

## **Intergenerational Priorities of the Church of God in Jamaica and the Implications for Communication, Education, and Health**

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**Abstract:** This report of the Church of God National Convention highlights intergenerational priorities for sustainability. The purpose of the convention was to strengthen the members, but as an interdisciplinary research team of health care providers, and educators, the goal was to maximize and develop methodologies that might assist in improving communication, education, and health. The priorities are clustered in three generations of church leaders: the Veterans, Issacharians, and Naaman's Maid. The framework and culture are explained for global understanding of the efforts within the Jamaican church; expectantly, other ministries will find this work useful. The implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** Church, Health, Communication, Education

### **1. Introduction**

In celebrating 90 years of successful ministry, The New Testament Church of God (COG) met in July, 2015, in St. Catherine, Jamaica, for its annual convention. Perceiving a departure from the organizational practice, the focus of the convention was "Returning the Glory". This theme suggested the need for the church to worship, model, and represent Christ as is traditionally understood in Caribbean Church of God context and outlined in the COG Minutes (2015).

During this five-day event, the delegates addressed sustainability of the Church of God as they know it. In all presentations, including sermons and testimonies, the common refrain surrounded a declared or understood mutiny between generational modes of worship. Current COG leaders expressed a fear that in time, there will be "a generation that knew not God" (Judges 2:10, KJV). There was a *perceived* insufficient appreciation of the work of those who have "fought a good fight", and the promise of the new generation.

Based on the merits of the convention, the writers embarked on an analysis of the presentations. We read the messages and non-verbal cues through cultural lens, and agreed that the objective of the gathering was to strengthen the denomination, and to recognize the efforts to a) build the church, b) maintain the church, and c) continue the beliefs and practices for generations to come. In this analysis, we identified priorities of the church and how current leaders can create balance between generations for the smooth operation of the organization and take cognizance of the unique gifts that the body of Christ possesses. This analytical report clusters such priorities according to cohort of leadership groups: the Veterans Generation (VG), Issachar Generation (IG), and the Naaman's Maid Generation (NMG).

## **2. The Veterans Generation**

It was estimated at the convention that 60% of the membership of the Church of God in Jamaica is over 50 years of age. The number of years such members have been in the church is unknown, but certainly, among them are those leaders who have demonstrated the courage, tenacity, and strength to uphold the values and beliefs of the COG: the veterans. This recognition was clearly and repeatedly articulated and applauded throughout the convention. Undoubtedly, the VG has trained successive generations of leaders who are making a difference globally in ministry, science, and technology.

Like military veterans, the church vets have stood “in the line of fire” to defend the faith and raise generations of preachers. Examples were clear in the testimonies and reports of those serving in communities where traditional worship styles (which the culture deems as witchcraft) are common practice. Many veterans, have died “in the uniform”, namely, the breastplate of righteousness and the shield of faith, as outlined in Ephesians 6:12-14. Pastors shared experiences of “symbols of evil” placed on or sprinkled on church properties. Such symbols are intended to force removal of the church and are quite popular in the Caribbean; for the communal belief is that the fate of the world is at the mercy of supernatural forces for good or evil (Andrews & Boyle 2012). So the pastors of the churches understand the messages and are often under intense duress and needing assistance to win the fight against evil.

Veteran leaders, with advancing years, struggle with the comportment of the new generation and the changing religious paradigm. For those veterans, principles of reasoning and the use of technology are often considered to be “evil creeping in the church”, and that logic modifies beliefs and appeases irresponsible habits in the church. It is for that reason, that reggae music with its international acclaim and origins in Jamaica, although gospel music may be infused with Gospel lyrics, is still viewed with contempt among the veterans. The association of reggae music with worldly pleasures weakens any message that is contained in the lyrics, but the music elates the new generation.

