

Mobilizing Boomers and Busters for World Evangelization

by Paul Borthwick

Before the 1950's, very few people thought of themselves in demographic categories. Then, between 1946 and 1964 over 76 million babies were born, and the "Baby Boom Generation" came into being. With distinctives in music (especially Rock 'n' Roll), history (the Viet Nam War, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the first man on the moon) and the influence of television, "Baby Boomers" became a uniquely influential segment of American society.

Today, a "Baby Boomer" occupies the White House—illustrating the transition of power occurring in the nation, in the churches in the USA and in mission organizations. This generation, traveling through U.S. history like a "pig in a python," has come of age. The first generation raised on TV is here, and we who are committed to global evangelism must address this reality.

James Engel identifies this generation as crucial to the continuation of the missionary enterprise. He writes: "Unless radical changes are made by mission agencies and local churches, Christian baby boomers will not provide the human and financial resources needed for accelerated evangelism in the 1990s" (James F. Engel, "We Are the World," *Christianity Today* (September 24, 1990), p. 32).

Comedian Dave Barry challenges "boomers" in his *Dave Barry Turns 40*: "The only solution for us is to face up to the fact that we are no longer the hope for the future... We baby boomers are the *hope for right now*, and we're going to have to accept it" (p. 24).

On the heels of the "boomers" comes a smaller segment, the so-called "baby busters,"—those born after

1964. Living their lives in the shadows of the boomers, "busters" have grown into the "disillusioned left-overs" of the boomer generation. The thirty and younger busters tend toward greater sarcasm, cynicism, and even despair than their boomer predecessors. This "Twenty-something" generation represents even a greater challenge to the issues of recruitment and funding for cross-cultural, international ministry and missions from the United States.

When we examine the challenge of the Baby Boomer and Buster generations, the question might be posed, "Why all the fuss?" Engel's quote above alludes to the two major issues, of personnel and funding. If the Great Commission is to be fulfilled, the Church must be mobilized and the endeavor must be funded. Boomers and busters represent the major source of both resources, and yet studies reveal that these two generations are less globally minded and less generous than the prior generation that sent out thousands of missionaries in the decades before. So the question becomes, "How then can these generations be mobilized for missions—for generosity, and for evangelization to the ends of the earth?"

Know Your Audience

Before identifying ideas on how to stir baby boomers and busters unto action, we should identify observable characteristics about the generation we're trying to mobilize. What are some of the key characteristics of these two generations affecting their involvement and grow in their perspective on world missions?

Expectations About Life

The parents of boomers—

children of the depression—were satisfied with less and demanded less. For instance, in 35 years of low income labor, my father never asked questions about self-actualization and happiness. He never blamed his father for any of his own problems, and he never knew the word "dysfunctional." He was satisfied with a roof over his head and food on his family table. It was a time of low expectations and low disappointments.

In contrast, I (born in 1954) grew up expecting self-fulfillment. My generation had their heads full of ideals and dreams of doing better than the generation before. With no "world wars" to sober our demands, we grew up as the generation with the greatest "sense of entitlement" (i.e., all the happiness that is my due) in American history. We blamed our parents for our neuroses, and everybody suffers from some sort of dysfunctional relationship—for which we expect a cure. We thought that life should be exciting, and in one boomer's words, it should be a "lifetime full of once-in-a-life-time experiences." In my boomer culture, high expectations have yielded high disappointments. However, in time, boomers have come to realize that life is not turning out as expected. The economy, the world, and relationships have let us down. This disillusionment has been passed on to the "busters" who followed after.

Idealism gone personal

The earliest boomers were out to change the world, and the Beatles assured us that "love" was in fact all we needed. But idealism was tainted—heroes were assassinated, an ugly war lingered, and our cities became war zones. Idealism about changing the world began to shift inward. "I can't change

the world,” stated one 38 year old, “but I can change *my* world.”

