

INTRODUCTION TO GEN Z AND SOCIAL ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

The 180° Symposium for 2019 focused on Gen Z and Social Issues. In North America this age cohort consists of those born between 1995-2010. They share a number of the same social concerns as previous generation, but they also have certain issues that stand out more to them. Those who minister to Gen Z, whether they are in full time ministry or serve as volunteers or who parent these young people, need to be aware of these issues and integrate this into their ministry to increase effectiveness in these unique times to this unique generation.

INTRODUCTION

When the North American Division's (NAD) Youth and Young Adult Ministries Department joined forces with the Center for Youth Evangelism's (CYE) for the annual 180° Symposium, it created a collaboration of academicians, administrators, and practitioners. As the three members of the NAD department, we refer to ourselves as the "One Team." While Tracy Wood serves as the director, his specialized focus is on young adult ministry and camp ministry. Vandeon Griffin's title is associate director and his specialty is teen ministry. Armando Miranda is also an associate director, and he takes primary responsibility for club ministry, which includes Pathfinders, Adventurers, and Master Guides. While all three of us have our specialties, we also maintain regular contact to function as "One Team."

It is our joy to team up with the CYE at Andrews University for the 180° Symposium. Director Ron Whitehead has empowered Gerardo Oudri to oversee the symposium. Gerardo has a paper in this collection as well. Our role is to provide a simple introduction for the 2019 topic: ZOOM IN: REAL. DEAL. HEAL. The description of this

theme can be summarized as: Gen Z and Social Issues. As young people "come of age" they begin to view their larger world and recognize discrepancies, injustices, and inconsistencies. While they can easily be myopic since they are still discovering their larger world, it is often the youth who "say it like it is" either because they are finding their voice or because they aren't fully vested in maintaining the status quo like those older often seem to be.

WHO IS GEN Z?

While some have grown weary of all the press and emphasis given to Millennials, those who work with youth recognize that Millennials are no longer youth. As young adults they could, and should be asked about those following them now in the period of life called "youth." The first 180° Symposium focused on Millennials and the concern of widespread departure of this generation from church involvement (Dudley and Walshe 2009). What will the next generation be called? And what arbitrary boundaries or significant events will mark its edges?

Youth as a stage of development sometimes may be narrowly defined as the high school years. Some expand this to add all the teen years, which includes middle school and sometimes early college. When it comes to congregations, especially those with less than 75-100 in attendance, "youth" could be anyone under the age of 30 or sometimes even 40! But to compare a 13 year-old with a 30 or 40-year-old seems to miss the mark, at least developmentally. After all, the 13 year-old adolescent could be the child of the 40 year-old adult. But it's possible those are the only two people in the congregation under the age of 60. In such instances, it's easier to clump them into one group and label them "youth," at least in comparison to those who have retired or are nearing that stage of life.

One obvious drawback to labeling a cohort moving through the stage of "youth" has to do with those who don't fit the label. This could be individuals who differ from the norm, or those on the cusp of either the leading edge or the trailing edge of the cohort. However, general statements can be helpful when making broad observations or noting tendencies, provided one keeps in mind the limitation that what could be generally true might have individual differences.

Those who consider generational models often base this on Strauss and Howe's 1991 publication *Generations*. One principle proposed in this pivotal publication of an American perspective viewed a generation covering approximately 20 years. With the rapid changes in technology,

that time might be shortened now to as little as 10-15 years (Dupont 2019). While each individual or institution might create its own boundary markers for the start and end of Gen Z, the one we'll posit for consideration at this time draws on more than a dozen sources cited in Wikipedia that tend toward a range of those born from 1995-2010 (Wikipedia 2020). At the time of the 180° Symposium in 2019, that would put them in an age range of 9-24 years of age. Some demographers (Fry and Parker 2018) have used the term "Post-Millennial Generation" simply because chronologically they came after the highly publicized Millennial cohort. A label like "iGeneration" (Clarke 2010) stems from internet familiarity and the popularity of Apple products such as the iPhone and iPad. The term "Digital Natives" (Rothman 2014) broadens the technology emphasis since this group not only found the internet to be available, but actually expects it as normative. A visual look of generations can be seen in Figure 1.

Some things in youth ministry persist from one generation to the next, things such as the importance of relationships, one's search for identity, sexual exploration, and movements toward independence. These all have spiritual implications. But for those who do ministry to, for, and with young people, one needs a special awareness and understanding of unique characteristics of the youth stage for a given generation. This would be for youth pastors, conventional pastors, volunteer youth leaders such

as Youth Sabbath School teachers and AY leaders, as well as parents. The unique elements for the current generation of youth are what this 180° Symposium addresses. The same quest will be necessary when the next generation, which some have already labeled as the "Alpha Generation," enters adolescence 10-15 years from now. A look at the generations in the year 2029 can be seen in Figure 2.