There is still a thriving cohort of veterans who believe that education is not necessary for propelling the Gospel: that is the work of the Holy Ghost. “The Holy Ghost will educate you like He did on the Day of Pentecost”, said one veteran leader. Certainly, the disciples did evangelize in a global community setting (Acts 2), and people of all nationality and beliefs could comprehend the Gospel in their native language. Whereas that citation would silence even the most astute theologian, and that case could be literally interpreted, the missing element of education in the Church mediates interpretation of biblical symbolisms so that much contextual truths are still unearthed. For example, to many uneducated vets, “sparing the rod and spoiling the child” only means flogging, a practice that has region wide support.

The VG needs clarification on the role of education and context, for applicability of the Scriptures will assist with alleviating the anxiety that the approach to Christianity, as is preferred in the modern church is shaking the foundation that they [VG] have built. In fact, ignorance might be diluting the Gospel and subscribing to the fear of impending demise of the organization.

Haggai (a VG of his time) asked, “Who has seen the church in her first glory and what is it compared to then, isn’t it as nothing?” (Haggai 2: 6). Today’s Haggai generation echoes the identical sentiments of the body of Christ in describing the COG as “gone to nothing”. Hence, they preach against jubilant children having fun within the church setting, for “the children of Israel ate and drank, rose up to play, and the Lord was displeased” (Exodus 32:6). “Flee also youthful lusts” (2 Tim. 2:22) bellow many Veterans in their vocal opposition to risky sexual behaviors and substance use in adolescents. Yet, strategies to flee from such lusts receive laughable attention. So the veterans definitely have lessons to teach the young people of today’s church as risky sexual behaviors have been identified in Caribbean church millennials (Archibald & Newman, 2015).

The VG advocates herbal remedies for health (Marshall & Archibald, 2015) over conventional medical approaches since “and the herbs were for the healing of the nation” (Genesis 1:29). is a popular support. The millennial generation in general does not have rote memorization of the Scriptures; therefore, it appears as if Scriptures are not foundational to decision making in that group. While the benefits of herbs are clear, the responsibility of the vets is to pass on the benefits of healthy eating as contribution to sustainability of the GOG. It is inadequate to hear the message of the healthier choice of eating callaloo [spinach] in lieu of beef liver and onions and see a dissonance in practice. This lifestyle needs to be a proud practice. For example, at the convention, the unplanned pot-luck style of fellowship did not represent advocates of healthy lifestyle. The variety of fine Jamaican cuisine one succulent dish at a time (brown-stewed chicken, oxtail, curried chicken, jerked pork, red peas and rice ) was omnipresent at the convention! It seems that the belief that not having meat in any staple meal implies poverty, is still perpetuated. Eating healthy meals and using natural remedies for simple afflictions have been practiced among people of lower socioeconomic status for generations. However, there seems to be a linear relationship with improved socioeconomic status and meat products consumption.

The VG group is not hopeless, for within that population is a squad that has understood and have made efforts to improve with the times. They recognize the need to leave the COG stronger than their predecessors and are vigilant to educate themselves and support their “grandchildren’s” aspirations: an opportunity they [vets] did not have. Such enlightened vets understand the urgency of the times and their waning energy levels. These vets are cognizant of their responsibilities and are staunch supporters of the next generation of leaders, intervening on their behalf and calling to remembrance their personal struggles and triumphs of youth. Young people express feelings of safety around such Veterans for they too can share their life challenges and opportunities in a non-judgmental atmosphere. Clearly such vets have mastered developmental tasks and have come to terms with their mortality. The attitudes suggest generativity or ego integrity that Erickson (1950) theorized is the case. The highly respected vets the respectable leaders might be able to “slowly infuse” doses of appreciation, utilizing the five rights as applicable in medication administration. Perhaps Veterans might recognize that the new work is increasing the osmolality of the Gospel, pulling humankind to an area of higher concentration, thereby returning the glory to the church.

The practice of resiliency and adaptation might be instrumental as part of the Issachar generational priorities.

