

Impact 365

By [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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On Thursday evening (April 18), I will be in the Chicago area for [Impact 365](#). If you're in the area, you're welcome to attend! (Just click the link for details.)

Here is an interview, conducted by Bronwen Henry, one of the event's coordinators and the Managing Editor at New Church Connection.

**BH: Who do you consider to be part of the "new generation"?**

CHM: I talk about “generations” in a couple of ways (which can be confusing). In my first book, I talked about generations as an age category. In *Reframing Hope*, I moved more to talking about it as a chronological slice in time. The shift was important for me because I know that there are many people who are older and have an excellent grasp of the cultural shifts that are occurring. Of course, there’s a lot of overlap in the two ideas, so I tend to talk about it interchangeably.

**BH: What do you think draws you to advocate for this new generation?**

CHM: I was pastoring a church and no one in the congregation looked like me. Most of my friends weren’t going to church. So it is primarily a deep longing and love for people that draws me to advocate.

I’m also saddened by a lot of the conclusions that people make when looking at studies and research about emerging adulthood (Dr. David White has an excellent summary [here](#)).

- When people see the inability for someone in a younger generation to keep a job, a researcher might conclude that the person isn’t loyal, instead of looking at the larger economy.
- When people look at statistics that say that younger people are getting married later, people determine that young men and women want to extend their adolescence, instead of thinking about how job insecurity might be affecting the ability to make commitments.

- When a person is not able to get a mortgage, people conclude that he or she just doesn't want to "settle down," instead of looking at the pernicious problem of debt in our country.

This felt ageist and I wondered if the conclusions would be different if people ministered with this generation and listened to their stories. In reality, the economic situation of young men and women is vastly different and it will affect the way that they are able to settle down and form roots. We need to be able to understand that, because it ought to change the way that we do church.

**BH: What do you think are some of the greatest challenges this generation faces?**

CHM: As I state above, I think economic challenges greatly affect the ways in which people can settle down and form community. Our society tends to make a marriage certificate and a mortgage necessary markers of adulthood. Can we begin to change our definitions and marks of maturity for a generation that may not be able to get married and buy a house right away?

There is more depression and anxiety in the US, and Bill McKibben has done an insightful job of linking the rise of depression to our lack of community in his book, *Deep Economy*.

We will have environmental challenges, particularly when it comes to water. As China and India move from being agricultural to industrial centers, they are using more petroleum and eating more meat. How can we sustain this globally?

We're also sorting out how [technology is shaping us as humans](#). We don't know how these changes will affect us, but we need to keep wrestling with questions on a deeper theological level than we are doing currently.

**BH: What are some of the greatest assets/gifts/privileges/advantages/opportunities of this generation?**

CHM: As we look at Generation X (roughly, people born from 1961 to 1981), they have an amazing ability to innovate and create things. Give a Gen Xer a credit card, and she will start a new business. We are seeing how this spirit of entrepreneurship is impacting the church, as there is a great longing for planting new churches and rethinking vocations.

Millennials (adults born after 1981) are part of one of the largest generations our country has ever seen and many say that they will outnumber the Boomers. They have been exciting and fascinating to watch. Much of the research determined that they would be institutionally minded team players. This may turn out to be true, but right now they seem to be playful subverters. Frustrated by student loan debts and not getting a job? Then go to the place where the money is. Camp out on Wall Street in New York City or K Street in Washington, DC.

They are highly affective at activism and seeking good, savvy with technology, fun and gimmicks to organize on an amazing level. Their continued involvement in the political process will change our country in amazing ways.

**BH: In thinking about the future of the church, what gives you hope?**

CHM: In much of the denominational church, we have built our congregations through our prestige and influence. Though we still have some residue of power left, for the most part, we've lost a lot of our clout. I find this to be hopeful, because it's forcing us to re-think who we are and what our mission is. We no longer sit back and expect people to stream into our pews, but we do know that if they gather, they are there for a reason and a purpose.

**BH: You've written books, given lectures, and shared your wisdom over the radio. Through this process of becoming more a part of the world-wide conversation, what is one of the things that has most surprised you?**

CHM: I thought I would be helping generations within the church understand one another, but I had no idea that my work would be used in more personal ways. I have had numerous parents tell me that they thought there was something wrong with their son or daughter because he or she couldn't find a job, support a household, get married, etc. They didn't understand the larger economic picture and had no idea that these were difficulties that extended way beyond their particular progeny.

**BH: In your work of advocating for the new generation, what one significant challenge/fear/obstacle have you had to overcome?**

CHM: One challenge is related to my answer above. Often parents are so angry and frustrated with the younger generations in their own family, they don't understand how they carry that disappointment into the church.

Another challenge that has frustrated me is the lack of concern that the church has over some of issues that are really important for a new generation. Fighting predatory lending, providing health care for young adults, student loan debt—these are issues I never hear about in church and they're crucial.