In the 1960s radical thinking challenged boomers to give up their lives for the vision of peace and world change. The Peace Corps became the most vivid illustration of this idealism. The *cause* was worth it! However, by the 1980s dedication to the “cause” soured. Boomers and busters dedicated themselves to personal fitness and a spiritual inward journey which in large part became the seedbed of the New Age Movement. Advertisements and books exhorted a self-centered, almost nihilistic approach to life: “I’m worth it,” became the new cause.

Redefining commitment

Breakdown in the family, national disunity about Viet Nam, and the disgrace of deceptive public leaders all led to a redefinition of commitment. A lifetime of marital fidelity became optional. The principle value was to have multiple options—with no sense of compulsion to choose and stick to any.

One pastor of boomers and busters summed up the tension of ministering in this age by observing, “It’s tough to have a significant ministry with people whose top priority is to keep their options open.” *Leadership* magazine illustrated this with a man asking his pastor, “Would it be possible to audit the class on Total Commitment?”

With redefined commitments, nothing is seen as permanent, including jobs, dwelling places, even marriages. Multiple options emerged out of the value: “I’m committed as long as I’m fulfilled.” Increased options results in diminished “brand loyalty”—whether we are talking about American-made versus foreign, denominations, churches, or even mission agencies.

The redefinition of commitment has trickled down to the busters to virtual indecision. Having observed the failures of the boomers, busters now think, “No commitments means no failures.”

David Johnson, young adult pastor at Grace Chapel where I serve, commenting on the buster attraction to bunjy-jumping, observed, “Baby busters are willing to risk their lives, but they are unwilling to risk living.”

Before suggesting any responses to this boomer/buster generation, it is important to note that these segments of society have a much different image of missions than the older generations had. To boomers and busters, missions might be equivalent to cultural imperialism, illustrated by the tremendous hesitation in 1992 to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the landing of Columbus. What Columbus did was misdirected superiority and was definitely *not* politically correct.

Presenting the missions challenge to boomers and busters should be easier because no generation before has had so much access to international knowledge, CNN, and the “global village.” Ironically, this knowledge has not necessarily translated into missions, due in part to the decreased conviction that “Jesus is the only way.” Increased acceptance of pluralism has created a segment in the church who are functional universalists, believing that people without Christ are not really lost but will be saved in some other way in the end. With this underlying belief, there is decreased conviction that we actually need to and “have a story to tell to the nations.”

Our Response

Simply highlighting these characteristics can be depressing if we do not prayerfully and diligently look for ways to respond correctly. We have an unchanging message and mandate—to make disciples of all the nations—but we believe in adapting and contextualizing the message according to the cultures of the peoples we are trying to reach. In the case of the boomer and buster generation it is no different. We are in fact needing to contextualize

and adapt the mobilization message so that we can produce boomers and busters who will pray, give, and go to the ends of the earth. Ours is the I Chronicles 12:32 challenge—to understand our times and then determine how to respond.

If we believe in contextualizing our message (and methods) we most likely will face some things that make us uncomfortable. For instance, it may very well involve us in changing our style of recruitment, with the need to answer the Boomer question “What’s in it for me?” At the same time we need to wrestle with questions which challenge our traditional ways of doing missions.

If we fail to adapt our message and methods, we may still be able to recruit from the small number of boomers and busters who fall into the more “traditional” category, but over time this group will get smaller and smaller. In addition, that older generation will not provide sufficient funding nor the progressive vision which our mission efforts will need to evangelize our world. So consider seven basic responses:

Accept the Challenge

At Inter-Varsity’s 1990 Urbana Conference, the emphasis for the first two days was on how God uses hurting, dysfunctional people to do His work. There were times of healing, prayer, and testimonies to healing. By the third day, the “Marine Corps,” more traditional, “buck-up-buster” types were outraged. Where was the missionary challenge? Where was the sacrifice? What’s this stuff about inner healing?

Some mission leaders were ready to stop supporting Urbana. However, the leadership of Inter-Varsity did not flinch, because they knew that they needed to start with brokenness, because that was a theme that their audience could resonate with. They had done their research. They knew that most busters saw themselves as hurting and dysfunctional, and hence addressed the

mission message to this audience. The powerful call to the ends of the earth went forward; but it was adapted and contextualized to the self-perceptions of the target audience.

