

# CREATING DIALOGICAL SAFE SPACES FOR GEN Z DISCUSSIONS ON SOCIAL ISSUES AND CREATING MEANINGFUL CHANGE

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## ABSTRACT

*Gen Z is interested in participating in impactful societal change. The process of change begins with intentional dialogue. After dialogue, a process of seeking and implementing change is necessary for true societal impact. Using research on current methods used in various settings and real-life stories we propose elements that foster safe spaces for Gen Z to have constructive dialogue that leads to change, both in them and in the church.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Leon was a black Adventist growing up in the 60's attending a conservative Adventist Academy with a family culture of dedication and loyalty to both Adventist education and the church body. The oldest of three boys, a member of the honor society, and musically gifted, Leon had a lot on his plate.

Leon was also gay. He denied this for years, knowing that if he were to come out, he would be condemned and ostracized. He prayed for healing. He asked God to change

the way he felt. He tried to date girls. It was all to no avail. Over time, the weight of the crack within his integrity was too much to handle and he told a trusted friend one day at school that he knew he was gay. By the end of the day the whole school knew, and the hallway parted as he walked down it, out the front doors, into a sinister and hateful world that felt safe just the day before. He climbed the hill in front of the school, not looking back, headed to the barbed wire fence where he knew the jagged metal would cut him deep enough to spill out his life blood until he didn't have to feel anymore.

Some would hope that this story was an outlier, but it seems that we are hearing Leon's story more and more. Many young people are suffering in silence, struggling alone, knowing that to share the truth of the struggle would put them outside the place they have been told is absolutely critical for their salvation: The church.

Years of ministry experience lead us to believe that youth find talking about sensitive issues in the church dangerous. There is much to lose and very little to gain. They wish church was a place for open dialogue but have found that it is mostly a place of judgment and rejection.

This chapter gives a short description of Generation Z and how it relates to the discussion of social issues. We will explore several methods that are being used, mostly in educational settings, to help youth discuss challenging issues, and then move them toward effective change in their community. We will conclude with real experiences in seeking to create safe spaces for youth and young adults to dialogue on challenging social issues and how to help them create change in their communities.

## WHO IS GENERATION Z?

"Generation Z has been profoundly shaped by the advancement of technology, issues of violence, a volatile economy, and social justice movements." (Seemiller and Grace 2017, 25) Seemiller and Grace help us understand the big picture of what has helped form the group that sociologists have named "Generation Z." The unique mix of personal technology and current societal issues have profoundly affected the youth we find in our churches today.

Many adults have found it hard to understand Generation Z. Darla Rothman recognized the generational differences and described it this way: "Other generations say, 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going.' Generation Z says, 'When the going gets tough maybe you should try another route.' Other generations say, 'If at first you don't

succeed, try, try again.’ Generation Z says, ‘If at first you don’t succeed maybe you shouldn’t be here.’” (Rothman n.d., 2)

In Gen Z we have a group of youth who have access to more information than any other previous generations. Because of this reality, the majority of Gen Z are visual learners who would prefer to learn by trial and error through the use of technology. Rothman puts it this way, “The brains of Generation Zs have become wired to sophisticated, complex visual imagery. As a result, the part of the brain responsible for visual ability is far more developed, making visual forms of learning more effective. (Rothman, n.d. 2) Seemiller and Grace (2017, 23) call them *Observers*. You can see this in youth who will watch an instructional video on YouTube about makeup or playing a video game. Once they learn the method, they try it. But, for Gen Z, it is not enough merely to learn something. They want to apply the information in multiple ways. They hope that their learning will have “broader applicability” to several areas of life, and they are very comfortable learning on their own.

Members of Generation Z have a high interest in affecting the surrounding community. Seemiller and Grace “found that community engagement opportunities that make a lasting impact on an underlying societal problem appeal more to Generation Z students than do short-term volunteer experiences that address the symptoms of that problem.” (Seemiller and Grace 2017, 24) Today’s youth believe they can change the world. It’s no wonder that Seemiller and Grace challenge us with the idea that “opportunities for students to create social change through developing technology, drafting a business plan, or accessing start-up funding may align with how Generation Z students see themselves engaging in and affecting their communities.” (Seemiller and Grace, 2017, 24)

Generation Z challenges our traditional notions of education and community interaction. They challenge us to seek new ways of engaging them through technology and dialogue, and to join them in changing their communities for the better. We will explore how we can partner with Gen Z to make this happen in our churches. Before a conversation begins, starting with the end in mind helps create purpose and direction. In a world of social media where people love simply voicing their opinions without accountability, restorative and redemptive direction is important. Unity, understanding, and a re-education of culture need to be the end goal.