### 3. The Issachar Generation

The mid-generation of leaders was about 20 % at the annual COG convention. These Issachar leaders were present primarily on the praise team, which led the congregation in songs which are essential to a successful worship service. In fact, praise and worship is like the anesthesia preparing the congregation for the big operation [sermon] that is intended to excise sinful practices and add any kind of Godly device to sustain a healthier walk with God. So it is not surprising that people fall prostrate during the service. The IG leaders are expected to prayerfully select such songs “to be a blessing”. Since Biblical times, the tribe of Issachar was recognized for its cutting- edge leadership style that was required to guide the transition from Saul to David. (I Chronicles 12:32). The contemporary application of this is still relevant for the evolution of the church. The modern “Isaacharians” are the prime recipients of the wisdom of the historians, and the knowledge of modern science, and are therefore positioned to merge both perspectives to advance the church. This need to fuse talents and resources for the benefit of the church was a salient call at the convention as different generational leaders sought support for their ministry. So this appeal is a priority of the current leaders to provide transferable tools for both the millennials and Veterans. Likely, this reciprocity might allow members to recognize that the glory does exist in the church.

The IG has witnessed a lifestyle that is “in the world” (Romans 12:2) yet not of the world and a separation from behaviors and practices that are divergent from the Scriptures (Galatians 5:19). Many Veterans have moved a couple of rungs higher on the socio-economic ladder of success and have maintained their faithfulness to the church as an organization. Through fierce defense of their faith, they have secured the efficacy of the Gospel in the midst of attempts to weaken and thereby pervert it (2 Peter 2:1-3). This is one legacy that the veterans have bequeathed to the Isaacharians and subsequent generations; this asset will ensure sustainability of the organization. So Issacharians are charged to teach the Naaman's Maid Generation and provide them with an *apologia* of the authenticity of the Gospel, as the apostle warned would be required (Eph. 2:20).

Another priority of the IG clearly lies in assisting the Veterans to appreciate current and successful trends in evangelism. The commission to “go” (Matt. 28:19, KJV) has taken on a more expansive definition, than “walking”. That was the only means of spreading the Gospel when the Great Commission was given today the good news has infiltrated populations that were previously untapped. In fact, this broadened description might be what Jesus meant when He said, “Greater things shall he do in my name”. Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, and mobile devices, such as smart phones and tablets, present limitless possibilities for promulgation of the gospel. However, a cadre of leaders in the IG group struggles with this broadened definition, thinking that the church has become too secularized at the same time these virtual spaces are where Generation Y lives, travels and finds themselves.

A significant priority identified at the convention was the phenomenon of self- crucifixion that is revered by the VG juxtaposed with the IG’s awe of the ontology of self-actualization. Issachar leaders need to detangle the kinks that these differences create. Undoubtedly, the major function of the church is to

develop, maintain, and restore the spiritual integrity of the members; however, there is renewed recognition of the purpose of the COG as a community agency that supports health and educational well-being. This acknowledgement is consistent with the mandate of education (1 Tim. 4:12), communication of the Gospel (Matt. 28:19) and health (Is. 49:31) in the Messiah's teachings.

Congregants and leaders at the convention have successfully converted traditional practices into doctrines, and have embraced a neo-positivistic attitude, where everything is either black or white. For example, traditional attire for a woman of a skirt/blouse or dress has become a teaching in the church, so women who dress to the contrary have departed from the faith.

The church as an organization, reflecting the organism, (the Body of Christ) must provide Scriptural support for positions as the next generation of leaders is bold enough to question practices and will dismiss perspectives that appear senseless. Therefore, the IG has a responsibility to flesh out the doctrinal truths and present them as attractive as they are to the next generation. It is a priority of the church to have an intergenerational dialogue, highlighting appropriate comportment and styles within the organization. Indeed, this is the time for the COG to distance itself from discrimination, prejudice, and stigma that are associated with individual differences.

