

Superintendents' Certification Lesson 5

Generational Wisdom

Learning Objectives:

- Coordinators-superintendents will be able to verbalize the changing needs of the adult church and community population whom they wish to involve in Sabbath School.
- Sabbath School "principles" will find common ground in a generational range of the population.
- Leaders will develop resolutions to the tensions that likely exist among the generations.

George Barna, writing about the church in the twenty-first century said: "The American population will be nearly evenly distributed between children, young adults, middle-aged adults, and the elderly. The transition will have been completed from a youth-heavy society to one, which is less imbalanced by age. We will also be a society that is more acutely aware of the differences in attitude and lifestyle associated directly with age, and intergenerational conflicts may intensify as each age segment vies for control" (*The Frog in The Kettle*, p. 201).

Paul Richardson, director for Creative Ministry, in his *INNOVATION Newsletter*, reports, "the median age for the Seventh-day Adventist community in North America, including the unbaptized children in church families, is 58. The median age for the general public is 36 in the United States and 37 in Canada" (November 1, 2006, Vol. 12, No. 19).

Digital Natives Versus Digital Immigrants

More than 1,000 local Seventh-day Adventist churches in the North American Division have no children or teens at all. Could the Adventist Church in North America be one generation away from extinction?

We must come to recognize that generational issues differ and then be willing to address those differences. Five to seven generations are living at one time today. Each generation has different learning styles, values, expectations, and desired outcomes.

Over the next 10 to 20 years, the adult Sabbath School could have four, sometimes even five generations in attendance. Each generation brings different experiences, interacts with technology differently, and has had differing educational experiences.

What needs to happen in the Sabbath School to attract, assimilate, disciple, and position each generation? What kinds of tensions exist in this scenario?

In contrast to older Sabbath School members, many younger members are more connected to electronic communication devices. Technology is the driving force in much of the change in our culture. We live in an age of instant communication where it is now possible to communicate almost anything, in almost any form, almost instantly, to almost anyone in the world. Faxes can now be sent in three dimensions. The Internet opens up a whole world, one with its own rules, justice, language, and culture. The computer is making a greater impact on our culture than the printing press did in the days of Gutenberg.

We have become so used to living in a fast-paced technological world, we often fail to realize how addicted we are to today's inventions and gadgets. So what would you choose if you could only have one in your life: a cell phone, a computer/Internet, or a vehicle?

If we think of today's generation as digital natives, then our older generations are digital immigrants. The use of technology has enabled digital natives to be better at taking in information, making decisions more quickly, multi-task and parallel process, as well as think graphically rather than textually. Most digital immigrants will never understand or use technology in the same way as digital natives.

Upside-down Leadership

More frequently, we are seeing the phenomena of upside-down leadership where older members are led by younger ones. Some older members may have uncomfortable or negative feelings toward the younger leaders. Leadership skills are key. Young leaders need to understand their older colleagues and appreciate their priorities, preferences, experiences, and life skills. Younger Sabbath School members may be impatient with traditional organizational hierarchies and want more democratic and diverse teams. They often want to be a part of the decision-making processes. They may question and challenge authority, viewing the "chain of command" and the "pay your dues" philosophy as inefficient.

Younger members are more apt to believe that results should drive the team, and that all should have access to authority. Older generations, used to more hierarchical structures, may be confused or defensive by this new way of interrelating in the Sabbath School.

The good news is that the differences among the generations aren't as wide as they may seem at first. In fact, the generations may be more alike than different.

A Superior Mix

The business world has learned that mixing generations makes good sense. Studies have shown that a diverse mix of genders, ethnic backgrounds, and ages in senior management teams produces superior corporate performance. A study with more than 1,000 executives found that organizations that include senior managers under the age of 40 show a greater success pattern than those with exclusively older top executives. (Farren, Caela, "How to Eliminate the Generation Gap in Today's Work Teams," *Employee Benefit News*, June 1999, vol. 13, issue 7, p. 34).

The impact of diversity issues has helped to soften employer attitudes toward making the workplace more flexible and accommodating—and more fair—to workers with many different values and priorities. The same can be true with the Sabbath School. Ellen White wrote: "Unity in diversity is God's plan. Among the followers of Christ there is to be the blending of diverse elements, one adapted to the other, and each to do its special work for God. Every individual has his place in the filling up of one great plan bearing the stamp of Christ's image. . . . One is fitted to do a certain work, another has a different work for which he is adapted, another has a still different line; but each is to be the complement of the others. . . . The Spirit of God, working in and through the diverse elements, will produce harmony of action. . . . There is to be only one master spirit—the Spirit of Him who is infinite in wisdom, and in whom all the diverse elements meet in beautiful,

matchless unity” (*Mind, Character, and Personality*, vol. 2, p. 800).

Shift

The main thing to remember is that if generational differences are not acknowledged and discussed, and solutions are not supported by leadership, the resulting tensions may have a significant negative impact on the program. Once the dialogue is opened, managing the various group differences will be important so the differences can be positioned to complement one another rather than create a conflict. As with any other dimension of diversity, each generation needs to respect the others and appreciate (not merely tolerate) their differences. Each generation has values the others can learn from. The successful Sabbath School leader will find a way to let every generation be heard. These leaders recognize that no one has all the answers.

How will Sabbath Schools manage this shift to the younger generations who have different expectations, preferences, and priorities? It is clear that the days of the standard cookie-cutter program are over. One-size-fits-all solutions will no longer work. Choice and flexibility will be key to managing the issues. If managed well, generational barriers to the successful, vibrant Sabbath School will continue to melt away.

“Like the different parts of a machine, all are closely related to one another, and all dependent upon one great Center. There is to be unity in diversity. No member of the Lord’s firm can work successfully in independence. Each is to work under the supervision of God; all are to use their entrusted capabilities in His service, that each may minister to the perfection of the whole” (*In Heavenly Places*, p. 287).

Follow-through Discussions

Challenge 1: The younger adults want to forego the general Sabbath School and just get on with the lesson. The older ones want the big gathering, reading a mission story, having songs, etc. Discuss how to deal with that.

Challenge 2: Following the lessons in the quarterly provided by the Holy Spirit versus doing other studies to meet various desires.

Challenge 3: Sabbath School attendance for adults. Parents drop off their kids and go to second church service, forgetting Sabbath School altogether.

Common Ground

The generations are more alike than they think. Make a list of points of common ground.

Points for Dialogue

- Not only is the Sabbath School forced to compete with a fast-paced world; it is now confronted with the diversity of multiple generations. How can the Sabbath School meet the needs of people older than 60 and also younger than 40?
- How can the Sabbath School attract and keep new members or “seekers,” people who are just “checking out” church? Are there effective resources for speaking to the needs of the church member and nonmember?
- In some places, our denomination is a “graying” church. What does that mean in light of the Sabbath School goals of evangelism and disciple making?