May Visitor Explores How Camp Meetings is Changing

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“It was so entirely different than it was from the 80s,” she noted. Although Morgan appreciated the guest singer and other soloists, she missed the joy of participating in song. She also appreciated the plethora of seminars to choose from—and especially benefitted from one about how to give Bible studies—but believed the tradeoff was fewer gatherings to socialize.

The changes the Morgans noticed have been purposeful. Camp meeting is changing. How it operates. The way it looks and sounds. Even who attends. Click here to read about these changes in this month’s issue.
Seamos realistas. Los campestres están cambiando. Su forma de operar. La forma en que se ven y se escuchan. También los que asisten. Los nuevos intereses de un cuerpo de Adventistas del Séptimo Día americanos en desarrollo y constante cambio instigan cambios. Una economía creciente y decreciente influye cambio.

A pesar de todas las razones, los líderes de Asociaciones de los ocho estados que componen Columbia Union se han dado cuenta que los enfoques históricos en estas asambleas anuales—en donde los miembros se reúnen principalmente para orar, adorar, y cantar—tal vez ya no atrae a las masas. Para atender las preferencias cambiantes de nuestros miembros y hacer frente a la asistencia y participación menguentes en muchos lugares, estos líderes se pusieron a pensar, encuestaron a los miembros, y concibieron algunas soluciones eficaces.

Los planificadores se esfuerzan en crear conexiones positivas espirituales y emocionales a través de programas específicos a la edad y los intereses, la participación intergeneracional, la programación cultural, y el uso de los talentos locales. Aunque se desconocen los desafíos que traerá el futuro, estos intentos podrían ser algunas de las claves necesarias para cultivar y mantener la asistencia. Los participantes también pueden ayudar a planificar reuniones futuras dando a conocer continuamente sus necesidades por medio de encuestas. Sus respuestas ayudarán a guiar los planes futuros para que “nuestros constituyentes también tengan una voz sobre lo que se presente”, dice Heidi Shoemaker, directora de comunicación en Ohio. Lea más en inglés en las páginas 10-14.—Elizabeth Anderson
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For the Morgans, however, the one discovery that has kept them from returning is that very few of their old camp meeting friends still attend. “It could be that we have been in Potomac for over 50 years. Maybe we just see all the same people in this area that go to camp meeting,” she proposed. “We just didn’t see a lot of people that we used to see there.” She also noticed that the grandkids traveling with them had the same experience. “They didn’t seem to find friends. I remember making friends and seeing people year to year,” she said.

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The new interests of a developing and ever-changing body of Seventh-day Adventists have necessitated change. A waxing and waning economy also influences change. But, what probably most influences conference leaders around the Columbia Union Conference’s eight-state region to make alterations to camp meeting is the fact that the more traditional approach to the annual event no longer appeals to the masses. Younger members don’t emotionally resonate with the good, old-fashioned camp meeting.

To keep camp meeting relevant to the majority of members, and to tackle dwindling attendance at many locations, conference leaders have put on their thinking caps, conducted surveys and implemented a number of savvy methods to keep members coming back.
Bridging the Generation Gap

Many conferences are trying to bridge the generation gap by providing programming that appeals to all ages. Tammy Horst, communication director for the Pennsylvania Conference, reports that they are trying to jumpstart turnout with events that engage young people and families throughout the week. They also offer an interactive Sunday marketplace and interest-specific events, such as biking, hiking, canoeing/kayaking, a motorcycle ride, a children’s waterslide and a women’s tea. This year they’ll also host a general-interest concert featuring family-focused recording artists and speakers, Steve and Annie Chapman.

The Potomac Conference has made efforts to deepen their community imprint and uses the annual gathering to pool conference members’ gifts and talents to serve the New Market area. “We want residents to know that we’re here, that we see ourselves as part of the community and want to be of valuable service to them,” says Dan Jensen, communication director. So far, church members have remodeled the homes of two New Market members in need. Potomac also recently initiated a children’s program called Summer Splash, led by Barbara Manspeaker, that runs in tandem with their main meeting. Jensen says this program helps create a positive emotional experience for young attendees, many of whom are not Adventist.

Although Mountain View Conference’s camp meeting attendance remains high, Daniela Pusic, Young Adult Ministries coordinator, has a particular burden to grow young adults’ interest in the summer gathering. This year they plan to host daily meetings with young adult speakers, but will also unite age
groups by offering youth and adult activities. Mountain View young adults will serve the nearby community of Elkins, W.Va., by hosting a health expo, while the youth will host a free carwash. Pusic hopes this year’s activities will help spawn young adult groups in each conference church that will provide social, spiritual and service components.

Tapping Technology

Increases in technology are certainly altering the way information is shared during, to and from camp meeting, but might also be contributing to waning attendance. For some members, technological advances make it no longer necessary to attend camp meeting to hear prominent preachers. “They can hear them online or on TV,” states Raj Attiken, Ohio Conference president. “Until fairly recently, the only place you could hear the big-name Adventist speakers is if you went to camp meeting.”