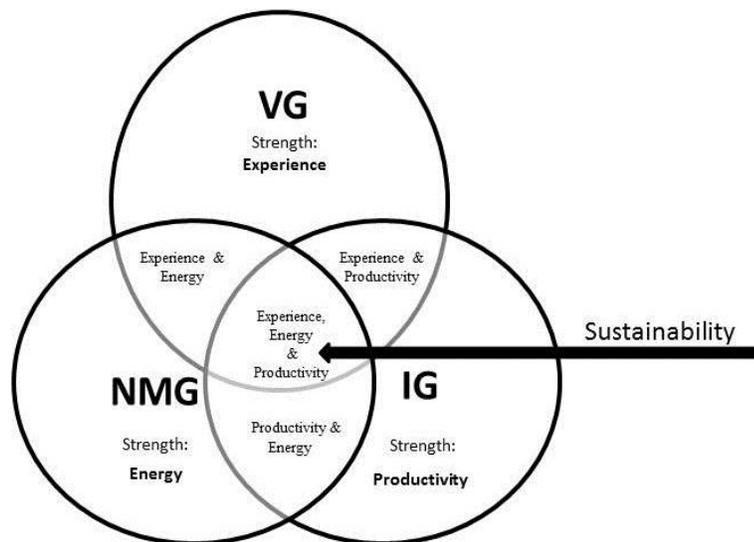
The IG is well poised to show its appreciation for ancestral legacy. As President Obama (2015) warned other groups, "sustainability of the organization demands creativity...by the efforts of those before and the promise of those to come". . Therefore, it is incumbent on the Issachar Generation to bridge the intergenerational divide, identifying and declaring its place and purpose as critical combinations for the militant church and prepare the NMG for leadership in an era of increasing distractions. (I Corinthians 9:25-27; Hebrews 12:1-4). The Naaman's Maid Generation

The Naaman's Maid Generation (NMG) is aptly named after a young slave girl who was visionary in instructing her master, the mighty man of valor - Naaman, on how he could be healed. This example is one of many throughout the Scriptures that exemplify the active role young people play in ministry. The NMG has difficulty digesting the idea of "*you can have the whole world, but give me Jesus*"; they are cognizant of the necessary elements in the world to complement their Christian practices. This group is energetic and poised with passion, promise, and purpose, to promote the Gospel with their unique twist. During the convention, NMG leaders were visible in youth programs and as worship leaders. The urban NMG leaders and those from larger local congregations had clear advantage of support for their leadership. This was clear even in the verbal response to such youth presentations. Consistent with the Theory of Reasoned Action (Fishbein, & Azjen, 2010) when people have knowledge, skills, and support from important or respected people in their lives, they are most likely to carry out a behavior. The VG is preparing the NMG with the knowledge, skills and opportunities to sustain the Gospel. The millennial generation is more likely to value differences in individual families and communities (whitehouse.gov, 2014). Their value system has far-reaching implications for the progression of the church. For example, the practice of wearing "dreadlocks" may not be accepted by the VG and the IG as it signifies association with the ideology of Rastafarianism, yet the NMG do not give much thought to young people who choose that hairstyle. This outlook echoes the Macedonian call for guidance in melding their perceived ecosphere with the principles of Christian ideology.

As beneficiaries of the VG's efforts, The Naaman's Maid Generation is aware of the "principles for holy living" as outlined in Scriptures (1Peter 1: 15, NKJV.org). Yet, the tide of cultural change and transformational laws influencing secular and religious dogma create tension for them, which makes it hard to survive as a generation of disciples. For example, living in a sexually pluralistic age, young people struggle to maintain established relationships with peers choosing alternative lifestyles. Additionally, others are conflicted knowing that members of their group have changed to such lifestyles and still continue to be active in the church.

