

FUTURE-ISMS

A month ago I was a part of our first-ever "Future of the Church Summit," hosted here in Colorado at our Loveland headquarters (for more on the fascinating and pragmatic outcomes of the Summit, see our cover article in this issue of GROUP, written by Group's founder and CEO Thom Schultz—it's called "Reversing the Slow Fade"). The highlight for many at the summit was the half-day we spent in conversation with Neil Howe, the president of LifeCourse Associates and renowned author of *Generations*, *The Fourth Turning*, and *Millennials Rising*, among others.

I often refer to Howe as a "secular prophet"—his generational theory is a groundbreaking filter for understanding both our history and our future. He has a unique perspective on the cultural climate we're living in, and the challenges we're likely to face on our horizon. So I scribbled notes on just about everything Neil said. Now, looking back at my notes, it feels like looking into a treasure box.

So let me throw a little treasure your way, with seven of Neil's observations...

1 "Students have a gathering mentality." They crave consensus, and debates feel unpleasant to them. This is why so many young adults have gravitated to Barack Obama—they see him as a consensus-builder and a catalyst for community-based problem-solving.

2 "Dealing with parents is the #1 problem in every youth-serving institution." Because parents often see themselves as best friends, not as authority figures, in their kids' lives, organizations that cater to teenagers must establish partnerships with parents or risk losing the opportunity to impact their kids. If you shut parents out, they'll make noise. There is a near-complete obliteration of the generation gap between teenagers and their parents.

3 "Millennials respond best in coach-like settings." Leaders who show their commitment to understanding them are most likely to get buy-in from young people. In general, teenagers experience the church as an organization run by know-it-alls, so they see few opportunities for ownership roles. The #1 complaint of Millennials is lack of access to mentors, and regular feedback on their "performance."

4 "In our current 'Fourth Turning' generational 'season,' characterized by world crises that must be faced and overcome, salvation-by-works overshadows salvation-by-faith." This means that Millennial kids are far more interested in the *what* of religion (what can I do?) than the *who* or the *why* of religion. They learn best by doing, not by contemplating. In Spain, for example, a recruiting video for potential new priests for the Catholic church emphasized helping people, not theological training, and the video exploded in popularity.

5 "Millennials are the 'no problem' generation." They are indulged and treated as special, so they have never tasted the generational bitterness that have defined previous generations. They are not cynical like their Gen X older cousins—they expect things to work out for them, and are surprised when they don't.

6 "It's impossible for most kids to spend much time with any one thing, including their friends." They have many more friends than kids in previous generations, but generally less depth in those friendships. They've moved from a "one best friend" mind-set to a "many more friendships, but shallower ones" mind-set.

7 "Millennial teenagers are generally risk-averse." They've been raised to believe that personal safety is the highest value in life. They are sorely afraid of failure, because it's violating to their sensibilities—that's why they're generally ambivalent about the prospect of marriage down the road. Why commit to something they've been told, over and over, has only a 50 percent "success rate"? They are generally "left-brain" people who want to satisfy expectations.

In the Bible, the sons of Issachar were "men who understood the times, with knowledge of what Israel should do..." We become like our distant cousins when we pay attention to "seers" like Neil Howe. ●

