LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

**The Role of Ministry Structure and Student Ministry Leadership in Retaining Students in Church Following High School Graduation**

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to

the Faculty of the Liberty University School of Divinity

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

by

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT
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The thesis of this project is to validate the correlations between the staff's role, leadership development, ministry structure, staff tenure and student development as they relate to retention of students in the local church after high school. Aspects considered include staff role, leadership development, and student development. Staff role covers the tenure of the pastoral staff, unified vision, resources, and congregational support. Leadership development includes enlisting, equipping, encouraging, and evaluating workers. Student development includes evangelism, education, encouragement, and evaluation.

Many churches lack a clear plan for students. Untrained volunteers often lead students, or an untrained and inexperienced person is hired to lead the ministry. Utilizing an untrained volunteer student leader to fill a position or hiring someone who is untrained and inexperienced may negatively impact students. Students may not receive the foundational instruction needed for a lifelong pursuit of Christ. The long-term goal of this project is to develop resources to assist churches in building student ministry teams and structures which will keep students connected to the local church after high school.

Student ministry should impact students in their cultural setting and adapt to a changing world. Lifelong followers of Christ should be discipled to be on mission for kingdom multiplication and growth. A case study of Cross Lanes Baptist Church is the focus of the project; it includes surveys of former students, as well as current and former adult student ministry leaders. Other published studies will be utilized for comparison.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my wife Shanna and our children, Avery (Avery was also a great help in editing my project), Aidan, and Ace for their unending support, encouragement, and participation in serving Jesus at Cross Lanes Baptist Church. Throughout our marriage, Shanna's sacrifice and devotion to Christ has made many things that seemed unlikely become reality.

I am grateful for a grandmother who prayed and a God who listened. My family has been changed through the forgiveness found in Christ alone. I am grateful for parents who continue to serve in the church and a brother who serves as a pastor. Both our families have been eternally impacted by the faithfulness of our grandmother and parents.

I would like to thank Dr. Seth Polk for being my pastor, friend, and mentor for almost two decades. I would also like to thank Dr. Wheeler for his unwavering support in education and ministry and Dr. Richard Ross for his continued faithfulness to Christ in his quest to introduce students to King Jesus.

Also, I am grateful to God for allowing me to serve at an amazing church. So many at Cross Lanes Baptist Church have helped me through this process. The amazing support and faithfulness of CLBC is beyond anything I ever imagined. I will forever be grateful for the love and support given to my family on a daily basis from our CLBC family.

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## Abbreviations

CLBC          *Cross Lanes Baptist Church*

NSYR          *National Study of Youth and Religion*

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In order for the church to thrive, it is essential that students exhibit a lifelong pursuit of Jesus Christ and involvement in His church. Students are a vital part of the church, but they are leaving the church at an alarming rate. If churches will consider and discover the best strategies for connecting students to a lifelong commitment to Christ, the results will be evident. Various adjustments to student ministry have been made over the past decade, but the model does not seem to be much different than it was before. Simply involving parents will not be enough to change the current trend, nor will having mentor-type opportunities alone. There must be a more comprehensive consideration concerning students leaving the church. This study considers the correlation between the staff's role, leadership development, ministry structure, staff tenure and student development as it relates to retention of students in the local church after high school.

## Ministry Context

Cross Lanes Baptist Church (CLBC) was planted in 1959 with a small number of families and has continued to grow as an active and healthy local church ever since. The steadiest pattern of growth in the history of the church occurred after 2003 when the current lead pastor began serving at CLBC in March of 2003. This author began serving as student pastor in September of 2003.

Throughout the 1990s into the early 2000s, the church experienced patterns of growth and decline. Although, the growth was sizable at times, it was not sustained. In 2003, a change in leadership did not immediately produce growth, but it did provide a groundwork for stability. The church started to experience growth by the end of 2004, but it was not until 2006 that the

student ministry significantly increased in size. Growth coincided with the change in the model of having lay leaders responsible for specific areas of ministry within the student ministry.

Longer tenures provide opportunities not afforded staff members who serve in short tenures. Some of the benefits of a long tenure include the ability to build trust among church leaders, create relationships with parents and students, increase community involvement and development of leaders, as well as establish long-lasting relationships between students and adult leaders. On the other hand, complacency and lack of intentionality can be problematic in a long tenure. While CLBC has experienced a large number of students staying committed to a church after graduation, church attrition is still enough of an issue to warrant examination of the ministry. Based on a concern regarding churched students becoming unchurched in college, this author realized a lack of intentionality regarding students who graduated from the church's student ministry. The current trends on the subject and the reality of the problem within the ministry of CLBC was the catalyst for the project.

The student ministry at CLBC has a group of over thirty committed adult volunteers who regularly serve. In fact, many volunteers have served in the student ministry for more than ten years. Consistency has helped leaders remain connected to students after completing high school. Each volunteer attends leadership training events that are held annually for those serving in the student ministry. The combination of long-term commitment and adequate training has equipped the student ministry to make a lasting impact in the lives of students.

In addition to long-term volunteers, CLBC has an active mission ministry, giving students opportunities to serve in the community, state, and around the world. Through CLBC, students are exposed to church planting and career missionaries. Mission teams are comprised of a mixture of adults and students according to the location and scope of the mission opportunity.

Mission opportunities are not classified as "youth" mission opportunities. Rather, students are treated as equals and often have their own leadership roles. The integration of students into the life of the church has proven to be a positive factor in retaining students in the church.

## Statement of the Problem

Southern Baptist churches are experiencing an ongoing decline in reaching people for Jesus. According to the *Baptist Press*, The Southern Baptist Convention reported 235,748 baptisms in 2019.[1] That number shows a drop when compared to 2003, a year in which the Southern Baptist Convention recorded 387,947 baptisms. In short, in 15 years, we have seen a concerning decline of over 141,000.[2] The weakness in evangelism coupled with young people leaving the church should cause alarm among believers.

The Barna Group states, "Less than one out of every four born again Christians (23%) embraced Christ after their twenty-first birthday. Barna noted that these figures are consistent with similar studies it has conducted during the past twenty years."[3] With over 75% of Christians becoming followers of Christ before the age of 21, it is of great concern to the church that many teens leave the church after high school. Thom and Sam Rainer report, "Over two-thirds of youth attending Protestant churches stop attending church between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two."[4] Trends and patterns in student ministry are essential considerations for student ministry

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[1] Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the 2019 Southern Baptist Convention,* accessed July 20, 2020, online at: http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC_Annual_2019.pdf.

[2] Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention, *Annual of the 2005 Southern Baptist Convention,* accessed July 20, 2020, online at: http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/annuals/SBC_Annual_2005.pdf.

[3] Barna Group, "Evangelism Is Most Effective Among Kids," accessed 7 March 2019, https://www.barna.com/research/evangelism-is-most-effective-among-kids/.

[4] Thom S. Rainer and Sam Rainer III, *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2008), 178.

leaders. According to a 2018 LifeWay Research study, "66 percent of students who were active in their church during high school no longer remained active in the church between ages 18-22."[5] The departure of students from church will likely have negative long-term consequences for their faith and the future of the church. Students need to learn that the Bible is true and authoritative as they go through the ministries of the local church.

Something must be done to keep students engaged during the college years and beyond. The potential impact on the future of the church is especially troubling. Formative teaching is missed and the years spent away from the church seem to impact beliefs in a negative way. In a 2019 article for *Gallup*, Jeffery Jones writes, "The past 20 years have seen an acceleration in the drop-off, with a 20-percentage-point decline since 1999 and more than half of that change occurring since the start of the current decade."[6] This timeframe coincides with the current stated problem. Losing students after high school, even if they return as adults, creates a crisis in leadership in the local church. Losing students for several years affects biblical knowledge, worldview, commitment and evangelism. These issues will make it more unlikely that students will return. If the exodus continues among young people, it will inflict irreparable damage to the church.

In recent years, there has been a focus on the departure of previously-churched students once they graduate from high school. Thom Rainer, the former President and CEO of LifeWay, has done a lot of work to address the issue. Decreasing church attendance among the young 20s demographic and a continued decline in baptisms among teenagers are two areas that have

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[5] Ben Trueblood, *Within Reach: The Power of Small Changes in Keeping Students Connected* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2018), 12.

[6] Jeffrey Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Down Sharply in Past Two Decades," accessed September 8, 2019, https://news.gallup.com/poll/248837/church-membership-down-sharply-past-two-decades.aspx.

helped identify that the church has a problem, and that student ministry contributes to the problem. This study will attempt to establish a direct connection between students leaving the church and the staff role, leadership development, and student development in the local church.

Current research is being conducted to determine why students are leaving the church. As a result of the data collected, ideas are emerging about how to change the problem the church is facing today. Many books offering solutions cite the 2002 National Survey of Youth and Religion presented by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.[7] The study was published over 18 years ago, and there has not been a significant positive change in the rate of students leaving the church after high school, indicating that there is likely something missing from the proposed solutions.

There are a lot of good ideas about how to keep students from leaving the church after high school, but they are ineffective apart from a more comprehensive effort. *Simple Student Ministry* addresses discipleship deficiencies in many churches and the need for students to be discipled.[8] In *The Millennials,* Thom and Jess Rainer address the discontentment of those in their late teens and early twenties with the traditional church. They write, "Millennial Christians will reject churches that tend to view the community as little more than a population pool from which growth in attendance and budget can come. But they will embrace churches that teach members to love the community."[9] The church must make changes that will provide young adults true community.

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[7] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

[8] Eric Geiger and Jeff Borton, *Simple Student Ministry: A Clear Process for Strategic Youth Discipleship* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009).

[9] Thom S. Rainer and Jess W. Rainer, *The Millennials* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 261.

The predominant strategy to correct the problem is typically a program of some sort. Programs can provide consistency and direction, but they must guide students toward a lifelong commitment to Christ. When programs are used to attract students, unless there is a direct connection to God's Word, only programs will keep students. Unfortunately for the church, there is no way to compete with the ever-changing preferences of young adults or the ever-changing climate of the culture. Preferences are subject to change. The world offers all sorts of activities and programs. A church which connects people to programs alone will fail.

