

Living Life to the Full:

spirituality for today's baby boomers

Christopher C. Walker, ISBN: 0-85910-988-7
Openbook Publishers, 2005. Rrp: \$19.95

Chris Walker is a baby boomer and a committed member of the Church. He has written what is primarily a theological book, attempting to draw parallels between the Christian faith as he understands it and the thinking and experience of the baby boomer generation. While the book purports to be a book for all baby boomers, it will probably be used mainly by those within the church who are thinking through the ways in which faith may connect with the experiences of the baby boomer generation.

This is also a very personal book for Chris, and one learns quite a bit about his background, education and faith, as well as the Walker family. (The late Sir Alan Walker was his father and Lady Win Walker was his mother.) The book also reveals much of Chris' experience in this significant Methodist and Uniting Church family.

Chris uses the age period 1946-1964 for his baby boomers. He is of course aware that these age definitions are open to interpretation, and he acknowledges that each generation is shaped by historical experiences that it shares. The baby boomer generation grew up after the war. It has not experienced the hardship of World War II or the depression that was prior to it, but it did experience the turmoil over the Vietnam War and the Cold War. Walker suggests that the Boomers, many of whom are now middle-aged are still looking

for peace of mind. The many options explored in their youth such as sex, drugs and overseas travel have all been found to be unsatisfactory in providing answers to life. Walker says, "They are still looking for a faith that truly satisfies and will give their lives a framework that is adequate" (p.9). In response to this search, Walker suggests a formulation of the Christian faith based around the Trinity.

The Mystery of Life

His section on the mystery of life outlines some of the contemporary world and personal issues that affect us all, highlighting questions about new life, death and living, as well as analysis of the influential philosophies or ideas which have helped to undergird the experience of baby boomers. While many philosophies do not cut God out of the picture, they often place God in a limited framework of reference, and some are clearly anti-transcendent. Walker contrasts this with a Christian perspective that focuses on the possibility of personal relationship with the living God, which links in with the individual's search for transcendence. This is why there is a perhaps surprising (though brief) discussion of sin, which in some relativistic and seemingly post-modern circles would seem incongruous. This discussion is actually an important foundation for a continuing theme in the book about the need for relationships to be restored.

Jesus Christ

The focus here is on models for baby boomers and Jesus as a true model. The theological basis for this chapter, like other recent works on contemporary mission, is incarnational.

This theme, while carefully considered later in the chapter, is also relevant in the consideration of Jesus in relation to life issues, like divorce, family arrangements, work and enjoyment. The section on enjoyment, tapping into the experience of baby boomers and, for example, their enjoyment of meals, events and activities is a helpful practical encouragement of the need to explore relationships more effectively. Relationships are one area highlighted in which Walker thinks that baby boomers have not had as much success, compared to what they have achieved, very often, in their professional or business lives.

The Spirit of God

The most interesting part of this perhaps unusual chapter for a mainstream church book was the renewed emphasis on the role, person and work of the Holy Spirit. Walker contends that the Spirit for Christians should actually be the Holy Spirit, and not a secular spirit or spirit of some other undefined quasi religion.

Companions for the Journey

The need for friendship and support, especially in the western world of increasing individualism, is a key factor for baby boomers, especially as they age. The renewed focus on community and the search for a community of peers and friends are issues explored in the context of finding that support. There is a helpful

summary of issues related to debates about the nature of the church, and current issues in being the church –

... we are constrained by the old, without knowing fully what the new will be like. (p.124)

Walker also suggests some ways to reach baby boomers in the context of 'church'.

The theme here is the need to focus on community, rather than structure, and highlight local identity rather than denominational identity, a point of special relevance for some protestant communities which have very diffuse modern identities.

Spirituality

'Boomers are interested in spirituality', Walker says (p.144). He suggests that boomers have been largely self-oriented consumers, but says that they are open to a spirituality that might assist them (p.145). In relation to that interest, Walker paints a picture of a Christian spirituality that draws on a range of Biblical characters, St Anthony of Egypt, Brigid of Ireland, John Calvin and the Wesley brothers. Walker suggests that different types of spirituality may fit different types of personality. In this regard, he draws on the Myers-Briggs typology.

This chapter links into the epilogue and the overview in which he stresses the need for balance. I believe this section will resonate well with many baby boomers, as they consider the need to have a balance in the different areas of life, and may be open to the idea of a balanced life including a spiritual dimension.

Evaluation by one baby boomer: Peter Bentley

As someone who fits into the baby boomer category (at one end) as used by Chris Walker, I have found this a very interesting book to personally reflect on some aspects of this cultural development. However, I believe the book is more personally relevant for those in the first decade of his baby boomer group (1946-1956), than the later group. The analogies, people and contextual references are often more related to the experiences of a slightly older group.

For many who try to follow the somewhat contrived idea of the post-modern church, this is a book that will challenge their paradoxical beliefs and practices. For others this book will enhance their desire for a community and better relationships. Walker's hope is that the church will be there to provide the community of loving and encouraging companions, which may help a person hear a call to a personal relationship, to enter, or enter anew into a covenant with the personal and living God. It is written by someone with a passion for faith, and a passion for others to come to faith.