Accepting the challenge means researching the culture of the people we're trying to reach and mobilize. It means not relying on old methods, outdated ideas, or recruitment approaches designed for the 1960s. If we fail to accept the challenge and "shake the dust off our feet" moving away from this "me-centered" generation, we may lose the opportunity to include the North American Church in the completion of the Great Commission.

Partnership

Virtually every boomer and buster is attracted to knowing people first-hand. Short-term mission teams allows people to meet "real-life" missionaries and national church leaders, and this relationship often results in giving, prayer support, and an increased willingness to consider involvement. Allowing people a taste of a "slice of the world" is perhaps the best way to enhance a global vision among boomers and busters.

The corollary is also true: Boomers and busters are less inclined to give blindly to people or projects simply out of loyalty or duty. If they don't know the person, or conversely, believe in the project, they are much less likely to give. As a result, emphasizing personal (hands-on) relationships with actual missionaries and leaders overseas is the best way to insure interest and positive responses.

Idealism

Boomers and busters have been deluged with facts for most of their lives. Most have callousness towards overwhelming statistics and automatically shut off when boring statistics are given which only stir up guilt.

Rather than paralyzing people with guilt, or boring them with statistics that they cannot respond to, we need to rather tap into that latent idealism (especially in the "we're out to change the world" boomers), and show them how to make a real difference. World Relief Commission's "Bethlehem Bazaar" taps into this. "I might not be able to stop poverty, but I can help

can help them specifically focus their efforts and energies, making significant "dents" somewhere, rather than sprinkling their efforts all over the world. Today, boomer and buster churches are allocating 25% to 50% of their budgets to one specific project or "people group," which is a distinct departure from the old model of a "pin in every country of the world map."

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Focusing efforts restores hope in people because it gives them a sense of serving and helping, and making a difference in response to one's need. Focused energies locally might include outreach to international students or to recently-arrived immigrants, or even the homeless. Focusing energies overseas might mean one city, one village, one need, or one ethnic people group. Focused energies

tell the boomer and buster, "It's not a hopeless world; you can make a world of difference, and here's how!"

Excellence

Like it or not, when we communicate with boomers and busters, we are competing for their attention, even within the church. While this does not give us permission to undersell the dramatic commitment needed to serve cross-culturally, it does remind us that the presentations we make, the publications we present, and the videos we produce need to be *quality*.

Busters raised on MTV are not likely to respond to a boring slide show or a video that bumps along as if it were filmed driving over a railroad track. The Canon Camera commercial stated the spirit of the age: "Image is Everything." While we might abhor this secular spirit, the fact is that image might make the difference of getting a hearing rather than being written off as obscure and out-of-touch.

To boomers and busters, excellence means up to date maps (no more

one family break the cycle of poverty by giving a gift that helps them become financially independent."

Communications

In an age of CNN and *USA Today*, boomers and busters have a low toleration for old news. If we expect them to be motivated to pray and get involved, we must dedicate ourselves to keeping people informed and up to date. With contemporary technologies, boomers and busters expect e-mail updates and fax replies, not newsletters that are months or weeks out of sync with the daily news.

It will cost us more money at home to keep the global mission of the Church before people, but the forward looking mission agency that is willing to contextualize will allocate money for quality videos, attractive informational brochures, and graphically presented educational tools.

Focus

Related to the issue of idealism, recruiters for missions will be more effective with boomers and busters if they

USSR!), color overhead slides, and presentations that honor time constraints. Use the news and build on it, including fax reports from Christians serving in the world's "hot spots."

Education

Whenever briefing boomers and busters concerning the worldwide commission of the church, the best advice is: "Don't assume!" I asked a worshipper at our church what he thought was the "Great Commission?" Being a salesman, he thought about it for awhile, and responded, "About 15 to 20%?"

We discovered that he had no idea what the term meant. So we need to explain it every time we use it. This also goes for the term "missions" (we prefer to use "cross-cultural ministries," so that people are clear on our focus). We can never assume that boomers and busters know the names of mission agencies, much less the acronyms which we in the missions world throw around so freely.