In *Transforming Student Ministry,* Richard Ross, co-founder of "True Love Waits," compiled information about the great need for adults in the church to connect with students and the need for parents to engage their children.[10] A growing number of groups are adopting his philosophy. In *Student Ministry and the Supremacy of Christ,* Ross calls for a paradigm shift concerning student ministry.[11] Ross suggests a move away from the student pastor fulfilling every role in the student ministry towards a model involving many adults in carrying out the responsibilities of the student ministry.[12]

Typically, churches put the responsibility of the student ministry on the student pastor. In many cases, student pastors are inexperienced and inadequately trained, especially in smaller churches. There is insufficient training in theological education on the importance of building a team to share the responsibility of the student ministry. Shared leadership has many benefits and can increase the impact a church can have concerning students. When leadership is shared, more people are invested in the student ministry, thereby helping it to be more efficient and more effective. Shared leadership gives responsibility to those who have committed to be a part of the

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[10] Richard Ross, ed., *Transforming Student Ministry* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2005), 57-59.

[11] Richard Ross, *Student Ministry and the Supremacy of Christ* (Bloomington, IN: CrossBooks, 2009), 1.

[12] Ibid., 3.

student ministry and allows the church to have a more significant influence on the lives of students. In sharing leadership, the student pastor no longer has to shoulder all of the responsibilities of a student ministry, allowing for more focused attention on building strong disciples.

In the research about students leaving the church, there seems to be little consideration about how the structure of the student ministry impacts the issue. Within the idea of the importance of ministry structure is the consideration of staff and leader tenure. There is not much available information on the average tenure of student pastors, although an abundance of information about creating a student ministry and how to build a student ministry is available. A *Youth Specialties* survey found that, "on average, a youth leader spends just over three years in one position and about five and a half years at a church."[13] Such short tenures do not allow for true, effective change to take place in a student ministry.

Considering the research on the issue, it is unlikely a few program changes or adjustments to ministry structure could be well-implemented if the student pastor is in place for less than five years. However, a ministry structure led by long-tenured staff has not been presented as a significant factor in potential solutions to the issue of students leaving the church. Ministry structure, including staff and leader tenure, has not been adequately researched as an essential factor in the significant problem facing student ministry today.

## Purpose Statement

The purpose of this project is to examine the impact ministry structure and tenures of the pastoral staff and volunteer workers have on students staying connected to the church after high

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[13] Youth Specialties, "7 Facts About the State of Youth Ministry," accessed February 7, 2019, https://youthspecialties.com/blog/7-facts-state-youth-ministry/.

school. Having served at CLBC for over 17 years, alarming patterns have been observed of students straying from church after graduation, which has exposed weaknesses in the CLBC model. For example, in the past there was no intentionality to engage and encourage college students to stay connected to the local church after graduation. Additionally, there were few options or expectations for students to teach and lead ministry opportunities. Although there were mission opportunities, these tended to engage a smaller group of students and were not a reflection of the entire group. As many students attended college away from home and struggled to find a local church on their college campus they became disconnected from the church. Upon deeper consideration of the issues and how to address them, it became apparent that more effort needed to be applied towards staying connected with students after they graduated high school.

**Thesis Statement**

The thesis of this project is to validate the correlations between the staff's role, leadership development, ministry structure, staff tenure and student development as they relate to retention of students in the local church after high school. Effective solutions to the problem of students leaving the church after high school are few. Although research has posed some solutions, they are often similar ideas within a relatively small scope. Given the complexity of both people and churches, solutions to this issue should cover every area of ministry.

One idea centers on discipleship and family ministry. While these are important concerns they are not enough. Additionally, much of the literature on the subject goes back to the student pastor. Most often the tenure of student pastors is low. When churches frequently change leadership for student ministry it does not allow for relationships with families to form and it interrupts discipleship. Just as relationships form, leadership often changes. Therefore, a more holistic approach to the problem must be adopted.

**Basic Assumptions**

A committed team of volunteers is essential for effectively developing students. Committed adults focused on building relationships and teaching the truth of Scripture are important. Allowing students to have leadership roles and share the responsibility of discipling other students is also a factor. Engaging parents is important in order to convey the necessity of students regularly attending church. As parents are engaged they understand the importance of learning and being trained in the Bible. Attendance affects discipleship. Students who are not as consistent in attending church typically are not as engaged in ministry; feeling unconnected, many easily drift away from the church. Having a well-structured team leading students takes the pressure off of the student pastor. Ministries that focus on one person are limited and doomed to fail at their departure. Consistency in leadership is important, as are the tenures of the student pastor and the student leaders.

When the church engages students as a part of the church and not as a separate group it helps students stay engaged in church. Involving students in community outreach and global missions is necessary in keeping them connected to the church long term. Too often students feel as though they serve no real purpose in the church as a whole. It is important that students have ownership in the church even as a teenager.

**Statement of Limitations**

Churches implement student ministry in various ways. Considering cultural differences throughout the United States, there is no a one-size fits all model. A 2014 Barna Group study assessed that since 2004, "The number of adults who are unchurched has increased by more than

30%."[14] The change of priorities concerning church attendance has significantly impacted teenagers and young adults. Combined with the change of priorities concerning church attendance, the church has also not yet figured out how to keep up with the increased diversity of the United States. Churches continue to struggle to find solutions for reaching people in increasingly diverse demographic areas.

With the changing cultural landscape and the many distractions facing young people today, the church must adjust their approach surrounding student ministry to keep young adults engaged in the church after high school. This study is not intended to be the sole solution to the problem the church is experiencing concerning the exodus of students. Rather, it seeks to demonstrate that a significant part of the solution has been overlooked. All churches will not have a staff person specifically dedicated to student ministry, and this reality must also be factored into the solution.

Leaders seeking an easy solution to the problem of students leaving will not benefit from this project. Without dedication to Scripture and a desire to reach students with the Gospel, these findings will not prove helpful. The church has long championed the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20: "Jesus came near and said to them, 'All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"[15] Often in student ministry the Great Commandment is underemphasized. The Pharisees questioned Jesus in Matt. 22:35-40:

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[14] "10 Facts About America's Churchless," *Barna.com*, (December 10, 2014,), Accessed 7 February 2019.

[15] All Scripture references are quoted from the *Christian Standard Bible* (2017), unless otherwise noted.

> And one of them, an expert in the law, asked a question to test him: "Teacher, which command in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."

Scripture is clear, God requires self-denial and surrender of authority from followers of Jesus. Putting the purpose of God above one's own desire is not a suggestion but a command. Unfortunately, this is not always a focus of the church, especially in student ministry.

## Terms

The terms "student ministry" and "students" will refer to students in grades 6 through 12. The term "student ministry" will be interchangeable with "youth ministry." Student ministry is typically a designated ministry for the training of teenagers. Generally, you will find age appropriate games, training, and events to target the middle and high school audiences. Often students are separated from the church in almost every way; the student ministry most often looks nothing like any other part of the church. A distinction is made between adult leaders and students who are leaders. The word "missional" will be understood to mean a well-rounded ministry or person focusing on both discipleship and missions. Dr. Michael Milton writes in *Christianity Today*, "A missional church is an ecclesial community of Word, Sacrament, and Prayer where pastoral staff, officers, and members are united in their commitment to the Gospel-driven practice of the Great Commission of Jesus Christ in every area of ministry and life."[16]

In order for a student ministry to be missional the church must adapt to its community. The church must have a presence outside of the church campus. Many churches do not have the

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[16] Dr. Michael A Milton, "What Does it Really Mean for a Church to Be '"Missional'?" Is it Important?" *Christianity Today*, accessed July 16, 2020, https://www.christianity.com/wiki/church/what-does-it-really-mean-for-a-church-to-be-missional-is-it-important.html.

right perspective when it comes to their communities. In, *Breaking the Missional Code*, Ed

Stetzer explains the issue,

> For many, the idea that there is a missional code is odd. After all, they think, *This is not a mission field*. This may explain the way many church leaders distinguish evangelism from missions: evangelism takes place near us; missions take place overseas. Some churches are "far-thinking" and "far-reaching" about international missions but fail to reach the people in the shadows of their own steeples. This is because North America is often not seen as a mission field, or it is seen as a "reached" field only in need of an evangelism strategy. We tend to think that true missional engagement is not necessary in our paganized, secularized, spiritualized North American culture.[17]

The idea of missions is purposeful. Mission opportunities for the local church should be planned

with purpose. In order for a student ministry to be missional it must operate with a clear biblical

purpose. It must see the community as a mission field and adapt to impact the community.

A relatively new descriptor pertaining to student ministry is "family ministry." Family

ministry has a direct correlation to a shifting focus in the local church relating to student

ministry, but often family ministry is not clearly defined. Some churches include children from

the nursery all the way through high school; others keep the traditional 6th grade through 12th

grade model while adding more family events and parenting education into the ministry. While

there is no agreed-upon definition, the idea is to focus on the church being an extension of the

home and an assistant to parents in guiding their children spiritually, instead of building the

student ministry on the personality of the student pastor alone.

Tenure is a little studied area of ministry. There are few records available in the Southern

Baptist Convention concerning tenure. Student pastors seem to cycle through churches after only

a short time. Students often have multiple student pastors during their middle and high school

years. The lack of continuity in discipleship and evangelism negatively affects student ministry,

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[17] Ed Stetzer and David Putman, *Breaking the Missional Code: Your Church Can Become a Missionary in Your Community* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 2.

as well as connections between students and adults. When churches have long tenured pastors, the consistency creates trust with the congregation and community. In *Forty Years in the Same Pulpit*, Chevis Horne writes,

> Long pastorates also help pastors extend their ministry beyond the limits of their churches into the life of the community. If it takes churches time to know and trust pastors, it takes communities even longer. Pastors must build trusting relationships with the community if they are to serve it in an effective way.
>
> Every pastor should know that his or her church is not an isolated institution. It is a part of the community and draws heavily upon its life and resources. A pastor owes a debt to the community and should be eager to pay it; long tenure will enable this.[18]

The reputation of a student pastor in a community can greatly impact the student ministry of a church. The tenure of student pastors generally has a direct impact on the experience students have in the church. It seems unlikely that much discipleship can take place within a short timeframe. Without an influence in the community or a substantial relationship with students, it seems unlikely that a short-tenured student pastor will contribute to keeping students connected to the church.

