

## **BUILDERS, SILENTS, BOOMERS, SURVIVORS and MILLENNIALS**

### **The Builders** (Birth years: 1901 to 1924)

Ozzie and Harriet immortalize the vision of the builders. As powerful midlifers, the builders created the image of father and mother and smiling, accommodating children. A generation of groups, not individuals, the builders are known for their insistence on conformity. During their powerful midlife years, the builders built everything big that we now see crumbling as we pass out of the twentieth century. They built the big businesses, the big unions, and the big government. Moreover, they built the big cold war – the forty-year standoff between the two big empires – that fueled much of their other big accomplishments. They built one other “big” institution. The builders were responsible for building up the big denominations and their big agencies through the fifties and early sixties. Builder pastors built big, “tall-steeple,” mainline churches. They managed the largest expansion of mainline denominational churches in the twentieth century. “Build it and build it BIG” was the motto of this generation that provided for collective infantry of the last BIG war.

Following the expected cycle of benefit, in their busy elder years they worked to convene the first White House Conference on Aging in 1961 (program to benefit the builders). The AARP (American Association of Retired Persons) is one of the wealthiest and most activist special interest associations in America. And we do know that this is a voting generation. Inevitably, their voting will protect what they have built.

### **The Silents (Birth Years: 1925-1942)**

The distinctive trait of this adaptive generation is that they are facilitators. Unlike the builders before them and the boomers after them, both of whom (each in their own way) push for everything, this generation quietly facilitates life – or at least tries to.

Many silents to this day feel a nagging guilt for stepping outside the boundaries of their elders. In their coming-of-age and young-adults years, their lives were marked primarily by conformity. Young silents followed the rules and did what they were supposed to do without question. As one silent put it:

My generation has always lacked creative ideas. We have worked long and hard, and we can't by faulted for lack of loyalty. But the world is changing, and for survival, corporations are looking past us to the creative energy so typical of boomers. And we resent it. We feel caught between the builders who built and the boomers who insist on rebuilding it. I notice among many within my generation and anger and a growing stubbornness. We are becoming blockers. Out of fear that the systems we have faithfully served will pass us by, we have begun diggin in our heels and using our skill as processors, stopping forward progress. Ironically, we rode the system the longest and received the most from it. Now we are afraid the ride is over, and we don't know what to do. So we block. Change is the enemy.

Several silents, feeling the internal angst of having spent the first half of their life marching to the drumbeat of the builders, took a decidedly internal turn and began to explore their feelings and the experiential side of life. We cannot understand the heavy emphasis on the therapeutic over the last twenty-five years of the twentieth century apart from the soul search led by the silents. Also, if the builders are the last Industrial Age generation, the silents are the in-between generation, caught in the squeeze between the end of the industrial-based world and the birth of the information-based world.

### **The Boomers (Birth Years: 1943 to 1960 or 1946 to 1964)**

There is no generation that has received more attention, or at least so it seems. For many reasons, beginning with the sheer numbers (76 million), the baby boom generation has been a dominant force during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Boomers were the children born beginning in the early forties to the parents of the end of the builder and the beginning of the silent generations. Demographically, the boomers' birth years begin in 1946 and end in 1964. This was based upon the incredible postwar baby boom. Demographers consider this boom to have ended in 1964 because it was the last year the annual birth level surpassed the four million mark. Beginning in 1965 there was a significant drop in the number of births.

Boomers are idealists in the generational cycle. As children, they were indulged. In part because of a reaction against their own overprotected childhood, the parents of boomers (silents) were not as strong in setting boundaries. In short, boomers were able to get away with much more than would have been possible for the two earlier generations. The last idealist generation gave us prohibition. The current, the boomer idealists, will give us prohibition of the nineties – the eradication of smoking from every environment.

Unlike the builders and the silents before them, the faith involvement of the boomers is anything but stable. Boomers are increasing their faith involvement. According to our Ethos II survey, close to 25% indicated having greater involvement in 1993 than ten years earlier. But the increase did not translate into involvement in mainline Protestant churches.

### **The Survivors (Birth Years: 1961 to 1981)**

A review of teenagers' wardrobes today would probably show that much of their clothing is black. One easy way to identify the younger generation from the boomers is to simply look at their clothing. Survivors wear more black and the boomers wear colors. Some have referred to them as "generation X." Many boomers hold negative images of this generation. Even though many of us have children within it, we view their generational ethos as dangerous and something from which we must protect them. Boomers look down their long, lofty moral noses at a generation that has, in a real sense, simply followed our lead. As a generational group, they will need to survive a world that has always been and most likely always will be hostile toward them. Therefore we call them survivors.

The other side of this generation, however, is that they do "study." They have chosen a more pragmatic approach. And for all the boomers idealist loftiness, many young people of this generation have much clearer personal goals. Many know what they want to do and major in before going to college. Also, boomers, as idealists, have an overall generational ethos of entitlement. Between the nurturing experience of boomers and their sheer size, life has tended to revolve around our needs and desires. This younger generation has had just the opposite experience. Nothing has revolved around them. They do not expect to be taken care of. Rather, there is a streetwise pragmatism that teaches that if they are to survive, they must make it on their own.

Why? When the survivors were born in their early years, their parents were pursuing the "self," living in communes, looking to the other world for life meaning, setting and pursuing super-careers, and so on. Their minds were not on the more mundane activities of life, such as nurturing children. The result? The latchkey generation. Thousands went home every day to an empty house. While dad and mom have been pursuing their own selves, these young people have been left alone. The divorce rate is one indicator of this. Between 1960 and 1985, the rate of divorce in the U.S. doubled. They could be called the "neglected" but survivors has a more positive ring and orientation.

While the boomers were more likely to have increased their faith involvement, survivors are more likely to have decreased it. The largest percentage have decreased (38%). But three in ten have also increased. A review of their religious preferences reveals two traits, one that they share with boomers and one that makes them distinct from boomers. What they share is diversity. Like the boomers, survivors are spread across many different traditions, and none of their above-average preferences are mainline Protestant. But unlike the boomers, survivors are more likely to prefer traditions that are more theologically conservative.

### **The Millennials (Birth Years: 1982 to 2003)**

No particular generational personality has yet emerged. It is too soon. We can, however, make note of social developments that are expected within the generational cycle that will most likely impact them. Perhaps the most obvious is the plight of children. One in five are in poverty, single parent household are growing and that this is probably not the best possible world for raising kids. We have become painfully aware of how at risk so many kids are.