## PRINCIPLES TO SPEAK AND SHARING REGARDING SOCIAL ISSUES

In an attempt to find principles that will help us create spaces where members of Generation Z will feel safe to speak and share on difficult social issues we will explore several approaches that are being used to help youth and adults enter into constructive dialogue—one that leads to constructive change and personal development. ASSET (Affirmative Supportive Safe and Empowering Talk) “is an evidence-based, affirmative school-based group counseling intervention for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) youth” (Craig, Thompson, and McInroy 2016, 4). Harvard Family Research Project studied ways to engage youth in afterschool programs academically, socially, and emotionally. Inquiry-based learning (IBL) “is an educational strategy in which students follow methods and practices similar to those of professional scientists in order to construct knowledge” (Pedaste, Maeots, Siiman, de Jong, van Riesen, Kamp, Manoli, Zacharia, and Tsourlidaki 2015, 48). Avery, Levy, and Simmons (2013) proposed a model based on deliberation. Zeldin, Gauley, Krauss, Kornbluh, and Collura (2015) studied Youth-Adult Partnership and found several positive elements. Kirshner and Jefferson (2015) studied schools that used a participatory democracy in their attempts to revitalize struggling schools. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is an approach in which “students work with a teacher or other adult ally to critically reflect upon the social and political forces influencing their lives, identify a pressing problem or school need, study it through systematic research, and then develop an action plan to raise awareness or change a policy” (Kornbluh, Ozer, Allen, and Kirshner 2015, 868).

After looking at these approaches, we gleaned several elements that create safe spaces where members of Gen Z can engage in dialogue. These include skilled and safe facilitators, a community of trust, exploration, and the possibility of change. We turn our attention to these four elements now.

### SKILLED AND SAFE FACILITATORS

It is extremely important to have adults as part of these conversations. The key is to have adults who are safe, free of judgment, and willing to embrace Gen Z as they are. ASSET makes it clear that facilitators need to have “skill in facilitating groups with youth.” (Craig, Thompson, and McInroy 2016, 4) These facilitators need to show a genuine interest in youth. Harvard Family Research Project

reported that facilitators “show that they care when they take time to get to know youth, learn about their interests, and communicate regularly with their families.”

The goal of the facilitator is to guide the discussion so that it remains open, where all opinions can be heard and considered. This can be challenging, especially when there are tough issues to explore. In deliberation the goal is “to arrive at the best possible solution to an issue through thoughtful consideration of alternatives. In deliberation, the group seeks to uncover the best possible rationales for alternative positions, ferret out their weaknesses, and consider the possible short- and long-term consequences associated with positions” (Avery, Levy, and Simmons 2013, 106). A participatory democracy seeks to have facilitators that help with “border-crossing” a term which refers to when a facilitator helps members of the group explore areas and experiences of others in the group in an attempt to understand other opinions better. This creates greater partnership and empathy between people.

### A COMMUNITY OF TRUST

Trust typically precedes dialogue, especially sensitive dialogue. Building trust begins with the facilitator and moves to the individual members of the group. ASSET builds trust with its members by helping the members create ground rules for discussion. These rules will be the foundation for a place of trust where the members will know they will be heard and not judged. Stating the ground rules is helpful, but living them makes them meaningful.

Building a sense of community and meaningful peer interactions is how the Harvard Family Research Project builds trust among its youth. “Creating shared norms and a safe environment and being a consistent presence for youth all contribute to a sense of community.” (Lopez 2015, 7) If dialogue is done well it can also create community. “The group process itself has the potential to foster a sense of community as members strive toward the mutual goal of achieving consensus. Ideally, decisions are based on ‘our best thinking’ and ‘our shared interests’ as opposed to ‘my best thinking’ and ‘my self-interest.’ ‘I,’ in essence becomes ‘we’” (Avery, Levy, and Simmons 2013, 106).

### EXPLORATION

A skilled and safe facilitator working in a trusting community will begin to generate discussion among the members of the group. Here is where a deep exploration of the issue will take place. In IBL this stage is called the *Investigation Phase* where “curiosity is turned into action” (Pedaste,

Maeots, Siiman, de Jong, van Riesen, Kamp, Manoli, Zacharia, and Tsourlidaki 2015, 54). Here is where community members, caring about one another, begin to truly try to understand one another, even if they disagree. When students deliberate this way, they learn to express themselves and listen to others. Avery, Levy, and Simmons quote a student who had this experience. “We’re learning to express ourselves and express our opinions and we learn to listen to other people, what they have to say” (Avery, Levy, and Simmons 2013, 105). Their focus groups revealed that through deliberating, students found their ability to embrace other perspectives increased.

