

WILL YOU LISTEN? THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF YOUTH AND YOUNG ADULTS ENGAGEMENTS IN SABBATH SCHOOL

Jharony Fernandez-Gibbs and Deslynne Roberts

Introduction

Faith and spirituality are important features of young adulthood, yet the decline in youth and young adult engagement in Sabbath School has escalated in the North American Division. Proactive steps to readdress the issue have begun, however the weekly experiences of youth and young adult engagement in Sabbath School remains to be explored. Moreover, Adventist youth and young adult relentlessly seek a more meaningful exploration of their faith and spirituality as it relates with their life experiences.

A number of previous studies conducted by the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA), on faith development amongst youth and young adults discovered that whilst faith development is an identifying marker in the overall growth of the church, youth and young adults continue to disengage from church. Several studies cited by Dudley (2000) highlighted a number of reasons why teenagers leave the church. These factors include “alienation, irrelevance, intolerance, convenience”¹

The Project Affirmation: Valuegenesis² study of Adventist Youth that begun in 1989 was another important landmark youth and young adult study for the SDA church in North America. Assessment on faith maturity and behaviors in various areas identified the two most important religious outcomes. The most important factors that ranked highly for youth and young adults were faith maturity and denominational loyalty. More recently the Barna Report (2013) stated that 57% of young adults remain unengaged in church life, whilst 23% are disengaged with the church life. Moreover, those who attend infrequently report various reasons; 22% report disagreement with the church, 39% report spiritual struggles, whilst 65% report some other reasons.³

Currently, the consensus suggests that Sabbath school classes are not meeting the needs of most young adults. Therefore, looking for other resources and communities where their needs are met has become a more urgent need for young adults. This results in a large number of young adults becoming disengaged from Sabbath school, increasing the lack of attendance thereof.

This article deals with a survey conducted on the campus of Andrews University, to find out student’s attitudes, perceptions and involvement with young adult Sabbath School. The survey revealed many significant responses about the lived experiences of college campus youth and young adults’ engagement in Sabbath School.

Among these responses, four emerging themes describe those experiences: (1) relevancy, (2) faith and spirituality, (3) teaching and facilitation and (4) relationships. Participants' response to the survey indicated varying levels of spiritual maturity and conflicting interests in Sabbath School. The experiences of young adults highlighted that the current Sabbath School model should be altered to facilitate active faith development throughout young adulthood. In addition, a greater emphasis is needed to foster a desire for a mission-minded approach in this ministry, one that equips young adults for the active engagement in religious pursuits within the Adventist Church, and leads to the enlargement of God's Kingdom.

Sabbath School Matters Survey

In this study, 224 respondents completed the online survey, of which 93% were young adults aged 18-35 years, and 7% were youth, ages 15-17. Attendance at Sabbath School indicated that 73% attended Sabbath School in the last 6 months, whilst 23% did not attend. In contrast, 43% attended each week, with 18% attending twice a month, and 11% once a month. Of the 73% of young adults, there is some favourability towards the Sabbath School program; however, some caution should be given to this finding, based on the population sample used for this study and the demographics of this group, since this was conducted on an Adventist college. Had this study been conducted in a different context, perhaps the results would have varied.

There is also a need to provide a broader lens in which to determine the response of youth and young adult from the local church, especially when 49 college students have disengaged from Sabbath School entirely. The actual experiences of youth and young adults highlighted several reasons for the decline in attendance. In general, 55% of respondents stated that they do not attend Sabbath School because they are too tired and 35% state that Sabbath morning's no longer work for them; 37% reported a lack of stimulation; 37% are no longer interested; 29% stated that the topics do not help them grow spiritually, and 25% stated that the Sabbath School lessons do not help them to think critically about their faith and SDA theology, whilst 16% reported that the Sabbath School lesson is too structured.

1) Relevancy

Some respondents described relevancy in terms of purpose and function of Sabbath School, the structure, *engagement*, *location* and *delivery* of the bible study guide. One respondent stated that *"We need to have a clear vision-a goal in mind, so it's not just a 'hangout' club. But have a purpose in what we do. A mission"*. It comes as no surprise that in comparison to Gen Xers, Millennials place significant value on contributing to purposeful and meaningful activities, in the hope of making a positive contribution to the world. This aptly describes the need for the Sabbath School model to incorporate a mission minded approach in its structure that is relevant for the post-modern and meta-modern society.