It is also important to have consistency in adult leadership among students. The development of impactful relationships takes time. Students need to see consistency and know that those who are leading are not just filling a vacancy, but have a desire to build relationships with students. It is helpful to the student pastor to ensure the student ministry's message is clear and consistent. Having consistent leadership helps the student pastor develop a plan to engage students. It also creates a place of stability for students.

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[18] Chevis F. Horne, *Forty Years in the Same Pulpit* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Inc., 1995), 3.

**Theoretical Basis**

Many have adopted the newest philosophy of student ministry, family ministry. There are large conferences based on the idea of having a student ministry focused on families. The traditional style, condemned by most of the new works on family ministry, was one of isolation. The traditional style of student ministry had elaborate events and youth-specific meetings that typically separated students from the rest of the church. These meetings often excluded most adults. The youth would meet, and the planning and programming would be focused on their comfort and entertainment.

In *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, Mark DeVries outlines the perils of the traditional youth ministry and its isolationism as the culprit for making uncommitted and unprepared teens.[19] He explains the need to transition to a family ministry in order to address the problems of modern student ministry. DeVries writes, "We can find the primary cause of the current crisis in youth ministry in the ways that our culture and our churches have systematically isolated young people from the very relationships that are most likely to lead them to maturity."[20] Some books on keeping students connected with the church after student ministry take the same approach of a progression to a more inclusive style of ministry. The transition from age-segregated events and entertainment-driven ministry for teens is a current trend in student ministry. Unfortunately, some conclude that a new program will simply change the problem in student ministry. Philosophies of ministry vary and need to be adaptable, but choosing a particular model may or may not work in a given situation. With the continued breakdown of the family, it can be difficult for students to understand the concept of family ministry. Without clear direction on

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[19] Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*.

[20] Ibid., 36.

building a student ministry team to engage students, there will not be a measurable difference in commitment from students after high school graduation.

There are not many written resources about the biblical call to student ministry. In his new book, *Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, Richard Ross devotes an entire chapter to the biblical rationale for Youth Ministry. He writes, "The contemporary youth pastor is consistent with a New Testament ecclesiology."[21] Ross points to examples in Scripture where young people were being trained in the things of God. For example, during the exile, the Israelites built schools to teach children the Torah. Samuel served in the temple and started leading at a young age. Many believe most of the disciples were teenagers when they were called by Jesus. Given the impact of the disciples on Christianity and the spreading of the Gospel throughout the world, it is important to have well-trained teenagers. The church cannot accomplish its mission of taking the Gospel to the lost without teenagers. Teenagers possess the ability and have the most opportunity to reach their community given our education system. Students are able to impact peers with the Gospel through years of building relationships.

Paul, as a leader in the church, mentored Timothy. Timothy was instructed by Paul not to allow people to make his age an issue. Paul writes in 1 Timothy 4:12 "Don't let anyone despise your youth, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity." The Scripture is clear that believers are empowered through the Holy Spirit. Jesus said in Acts 1:8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." This quote should remove the apprehension of having teenagers in church leadership. In dealing with teenagers,

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[21] Richard Ross, *Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime* (Fort Worth: Seminary Hill Press, 2017), 59.

churches must take their example from the Scripture and prepare students to impact the world with the Gospel.

There are some who have joined the Family Ministry model who call for the abolition of student ministry. Concerning this faction, Richard Ross writes, "Those leaders tend to believe that a teenager's total church life should be experienced only with his or her family."[22] Many of the works about family ministry stop short of calling for the abolition of student ministry, but in many ways, they have a similar message as those who say families should not ever be separated in ministry. Family ministry may contribute to the problem surrounding students considering that they rarely receive age-appropriate training in theology nor are they working and serving among their peer group.

Some in the field of student ministry theorize that changing the programs of a ministry, or styles of a ministry will result in an improvement of the rate of students leaving the church. This project considers ministry structure in combination with several other components that should be a part of every student ministry. More robust solutions are needed to change the culture of the church concerning students. For a student ministry to truly equip teenagers, it must have biblically-solid adult leaders who are both well-trained and organized. A team of leaders should be established, with each member having a specific responsibility concerning the student ministry. The structure allows the student pastor the ability to more efficiently and effectively delegate responsibilities.

In order for a student ministry to equip teenagers meaningfully, students should be trained with the expectation of leading. One of the most common problems among students after graduation is the lack of training concerning teaching and leading. Giving students the

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[22] Ross, *Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, 53.

opportunity to learn and grow as leaders is critical to the development of a student ministry that will keep them connected to the church after graduation. Engaging families is essential in student ministry, but there is still a need for age-appropriate instruction for teenagers. The student ministry should offer help as it relates to parenting and connecting with teenagers.

In order for a student ministry to equip teenagers, parents need to understand that they are the primary teachers as it relates to God; the student ministry exists to assist them along the way as they connect their student to a life of serving Jesus. Families need to serve together in the local church, allowing students to observe the commitment and example of their parents.

Another key component in equipping teenagers in student ministry is their integration into the church as a whole. Historically it has been the pattern of the church to separate youth from the rest of the church. In doing so, this approach puts all of the responsibilities on the student pastor. Ross considers the approach of segregating students as harmful to a lasting connection to the church. He writes, "But the research is clear. On average, teenagers who spend six years mostly with other teenagers do not stay connected to the church or walk in faith the rest of their lives."[23]

The model at CLBC is to engage adults of all ages with the student ministry. Mission Teams are often made up of team members with ages ranging from 10 to 60 years. Senior adults actively participate in student ministry events and outreach opportunities. Senior adult involvement has proven to be an asset in fostering more relationships outside of the typical teenage peer group. The inclusion of older adults infuses the student ministry with a measure of wisdom, maturity, and respect that could not be obtained in a separate ministry.

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[23] Ross, *Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, 150.

**Statement of Methodology**

The applied research for this project has two subject groups. Group one is comprised of former students over the age of 18 who attended Cross Lanes Baptist Church while in middle or high school. Group two is made up of current and former volunteer leaders who served in the student ministry at CLBC after 2004. The main concern of the research is to gauge the continued connection to a local church after high school graduation. Former CLBC students were asked about church involvement during the first four years following high school graduation, as well as their present situation as it relates to church involvement. Current and past adult leaders were asked about their understanding of their work and how they felt about the expectations provided. They were asked if they felt adequately equipped to carry out the expectations given.

The student survey was used to gauge the percentage of students from CLBC who are still connected to a local church after graduating high school. Several questions were used to assess the involvement of each student while at CLBC in order to correlate that information to their current status as it relates to the local church. The information gathered provides indicators of what is consistent with students who stay connected with the church after high school. The information was gathered through contacting past students with surveys and asking them to contact other students who have participated in the student ministry at CLBC.

The research regarding volunteer leaders who have served at CLBC connects the length of serving in a particular student ministry with the retention of students after high school. The survey was utilized to understand more fully the engagement and usefulness of consistent leadership with students. Understanding if leaders are continuing to connect with students after graduation is significant in understanding what it takes to keep students engaged in the local

church. Gauging the importance of long-term commitments from adult leaders is also a great asset when formulating a plan to keep students engaged. Adult leadership is necessary in student ministry; unfortunately, adults are sometimes utilized in student ministry just to satisfy an understood ratio for safety. Without adults genuinely engaged in the lives of students, a lasting commitment by students to the church is unlikely. Adult leaders must have proper training and clear expectations to make a difference in the lives of students.

**Summary**

Given the increasing amount of focus on the problem surrounding the exodus of students from the church, a project like this one is necessary. The local church must understand its role related to students, not only during middle school and high school but also during their college years. Too often the solutions offered are merely self-promoting materials with a narrow scope. Correcting the complex problem of student attrition is impossible to tackle with such a narrow focus.

The issue surrounding students leaving the church has many layers. A few changes in programming and a better connection to families will not solve all problems. Many students come from broken homes; also, it is becoming more likely that the majority of them do not live with both of their biological parents. The culture is changing rapidly and the church needs to better understand youth culture and the need to build lasting relationships. It will take time and resources for the church to make the necessary changes to impact the outcome. Given the long commitment of many adult leaders serving at CLBC, it has been possible to see connections which influence involvement for students following high school. Having students who attended CLBC in high school return after college and connect in serving has also been helpful in seeing

the importance of a continued connection after high school. Making lifelong connections with

students is a key part of keeping students connected to the church after high school.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Foundational Problem Data

*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* by Christian

Smith and Melinda Denton delves into the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR).[24] [25]

The NSYR is the catalyst for much of the current conversation about teens and spirituality and is

often cited for arousing discussions about connections between the church and the retention of

young people after high school. The NSYR studied young people aged 13 to 17 years, with the

goal of following up with the same questions with respondents as ages 18 to 23. Numerous

books concerning teens and the church use the NSYR to identify current problems in the church

concerning teens. Smith and Denton break down the findings of the NSYR and point out major

differences between religious and non-religious teens. Their research has spurred a conversation

about how to reach students for over a decade. Smith and Denton conclude,

> Religious congregations and other religious organizations are uniquely positioned in the
> array of social institutions operating in the United States to embrace youth, to connect
> with adolescents, to strengthen ties between adults and teenagers. This could only be
> good for all involved. But it will not happen automatically. It will require intentionality
> and investment.[26]

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[24] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Christian Smith, *National Study of Youth and Religion*, last accessed July 20, 2020, https://youthandreligion.nd.edu.

[25] Christian Smith, *National Study of Youth and Religion*, last accessed July 20, 2020, https://youthandreligion.nd.edu.