### THE POSSIBILITY OF CHANGE

When tough discussions happen with Generation Z, there is an elevated possibility they will seek to change their surroundings. That means, for our discussion, the targets of change will be the church, the community, or both. Youth need to have the opportunity to seek meaningful changes once they enter into a dialogue about social issues. This is what they are seeking. YPAR involves youth in major decision-making for the school. This creates a positive attitude in adult decision makers as they see the “voice of the youth” considered as part of the process. Here is where “collaborative partnerships” can be made. “Students must adapt and alter their communication for stakeholder buy-in, making connections, and sustaining partnerships with diverse groups with varying interests.” (Kornbluh, Ozer, Allen, and Kirshner 2015, 876) In a participatory democracy, adults and youth will come together and share responsibilities based on skills and passions. In this environment, both youth and adults will be valued for what they contribute to the change process. “When youth engage in activities of shared importance with adults, the processes of collective decision making and purposeful action provide a solid foundation for the youth’s own development as well as for others in the setting” (Zeldin, Gauley, Krauss, Kornbluh, and Collura 2015, 2).

Safe spaces for Gen Z to discuss tough issues is crucial for them and for the church. But these spaces do not happen by accident. It calls for skilled facilitators who can help create a trusting environment where people feel welcome—a part of the community. This dialogue will lead to an increase in knowledge and understanding that will spark the desire to improve and change the culture and environment. When that occurs, the partnership of youth and adults can help usher in a new perspective and ap-

proach that will make the church a better and more effective place for spiritual growth and community service.

### SPARK TALKS

On February 15-17, 2019, the Atlantic Union Conference hosted a gathering called “God Encounters” for the young adults in the union. On the Saturday of that weekend the event had three group conversations called “SPARK Talks.” These were conversations focused on three topics: Women in Ministry, Race and the Church, and Sexuality and the Church. Facilitators maintained two goals as they guided the conversations during these sessions. The first goal was simply to explore challenging issues that exist in the church but are not often addressed. The second goal was to experience the sharing of different ideas between believers while keeping unity intact. The facilitators gave a brief introduction of the topic of discussion, without giving any specific opinion, and then opened the floor to discussion and questions. The goal was to engage in conversation rather than reaching a conclusions on either side of an issue.

Conversations shared with leadership after the potentially controversial SPARK Talks consistently seemed positive in terms of reaching young adults where they live, providing a venue to both talking and listening, and a willingness to tackle difficult issues. One facilitator expressed his appreciation of the event and his thoughts through an email sent the day after the gathering: “Thank you so much for your bold leadership in organizing an event that tackled three difficult subjects. As a result, I have had many significant conversations with your youth and young adults who have pertinent questions about sexuality. (A few even came out to me, expressing to me how they would only feel comfortable talking to me in private.) The more we address and seek to answer these questions, the likelier we are to keep them” (Anonymous, February 17, 2019).

### BACK TO LEON

This chapter began with the story of Leon, a black Adventist young man who found himself ostracized by the people he trusted the most when they found out he was gay. He felt the need to end his life. He sat for an hour, trying to muster the courage, slumped against a fencepost. That’s were Eric found him. He sat down next to him and said, “Listen, gay or not, you’re still my friend. It won’t change how I feel about you. Get up man, I’m going to stand with you.” Eric helped form a small group of guys who banded around Leon. They walked with him in the halls and fielded the comments. They sat with him at lunch and made

sure everyone saw they were with him. They hung out and went camping and pulled him right back into all the social circles that would have shut him out by himself.

When Eric created the safe space for Leon to speak with him, connections were made, and community was formed. Leon found a place to belong. Eric took action and changed the environment, and he changed the conversation. In practical terms in order to apply the lessons learned from both research and real-life stories, it seems that we must do more than just talk. We must apply proactive buffers to protect the negative influences that can be the tipping point of losing precious people.

Creating safe spaces for Gen Z to openly share and discuss these and many other challenging issues is a crucial ministry we need to implement immediately. We need to stop being afraid of tackling these issues in an open forum. Gen Z is asking questions, such as How do we reach our community? what about Adventist education vs. public education? LGBTQ issues? lifestyle choices? being a friendlier church? other faith communities? personal spirituality? forgiveness? We can no longer avoid these topics, and many others. We need to engage our youth in these conversations. And once they are engaged, we need to provide the methods and environment where they can become positive change agents in the church. This method of engaging and empowering them will not only help them in their development but will also help the church make the appropriate adjustments it needs to stay connected to the current generation and remain relevant to its community.

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