sites; through these mediums of communication, they were distributing information, sharing their hearts, and working through their grief—not in person, but online. When they could not physically be in the same place at the same time, the Internet provided a means to connect with others in an important and very personal way.

The modern church must recognize the need for such connectivity in the Body of Christ; without it, our programs, our structures, and our way of doing “church” itself will seem antiquated and irrelevant to young adults, adolescents, and children who need Jesus in this post-modern world.

If the church is to continue to reach new souls for Christ and minister to the needs of its people, we must recognize that communications systems change; while core communication needs remain the same, the methods with which to achieve the same results are constantly changing. The Church must recognize this and adapt to these changes or its communication methods will continue to grow increasingly stale and irrelevant.

Recent research from the Barna Group ([www.barna.org](http://www.barna.org)) on the Millennial Generation has indicated that these young people are hungry for truth. They have seen that the “rules,” the “freedom,” and the “stuff” don’t provide lasting happiness or fulfillment.

“The two fastest-growing macromodels of church are the house church and cyber-church formations.”

—George Barna, *Revolution: Finding Faith Beyond the Walls of the Sanctuary* (2005)

They have grown up with the films *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Spiderman*. They love to play fantasy video games where they fight dragons and stand for what is right and good, and they realize that treating others as they wish to be treated is one of the keys to a happy life.

This generation wants someone to tell them that there is more than the ambiguity this postmodern world, where they have grown up without any sense of absolute truth or standard of right and wrong. But despite this desire, they don’t want to hear it in a lecture, they want to hear stories—the stories of people they know, people they care about, and people who in turn care about them.

The turn tales of others speak truth and have credibility; knowledge matters because it is empirical, that is, dependent on evidence or consequences that are observable by the senses. In addition, the knowledge gained is valued because it is sealed by relationships that count.

Many modern churches encourage relationship building through small groups, or cell groups, which can be very effective, but are not enough on their own. This generation craves more. To be expected to go to a physical location every time they have a need or a question, or

simply want to share something from their heart just isn’t practical. They don’t have time to call everyone in the group, and even e-mail lacks immediacy and seems flat. But if given the ability and tools to post a message online in a place where everyone can see it, or go online and find out who is on their computer to instant message or chat immediately, or even text message from their cell phone—they will get a response from the people they care about because the methods for connectivity are present and available whenever needed.

The bottom line is that the church must embrace new technologies that allow believers to connect in more authentic and progressive ways. The church market is adapting and new technologies are being created to assist churches in reaching the younger generations and beyond. The Oikos Community Console™ ([www.oikosconsole.com](http://www.oikosconsole.com)), by Simon Solutions, is one example of how the Millennial Generation is motivated to come up with ways to reach beyond the current status quo.

Oikos, which is also the Greek word for household or family, is a revolutionary online community-building platform with which congregations, ministries, schools, and cell groups can connect, share, and communicate online. It combines communication tools such as small-group communities, media sharing, 24/7 prayer requests, calendars, forums, and chat—all tools these generations crave. But unlike some of the other social networking sites out there, Oikos provides security that enables the church to oversee, provide insight, and monitor in a way that is conducive to the Body of Christ.

Online tools such as the Oikos Community Console provide the ability to enhance and deepen relationships, increase influence, reach a wider audience, and connect your community in powerful ways. It allows the present-future church to meet needs, pray, educate, and encourage in real-time while protecting and respecting its members.

For organizations that want to maintain their relevance in the ever-changing technology landscape, new options must be considered in order for the modern church to be the connected family that God intends.❖

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