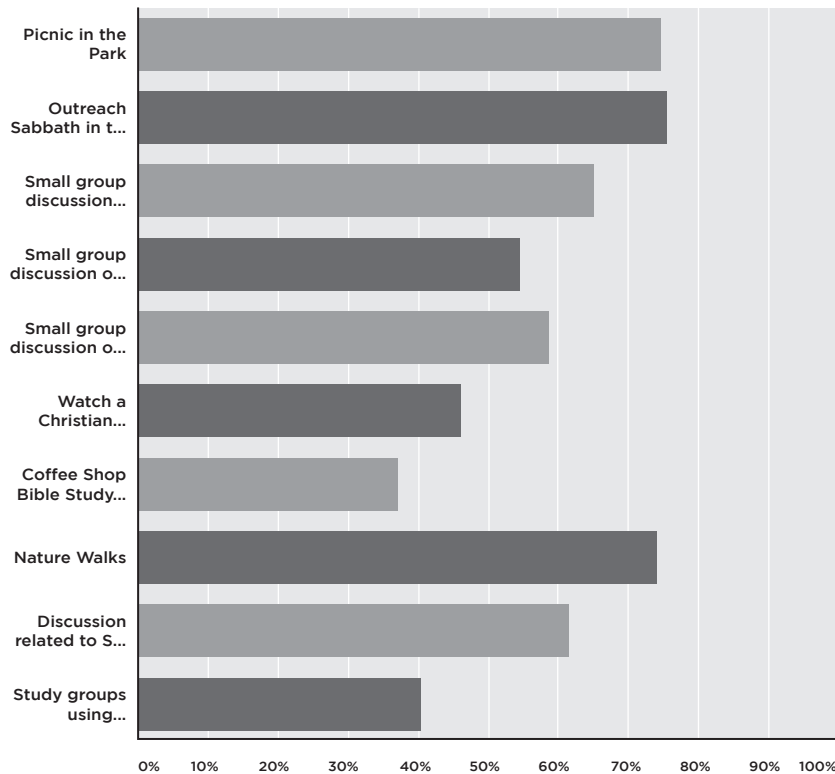
Consideration should also be given to opportunities for active engagement with the wider society. This notion was best articulated by one of the participants in these words: *"have it outside of the walls of the church"*. It is evident that a community focused Sabbath School model, one that goes beyond the church walls, is an expressed need that appeals most to young adults (See Figure 1 below).

The accumulation of these factors can lead to increased relevancy for engaged and disengaged youth and young adults. The survey highlighted that 24% of disengaged youth and young adult want more discussion on social issues, and new interactive ways of studying the Bible, whilst 17% no longer want to use the Sabbath School lesson. In contrast, engaged youth and young adults recognise the importance of re-imagining the Sabbath School experience through a range of activities. The graph below highlights the responses of 143 participants from this survey.

FIGURE 1

Sabbath School Matters Survey (2017). Question 13

Would you want to participate in the following activities/program as part of your Sabbath School group?



The results highlight a number of activities that could peak the interest of youth and young adults and also has the potential to increase their engagement in Sabbath school. The highest-ranking responses include a desire to have Sabbath School picnics in the park (75%), planned outreach activities (76%), and participation in nature walks (74%). A consistent response ranging from 60%–65% emphasized a need for more small groups that facilitate topics such as personal development, social issues and interfaith beliefs.

2) Faith and Spirituality

Faith development throughout young adulthood has many peaks and trough. The terrain is challenging for some, yet for others their faith development is linear. According to faith development theory, faith is determined by internal and external influences. Internal being the intrinsic motivators that respond to a

stimuli, whereas external factors such as religion, doctrine and culture influence responses to faith and spirituality across the trajectory of lifespan development.

The responses that participants gave to issues pertaining SDA doctrine, personal faith, religious belief and how they impact on the faith community varied. One respondent stated that *“My generation long for a Christianity that is genuinely transformative, not necessarily new, creative, or innovative”*. While Sabbath School can be the place for spiritual growth and maturity for young adult and their peers, results from this survey highlight an underlying need for discipleship, despite the fact that many young adults believe in God but don't see Him as personal. Transformative faith is likely to arise when young adults engage in the process of discipleship.

Another response affirmed that *“Adventist young adults know the theology of the church well enough, they understand Adventism for the most part, but God has no active role in their lives”*. The dissociation between spirituality, faith and religiosity in the life of young adults is apparent in the above response. Simply put, the responses cited seem to validate the need for a discipleship model, one that facilitates more opportunities to empower, equip, connect and educate young adults in their quest for deeper faith; and Sabbath School could be a vehicle to make this happen. In this regard, several participants expressed a *“desire to see more of an emphasis on the simplicity and practicality of the Bible and how to share this with others in Sabbath School”*.

3) Teaching and Facilitation

In regards to teaching and facilitation in Sabbath School, the study revealed various views of young adults that will improve their Sabbath School experience. Young adults felt that *“instructors need to talk less and let participants engage more”*. We have to keep in mind that we are working with a newer and younger generation who do not function the same way as those from the Gen X and Baby Boomer generations. Young adults want to be able to engage in their learning experience so they can grow and fully comprehend what they believe in. They want to share their views on current issues inside and outside the church.

While there is the notion that young adults only care about selfies, iPhones, Facebook, Instagram, snapchat, etc., research has demonstrated that young adults also care about service and social issues, and want to be in a church community that is willing to allow them to engage in such activities.⁴ If Sabbath School classes provide young adults an opportunity to share their views and tie them with Biblical truths, this will enhance their experience as well as their spiritual growth. Many youth and young adults are saying “no” to church because of the church's stand on cultural issues such as women's ordination, and the treatment of the LGBTQ+ community.⁵ Having Sabbath School classes that respond to these current events is essential to their integral growth.