The essential starting point, however, is educating people regarding the biblical mission mandate of God's purpose and plan for His world. Boomers and busters need to search the Scriptures for themselves to discover 1) That global outreach and redemption is in the heart of God; and not a reflection of

some kind of cultural imperialism, 2) That people are lost without Jesus Christ, and that He is the *only* mediator between God and mankind (I Timothy 2:5)—the *only* source of true salvation (Acts 4:12; John 14:6). Our mission is to declare Jesus to a lost world—to every people, tribe, tongue and nation on the face of the earth, and 3) That God has sovereignly chosen and even limited Himself to change and redeem this lost world through us, His Church—through all those who call Jesus Lord!

Conclusion

We face an incredible challenge in mobilizing boomers and busters for world evangelization, but we also have tremendous resources. A contemporary resource which surpasses all others in responding to them and transforming people and getting them involved in world missions is short-term missions.

Engel and Jones documented in their book, *Baby Boomers and the Future of World Missions*, that short-term missions combines all the responses in a one two-week to two-month experience. Short-term missions introduces participants to missionaries and national leaders, giving them a *first-hand* experience. This puts them in contact with

people—including unreached peoples—and shows them how and where they can make a difference. Short-term missions focus on peoples' energies, showing them a need, giving them a vision, and enabling them to be part of the solution themselves. Although not a cure all and certainly not the only key, short-term missions provide an educational intensive experience in the why and how of world missions. Therefore, any church or mission agency interested in tapping the vast resource of the prayer, finances, and personnel of the boomer/buster generation will need to invest in this important mobilization key.

Recommended Reading

George Barna, almost anything he wrote after 1990

Leith Anderson, *Dying for Change* (Bethany House)

Hans Finzel, *Help! I'm a Baby Boomer*

James Engel & Jerry Jones, *Baby Boomers and the Future of World Missions* (available ACMC)

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A Response: The Spiritual Dimension

by Francis J. Patt

Paul Borthwick's article is extremely accurate regarding the cultural disposition of the *boomer* and *buster* generations. When he quotes Dr. James Engels, "Unless radical changes are made by mission agencies and local churches, Christian baby boomers will not provide the human resources needed for accelerated evangelism in the 1990's" (James F. Engels, "We Are the

World." in *Christianity Today* (Sept. 24, 1990, p 32), he is directing our attention to the sociological patterns and dispositions of almost 100 million people in the United States. His point of view is, generally speaking, much the same as other articles dealing with the same subject. Borthwick stresses the need to contextualize world evangelization to those two generations.

Borthwick states that *boomers* and *busters* are disinclined to support anything they do not understand or have a shared interest in. He raises the idea of using short-term missions to get people involved and thereby draw them into world evangelization. Let me affirm that this works! We have seen over 50 people recruited for world missions and sent to the field from one church in

the Philadelphia area that began using the short term model of mission mobilization ten years ago.

The idealism raised in the article should refer only to the *boomer* generation. Busters are anything but idealistic, whereas boomers thrive on it. We (I'm a boomer too) have simply become middle-aged and cynical. We wanted to change the world back in the 60s, and we believed we could. Since most of us were not Christians at the time, we never realized that the summation of the world's problems is *sin*. We thought we needed to change basic institutions of society. Now, however, some of us have realized that people need to change and affect a true metamorphosis. In the 60s and 70s, we would follow anyone with a cause. Now we won't follow anyone or anything that cannot be guaranteed to succeed. We want to see proof before we will put our hearts into something ever again—even Jesus!

Borthwick correctly observes that the *boomer* and *buster* generations have grown and developed with communications and marketing as significant forces shaping their values. Current sociological data would suggest that the answers to most of the Church's and mission agency's problems could be found in more and better communication, a greater order of professionalism and excellence similar to the media, and giving hands-on ownership of projects to the *boomer/buster* laity. Hitherto, this advice has not been taken seriously by the churches. However, all of this is to the point, and mission agencies and the church would do well to listen.

Going a Step Further

Borthwick concludes by discussing the merits of short-term missions in mobilizing these generations and repeats a call to essentially contextualize for them the mission challenge and ministry.