[26] Ibid., 264

*Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* is a follow up to *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*.[27] [28] Using the same subjects from the 2005 NSYR, *Souls in Transition* compiles additional data in order to have a better understanding of the impact of religious beliefs on commitment to the church. The exploration of data revealed that highly religious teenagers, with lower parental religiousness, doubts about faith, infrequent personal devotion, and fewer religious experiences were more likely to abandon religion.[29] Strong parental involvement in religious things and connections to others in a religious congregation were two of the main contributing factors for continued involvement in religious things from the subjects studied. Socialization into religion by parents and adults within a religious congregation is a main factor in students staying engaged in religion. Smith and Snell write,

> First are individual family households, where parents predictably do the primary socializing. Second are individual religious congregations, where other adults can exert socializing influences on youth. If nothing else, what the findings of this book clearly show is that for better or worse, these are two crucial contexts of youth religious formation in the United States. If formation in faith does not happen there, it will—with rare exceptions—not happen anywhere.[30]

The church must do well in training adults and integrating young people into the life of the church.

*Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* written by the Barna Group and the 360 Impact Group explains that society is ever-changing as it relates to

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[27] Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

[28] Smith and Denton *Soul Searching.*

[29] Smith and Snell, *Souls in Transition*, 229.

[30] Ibid., 286.

biblical relevance.[31] A study concerning Gen Z reported, "The percentage of people whose beliefs qualify them for a biblical worldview declines in each successively younger generation: 10 percent of Boomers, 7 percent of Gen X and 6 percent of Millennials have a biblical worldview, compared to only 4 percent of Gen Z."[32] In short, it is increasingly difficult to get students engaged in church. When surveyed, 79% of students who identify as engaged with the church say church attendance is important, as opposed to 25% of students identified as unengaged church goers. Considering the trends of young people in America, it is important to discover how the church can better retain students after high school.

David Kinnaman's *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* highlights research showing that almost 60% of young adults, who were once regular attenders, have dropped out of church.[33] The focus of the work is to examine those who were involved in church during their teenage years. Kinnaman points to shallow teaching and the lack of meaningful relationships with adults in the church as the main causes of attrition. There is also a perception among young adults that churches are not accepting enough of those who live outside the biblical lifestyle and are unsafe places to share doubts. Kinnaman writes,

> The next generation is growing up in a culture in which the authority of the Christian community and obedience to Scripture are much less present in their developmental experiences. Mosaic Christians face an environment in which Christianity's authority has been greatly diminished in both obvious and subtle ways.[34]

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[31] Barna Group and 360 Impact Group, *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* (USA: Barna Group , 2018), 25.

[32] Ibid., 61

[33] David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book, 2011), 23.

[34] Ibid., 51.

Young adults are now influenced in different ways than any generation before because of access

to social media. Kinnaman expresses concerns with the younger generation and the lack of a

biblical worldview because their culture is changing quickly. He states,

> Simply put, technology is fueling the rapid pace of change and the disconnection between the past and the future. The Internet and digital tools are at the root of a massive disruption between how previous generations relate, work, think, and worship and how Mosaics (and, to some extent, Busters) do these activities.[35]

*Transforming Student Ministry* by Richard Ross exposes the problems the church is

experiencing concerning young adults leaving the church. He writes,

> Once the teenager graduates and moves beyond the social "bubble" of the youth group, his or her attitude about religion likely will swing back toward the basic values of his elders. While the youth group may have provided a wonderful social environment with other students, it may not have provided the kind of true spiritual nurture that sustains a student outside the immediate context of the youth group.[36]

The truth of young adults leaving the church after high school is difficult to ignore. Ross offers

suggestions to curb the departure from the church among young adults. The content largely deals

with the need of parents to better engage spiritually with their children.

*The Millennials: Connecting to America's Largest Generation*, also explores the changes

in attitudes concerning religion.[37] The book provides an in-depth look at the millennial

generation and their views on religion and life. Jess Rainer writes, "While only one out of three

Millennials attend worship services regularly, only one out of five is involved with a small-group

Bible study. Millennials are no longer choosing to identify themselves with religion. Most of my

generation has decided to remain content with calling themselves spiritual."[38] Their research

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[35] Kinnaman*, You Lost Me*, 41.

[36] Ross, *Transforming Student Ministry*, 63.

[37] Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*.

[38] Ibid.*,* 47.

concerning what is needed to retain students in the church affirmed what many others have

concluded: that parents are key influencers in the lives of their children. The authors write,

> We cannot overstate how important relationships are in motivating this generation. We asked the open-ended question, "What is really important in your life?" The respondents could have listed any number of choices. The results are amazing.
>
> "Family" was the overwhelming response, noted by 61 percent of the Millennials. "Friends" was a distant second at 25 percent. And, much to our surprise, no other response was greater than 17 percent.[39]

## The Role of Relationships in Solving the Problem

In *Student Ministry and the Supremacy of Christ*, Richard Ross focuses on a solution

concerning young adults leaving the faith, rather than just the problem.[40] Ross calls for a

paradigm change as it relates to student ministry. He explains,

> Teenagers who experience church in a rich web of intergenerational relationships are more likely to love and worship the Father, increasingly embrace the full supremacy of the Son, invite Christ to live His life through them, and join Him in making disciples among all peoples . . . It is time for change.[41]

It is important for students to be connected to multiple adults in the church family. In the old

paradigm the student pastor had all the responsibility. The new paradigm calls for a team

approach where the student pastor facilitates multiple adults engaging in the student ministry. As

students are mentored by adults, the students can begin having responsibility in ministry. One

challenge in having many skilled leaders is allowing students to become passive learners. A team

of adults leading a ministry is not enough. The adult leaders must intentionally mentor students

and develop active learners who are fully engaged in ministry. Ross writes, "Students who have

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[39] Rainer and Rainer, *The Millennials*, 104.

[40] Richard Ross, *Student Ministry and the Supremacy of Christ*, (Bloomington, IN: CrossBooks, 2009).

[41] Ibid., 42.

heart connections with at least five significant, spiritually alive adults have the best opportunity to develop a sustainable, alive faith embracing the supremacy of Christ."[42]

Ben Trueblood's *Within Reach: The Power of Small Changes in Keeping Students Connected*, presents a positive strategy to reduce the number of young adults who leave the church.[43] Compiling numbers from LifeWay Research, Trueblood maintains a positive outlook on the potential of changing the trend of young adults leaving the church. He encourages student pastors to involve parents in the student ministry because parents are a primary influence on their children. Trueblood makes correlations concerning parents' desire to attend church and their involvement in church. A lack of connections later on with adults within the church are an indicator of young adults choosing to leave the church. Trueblood states, "The number of adults from church who invest in an individual student's life is one of the strongest predictors of whether a student stayed connected to the church or left after high school."[44] The need to involve many adults in student ministry and to disciple and involve parents is emphasized as necessary in combatting the issue. The positive presentation encourages student pastors to be active in the lives of parents, leaders and students.

*Family-Based Youth Ministry* by Mark DeVries addresses the issue of isolation for teenagers.[45] DeVries writes, "Today teenagers have less access to the natural extended family structures that lead to mature adulthood. And they have such limited connections with adults that it has become a novelty for a teenager and an adult to have more than a passing conversation

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[42] Ross, *Student Ministry and the Supremacy of Christ*, 39.

[43] Trueblood, *Within Reach*.

[44] Ibid., 26.

[45] DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*.

together."[46] As families deteriorate with higher divorce rates, both parents working, less

community involvement, and the decline of extended family, teenagers become increasingly

isolated. DeVries explains, "It's clear that young people grow to maturity in general, and to

maturity in Christ in particular, by being around people who exhibit such maturity themselves."[47]

DeVries shows that kids who had six or more mentors were less likely to leave the church after

high school. The message is clear: the isolation of teenagers in society cannot be emulated in the

church. Student ministries must be intentional in involving students in the overall life of the

church.

  Josh McDowell presents a crisis in the church relating to student ministry in *The Last

Christian Generation*.[48] McDowell cites George Barna's research that 98% of young people who

professed to be "born again" did not reflect Christlikeness in their actions or attitudes. McDowell

writes,

> We haven't lacked creative resources or high-impact Christian events over the last decade.
> We are inundated with books, courses, and events. And while these efforts have been
> worthwhile, because some people's lives have been transformed by the power of God, for
> some reason we're losing more ground with this new generation of young people than we
> are gaining.[49]

McDowell identifies the lack of a biblical understanding of truth as well as a lack of mentoring

relationships as culprits for the confusion among young people. Many adults are not modeling

Christlikeness for students, and as a result, many students are confused about their beliefs. The

importance of relationships, and especially intergenerational relationships, are key in the proper

development of disciples.

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[46] DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 91.

[47] Ibid., 37.

[48] Josh McDowell, *The Last Christian Generation*. (Holiday, FL: Green Key Books, 2006).

[49] Ibid., 19.

Anita Cloete shares a related concern about the focus of traditional families as the primary influence of students in *Revisiting a Family Approach in Youth Ministry*. She writes, "Although there seems to be much support for this approach, there is little discussion on the complexities of family life today and a lack of engagement with the diversity that is part and parcel of family life."[50] If the church focuses only on traditional families, it will exclude a significant number of youth. According to Cloete, the church must objectively and creatively engage students no matter the family situation.[51] In changing the approach of student ministry, the church must be cautious about unintended consequences.

<div align="center">The Role of Discipleship in Solving the Problem</div>

In *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts*, Thom and Sam Rainer explore the issue of young adults leaving the church.[52] The Rainers discovered that the reasons for attrition were most often not issues of disagreement with theology or moral beliefs, but the lack of a perceived need for church. The authors write, "A complex church will have a plethora of activities. A complex church will have many organizations and programs. But a complex church is typically weak at intentionally bringing members into meaningful Christian relationships with one another."[53] Young adults want depth in teaching and a sense of community. Opportunities for community outside the church played a role in the apathetic tone of the young adults as it related to the church. The all too often cumbersome nature of church polity is complicated and confusing to many young people. Young adults tend to desire a more

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[50] Anita Cloete, "Revisiting a Family Approach in Youth Ministry," *In die Skriflig/In Luce Verbi*, Vol. 50 No. 1 (08 January 2016), 2.