Young people wonder about the terms and conditions of defending their faith, considering the skepticism shown to behaviors such as reading an "e-Bible" and the lack of "fire" in their worship. The VG is not silent about *their* journey. They tout it at every opportunity; and since most times, the Veterans are in charge of popular service sessions, the millennial generation tends to think that Sunday morning church attendance is for them, the Veterans. This criticism contributes to church -hopping in the younger group. As modern technology increases and communication is refined, instant electronic updates provide an opportunity for the younger generation to attend the most popular services of the day, wherever they might be located. Since youth of African descent are more likely to attend religious services than their peers (Manlove et al., 2008) church programs are developed with the intent to keep teenagers connected with religious institutions and away from risk behaviors (Francis & Liverpool, 2009). The trend of church hopping is worrisome to church leaders because it means questionable Christian stability (TODD, 2007). Christian stability is one factor that affects lifestyles.

However, the millennial generation has lessons for other leadership groups if acceptance is embraced. For, who would have thought that a young maid would muster the courage to direct her master to deliverance from leprosy? In the same way, the millennial generation is uniquely positioned to assist the church in areas of chronic spiritual conditions.



**Figure 1:** Intergenerational Leadership & Sustainability of the Church

#### **4. Discussion and Implications for Communication, Education, and Health**

The intent of this work was to recognize the sustainable needs of the Church of God, and understand the generational urgency of such needs, and eventually how such discovery will aid in communication, education, and health. The COG is an organized community with churches throughout Jamaica. As an interdisciplinary research team of health care providers, and educators, our goal was to identify and develop methodologies that will promote communication, education and health, and to publish such report. Since no literature of this nature has been traced, this work is preliminary for this team and for the COG as a community agency primed for research. We observed the specific context of the reported assumptions noticing the aspects that were obvious and therefore relevant to the growth and development of the church. Unknowingly, we might have missed certain aspects that were relevant or specific subgroups (such as urban or rural memberships) within the church. However, capitalizing on opportunities such as this convention, is insightful and central to improving the way communication, education, and health care are provided in Jamaica. Thousands of people with common beliefs and values support this event, and the visionary healthcare providers can seize the occasion to extract additional and timely data for Jamaican citizens.

If medical care in Jamaica is to improve in spite of the economic challenges, it means that providers must identify alternative means of healing its people. The Veterans have a wealth of knowledge on the use of herbal remedies and testimonies of success. Herbal alternative was practiced in the absence of fiscal support for conventional approaches, but with the advent of holistic medicine, a new interest in herbal remedies has resurfaced, (Marshall 2015). Perspectives have changed; therefore, qualitative exploration of how herbal remedy is practiced among church members is legitimate. This is especially informative since common herbs in Jamaica that are contrary to church beliefs are globally accepted for medical practice.

Historically, this gathering has been a focus of substantial efforts of COG leaders solely for spiritual enrichment. Gender-based sessions that focused on different areas of interest to the church in turn serendipitously attracted special age groups. Hence, much of the perspectives in this report were extracted from such group-specific sessions. Since some reasons for the weakened state of the church hinge on young people: their sexual behaviors, church-hopping and acceptance of individual differences, then scrutiny of sexual behaviors among adolescents is highly directed. The scientific community mandates an interdisciplinary approach to discovery as health, beliefs, family values, and social issues are intertwined in adolescents' behavior. Again, these approaches are not supported in the literature among Jamaican church-going youth. The silence on sexual communication among people of Caribbean descent is briefly mentioned in the literature (Hutchinson et al., 2007). However, much more work is still undone and expansion to Jamaica is useful since the country is located in an area where HIV/AIDS is still a major world health concern. Drug use and abuse has been identified in youth worldwide, however, it has not been isolated in the Jamaica COG youth.