At this point, most of the discussion which follows continues where

Borthwick's article ends. His approach very correctly addresses social conventions, needs, and dispositions. His article provides needed understanding of the culture of these 100 million persons and it guides us as to how to *market* our message to them. Nevertheless, I have come to believe that this is only telling part of the story. Please hear me in this, Paul Borthwick, Dr. Engels, Leith Anderson and many others are all correct. Their encouragements and admonishments should be heeded, but the Church must go one step further.

Paul's article made considerable reference and allusion to the need for "contextualization." In essence, this means that a particular culture's situation and circumstance and/or traditions predisposes it to be more inclined to respond to the Gospel when it is presented in a manner that conforms to these same traditions, circumstances, and situations and affirms values inherent to the culture. While contextualization seems to be an issue that missionaries need to address when planting the church in a foreign, cross-cultural context, the same issues and precautions are operative for the Church in any culture. The basic rule is and always has been, "God judges all cultures." We need to take Paul Borthwick's observations seriously.

The Basic Point

However, the primary problem we face is that we will be pandering to sociology, anthropology and human sinfulness if we fail to challenge both of these generations to grow beyond their hurts, dysfunctionality, idealism (gone sour), pride, and cultural values. Contextualization is not meant to be a method to help people stumble over the cultural baggage of the person communicating the Gospel.

The basic point is that if there is to be any stumbling block, it must be Jesus, not our culture. Scripture says: "Behold I lay in Zion a choice stone, a precious corner stone, and he who believes in Him

shall not be disappointed." This precious value, then, is for us who believe. But for those who disbelieve, "*The stone which the builders rejected, this became the very corner, a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, for they stumble because they are disobedient to the word, and to this doom they were also appointed.*" (1 Peter 2:6-8). This implies that getting a person in the door by using canny marketing, and then leading them to get saved by grace through faith in Christ, the job of the Church does not stop there. It goes on to include, "*teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*" In other words, the Church is responsible for discipling converts.

I hear little or no admonishments urging us (boomers) to deal with our embrace of rebellion, immorality, licentiousness, and idolatry in our youth. Do we still remember that the rebellion was not just against government, but against our parents "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. *Honor your father and mother* which is the first commandment with a promise, *that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth...fathers, do not provoke your children to anger; but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.*" (Ephesians 6:1-4) Who will call us to see the wrong that was done, to ask forgiveness from God, our parents and our leaders (if we have not already done this individually) and to repent as a generation. In addition to all the *boomers* and *busters* characteristics that have been mentioned, no one is pointing us to the fact that *boomers* do not like the word SIN, nor moral absolutes.

Leadership Distrust

Boomers also have an aversion to institutional religion, and distrust leadership. What does the Word say about that? It is high time to talk about how sin, unconfessed and undealt with, has long-term ramifications. The apostle Paul

says, “*Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatsoever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life.*” (Galatians 6:7-8) The prophet Hosea says, “*For they sow the wind, and they reap the whirlwind.*”

The spiritual principle that operates here is that whatever we sow we get back in greater abundance. The boomer generation cozied up to all the sins I listed above and we are now reaping the fruits thereof. For those of us that were ushered into the Kingdom by the Grace of God, the fact remains that many sins from our past remain unrecognized and unconfessed and undealt with. But we all know that the effects of sin are not negated by ignorance. I believe that much of our cultures disposition is related to our sinfulness and its consequences

In summary, it is time to understand that contextualization is not just for the mission field. It is for the Church in the United States as well. But, we must stop allowing the Church to be conformed to the image of a prostituted and rebellious generation—a *secular world that is on a hell-bound train*. (Acts 2:40) It is time to cease allowing the world to set the moral agenda for the Church. It is high time to say, “Enough is enough,” and take a stand for truth and righteousness! Marketing in the church may be acceptable and profitable as long as the Church—expressed or gathered in local churches—understands that it cannot replace the ministry of the Holy Spirit in drawing people to Christ and empowering them for the coming of His Kingdom into all the earth. Unfortunately, at least in many cases, the Church is doing just the opposite.

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