[51] Ibid., 5

[52] Rainer and Rainer III, *Essential Church*.

[53] Ibid., 147.

streamlined way of life. *Essential Church* encourages the church to discover how to reduce the apathy that has destroyed church attendance among young adults.

In a similar vein, *Simple Student Ministry* by Eric Geiger and Jeff Borton calls for simplicity in discipling students.[54] Students need to do more than just learn Bible verses and doctrinal teachings; they need to put them into practice. The biblical goal of student ministry is to produce life-change among teenagers. The spiritual result of life-change will help to mitigate young adult exodus from the church. Geiger and Borton write, "Students who get opportunities to live out what they have learned experience transformation. A lightbulb comes on. All the lessons about serving others make sense."[55] Concerning discipleship the authors explain,

> *Simple Student Ministry* will encourage you to design a process for discipleship in your student ministry. The process should be crystal clear (clarity) and move students to greater levels of spiritual commitment (movement). All of your programs and leaders should be aligned (alignment) to the process God gives you. And you should leverage (focus) all your energy and resources on your discipleship process.[56]

*Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime* written by Richard Ross is a guide to move a church from the failing model of youth ministry into a disciple-making ministry.[57] The author shares the biblical foundation for student ministry and the main factors that lead to lifetime commitment to the church. Ross explains how to involve and instruct parents so they can make a lasting spiritual impact. The church must also impact the students through meaningful service, solid teaching, and true involvement in the life of the church. Mission opportunities and service are highlighted as necessary for a church desiring to create lifelong committed followers of Christ.[58] This is not

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[54] Geiger and Borton, *Simple Student Ministry*.

[55] Ibid., 137.

[56] Ibid., 19.

[57] Ross, *Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*.

[58] Ibid., 149-150.

another explanation of the problem. Rather, it is a well thought out plan for changing the future

of student ministry and the church. Ross explains, "The senior pastor must lead the stakeholders

of the church to grasp a new perspective on youth ministry."[59]

In *Almost Christian*, Kendra Dean continues to look at the issues concerning youth

established in the National Study of Youth and Religion.[60] Dean participated in conducting the

research of the NSYR project and provides considerable insight concerning the findings. Many

popular ideas have infiltrated the church and, as a result, the church is not making the necessary

spiritual difference in the lives of students. The lack of true Bible teaching and the lack of

commitments from parents have compounded the problem. The author promotes the idea that the

church among teens has pushed Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, instead of biblically sound

theology.[61] Dean states,

> There are inspiring exceptions, of course, but for the most part we have traded the kind of
> faith confessed and embodied in the church's most long-standing traditions for the savory
> stew of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. And, for the most part, young people have
> followed suit.[62]

The church teaches of a nice and fair god with followers seeking to be happy. God is

there when needed, but is otherwise uninvolved in life and decisions. This unbiblical theology of

teaching good people how to make it to heaven has created a shallow and erroneous

understanding of God. The author calls for parents and church leaders to teach the Gospel and

talk about it on a regular basis with teens. The need for conversations and answering hard

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[59] Ross, *Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, 159.

[60] Kendra Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

[61] Ibid., 36-37.

[62] Ibid., 10.

questions is essential in connecting students to a lifelong relationship with Christ and the church. Concerning the NSYR Dean writes, "So when the NSYR points to American churches' inability to meaningfully share the core content of Christian faith with young people, it points to a church that no longer addresses the issues of being human, and whose God is therefore unimportant."[63]

In *Imagine-making disciples in youth ministry . . . that will make disciples,* Malan Nel posits the need for discipleship in order to combat the issue regarding students leaving the church.[64] Concerning the focus of youth ministry, Nel indicates, "Our understanding of salvation as decision-making rather than disciple-making has not done the job."[65] A focus on making true disciples will impact evangelism and put more people in the place to be discipled. This call is not for students alone, but for those who are leading students. The church must become a place that teaches people how to live as they learn from Scripture.

Writing for *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Nel and Moser discuss how the division of discipleship and evangelism has impacted the retention of youth in the church. They claim, "There must no longer be a perceived split between *who we are* and *what we do*. It is ineffective to divorce our desire to reach out and our core identity as disciples of Jesus who pursue spiritual maturity."[67] Their article points out the connection between identity and numerical growth. Utilizing several passages, they emphasize "identity" and "mission" relating to followers of Christ. No matter what approach is taken, there are always unintended consequences. As the church emphasized reaching the lost, it often neglected discipling those who had been reached. An emphasis on

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[63] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 10.

[64] Malan Nel, "Imagine-making disciples in youth ministry ... that will make disciples," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 71, no. 3 (14 August 2015): 1-11. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v71i3.2940.

[65] Ibid., 1.

[67] Kenneth A. Moser and Malan Nel, "The Connection Between Youth Ministry's Division of Evangelism and Discipleship, and the Lack of Retention of Youth in North American Churches," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 40 (20 November 2019): https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v40i1.2020, 5.

biblically discipling students towards living as Christ is much more likely to impact students in a way that will keep them involved in the church.

**Theological Foundations**

Discipleship, parental relationships, biblical understanding and relationships with mature believers are all considered essential in keeping students connected to the church after high school. Scripture presents numerous examples of discipling relationships, parent to child instruction, and admonishment to know and live out Scripture. In 1 Corinthians 3:10–11 Paul gives a warning,

> According to God's grace that was given to me, I have laid a foundation as a skilled master builder, and another builds on it. But each one is to be careful how he builds on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than what has been laid down. That foundation is Jesus Christ.

When the focus of student ministry is not Jesus, it will fail. The church must recover the preeminence of Jesus. It must be taught from the cradle to the grave. When the church fails to adequately disciple the flock, it will experience loss. A major reason students are leaving the church is because they have not been adequately discipled. Many of them consider themselves Christian, but have no evident markers of the faith in their lives. If the church adequately addresses issues surrounding the Person of Christ, discipleship, biblical parenting and the Scripture, it will make a tremendous impact in keeping students engaged with the church.

The Authority of Scripture

The importance of the authority of Scripture is highlighted in 2 Timothy 3:16–17, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, for training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." In order for students to be prepared for lives as believers, an adequate understanding of

Scripture is necessary. Student ministries can sometimes make the mistake of not challenging

students simply because people do not generally accept correction well. In *Shepherding a Child's*

*Heart*, Ted Tripp writes, "Correction helps your children to understand God's standard and

teaches them to assess their behavior against that standard."[68] Understanding Scripture equips

followers of Christ to live for God. When students are not adequately trained in Scripture it can

lead to doubt, apathy, and disdain concerning the things of God. God's Word is transformative;

as stated in *The New American Commentary*, Thomas and Hayne write, "Those who obey the

commands and respond to the promises of Scripture can find the strength to live a life of such

arresting quality that it can encourage and enlighten others."[69] Students need to understand the

authority and usefulness of Scripture in order to properly apply it to their lives.

In 2 Peter 1:20-21 it is written, "Above all, you know this: No prophecy of Scripture

comes from the prophet's own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by the will of man;

instead, men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." Understanding that

Scripture carries with it the authority of God is essential in Christian formation. It is equally

important that the church understands its role in the process. Instructing parents, Lou Priolo

writes,

> Teaching the Bible to children is non-optional. You have been given the responsibility to
> indoctrinate your children with Scripture. The question is not whether or not you are
> going to teach God's Word to them, but whether or not you are going to obey God's Word
> yourself. No matter what you believe your parental job description entails, nothing else
> you do to, for, or with them is more important than this.[70]

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[68] Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2005), 82.

[69] Lea D. Thomas and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus.* Vol. 34, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 238.

[70] Lou Priolo, *Teach Them Diligently: How to Use the Scriptures in Child Training* (Woodruff, SC: Timeless Texts), 14.

The primary responsibility of teaching children the Bible rests on parents. The responsibility of the church is to prepare parents adequately for their responsibility of training their children in the Scripture. The church must hold Scripture in the highest regard and use the children's ministry and student ministry as a help to parents and not a substitute.

The Application of Scripture

The need to understand Scripture cannot be overemphasized. Consider Joshua 1:8: "This book of instruction must not depart from your mouth; you are to meditate on it day and night so that you may carefully observe everything written in it. For then you will prosper and succeed in whatever you do." Here it is important to understand that Joshua knew the writer of the Scripture personally. As one who was mentored by Moses, Joshua was well acquainted with the Scripture. Joshua presents somewhat of a transition in relation to God. Considering the way God interacted with people from Adam through Moses, it seems there is a shift from Joshua throughout the rest of the Old Testament. Concerning the shift, James Boice writes, "Even more, that written Word is what ties us to Joshua, just as it was what tied him to his illustrious predecessor, Moses. Indeed, the Bible is what ties us to God, for God has decreed that it is only through his Word that he will be made known."[71] In this passage God gives a clear instruction to make the Scripture central to life. Considering God's call for His followers to live for His glory, it only makes sense that a dedication to His Word would bring a promise of prosperity and success.

The importance of Scripture is paramount. In Colossians 3:16–17 we read,

Let the word of Christ dwell richly among you, in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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[71] James Montgomery Boice, *Joshua* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2005), 15.

The work of Scripture, then, is plainly stated. The Scripture provides wisdom, teaching, and admonishment. It teaches us to love God properly. Referring to verse 17, Richard Melick writes, "The two realms of speech and action encompass every area of life. A truly Christian commitment incorporates them both."[72] The Scripture challenges us to glorify God in all things. When understood correctly Scripture gives one direction for life. If students are properly trained in the Scriptures they are more likely to be impacted by Scripture for the rest of their lives.

<div align="center">The Role of the Family</div>

Deuteronomy 6:4–10 is at the core of understanding the significance of the role of family.

> Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. These words that I am giving you today are to be in your heart. Repeat them to your children. Talk about them when you sit in your house and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a symbol on your forehead. Write them on the doorposts of your house and on your city gates. When the Lord your God brings you into the land he swore to your ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that he would give you—a land with large and beautiful cities that you did not build.