#### **5. Implications for Education**

Delegates at the convention recognized that more than 80% of the VG grew up at a time when, for them, like many other non-church going people, secondary/tertiary education was unaffordable, inaccessible and unavailable. The COG in Jamaica was widely perceived as the denomination that was populated by

housekeepers, gardeners and artisans, with weak earning power. The IG has changed this perception because secondary/ tertiary education is now widely attainable, and educated professionals are in Church of God leadership roles. World affairs, in the context of Biblical prophecies, are invariably matched - to great effect - to cultural practices in Jamaica. The new approach to the study of the Word is raising the level of intellectualism applied to the interpretation of Scripture and is slowly resonating with the VG. "We have a group of very brilliant young people in the church, and we must support them since we are the ones who prayed that this day would come," said one speaker at the convention. So, the seemingly enlightened view is that academic achievement is, after all, part of "the things of God" and the IG is adhering to the Biblical admonition to "seek ye first the kingdom of God" (Matthew 6:33), and the new vision is part of "all things shall be added".

While the IG continues to lead the way in emphasizing the benefits of an educated congregation, they must recognize the accompanying responsibility, and as a result guide the VG in the use of modern technology that can enhance the delivery of the message and position the denomination for expansion. For years the denomination has been reporting a membership of just over 100,000 and 365 branches, spread across the 14 parishes in the island with a population of 2.8 million. Some observers argue that there is not enough emphasis on communicating the Gospel; hence the denomination is not experiencing the rapid growth that it envisioned. As the bridge between the VG and the NMG, the IG needs to lead the way in digital evangelism and virtual fellowship as the COG takes cognizance of the opportunities that have been brought about by the emerging information and communication technologies. The digital footprint of the COG must keep pace with the technological savings of the members, particularly the IG and NMG. However, in implementing new approaches to ministry, the IG needs to consider the VG, some of whom may be facing age related degenerative diseases, and the youth, some of whom may have divergent priorities as they seek to carve their own path.

## **6. Implications for Communication**

In order for the church to continue to move forward, the implications for intergenerational collaboration as it relates to communicating the Gospel must be addressed. Each group must appreciate and accept the roles of the other in evangelism - the primary method of spreading the Gospel. As such, this acceptance is largely dependent on the attitudes of the VG and IG. As seasoned warriors, these groups must understand and remain cognizant of their role in grooming the NMG for battle. In so doing, VG and IG must embrace the relevance and reality of the contemporary Christian faith. In a world where the culture toward religion has changed, many individuals no longer desire a relationship with God. Consequently, the NMG is charged with bringing the Gospel to a generation that is farthest from God than any other cohort in history. Though this challenge may seem insurmountable, we are reminded in scripture, that we 'can do all things through Christ who strengthens' (Phil. 4: 13, KJV, 2015).

Therefore, since they have this assurance, the VG and IG must lay aside the weight of pre-conceived ideas that so easily beset them and run toward the challenge of establishing innovative ways to evangelize such as text messages, short inspirational phrases, Facebook posts and the use of other social media outlets to communicate encouragement to the NMG. For instance, simple gestures such as sending scripture verses or composing a short prayer or inspirational message are ideal. Such simple strategies provide support and reassurance to the NMG and may embolden them in their witness. Further, as

church hopping has been identified as an issue among the NMG a sustained network of communication may also serve as an essential building block for improved trust and openness; thereby, solidifying nurturing relationships between VG and IG. In so doing, the older generations would be able to remain connected to the NMG and further assist their development. As such, the NMG service in kingdom building will most likely be compelled by personal choice and not by compulsion. Self-less service in the NMG will safeguard the viability and sustainable expansion of Christ's church on earth.

Since, the overall goal of evangelism is to win souls for the kingdom, to increase church attendance and harness resources, perhaps a strategic plan should include the IG and VG laboring alongside the NMG to harness the critical assets that are necessary to assist the younger generation. In so doing, the NMG can run the race that is set before them, looking to God who is the author and finisher of their faith so that the baton exchange can occur seamlessly across generations (Heb. 12: 1-2 Rom. 14:1).

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