A final point to bring to light is that young adults *“would like to see Sabbath School teaching people HOW to study the Bible for themselves and HOW to pray themselves rather than spoon feeding them premeditated conclusions ABOUT the Bible”*. On a personal note, I recently met an Andrews University student who shared her disengagement and lack of participation in attending church and Sabbath School. When asked why, she simply said that if she feels closer to God outside in nature, and hanging out with friends, then that is what she would do. She also said that in the past two years at Andrews, she did not

need to open her Bible once during church services and Sabbath School. She wanted to study her Bible and grow deeper in understanding the scriptures. She desired depth.

4) Relationships

Young adults also reported that they would like to see Sabbath School “*move to a more relational dynamic instead of the teacher/facilitator at the front of the room*”. Building relationships is key to reaching young adults. Authenticity in relationships is vital for them. Sabbath School Teachers need to demonstrate that they care about what they have to say inside and outside of class. Welcoming, caring and authentic Sabbath School classes are needed to retain youth and young adults. Sabbath School should provide what Rainer and Rainer (2008) call a “third place”, an anchor of a community that encourages relational interaction between its members.⁶ Sabbath School needs to be a place that provides a safe environment for young adults to express themselves and connect with one another. Just as it is important to have a community that guides and mentors in a church, it is also crucial to have that same element within the Sabbath School setting.⁷

Among the responses in this category was the desire for “*shorter lessons and more time for bonding*”. Young adults do not want to spend most of the time on the vertical connection with God alone, but also enjoy the horizontal connection with their peers and teacher. This is a positive attribute of young adults. We constantly see Jesus in the Gospels investing not just in His connection with God the Father, but also investing in His connection with His brothers and sisters on earth. Getting to know each other is significant for young adults. Sabbath School can supply that platform for young adults to not just get to know God but get to know one another, following Jesus’ example.

It is also vital to note that visitors should be welcomed and received as friends to the Sabbath School class. One respondent stated: “*Always acknowledge visitors. Instructors need to talk less and let students engage more.*” According to Stetzer, Stanley and Hayes, we should move from the model of behave/believe/belong ministry to belong/believe/become ministry model.⁸ Making young adults feel that they belong to the Sabbath School class can definitely have an impact on their engagement and participation. Nobody wants to be part of a group of people that does not notice when they have been absent for three weeks in a row. There needs to be intentionality in following up commitments, checking on the students, visiting homes, engage in conversation, know when they are sick, notice when they have been missing, etc.

In essence, when the church becomes essential to young adults, then they will know that they are essential to the church. The same applies to Sabbath School. Sabbath School can be essential to young adults if they know that they are essential to Sabbath School. Building relationships with students and visitors attending the Sabbath School classes will ensure that they feel important to the Sabbath School class. This will inspire them to continue to attend and be engaged. Intentionally building relationships with young adults will reflect the character of Jesus.

Limitations

This study revealed some positive responses about Sabbath School engagement among youth and young adult. The sample size provided a range of

responses, yet it was not large enough to investigate the scope of the issue from young adults who do not attend Sabbath School on college campuses. As a result, this particular population group that the survey targeted, may not necessarily reflect the current situation with Sabbath School attendance and engagement of youth and young adults in the North American Division. Culture, age, church attendance and affiliation to the Adventist church are unclear.

While access to college students on an Adventist college campus was convenient for this study, many variables emerged that should be taken into account. Defining the intricate needs of young adults aged 18–35—whether they are in college or not—is multifaceted. Young adults' engagement in Sabbath School is impacted by life transitions such as college life, work, marriage and parenthood. These factors do impact religiosity and spirituality among young adults, which in turn affects their perspective on and engagement with Sabbath school.

Recommendations

There are several recommendations that were gathered from this survey that should be considered in the development of Sabbath School Ministry. Given the sample and methodology used for this pilot study, in order to obtain a more in depth perspective, there would be value in conducting an in depth study of young adult engagement in Sabbath School across the North American Division that include teenagers, youth and young adults in the local church.

Second, the true relevancy of the current youth and young adult Sabbath School model and resources should be analysed in detail. This may require an objective look at how they speak to the lives of youth and young adults; for example, considering the global and techno savvy context of this generation, there should be intentionality in creating a relevant model and resources that embrace the many nuances of young adulthood. Identifying interactive resources for Sabbath School is vital for retaining young adults as well as embracing the diverse learning needs of this generation.

Conclusion

Sabbath School can be a very useful ministry in the lives of youth and young adults. As their faith matures the evidence suggests that this generation craves for a much more spiritual experience. It is therefore important that the responses of the youth and young adults are embraced and valued as a legitimate expression of their desire to re-imagining the Sabbath School experience. We are living in a world that presents many enticing options for youth and young adults, which cater to their needs. While the church is well positioned to respond, we should not miss the opportunity to listen to the spoken and the unspoken voices of our youth and young adults.

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