Walter Elwell and Barry Beitzel write, "Within the Shema is found both a fundamental doctrinal truth and a resultant obligation. There is an urgency connected to the teaching: the word *sh'ma* demands that the hearer respond with his total being to the fact and demands of this essential revelation."[73] It is important for the church to emphasize the importance of the family and the need to properly instruct children.

The role of the family in the development of students should not be underestimated. In *Everyday Parenting*, Justin and Sarah Buchanan write,

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[72] Richard R. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon,* Vol. 32, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1991), 306.

[73] Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "The Shema," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1945.

The primary role God has given to parents is the faith formation of their children. While parents are responsible for other aspects of care for their children, none is so vital as this. Scripture teaches that parents are to diligently teach their children of God's character and command in every sphere and circumstance of life (Deuteronomy 6:7).[74]

Student Ministries must come alongside parents and partner with them to prepare students for life after high school. In order for the church to make a change concerning the current problems surrounding students and young adults, it must address the failures in the family. Richard Land writes,

> Our world is unimaginably different from the world of Martin Luther or Paul. Though times and cultures change, the basic needs of our humanity do not; our children desperately need the spiritual and moral advice and guidance God expects parents to provide. Even seemingly disdainful teens desperately seek parental involvement and advice. William Damon of the Stanford University Center for Adolescence reminds us that parents need to "share what they really believe in, what they really think is important. These basic values are more important than math skills or SATs." Amazing, isn't it, that his conclusions are so similar to the priorities in Deuteronomy over three thousand years ago! However much the world has changed, the human nature God gave us hasn't changed at all.[75]

The church must be clear in its message and helpful to parents as they seek to impact their children with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Student Ministries must be intentional in offering a setting where parents and students can serve together. Student Ministries must be faithful in training students and equipping parents to do the same.

## The Role of Mentoring

Moses and Joshua are good examples of mentoring from the Old Testament. Joshua was born in Egypt and went through the great events of the Passover and the Exodus with Moses and all the Hebrew people who escaped from slavery in Egypt. Moses took Joshua with him when he

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[74] Justin and Sarah Buchanan, "*Raising Teenagers to Live on Mission for God*" in Alex Sibley (ed.), *Everyday Parenting* (Fort Worth: Seminary Hill Press, 2017), 101-102.

[75] Dr. Richard Land, *For Faith & Family: Changing America by Strengthening the Family* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2002), 19.

went into the mountains at Sinai to talk with God (Ex. 24:13). Moses also gave Joshua a

prominent place at the Tabernacle. As Moses' servant, Joshua remained at the tabernacle as his

representative while Moses left the camp to fellowship with the Lord (Ex. 33:11). When Moses

sent Joshua as one of the spies to scout out the land of Canaan, twelve spies were sent and only

Joshua and Caleb returned to the camp with a report that they could conquer the land (Num.

13:8).. Because of their faith, Joshua and Caleb were allowed to enter the Promised Land, but all

the other Israelites who lived at that time died before the nation entered the Promised Land

(Num. 14:30).

Joshua was chosen as Moses' successor (Josh. 1:1–2). He led the Israelites to conquer the

Promised Land (Joshua 1–2). Moses led Israel out of Egypt, but Joshua completed the quest to

inhabit the Promised Land by leading Israel into Canaan. Moses impacted Joshua throughout his

life helping Joshua make a major contribution to the history of Israel.

Eli made a tremendous impact on Samuel through mentoring. In 1 Samuel 1:23-25,

Samuel was sent to live with the priest Eli at a very young age,

> Her husband, Elkanah, replied, "Do what you think is best, and stay here until you've
> weaned him. May the Lord confirm your word." So Hannah stayed there and nursed her
> son until she weaned him. When she had weaned him, she took him with her to Shiloh, as
> well as a three-year-old bull, half a bushel of flour, and a clay jar of wine. Though the
> boy was still young, she took him to the Lord's house at Shiloh. Then they slaughtered
> the bull and brought the boy to Eli.

His mother dedicated him to the Lord and Eli taught him the things of priesthood. Samuel went

on to write 1 and 2 Samuel in addition to being a judge, priest and prophet. Samuel was used by

God to anoint Saul as the first King of Israel and after God rejected Saul, and Samuel anointed

David as the rightful king. Samuel is one of the most significant characters in the Bible. The

influence of Eli was central to Samuel's life and calling. It is evident in 1 Samuel 3:7-11,

> Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, because the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. Once again, for the third time, the Lord called Samuel. He got up, went to Eli, and said, "Here I am; you called me." Then Eli understood that the Lord was calling the boy. He told Samuel, "Go and lie down. If he calls you, say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. The Lord came, stood there, and called as before, "Samuel, Samuel!" Samuel responded, "Speak, for your servant is listening." The Lord said to Samuel, "I am about to do something in Israel that will cause everyone who hears about it to shudder."

Eli directed Samuel to respond to the Lord with the attitude of a servant. Samuel did not know the Lord at this point, so Eli's impact on Samuel cannot be overstated. Eli's mentoring of Samuel should be mimicked in student ministry. Those who have gained wisdom and understanding through the difficulties of life are well equipped to direct the younger generation.

The transition from the prophet Elijah to the prophet Elisha is another good example of mentoring. In 1 Kings 19:19-21, Elijah is instructed to anoint Elisha as his successor,

> Elijah left there and found Elisha son of Shaphat as he was plowing. Twelve teams of oxen were in front of him, and he was with the twelfth team. Elijah walked by him and threw his mantle over him. Elisha left the oxen, ran to follow Elijah, and said, "Please let me kiss my father and mother, and then I will follow you." "Go on back," he replied, "for what have I done to you?" So he turned back from following him, took the team of oxen, and slaughtered them. With the oxen's wooden yoke and plow, he cooked the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he left, followed Elijah, and served him.

After the initial call, nothing additional is written about Elisha until 2 Kings 4 when Elijah is taken away in a chariot of fire after blessing Elisha. While Elisha was different than Elijah in appearance and in the fulfillment of his role as a prophet, his work was the same. He faithfully performed miracles and served the people around him. It is evident that his time with Elijah had a great impact on his life.

Jesus provided perhaps the best biblical example of mentoring with the disciples. Throughout the Gospels we receive insight on discipleship from the life of Jesus and the twelve disciples. Throughout his life, Jesus taught others; this was especially true with the disciples. Jesus called them individually and equipped them to serve. Jesus made a long-term commitment

to train the twelve disciples. The disciples ultimately impacted the entire world. The impact of the twelve disciples is still felt today. Through their faithfulness to reach and teach others they effectively spread the Gospel around the world.

A memorable relationship from the New Testament Epistles is that of Paul and Timothy. Paul writes two Epistles to Timothy with instructions on how to serve the Lord faithfully. Paul considered Timothy a young man and their relationship demonstrates an older adult guiding a younger adult. Timothy served with Paul, but served without Paul in Ephesus for most of his ministry. Paul impacted Timothy greatly through their relationship. While Paul travelled often, Timothy planted his life in Ephesus. Timothy's ministry provides a helpful example of longevity in a congregation. This was no doubt a result of the discipling relationship between Paul and Timothy.

Scripture is clear on the call to impact the lives of others. Jesus stated in Matthew 28:19-20, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." The call in Scripture is to impact the lives of others with the Gospel of Jesus. Christians are not commanded only to share the need for salvation, but to include all of the teachings of Jesus to those who are reached with the Gospel. One of the downfalls of student ministry in the past was the focus on evangelism without discipleship. Students were drawn to events and heard the Gospel of Jesus, but were, in many cases, not challenged to live differently. The need for discipleship among young people is obvious; the lack of biblical understanding is great. Student ministry must focus on the teachings of Jesus if there is to be any hope for the church to recover the younger generation.

A Protected People

Studying the relationship between students and the church reveals how students are often led astray in the world. 2 Corinthians 11:3 addresses this concern, "But I fear that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your minds may be seduced from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ." Often in the academic setting ideas are contrary to the Bible in their content. The overwhelming majority of universities seem to accept and promote ideas such as Naturalism, denying anything supernatural. Students who are not adequately equipped can easily become confused. Universities indoctrinate students with the ideas of evolution, leading people away from the idea of God. It is important that student ministries adequately equip students to stand against deceitful teachings.

John MacArthur in his commentary on 2 Corinthians states, "The danger false teachers pose is that they shift the focus off Jesus Christ and onto rituals, ceremonies, good works, miracles, emotional experiences, psychology, entertainment, political and social causes, and anything else that will distract people."[76] Scripture is the main protection for Christians. Adequately understanding who God is and what He expects of His followers are both important. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:31-33, "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved." Believers must understand their purpose in life as outlined by God. In order for students to be prepared for the objections to God they will encounter in a University setting, student ministries must focus on equipping students through adequate teaching.

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[76] John F. MacArthur Jr., *2 Corinthians*: *MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 356.

A Strong People

In Ecclesiastes the call for Christians is to walk together in order to help one another remain faithful to the commitment made to God. Ecclesiastes 4:9–10, "Two are better than one because they have a good reward for their efforts. For if either falls, his companion can lift him up; but pity the one who falls without another to lift him up." Discipleship forms a bond between believers that allows them to help one another faithfully live for Jesus. Walking with someone provides safety in a time of distress. In student ministry this is done through faithful leadership. Adult leaders must understand the role of coming alongside students to help direct them through the difficulties of life. Students often disconnect from the church because they believe church has nothing to offer them once they go to college. Making a transition to a new church is difficult. Students often try to keep some form of commitment to the church, but without leaders who understand the need to stay connected, students often drift away. In *Disciple-Making Teachers*, Josh Hunt writes,

> Christianity is about people drawing close to each other in love. Yet many churches are characterized more by polite distance than by the connection of hearts and souls in love. Disciple-making teachers recognize the need to create environments where deep friendships, friendships like the ones my friends and I experienced in college, can develop. Disciple-making teachers understand that friendships such as these won't develop on their own. Disciple-making teachers know that they will need to be very intentional in helping to develop close friendships.[77]

Intentional discipleship will forge relationships that will stand the test of time. It will not fade with distance, but will continue to impact the student for years to come.