Conversely, conferences have put technological advances to good use. New technologies help campers document camp meeting history for posterity. “We ask the kids and even the adults to text or email us photos,” reports Heidi Shoemaker, Ohio Conference communication director. “It’s amazing to see how many texts and emails have come in during camp meeting,” she adds. And, some of those images end up on their Facebook page.

Embracing Culture

In-person interaction is still an integral part of the camp meeting experience. One growing faction of the union membership that is discovering this are the numerous international cultures who’ve found sister communities inside the mid-Atlantic’s bustling cities.

For example, Allegheny East Conference’s annual gatherings continue to flourish. “We pride ourselves in being the old-fashioned camp meeting,” shares Robert Booker, conference communication director, whose attendees still meet outdoors under pavilions and tents and sleep in cabins and campers. However, he also notes that within the past 15 years, they have worked to satisfy the needs of cultural and language groups by providing places of worship for Haitian, African, East Indian and Indonesian constituents. “That has kept the camp meeting growing too,” Booker adds.

Rubén Ramos, Multilingual Ministries director for the Columbia Union, shares that the Hispanic constituency, the union’s largest subculture, continues to grow. As a result, conference planners—especially in the Allegheny West, Chesapeake, Ohio and Pennsylvania conferences—are trying to establish and build the camp meeting tradition by getting Hispanic members in these blossoming areas used to participating. Conferences with more established customs, like New Jersey and Potomac, are also meeting the demand of growing attendance by expanding the Spanish-language meetings from one to three days.

In Potomac, Hispanic members are revisiting the original purpose of camp meetings—to plant churches. This year they will branch off from their usual meeting place at Shenandoah Valley Academy in New Market, Va., to a location closer to Richmond. They hope to start a church in the
Chesterfield community, reports Jacqueline Sanchez, administrative assistant to Potomac’s director of Hispanic Ministries.

In With the New

Shoemaker in Ohio says they realized they were pulling pastoral resources from congregations and communities to serve a relatively small number of camp meeting attendees. Therefore, they agreed to try more localized “hometown camp meetings” as a way to efficiently utilize human and financial resources. They conducted these local gatherings in 2009 and 2010.

Meanwhile, the Chesapeake Conference tried one-day regional meetings from 2008 until 2010. They continued their yearly meeting on Maryland’s Eastern Shore, and added gatherings in Hagerstown and along the Baltimore-Washington corridor. Samantha Young, Chesapeake’s communication director, reports that the regional assembly in Hagerstown went well, but the Baltimore-Washington area event never materialized because of the difficulty in securing an affordable venue.

Both conferences returned to an extended meeting schedule in 2011, citing that pastors and constituents missed the single, central locations. Ohio returned to a full week, with key changes: their event is now entirely pastor planned, led and organized, and features talent and program participants from their own territory, which helps keep their budget expenditures down. Shoemaker says she has noticed increased attendance. “It’s still not where camp meetings were in their heyday, but we’re doing it on a budget, and we’re getting a whole new demographic of people,” she shares. “We focus on families, we focus on intergenerational worship, we try to have activities that bring all generations together and we’ve been really pleased with the results.”

Chesapeake also revamped their event to give it a fresh feel, and now calls the five-day meeting “The
Gathering.” Young notes that “the new format meets a need we didn’t anticipate. For church members who worship in smaller, rural congregations, camp meeting provides a sense of belonging to a larger movement.” While the event is back as a three-year trial, Young says that so far it has been a success.

There has also been an emergence of specialty camp meetings around the North American Division, including cowboy camp meeting, singles camp meeting and Ohio Conference’s “Rev it Up!” Motorcycle Camp Meeting. Tom Hughes, pastor of the Newark (Ohio) church, organizes and leads it every year and draws enthusiasts from around the union and beyond.

Conferences will no doubt need to continue finding ways to keep camp meeting relevant as the church’s membership steadily transforms, but attendees can help shape the future of these gatherings by making their needs and interests known. As Shoemaker suggests, “This way our constituents also have a voice on what is presented.”

7 Little-Known Facts About Camp Meeting’s Past

1. Adventists adopted camp meeting from the Wesley movement (which created the Methodist Church) and the Campbellite movement (which created the Christian Church Disciples of Christ).

2. Frontier Americans would camp in a mountain meadow using whatever primitive shelters they could build, a tradition sometimes called the “brush arbor” camp meeting. Early Adventists were familiar with this tradition and utilized it along with holding meetings in churches and homes.

3. From the 1850s into the 1920s, the Adventist Church used big-tent camp meetings primarily as evangelistic events.

4. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a yearly conference constituency meeting was often held as part of camp meeting. Now conferences host their own constituency sessions every four or five years.

5. In the 1950s, camp meeting attendees stayed in rows of tents, with a semipermanent cooking shelter placed every three to four rows. County fire marshals stopped approving permits for tents starting in the 1970s.

6. Until the 1970s, it was normal for pastors to spend a week before and after camp meeting to set up and take down tents, but it kept the spiritual leaders away from their constituents for numerous Sabbaths. This created a negative impact on congregations.

7. Camp meeting used to be the main setting for pastoral ordination services, which are now typically conducted by the local churches.

—Monte Sahlin, Ohio Conference’s director of research and special projects