Bucking the Establishment

Generational Replacement in Politics... and Religion

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It’s not a good year to be the establishment – in politics or religion. As the Iowa caucuses arrive next week, both Democratic and Republican establishment candidates are on edge. What looked like Hillary Clinton’s presumptive nomination six months ago has now turned into a dead heat with Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders. And on the other side, a host of establishment Republicans trail outsiders Donald Trump and Ted Cruz. Both parties – especially the Republicans – have gone on record saying they must get younger. The party that succeeds in engaging a younger and more diverse electorate will have the advantage over the next few decades. And if a recent USA Today/Rock the Vote poll is any indication, young voters prefer Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump. Establishment is out; new and populist is in.

In many ways the political landscape mirrors the heightened anxiety among religious institutions that worry they must get younger in order to survive. Such anxiety can lead either to paralyzing fear that leads us to bury our head in the sand or complete change that leads us to overturn everything for the sake of survival.

Much of the fear for religious institutions has been illustrated in the widespread response to recent Pew reports on the “rise of the nones,” the rising number of Americans that remain unaffiliated from religious communities. Pew polls have reported that “nones” now make up 23% of Americans, and 35% of American millennials.

Yet, while these numbers are worth our attention, their immediate impact may be overblown for dramatic swings in religious giving. Many researchers are coalescing around the notion that the current “nones” are most likely former “nominal” religious practitioners.¹ Our culture has evolved so that it is more acceptable for those on the edge of faith communities simply to be honest and admit they are really more areligious than religious. Research continues to show that regular attendance at religious services, social relationships formed within faith communities, and spiritual practices are some of the best predictors of giving. If these current “nones” were largely nominal Christians, then they were probably giving nominally to their religious institutions and their giving patterns have probably not changed significantly. A minority of committed practitioners constitute the large majority of religious giving. In the short term, we do not predict the rise of the “nones” will make a drastic difference in religious giving totals.

Like politics, the bigger question for religious institutions may be generational replacement. Though the impact on religious giving might not be felt in the immediate future, shifts over the next generation are less certain. As the giving of older generations declines, will new generations be there, willing and able to take their place? If traditional religious institutions have functioned most often as the establishment, how will they change to engage a new generation?
1st The first option is to do very little - simply redoubling efforts to call those outsiders back into traditional institutions, expecting a younger generation to return to faith when they settle down, have families, etc... But this strategy does not work. New generations are not simply returning to traditional establishment institutions.

2nd The second option is to change everything. Yet, at the same time, abandoning what used to work in search of something new is also not the answer. Rachel Held Evans, popular author and a leading millennial voice, reminds us that trying to "make church cool" often backfires. Fog machines and sound systems may work well in some settings, but perhaps maintaining liturgy and tradition are better for others. Authenticity is key. You cannot be something you are not.

3rd Perhaps, the best approach is the middle way – remaining true to your mission and your identity, but willing to reframe and articulate in the midst of changing contexts. Our research (and practical experience) continually underscores that organizations with clarity around their purpose (mission, vision, and values) have greater success in fundraising, engaging volunteers, incorporating new members, and nurturing leaders. To turn to the political analogy once again, faith practitioners of any generation are rarely single-issue voters. Focusing on a single issue or single generation may lead you astray from your organization’s own mission. In fact, while generations are different, they may be more alike than we give them credit. Despite the notion that we tie social media and online presence so closely to the millennial generation, recent research from Dunham+Company shows that donors between the ages 40-59 are most likely to give online. In fact, donors over 60 are as likely to give online as those under 40.
Similarities across generations, however, should not distract us from the impending issue of generational replacement in religious institutions. To help your organization navigate this changing landscape, we suggest the following:

1) **Focus on Planned Giving:** As we enter one of the greatest generational transfers of wealth in our history, religious institutions must develop a focused effort on planned giving. While faith communities have excelled in regular weekly or monthly collections, they have fallen behind others in the non-profit sector in legacy giving. This need not be the case. If we are clear about our mission and vision, and can demonstrate effective management and transparency, then faith-based fundraisers should be able to nurture giving that will serve to maintain – and even transform – our organizations as we seek to engage the generations to follow.

2) **Cultivate New, Younger Donors:** Along with building upon the legacy of the established generation, we must also be integrating the notion of stewardship and generosity into the actual lives of those future generations. Rather than approach new generations of donors as the next source for funding, we must instead invite them into relationship to discover the joys of giving as a part of a life of faith. Denominational and congregational structures will change. So will our approach to generosity. No longer only a program to support the established institution, giving is a way of life that may actually serve to bring a new generation into faith communities. We know that volunteering, service, and social networking are key for this generation. We may find that intentionally inviting new generations into generosity does not serve simply as a generational replacement of financial support, but rather the pathway into realizing reimagined communities of faith for new contexts.

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