

# Building a Bridge to the Next Generation

## Dr. Jim Engel Gives Candid Advice for Narrowing Generation Gaps

By Lucinda Armas

*Editor's Note: In the late 60s and early 70s, Dr. James F. Engel often stood between protesting students, the National Guard, and the Ohio State University administration. As a professor and an active moderator on campus, he listened to students' points of view and respected them for their convictions and desire to seek justice.*

*For decades, he has bridged generations. When Boomers were considered the "new generation," Dr. Engel prophetically challenged the evangelical world to think about how to nurture and channel their involvement. We asked him to draw from his vast experience to help Baby Boomers now build a bridge to the next generation.*

*There were many terrific insights that surfaced from our conversation with Dr. Engel. Below, we've summarized a few key points—some "don'ts" and some "do's".*

### **Don't oppose this new generation.**

"One of the first things I would say is quit being an opponent of the postmodern generation," declares Dr. Engel. "Sometimes we act and talk as if this generation is somehow off the wall and not trustworthy, that they don't believe in the Word of God or aren't authentic in their beliefs. Personally, I have really been disturbed by the number of people who put this generation down, saying they're no longer really evangelical."

Dr. Engel sees an unspoken clash [between the generations] regarding the Kingdom of God. "Granted, there is a different outlook on what should be our priorities. While younger Christ-followers may not like being labeled evangelical, their hearts are for God's Kingdom. They're just going about it using a different way of planning and thinking."

### **Do mentor them.**

"Help the next generation fulfill the vision God has given them." That's his advice. "The good manager is going to be a mentor," Dr. Engel challenges. "A good manager is going to care about his or her people. The implication for Christian organizations is clear. There needs to be serious emphasis on mentoring staff."

Dr. Engel, himself, serves as a mentor in his church. As co-director of The St. David Kenya Partnership Group, his role is to help encourage team members, accompany them to Kenya, and help them think about the world in fresh ways. "Mentoring plays a big role in this project," he explains. "My co-director is a woman 30 years my junior – sharp as a tack, but green as grass when it comes to ministry," Engel says candidly. "But, boy, is she doing a great job."

"The younger generations need the encouragement of older people. I think the Boomer generation has done a wonderful job. They're the ones who started thinking fresh, breaking out of the box. Thank God they did!"

### **Don't box them in.**

"Boomers and even Builders need to remember how they felt back when they broke free. Now then, put yourself in the shoes of the next generations who are saying 'we have a different outlook.' You need to set them free, but this doesn't mean 'give them free reign.' Be their champion!" says Dr. Engel.

"Don't try to make this generation work and minister like yours. Boomers need to do a little more turning people loose and letting them go about it their way. Then have them report back. You aren't giving them unlimited freedom. Nobody does that! But let them do it their way. This means we need to start thinking in new, fresh ways – politically, spiritually and economically. This isn't the same world today."

"The older mindset of evangelicals was primarily focused on evangelism," explains Engel. "The rest of it was sort of tacked on. Of course, if you're going to win the world, you'd probably better build a church and do some things to help the poor. This generation doesn't think in those terms. If you expect them to think in those terms, you're putting them into a box that isn't biblical."

Dr. Engel points to the virtual office as an example of doing things differently. "A lot of organizations today are becoming virtual organizations. They're really breaking down into oper-

ating units. You, as the organization, provide staff with all the help you can, encouragement, resources, etc., and you keep them accountable. But in many places, it's a different game. No office."

### **Do focus on teams.**

According to Dr. Engel, "doing it their way" means making use of teams. "I think this is a continuation of what's already underway. One of the things Boomers brought was breaking away, getting away from the top-down dictation of management and replacing it with teams."

Referring back to the Kenya Partnership project, he says: "The focus is not so much on what we do, but the fact that we're doing it together ... and that's expanding the church in terms of impact. A common feature is working together, joining hands. It doesn't matter that there are two groups, one in Kenya and one here in the U.S."

### **Don't count the numbers.**

"It's time to stop counting the numbers," Dr. Engel emphasizes. "Our numbers, for the most part, have not been reflective of very much at all, when you look at the numbers of alleged Christians in the world today and the general deterioration on the world scene. So, we have a church. That's good. But what's happening in that church? What's happening in our churches? How are we influencing our communities? That's the central issue."

"One of the reasons I come down

hard on strategic planning is that many Christian leaders borrowed liberally from the business world and made numbers our goal," he explains. "I'd say to leaders: there are too many Christian missions still in yesterday's paradigm of ministry, which is focusing on winning the world with numbers. While we've moved a long way away from that, a good many are still focused there. That emphasis will not motivate young people. Instead, I'd constantly be asking those in my organization: 'What do you think should be done?' Constantly push back. 'What vision do you have and how would you make it a reality?'"

### **Do encourage results.**

"As I reflect on the Boomer generation, I think there was a genuine desire to see results around the world. I don't doubt that. That was a very good thing and I hope we don't lose it. We always need to be bearing the faith and making impact," he reflects. "The Lord wants that, he wants us focusing on outcomes. But these next generations have a whole different way of planning and thinking. It's very much centered on accomplishing results, but it's a different set of results. Programs don't matter as much here," he boldly states.

He continues: "If we're saying the primary focus of the church on earth is to win the world – if that's the primary purpose, then we aren't reading what Jesus said. Jesus said his goal was to bring and help people understand the Kingdom of God. The first way to do

that is by winning souls, but then there's so much more – the whole Great Commission.

"Fortunately, I think there have been a lot of changes in evangelicalism as a whole to come into truly holistic ministry and doing the right things – particularly, the ministries centering on building people and building community. The whole impact of the Kingdom on lives is going to be a key priority of the emerging generation.

"This generation would say the primary program is our lives. What are we, in our lives and relationships? Are we really concerned about other people? I personally find that extremely biblical. Real evangelism occurs when someone comes and touches someone else, and there's a relationship through which Christ can work. It has very little to do with programs. That's a central theme for younger generations and should be for all of us: our life is our message ... our program is our lives."

**Dr. James F. Engel** is the founder and president of Development Associates International. A retired professor, he's an authority in consumer research and communications strategy, and has consulted with hundreds of ministries and organizations throughout the world. You can reach him at [jengel334@comcast.net](mailto:jengel334@comcast.net).

**Lucinda Armas** is a communications and marketing consultant, who studied under Dr. Engel at Wheaton Graduate School. You can reach her at [lucindarmas@yahoo.com](mailto:lucindarmas@yahoo.com).

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