On Mission People

In Acts 1:8 believers are instructed to take the message of Jesus throughout the world. The author writes, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come on you, and you

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[77] Josh Hunt and Larry Mays, *Disciple-Making Teachers* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing Inc.), 22.

will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Followers of Jesus are commanded to take the message of Jesus everywhere. There is a

progression here illustrated through geography. Jerusalem serves as "home" and the progression

takes the message throughout the world. The need to proclaim the message of Christ is

imperative in student ministry. Students need to understand the call of Christ and the promise of

power through the Holy Spirit.

Paul again highlights the importance of knowledge of Scripture in 2 Timothy 2:15 "Be

diligent to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who doesn't need to be ashamed,

correctly teaching the word of truth." In order for someone to follow God adequately, that person

must have a robust understanding of Scripture. One of the indictments on traditional youth

ministry is a lack of focus on discipleship and a full understanding of the teachings of God. This

verse expresses the need for diligence in the quest to be approved by God. John MacArthur

writes,

> The **diligent** believer—in this context, the **diligent** teacher—gives maximum effort to
> impart God's truth as completely, as clearly, and as unambiguously as possible. He gives
> unreserved commitment to excellence in examining, interpreting, explaining, and
> applying God's Word.[78]

The broader context of the passage relates to false teachings. Considering the current condition

of our society, it is more important than ever to be grounded in truth to keep from being led

astray.

## Summary

Considering the immense amount of data surrounding the loss of students from the

church after high school it is important that the church attempts to understand and correct the

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[78] John F. MacArthur Jr., *2 Timothy: MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 74–75.

problem at hand. Throughout the modern writings on the subject several things are made clear. Relationships in the church, family relationships, discipleship, opportunities to serve, and a robust understanding of God's Word are all important factors in retaining students in the church after high school. As the data is considered, a brief consultation with Scripture makes these findings seem obvious.

Throughout Scripture the example of mentoring and discipleship are clear. From the declaration of the Shema in Deuteronomy to the relationship of Moses and Joshua, Elijah and Elisha through the numerous examples throughout the New Testament, the importance of teaching and understanding God's Word is obvious. In Scripture, God reveals himself to the human race. In order to live for Him adequately, one must rely on the Word of God.

As the church is intentional in seeking better ways to apply God's Word to the way ministries are led, there will be a noticeable change in engagement and retention. In seeking to glorify God, the church must be a place of clear and dynamic teaching of God's Word. As the Word of God is applied to every area of ministry, the strength of the church will increase. Families will be strengthened, students will be empowered, communities will be impacted, and the Kingdom will be expanded.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This project seeks to understand the dynamics concerning students leaving the church after high school as it relates to staff's role, leadership development, ministry structure, staff tenure, and student development. The desired outcome is to better understand why students leave the church after high school, in order to provide practical solutions to retain students. The long-term goal is to develop a strategy for making lifelong disciples. Richard Ross suggests every student ministry should ask: "Are we consistently introducing teenagers to Jesus and then discipling them into believers who will, for *a lifetime*, love God, love people, and make disciples for the glory of God?"[79] In order for the church in America to sustain viability, it must better address the issues surrounding young people and their exodus from church. The research demonstrates that discipleship is a key to correcting this problem.

New methodology is required in order to enact change. There must be a shift in the church's view of discipleship. Churches need to be proactive in reaching people with the Gospel and discipling them to be faithful followers of Jesus. In order for the church to keep students after high school ministry adjustments are necessary. Minor changes have been made over time, but the problem is too comprehensive for minor changes to make a substantial impact. The way the church approaches discipleship is central to effective change. A biblical survey of discipleship will highlight the importance of relationships. Intense personal relationships were the mode of discipleship modeled by Jesus. Student ministries must find a way to duplicate Jesus' model of discipleship in order to impact students as it relates to their connection to the church.

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[79] Ross, *Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, 7.

While discipleship methodology is a major factor, it is not the only important consideration. Churches need also to address staff and leadership tenure, leadership development, ministry structure, and student development. Without the other components a true change in discipleship is unlikely to occur. The structure, development and tenure will drive the methodology change in discipleship. Considering the aforementioned need for intense personal relationships, tenure must be a consideration. Also, training and structure must be in place to facilitate these needs. In order for the results to change there must be a shift in how student ministry is done.

Instead of student ministry being a standalone ministry with one person responsible for everything, it should more closely model the example of Scripture. Jesus trained the disciples and charged them to go and make disciples. The disciples in turn would train disciples to make disciples. Student ministry should be focused in the same way as the discipleship of Jesus. Student pastors must develop leaders with the purpose of having them train students to be leaders.

**Research Participants**

The research focuses its attention on adult leaders and students at Cross Lanes Baptist Church. In consideration of the thesis of the study, literature review, theoretical basis and theological foundation, it is necessary to include information gathered from both adult leaders and students. This chapter demonstrates the methodology used to gather information, analyze it, and make comparisons to the available data, as it relates to students staying engaged with the church following high school.

Adult Leadership

The research seeks to understand better the impact of training, clear expectations, pastoral support and ministry involvement among adult leadership. People have apprehension about serving with students due to preconceived ideas. Some may think only young people can work with students, or that students expect all their leaders to understand teenage culture. Proper training provides leaders with a healthy perspective for working with students. When leaders receive adequate training they are more likely to continue serving in the area they have been trained.

Leaders demonstrate higher levels of commitment when they have clear expectations and support from the pastoral staff. When student ministry is a priority from the lead pastor it makes an impact on leadership. Too often, student ministry is relegated to entertainment and appeal to the current trends of culture. When pastoral leadership includes students in leadership, ministry, and missions, it demonstrates value for the ministry. People want to serve where there is a vision and purpose. It is important that leaders have a clear expectation of what needs to be done and the support and encouragement necessary to accomplish those expectations.

Leaders who are engaged in ministry set a good example for students. Shared involvement in ministry builds relationships, which is a key ingredient in building a biblical student ministry. When students and adults serve together in ministry and missions it allows them to grow in community. In the review of current literature concerning students leaving the church, adult connections were identified as one of the most important factors in keeping students connected to the church.

Continuity is also helpful in developing students. Having the same student pastor throughout a student's time in student ministry offers consistency. Adult leaders who serve for

many years are more likely to make lifelong connections with students. Again, these connections are directly related to keeping students engaged in the church after high school.

Students

For decades churches have implemented a model of student ministry that separates students from the rest of the church. In this model, a disconnect results between students and the church. The problem of students leaving the church has been connected to this failed method of student ministry. Integration of students into the life of the church can take place while still allowing students to gather and serve with their peers. A shift must occur in the model of student ministries.

Unfortunately, when students only gather with other students, they are sometimes left out of ministry and missions, thereby dividing the church. Students engage in a ministry centered on their age and interests, then shift to a ministry asking them to focus on the mission of the church overall. Students are often unprepared for such a change. Allowing students to be engaged with the church in ministry and missions earlier lays the foundation for integration into the life of the church for years to come. Engagement of students helps them to better understand the organizational structure of the church and what is required for a church to succeed.

Another issue in the student focused ministry is a potential lack of Bible teaching. Many student ministries act as activity centers. Activities fully focused on students aim to increase attendance, which can leave spiritual formation an afterthought. This coincides with the data from the Barna Group relating to the biblical illiteracy of millennials. Without a solid biblical foundation, students have no real reason to stay engaged in the church. Bible teaching should be

a priority for any student ministry seeking to keep students connected to the church after high school.

When students are only engaged with peers, it is difficult for them to develop lasting connections. Students are constantly around peers with school and extracurricular activities. Church should provide a biblical community for students to grow in their understanding of who God is and their purpose in life. If a ministry focuses on pleasing a particular demographic and not equipping them, then it is not utilizing a biblical model. When students are integrated into the life of the church they are able to experience community; when students experience community among mature believers, it provides a better opportunity to become mature believers.

## Research Design

### Adult Leadership Research

In order for students and adult leaders to be well equipped a proper structure of ministry is necessary. It is important that leaders are given clear expectations and sufficient training. It is equally important for the pastoral leadership to give adequate time and attention to the student ministry, and show the importance of the ministry within the overall church organization. The structure of the CLBC student ministry was designed to produce well equipped and dedicated leaders in order to integrate students into the life of the church. Ministry leaders are selected due to their commitment to the church through ministry and missions. This model has allowed adult leaders to better connect with students throughout their time serving in the CLBC student ministry.

Key leaders who are well trained are instrumental in the advancement of the student ministry at CLBC. Through the long-tenure of the lead pastor (18 years) and student pastor (17 years) training has been provided on a regular basis. Training has been given a high priority

throughout the tenure of the student pastor. Through regular and quality training, well-equipped leaders have been placed in various key leadership roles in the student ministry at CLBC. Clear expectations and adequate training have positively impacted the ministry structure of the student ministry.

This confidential study was implemented through the use of a questionnaire. The questionnaire for adult leaders consisted of fourteen questions surrounding expectations, training, pastoral attention, and ministry involvement. The study type was submitted to and approved by the Institutional Review Board (See "IRB Exemption Approval"). The data was collected electronically.

The study was unfunded, and participants were not compensated nor promised anything for their participation. The participants experienced minimal risk for their participation. This study did not involve interviews, photographs, or any other identifying information for participation in the study. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the effectiveness of the student ministry at CLBC.

Twenty-nine adult leaders responded to the questionnaire. The recruitment of study participants was done via text and email seeking their willingness to participate. Participation in this questionnaire took less than 15 minutes. Each participant was asked to answer all questions. The consent form for participants was sent with the recruitment letter. Participation in the study demonstrated consent. All participants were at least 18 years of age.

Student Research

This confidential study was implemented through the use of a questionnaire. The questionnaire for students consisted of twenty-three questions surrounding church involvement, mission participation and church attendance. The data was collected electronically.

