The All Melbourne Matters report found that 18% of people aged 16-24 “were hurting deep inside and nothing seemed to help”. However, few people believed that Christian faith or the church could provide answers to this deep anguish. This belief has lead to the large numbers of young people leaving the church. Between 1996 to 2006 the number of people aged 0-24 attending the Salvation Army dropped by 87%. Attendance for those aged 25-44 also dropped by 80%. The proportion of people over 70 in the church is ten times that of those in their twenties [1].

Mega-churches have a higher rate of success in attracting young people to church. 31% of mega-church attendees are single, whereas single people make up only 10% of traditional churches’ congregations. Similarly, 45% of mega-church congregations are under 45, compared to 35% of traditional churches. However, 44% of mega-church attendees moved to their mega-church from another church in the local area. The proportion of new Christians and those who have not attended church for an extended period attending mega-churches only makes up 24% of mega-church congregations [2].

One of the key things that mega-churches have been able to do is to provide a myriad of programmes and opportunities for involvement by their congregations. The ability to “customise” the church experience appeals to post-modern generations who fear structure and authority as “control and negation rather than support and direction” [3]. Attendance at a mega-church does not look like traditional attendance. 25% of attendees also attend other churches at the same time. Mega-church attendees “craft unique, customised spiritual experiences through the multitude of ministry choices and diverse avenues for involvement that mega-churches offer” [2].

Churches that make room for people to engage God freely rather than through set structures and enforced rules will be more effective in ministering to this generation. This is further demonstrated in the recent research done by Latrobe University, which has shown that increasing numbers of people are choosing to live alone. Between the 1986 and 2006 censuses, the rate of people living alone rose by 65% in the 30 to 39 year old age bracket. The predominant reason given for choosing to live alone was independence and ability to do what I want [4]. This generation is more likely to respond to a church that focuses on the journey of faith and experience of God. They prefer minimal structure and flexibility in order, with a non-hierarchical culture. The core focus should be on discipling individuals in their journeys of faith with Christ [5].
FALLEN THROUGH THE CRACKS

A key challenge for the church will be to reach out to those who are under-represented in the church. Traditionally the church targets about 12 percent of the population. It engages well with those who fit the middle-class demographic but mission into other subcultures is problematic [6]. The megachurch study showed that they were effective in reaching those who were young, single, already-Christian, but also generally better educated and more affluent than the general population [2]. Similarly, the All Melbourne Matters report showed that those without tertiary education make up only 53% of church attendees, although making up 80% of the population. Another significant demographic that is missed by the church is those living in de facto relationships. They make up only 1% of church attendance whilst being 8% of the population. This demographic is growing fast, increasing by 77.2% between 1996 and 2006. Traditional church growth strategies largely overlook those who are not middle-class and/or respectable. In fact, traditional church growth strategies seem best at producing growth through transfers from other churches, rather than growth through new converts.

The challenge will be to reach those young people who would never come to church, and who are missed by traditional church growth strategies. Church culture is a significant barrier for many in coming to know Christ. For many, the cultural gap between their world and the church is as formidable a barrier to faith as sin and repentance. The culture of the church is predominately middle-class, and so it services the middle-class demographic really well. There is a desperate need for the church to engage those young single people for whom the church’s middle class culture is a barrier.

MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT

As discussed in the Connecting Forward Conference, instead of waiting for people to come to us, the church should go out and engage them in the contexts where they already spend time. Given the reaction of the postmodern generation against formality and structures, it will be easier to engage them in their recreational spaces rather than attempting to attract them through specialised church programmes [7]. This will be where real relationships can be built, and people will be comfortable to discuss spirituality. Evangelism to these subcultures needs to be treated like intercultural mission, because it is intercultural mission. We need to send missionaries to live amongst the people and to culturally contextualise the gospel for that subculture. Churches should be planted within the subculture, rather than bringing people out of their subculture into the church’s middle-class culture. Bringing people out of their subculture will prevent their future effectiveness in sharing the gospel with their friends.

This approach sits well with the rich history of the Salvation Army as a Missional force for Christ. As John Stanley Jones said, “the ordinary churches and chapels are entirely outside of the range of the outcast. As a rule, [the outcast] will not go to look for religion; it must come and seek him” [8].

WHAT WE CAN DO

1. Identify “lost demographics” of postmodern generations
   → Those who are single and/or living alone
   → Those who are living in de facto relationships
   → Those without tertiary education
   → Those of non-English speaking background
   → Those of lower socio-economic status

2. Identify recreational spaces outside the church where people can be engaged

3. Recruit, train and empower a team to engage the target subculture through incarnational ministry

NOTES

2 Thumma S, Bird W. Not who you think they are. [Internet]. 2009 Available from: http://leadnet.org/downloads/file_583.pdf