SOCIAL ISSUES FOR GEN Z

While Baby Boomers may have had an anti-establishment posture and bucked the previous generations, Gen Xers were left to themselves while Baby Boomers wrestled with becoming the establishment they had maligned during their own youth. Gen Xers numbered fewer and received the moniker of "Latch Key Children" since they had to care for themselves while their parents pursued their own interests. The next generation, Millennials, took center stage because they requested mentoring by their helicopter parents, and also due to their sheer numbers—definitely larger in number than Gen X and projected to surpass aging Baby Boomers in 2019 (Fry 2018). But by far, Gen Z outnumbers Millennials and also Baby Boomers (Duffin 2019). And while the social issues of the budding Gen Z cohort is still emerging, it shows similarities to the generation just ahead of it, and differs more than those in older generations.

One example is that Gen Z looks to the government to do more to solve society's problems. To put it starkly, 70

Figure 1. Generations in 2019

SILENT GENERATION		BABY BOOMERS		GEN X		MILLENNIALS		GEN Z		ALPHA GEN	
Born 1928-1945		Born 1946-1964		Born 1965-1980		Born 1981-1995		Born 1996-2010		Born 2011-2025	
Age in 2019: 74-91		Age in 2019: 55-73		Age in 2019: 39-54		Age in 2019: 24-38		Age in 2019: 9-23		Age in 2019: 0-8	
1928	1945	1946	1964	1965	1980	1981	1995	1996	2010	2011	2025

Figure 2. Generations in 2029

SILENT GENERATION		BABY BOOMERS		GEN X		MILLENNIALS		GEN Z		ALPHA GEN	
Born 1928-1945		Born 1946-1964		Born 1965-1980		Born 1981-1995		Born 1996-2010		Born 2011-2025	
Age in 2029: 84-101		Age in 2029: 65-83		Age in 2029: 49-64		Age in 2029: 34-48		Age in 2029: 19-33		Age in 2029: 4-18	
1928	1945	1946	1964	1965	1980	1981	1995	1996	2010	2011	2025

percent of those from Gen Z look to the government for this compared to just 64 percent for Millennials. But the numbers drop noticeably for Gen X (53 percent), Baby Boomers (49 percent) and lowest for the Silent Generation (39 percent) (Parker, Graf, and Igielnik 2020). A similar pattern emerges when asked if increasing racial and ethnic diversity is good for society. With Gen Z split about 50-50 racially in terms of White and Non-White groups, it's not surprising they have a greater openness to racial diversity. This stands in contrast to Baby Boomers who are less enthusiastic about racial and ethnic diversity. In 1968, 80 percent of Baby Boomers were White (Fry and Parker 2018). Add to that change a greater political and social engagement among Gen Z (Fromm and Read 2018) and it's not hard to anticipate conflict and changes in this arena by those who are part of Gen Z.

When it comes to ministering to Gen Z, keep in mind that change is a constant for those in this generation. But churches aren't known for making changes, much less making them quickly. Churches struggle just to adapt ministry practices, much less to change them altogether. One example is the Adventist Church's resistance to gender equality, at least in comparison to what those in Gen Z would expect. When the rest of an adolescent's world is making rapid changes, such resistance results in the church becoming less and less a part of their world. In general, the longer a church has been in existence, and the older its leadership, the less likely it will change. This may result in those from Gen Z disappearing from churches or migrating to churches that are more responsive to change.

When it comes to mental health, Gen Z reports the least amount of good or excellent mental health compared to other generations (Bethune 2019). Anxiety producing effects from sexual assault and mass shootings, as well as immigration and deportation issues stress today's teens. The barrage of news available on personal devices regarding things that seem to be completely out of their control contribute to this lower sense of well-being. They report bullying and now cyberbullying as common occurrences (Anderson 2018).

Another powerful stressor in the lives of Gen Z adolescents is academic pressure. This has to do with both academic achievement and job placement following an expected four-year college degree (which often takes longer than four years). Parents who haven't completed a college degree put even more emphasis on their children completing a bachelor's degree, while those who

know older Millennial graduates who failed to land jobs while incurring a large student debt wonder if the college track is really worth all it's cracked up to be (Parker 2017). And then there's the pressure some feel to "get into the right school" and to get high enough grades. All of this adds to the typical teen pressure of making and maintaining friendships, social interactions, sexuality, substance abuse, sports, physical appearance, religious activities, and extracurricular school activities.

CONCLUSION

These are just some of the issues we face at the beginning of the 180° Symposium in 2019. As we listen to the presentation of papers and then address these social issues, questions we would like to pose include:

- Are we the church that will raise, attract, and retain the next generation of children as well as their parents and grandparents?
- Are we shaping Adventist Education at every level of learning to meet the perceived needs of students, parents, and even their grandparents?
- Are we developing Adventist resources that are relevant?
- Who should be included in these conversations?
- As this group of academicians, practitioners, and administrators have convened for this 180° Symposium, what will we do here, and then in our various spheres of influence after this gathering concludes?

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