USING TECHNOLOGY TO BUILD COMMUNITY WITHIN THE SABBATH SCHOOL PROGRAM

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Observations About Current Sabbath School Programs

In my current role as Youth Director, I have many opportunities to visit and observe local church Youth Sabbath School classes. A few of these take place within the context of large, metropolitan congregations. These Sabbath School groups will typically be well staffed; the participants will be similar in ages and the experience will contain diverse programing components. And while the classes won't successfully attract 100% of the church's youth, they will be well attended (especially as the clock approaches 10 a.m.).

The far majority of my visits take place in the small, rural churches of Virginia. The Youth Sabbath School groups of these smaller churches often function with a dedicated streamlined staff and the participants often vary in ages from 14–25 years. Other than a few announcements, the program will consist of a monologue from the teacher with a few questions thrown in as an attempt to generate some discussion. I don't fault these teachers, especially the ones from the smaller congregations, as they are doing the best that they can with the resources and knowledge that they have. But you can certainly see why a young person may struggle to get excited about their Sabbath School class and will be tempted to find any excuse not to get there on time, if at all.

The Washington Brazilian Youth Sabbath School Class

To say that I was surprised the day I walked into the Youth Sabbath School class of the Washington Brazilian Church would be a gross understatement. The congregation is not a large one, but the Youth of the church make up a large portion of the membership. The Sabbath School program started like many large programs do. A very proficient group of singers lead out in a robust session of praise songs. But once the song service concluded, that was the end of any similarity to anything that I had witnessed before, or since, in a Sabbath School program. While the components of the program were familiar, every other aspect was revolutionary to me.

The leader of the class stood up and indicated that it was time to hear a mission story, from Angola. And it was live, from Angola. On the projection screen was one of their own church youth who was now a missionary who was currently serving in Angola, and by way of Skype, related a story of how God was using them to reach the un-churched in the community where they were stationed. Because it was live, the Sabbath School leader was able to pose some follow-up questions. Following the mission story, the leader stood up and drew every-body's attention to the screen for the special music, which was being performed by the Brazilian King's Heralds, live from Sao Paulo, just for them! Again, it was transmitted to them by way of Skype. And again, the leader was able to commu-nicate with the musicians and express his appreciation for the lovely music.

At this point I'm thinking, "OK, This was pretty cool. I know how it's done. But, is it really any different than just popping in the Mission Spotlight DVD or bringing up some inspiring musical group on YouTube?" Then it was time for the lesson study. The SS leader stood up and introduced the topic for the lesson and indicated that the discussion was going to be lead by an expert on the topic, who happened to be a pastor friend of his from Canada. And to make a true discussion we would need to be able to dialogue, to pose and answer questions. So he invited us all to take out our phones. And he threw a number up on the screen. When we had questions or wanted to give an answer to a question posed by the presenter, all we had to do was send our question or comment by texting it to the number on the screen and the presenter would get it. To make it easier for the presenter, a camera was set up at the front of the room so that the presenter could see the audience that he was speaking to.

Wow! What an experience! First class music; first hand testimony; and first-rate teaching. This could have been done anywhere, and it really could have been seen by anybody with a computer screen, iPad, or even a smartphone. My mind began to think of the implications. The more I think about what I observed that day the more I become convinced that this could be put to greater use. Not for the benefit of just a single church youth group, but for the enjoyment of unlimited youth groups. Here are a couple of my current thoughts on the topic.

1. Enhancing Community Between Two Or More Youth Groups

Imagine for a moment being a member of a small, rural youth group. You rarely see fellow youth who share your same values and beliefs who aren't your siblings or extended family members. You don't have a church school to attend. Your Sabbath School is made up of kids ranging from middle school to college. You may have had the same Sabbath School teacher since you were in Primary. Imagine on Sabbath morning being able to join together, with the help of technology, with a sister youth group or groups from your geographical area, share experiences, discuss topics, and maybe even perform music for each other. Perhaps your little, rural Sabbath School class is paired up virtually with a larger, resource rich, metropolitan Sabbath School class/es. Thus, the Sabbath School experience could potentially get a lot more interesting. Sabbath School leaders could share the teaching load. Social events could be coordinated.

2. Enhancing Programing Quality

Perhaps another way that technology can be used is by serving as the link to quality resources. As with the Brazilian Youth Sabbath School class, a local resource office (i.e. The local Conference Youth Department) could line up a schedule of live virtual Sabbath School programs, for example once a month, using this same technology, to provide special features or guest presenters to any number of church youth groups within the same time zone, who choose to subscribe.

The resource office has potentially broader contacts with many resources, than a local youth leader does. This would include: specialists who are willing to share their expertise, talented musicians, local members engaged in overseas mission endeavors, etc. With some legwork, one person could set this all up enriching the Sabbath School program for a whole host of Sabbath morning participants. If a local church community doesn't have the resources to provide

this level of enrichment in person, the next best thing would be to provide it through the use of the technology.

Conclusion

When talking to those who put this technology to use, their motivation was very clear: they were striving to make Sabbath School a more interesting environment for their youth, so that the Gospel would be better heard and God's Word would be better studied and better lived out. Most importantly, it was a low-cost venture: it only required a computer, a projector, a couple of microphones and a camera. Certainly, this church can serve as a model for other churches on how to use simple technology to enhance the learning experience of the Youth Sabbath School.