

What's honored in a country will be cultivated there

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

June 12, 2014

The national gathering for the PC(USA) starts on Saturday. I'm proud of our General Assembly. It's a biennial event where we wrestle with profound issues, listen to one another, and seek to discern God's will. Not everyone agrees with the decisions. Many of the votes end up with a nearly 50/50 split. But we covenant to be a part of this process and find unity in our differences.

I love that the commissioners to the assembly are made up of equal parts laity and clergy. I love that people on the ground, worshiping in local churches, and struggling with particular budgets make decisions.

One thing always makes me pause though. When we get the [age breakdown](#), it's nothing short of horrendous.

- 91 percent of the laity are 50 and older.
- 67 percent of the clergy are 50 and older.
- A mere 23 percent of all commissioners are under 50.

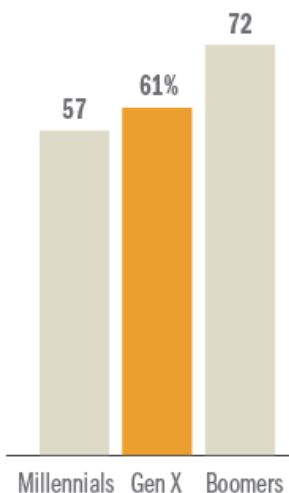
Why is this important? Well, the worldview of people under the age of 50 is much different, especially when it comes to things that mean a great deal to how we do church—racial ethnic makeup, marital status, education level, and religious affiliation. We have different opinions on marriage equality, immigration, and technology use.

Here are [Pew Research's graphs on these issues](#). Millennials and Gen X are under 50.

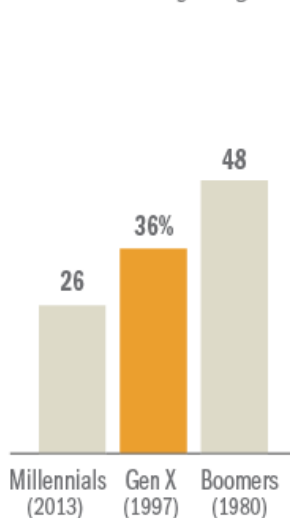
Generation X: Stuck in the Middle

Gen Xers are the demographic bridge between the predominantly white Baby Boomers and more diverse Millennials. They also fall in the middle on other demographic measures.

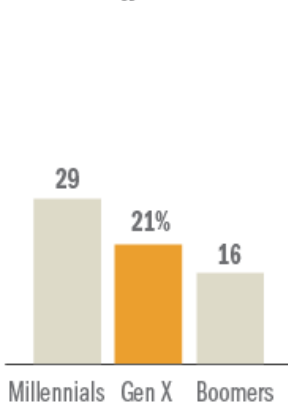
% white (non-Hispanic)



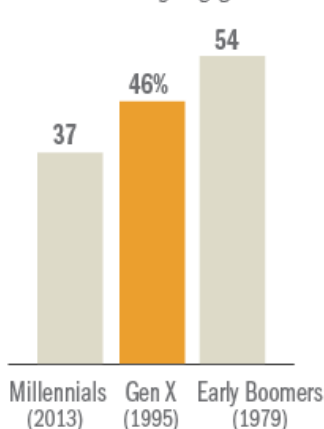
% married at age 18-32



% who are religiously unaffiliated

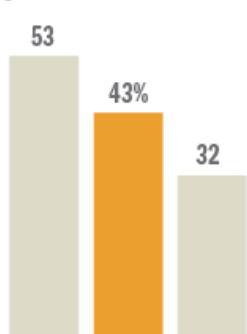


% with high school diploma or less at age 25-32

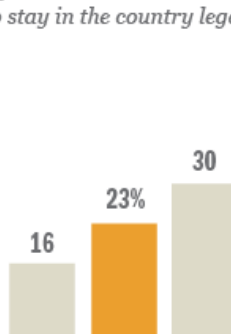


Gen Xers' attitudes on political and social issues often fit between those of the more conservative Baby Boomers and more liberal Millennials.

% saying they would rather have a bigger government with more services



% saying that unauthorized immigrants should NOT be allowed to stay in the country legally



Having people who can make decisions with that differing perspective will be important for the health and well-being of our denomination.

How do we fix this? Of course, there is no easy fix. Other than [buy my book](#). (Just kidding. Sort of.)

But when we think about the General Assembly in particular, is there anything that we can do? I think there is.

[Paul Raushenbush interviewed William Sloane Coffin](#) about a decade ago. I often go back to this interview, and it might give us a clue now, especially when Coffin quotes Plato: "What's honored in a country will be cultivated there." When I enter churches or study organizations, I ask myself, "What kind of work do they honor? Whom do they celebrate?"

Now, more and more, when I go to denominational events, they honor the lifetime achievements of distinguished individuals. Sometimes they are the unsung heroes of our church, who labored for years without any recognition. But usually, they are the people who have received loud accolades, fantastic salaries, and great honors their entire careers. And now that they are retired, we go to General Assembly luncheons where every Presbyterian organization hands out an award to a retiree and applauds what we used to be.

In one particular organization, when they were deciding who to give an award to, a person on a board asked, "Why don't we give out that award to someone who's not retired? What about giving it to a person who's on the top of her career right now?"

The answer came quickly: "Well, we don't want to give a young person a big head or anything."

I don't want to sound like a jerk. Of course, it's lovely to remember a life well lived. But the thing is, the award is not only for the person on whom it is bestowed. It is for the body. What's honored in a country will be cultivated there.

*(Now, I know that the PCUSA uses TE/RE to make the clergy/laity distinction. But no one outside of Presby-world understands what that means. So for the purposes of the ecumenical nature of this blog, I'm going to stick with laity and clergy. Those outside of the PCUSA, it might be helpful to note that we ordain our laity to be ruling elders and deacons.)