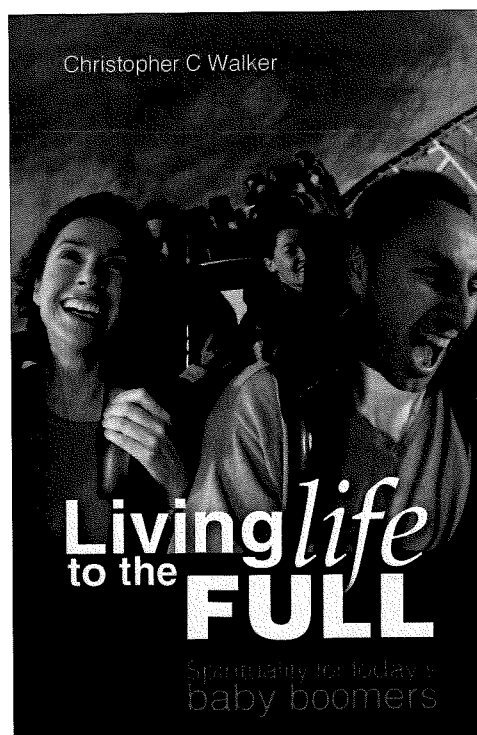
This is vividly illustrated by the closing section: 'The journey and the goal'. It is not like some contemporary books of spirituality which simply encourage exploration and a journey. This is a journey to an end. The cover photo on the book is of baby boomers on a roller coaster. The roller coaster brings forth images - living life to the full, doing something out of one's comfort zone, facing new challenges, freedom yet restraint. Is Christian

spirituality an alternative roller coaster, with its own excitement and challenge? Or is it another way of living life altogether?

Evaluation by another baby boomer: Philip Hughes

No doubt, there will be various reactions to Walker's expression of faith. Some will find it too liberal, not taking seriously enough some of the traditions of faith. Some will find it too conservative, failing, for example, to take seriously the need to re-write the faith within the context of today's thinking. Walker takes a Barthian approach, reading the 'boomer reality' on the one hand, and making comparisons and contrasts with the Christian tradition on the other.

My task is not primarily that of evaluating Walker's theology. However, from a research perspective, I admire the fact that Walker has tried to take into account the context of his generation. So many theologians have failed to pay more than lip-service to the essential truth that the writers of the Gospels found



self-evident, that the faith needs to be re-expressed within each context and must take that context seriously.

On the other hand, Walker's acknowledged sources for his understanding of the boomer generation are weak. He makes many broad generalisations. For example, he ignores the fact that the boomer experience in America has been different from that in Australia. He refers to a few social commentators, such as Hugh Mackay, and depends a lot on his own experience. But he fails to look more closely at the patterns of thought and life of the boomer generation. For example, many boomers would reject Walker's contention that they are 'interested in spirituality'. Closer examination suggests that they are less open than most generations, before or since. Militant secularism found its strongest voice amongst the boomers.

Among those who remained interested in religion and/or spirituality, a radically different approach developed in the boomer generation. The very nature of religion / spirituality changed from being something that was primarily communal to being something primarily personal. It changed, as Peter Berger has shown, partly because of very significant changes in the ways children were raised in the boomer generation. Walker's writing caters for an individually centred, consumer-oriented generation, and yet he wants to bring this generation out of their individualistic self-reflection. Is it truly appropriate for Christianity simply to offer 'a personal spirituality' to a generation looking for something to help them cope with the stresses of life? Or does the essence of the Christian faith challenge the very nature of our individualistic conception of life?

Philip Hughes and Peter Bentley

Reference:

Christopher C. Walker, *Living Life to the Full: Spirituality for Today's Baby Boomers*, Openbook, Adelaide, 2005. ISBN 0 85910 988 7.

Protestant Churches Win Some, Lose Some

This article presents the inflow and outflow patterns for Anglican and Protestant churches from 1996 to 2001, using National Church Life Survey data. Future editions of Pointers will include more detail regarding denominational variation.

When churches grow, many assume good things must be happening. Indeed, church attendance growth has been seen by some as *the* measure of church health. Where there is decline, it is assumed that the church must be unhealthy in some way.

Yet, NCLS researchers argue that a focus only on numbers can be limited and misleading. If a church only pays attention to its overall attendance growth or decline, it can draw wrong conclusions about the true nature of its connection with the community.

Research in Western countries has shown that much of what passes as church growth is actually people moving between churches, or 'religious musical pews'. Often it is not the inclusion of new believers as is often assumed.

Why do churches grow? This question has a very simple answer. Churches grow when inflow exceeds outflow. Overall attendance increases when the number of people arriving at a church is greater than the number of people who leave it.

NCLS Research offers the NCLS Inflow Outflow model which helps churches to understand whether their growth is a reflection of effectiveness in mission or whether it is being driven by other factors.

continued on p.15

Is Conflict Inevitable between Religion and Science?

There is an on-going study in the United States into how elite scientists see religion. A survey has been conducted of 1646 scientists at universities around the country. Fifty-seven per cent of the scientists surveyed did not see religion and science as inevitably conflicting. Biologists were the most likely to believe there was inevitably a conflict. Among those who did not see a conflict between religion and science, most saw 'fundamentalist' or 'conservative' religion as conflicting with science. Reported in *Religion Watch*, December 2005.