

YOUTH SABBATH SCHOOL CHALLENGES IN THE NORTH AMERICAN DIVISION

Armando Miranda, Jr. and Tracy Wood

In January of 2016 the North American Division (NAD) Youth and Young Adult Ministries department leaders held a visioning and strategic planning retreat with Union Youth Directors and ministry coordinators to plan for the next five years. At this retreat there was an appeal from Union Youth Directors to develop resources for youth Sabbath School leadership training. This appeal for youth Sabbath School resources was new to the Youth Department because Sabbath School ministry has never been an official part of Youth Directors' portfolio.

Traditionally the Conference, Union and Division youth and young adult ministry portfolio has consisted of a plethora of ministries (i.e.: Pathfinders, Youth/Young Adult, Public Campus, etc.). Each of these ministries has operated at the Division-level with Advisories and Focus Groups that give direction to the development of resources for leadership training and implementation. However, earliteen, youth, and young adult Sabbath School resources and training have not been included. With so many ministries it has not been feasible for most Conference-level Youth Directors to facilitate Sabbath School leadership training for local the church Sabbath School leaders.

Who is responsible for Youth Sabbath School?

In the NAD, the Children's Ministries department provides training of Sabbath School leaders from Beginners through Juniors using the General Conference Sabbath School lessons and teachers helps with additional resources. For adults, the Adult Ministries department of the NAD provides training of Sabbath School leaders using the General Conference Adult Sabbath School lessons, Teacher's Quarterly, and additional resources.

For Earliteen, Youth, and Young Adult Sabbath School, however, the NAD Youth Ministries department has never assumed ownership or responsibilities. Consequently, Union and Conference Youth Directors have not taken active leadership for youth Sabbath School. Yet, according to the NAD Working Policy 2016-2017 (FY 12 Youth Sabbath School), "The Youth Department supports local churches in the operation of Teen and Young Adult Sabbath Schools, including Branch Sabbath Schools. The purpose of the Sabbath School is to encourage the spiritual growth of teens and young adults through Bible study, fellowship, and involvement in ministry, and support of the world-wide mission of the denomination." While the word "support" has to be unfolded with precision, perhaps it is time to explore how this purpose can be accomplished.

Youth Sabbath School Crisis in the North American Division: Recent Developments

Throughout 2016 there was much discussion about *Insight Magazine* and its financial viability. Subscriptions had been declining for years and the income no longer balanced the publishing and printing expenses. For more than 30 years the weekly youth Sabbath School lesson has been printed inside the *Insight Magazine* and it was this publication that carried the lesson into the hands and the homes of teenagers.

The NAD Youth Department began attempts to determine how many churches throughout the NAD were using the General Conference youth Sabbath School curriculum entitled Cornerstone Connection. In spite of the little response, it was discovered that many Sabbath School leaders were using resources that were not Adventist-produced.

In January 2017 at the NAD Ministries Convention the NAD Youth Department hosted a Sabbath School Advisory to get input and direction from Union and Conference Youth Directors as well as anyone else who was interested. This advisory was open for anyone to attend. There were about 30 in attendance.

Following the Sabbath School Advisory, a Youth Sabbath School Taskforce was developed and met in February 2017. This included the two Associate Youth Directors for the NAD along with three Union Youth Directors. **Three initiatives** were developed from the advisory. **First, identify Union and Conference Youth Sabbath School coordinators** who will work with their union and Conference Youth Directors to build or rebuild Youth Sabbath School in the local churches. **Second, develop Sabbath School leadership resources** that can be used by the local church Sabbath School leaders in teaching and facilitating religious education to teens/youth. **Third, develop and provide Sabbath School leadership training for local church Sabbath School leaders** using the resources that have been created. It was determined that these three initiatives would begin immediately in this order.

In March 2017, it was determined by the Pacific Press Publishing Association board that they would no longer publish, print and distribute *Insight Magazine*. The last issue would be printed in June 2017. Also, the *Insight Magazine* website and social media platforms would be given to the NAD Youth Ministries department by Pacific Press. The transfers of the website and social media platforms to the NAD were made in May and June 2017.

In the fall of 2016 the Center for Youth Evangelism (CYE) on the campus of Andrews University and the NAD Youth & Young Adult Ministries department began collaborative planning to host a 180 Symposium entitled “Sabbath School Matters!” This event would gather administrators and youth directors from all levels of leadership, Sabbath School practitioners, academicians, resource developers, and young people to present papers addressing the demise of Sabbath School ministry. The format would be presentations followed by round-table discussions and conclude with recommendations and actions steps toward collaborative solutions. Anticipation was high that the outcomes would be used to create a way forward for the future success of youth Sabbath School ministry. This book contains the papers that were presented and the recommendations that were made at the symposium.

Resources and Leadership Training Challenges

About five years ago the General Conference Sabbath School committee decided to change the Sabbath School curricula for every age level beginning January 2019. This requires extensive work in writing the weekly Sabbath School lessons and developing the teacher resources for each age group. The General Conference develops lessons and teacher resources about three years prior to publication. This lag time poses a challenge to produce relevant and timely resources.

The Earliteen lesson, entitled RealTime Faith, used to be printed in *Guide Magazine* but as of January 2017 it is no longer included. The lesson is only available in a quarterly format and on a Sabbath School app produced by the General Conference. Similarly, the *Insight Magazine* with the Youth lesson, entitled Cornerstone Connection, is no longer printed as of June 2017. As with the earliteen lesson, this resource is only available in a quarterly format and on the Sabbath School app as well.

Currently there is no Earliteen, Youth, or Young Adult Sabbath School leadership training being offered. The only Conference-provided training is done by Youth Directors who have taken the initiative on their own. They must develop and provide their own Sabbath School training materials. Thus, there is an urgent need to develop quality resources for local church leadership training.

Challenges with the Resources Production Process

The General Conference Sabbath School department writes the Sabbath School lessons and teacher helps for each age-level of Sabbath School. These lessons are produced in English and sent to each Division for translation and publication. While this facilitates uniformity in that teens and youth around the globe unite in studying the same materials, at the same time it poses a challenge with a lack of contextualization for various subcultures.

In the NAD, because there is no translation of the materials into other languages, the General Conference sends the materials directly to the Pacific Press who prints the quarterlies and the teacher helps. That means that neither the Division nor the Unions or the Conferences have any input in the development of these resources.

Conclusion

As we have seen in this article, the Youth Sabbath School is facing some important challenges, mainly, three: (a) lack of administrative ownership (at all levels); (b) lack of relevant resources; and (c) lack of leadership training for the local level. It is expected that it will take the collaboration of many entities throughout the NAD to remedy the crisis. This is why the 180 Symposium focused on bringing together administrators and youth directors, Sabbath School practitioners, educators and academicians, resource developers, and young people.

Therefore, it is the anticipation of NAD Youth & Young Adult Ministries, along with the NAD Administrators, that the recommendations and outcomes from the Sabbath School Matters! 180 Symposium will provide insights and direction for putting in place initiatives that will bring solutions to the Sabbath School Crisis.