The study was unfunded, and participants were not compensated nor promised anything for their participation. The participants experienced minimal risk for their participation. This study did not involve interviews, photographs, or any other identifying information for participation in the study. The purpose of the study was to gain insight into the effectiveness of the student ministry at CLBC.

Seventy-two former students responded to the questionnaire. The recruitment of study participants was done via text and email seeking their willingness to participate. Participation in the questionnaire took less than 15 minutes. Each participant was asked to answer all questions. The consent form for participants was sent with the recruitment letter. Participation in the study was consent. All participants were at least 18 years of age.

**Data Collection**

The data was collected through the use of questionnaires, and there were no other types of data collection. All data was collected through an online platform (sogosurvey.com). The information collected in the survey was compiled and analyzed. The research methodology of the study is quantitative and quantitative research. Two questionnaires were used in the study. Questionnaire one was completed by adults who had served in any capacity in the student ministry at CLBC. Questionnaire two was completed by students who had participated in the student ministry at CLBC for any length of time.

Questionnaire one was used to assess the involvement and equipping of adult leaders serving in the student ministry at CLBC. The questionnaire also explored the satisfaction of those serving regarding adequate training, clear expectations, and pastoral attention for the student ministry at CLBC. Those surveyed were asked about their involvement in missions and given an opportunity to suggest what could be done to help them be more effective in serving in the student ministry. Questionnaire two was used to assess the involvement of students in the student ministry of CLBC and their involvement in church after graduation. The questionnaire also asked what specifically kept the student connected to church or for what reason the student was no longer involved in church.

Information received in the questionnaire was compiled and studied to determine any obvious correlations regarding commitment to the church following high school for students and correlations to ministry involvement and student interaction with the adult leaders. The focal point of this study is finding data to aid in the retention of student involvement in the church after high school and insights into implementing improvements regarding adult leaders and their connection to students.

Research Recruitment Letter

May 2, 2017

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Theology at Liberty University, I am conducting research to better understand how ministry structure and pastoral tenure impact students' commitment concerning the church after high school. The purpose of my research is to identify why students are leaving the church after being active in the church during high school. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years old or older and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete a survey. It should take approximately 15 minutes for you to complete the procedure listed. This survey will be anonymous.

To participate, go to use the included link and complete the survey.

A consent document is provided as the first page you will see after you click on the survey link . The consent document contains additional information about my research, but you do not need to sign and return it. Participation will serve as consent.

Sincerely,

Brandon Carter
Associate Pastor
Cross Lanes Baptist Church

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH RESULTS

Questionnaire results reveal the measure of success at CLBC in keeping students connected to church after high school graduation. They also illustrate important factors in effective student retention and draw relevant correlations of ministry structure as it relates to retention. Both questionnaires were analyzed to discover commonalities, trends, and correlations between the ministry structure and the retention of students. The results discovered will aid in addressing changes needed to strengthen the student ministry at CLBC as it relates to keeping students connected to the church after high school graduation. Prayerfully, the information gathered will impact the student ministry at CLBC and the information can be shared in order to help other student ministries.

First, the adult leader questionnaires will be examined and then the student questionnaires. After identifying patterns concerning adult leaders, the information received from students will be examined. Information will be considered from the entire group of respondents and then broken down into those who are still involved in church and those who are no longer involved in church. Finally, the information from adult leaders will be considered alongside the responses from students in order to assess strengths and weaknesses in the CLBC student ministry.

It is easy to draw conclusions based on speculative statistics and anecdotal information about student ministry and young adults. These questionnaires, however, provide factual data that allow correlations to be drawn between the ministry at CLBC and the retention of students following graduation. The recognition of successful strategies and unsuccessful strategies will lead to improvement in the ministry at CLBC. It is important that the information in this study is

used to strengthen the foundation of the CLBC student ministry. No matter the results, the leadership of the CLBC student ministry should seek to make any needed changes in order to better impact the future students who will attend CLBC.

## Quantitative Results

The importance of the student ministry to the senior pastor has a tremendous impact on a student ministry. Richard Ross states, "A godly and skilled youth pastor is a treasure. But for the church to produce many lifetime disciples, the pastor must produce disciple makers from the moms, dads, and volunteer leaders in the congregation."[80] When a senior pastor makes the student ministry important, there are implications that will impact the ministry. At CLBC, the senior pastor has consistently placed importance on the student ministry, allowing the Stewardship Team to allocate a substantial amount to the student ministry budget. For this reason, the importance of the student ministry is obvious to the members of CLBC.

While trustworthy data on student pastor tenure is difficult to find, some have drawn conclusions that tenure is important. Richard Ross writes, "Broad and lasting change is most likely when a senior pastor and youth pastor link arms for many years or even decades. This is yet another reason long tenures among youth pastors are almost always valuable."[81] At CLBC the senior pastor and student pastor have served since 2003. The continuity afforded with almost two decades of serving together is invaluable. Serving in long tenured situations allows for a consistent direction to be followed.

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[80] Richard Ross, *The Senior Pastor and the Reformation of Youth Ministry* (Nashville: CrossBooks, 2015), 3.

[81] Ibid., 10.

Knowing the importance of including students in the overall life of the church, students have not been separated from adults at CLBC. Ministry and mission opportunities are not divided between "youth trips" and "adult trips." Ministry and mission opportunities are open to all ages unless a specific work calls for an age restriction. Typically, this approach impacts international mission opportunities. This study highlights the correlation between ministry and mission involvement in the life of the church and retention of students.

When selecting student ministry leaders, ministry and mission involvement are taken into account. Leaders are encouraged to engage in the life of the church. When leaders and students work together it helps form relationships that continue beyond student ministry. The connection of adults and students has been critical in keeping students engaged in church beyond student ministry.

Adult Leader Questionnaire Responses

Table 1: Have you received adequate training to carry out your responsibilities?

|       | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|-------|------------------------|------------|
| Yes   | 21                     | 95%        |
| No    | 1                      | 5%         |
| Total | 22                     | 100%       |

Since it is important for those serving in the student ministry to be well trained, it has been a point of emphasis in the student ministry at CLBC. In *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, Mark DeVries writes, "Those who leave volunteer training to chance wind up with a dream team of amazingly gifted leaders who never seem to enough traction to move their ministries forward."[82]

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[82] Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 153.

The focus on training leaders at CLBC has contributed to keeping students connected to the church. Training gives leaders what they need in order to succeed.

Training at CLBC is multi-layered. CLBC provides large scale conference style training as well as smaller scale training on practical issues. One on one discipleship is also used as a mode of training. Generally, one large scale training session per year is provided. Smaller scale training typically takes place quarterly, and one on one discipleship happens throughout the year. The approach to training has provided the student leaders at CLBC with what they need to fulfill their responsibilities.

Table 2: Has the Pastoral Staff given adequate attention to the Student Ministry?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 22 | 100% |
| No | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 22 | 100% |

Adequate attention covers a number of areas. The amount of emphasis given to the student ministry by the senior pastor, student ministry staffing, ministry opportunities for students, mission opportunities for students, and budget are some of the major areas. The senior pastor at CLBC has consistently encouraged and empowered both the student pastor and adult leaders in the student ministry. This writer has been on staff as student pastor for 17 years. Multiple ministry and mission opportunities are available for students throughout the year. For 17 years CLBC has allocated a generous amount of money specifically for student ministry. In every area deemed important, the senior pastor and student pastor have given attention to strengthen the student ministry and its leaders.

In *The Senior Pastor and the Reformation of Youth Ministry*, Richard Ross points out the necessity of involvement from the Senior Pastor in student ministry.

> The more clearly the senior pastor understands the dynamics of contemporary youth ministry, the better he will be able to use his influence to assist. When he leverages his influence in ways that help (and do not hinder), he will see kingdom impact in the lives of teenagers, their families, and in the church as a whole.[83]

Having a pastoral staff which provides adequate attention to the student ministry is important in recruiting high quality leaders. Discipleship has been identified as important in keeping students connected to the church after graduation. This makes it critical that the adults in the church are adequately discipled. Again from Richard Ross, "But for the church to produce many lifetime disciples, the pastor must produce disciple-makers from the moms, dads, and volunteer leaders in the congregation."[84] The pastoral staff at CLBC considers student ministry essential. This consideration is evidenced by the responses from current and former student leaders concerning adequate attention begin given to the student ministry. There is no doubt this culture has played a role in keeping students connected to the church following high school.

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[83] Ross, *The Senior Pastor and the Reformation of Youth Ministry*, 7.

[84] Ibid., 3.

Table 3: Have you been given clear expectations by the Student Pastor?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 22 | 100% |
| No | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 22 | 100% |

When a church has a long tenured student pastor, they will likely have long tenured leaders in the student ministry. Mark DeVries writes, "Longevity does not happen by chance. It is undeniably impacted by the overall climate of the youth ministry. Churches with youth ministries that are appropriately funded and that have clear, measurable expectations tend to have momentum, and staff members just tend to stay longer."[85] This is true of adult leaders as well as student pastors. Clear expectations and support help to retain leaders.

CLBC adult leaders are not placed into the student ministry in a haphazard manner. Adult leaders must be known and faithful in order to have a role of leadership in the student ministry. Adults who volunteer to help often serve multiple years before being given individual responsibility. This practice helps to make expectations clear. Observation and training make it possible to share clear expectations with adult leaders. Given the response from adult leaders this approach is certainly helpful in retaining students after high school.

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[85] Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 127.

Table 4: Do you still have contact with any students who have graduated from the CLBC Student Ministry?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 19 | 86% |
| No | 3 | 14% |
| Total | 22 | 100% |

In connection with the previous question, relationship building is the foundation of discipling students. Adult leaders are asked to build meaningful relationships with students, and many ministry and mission opportunities are given to encourage this to happen. In *Transforming Student Ministry*, Ross says, "In contrast, making an impact on the life of someone else requires an ongoing, intimate relationship. Impact is all about investment because it is about changing lives."[86] It is encouraging to see the number of relationships that are ongoing even though students have exited from the student ministry.

Table 5: Have you ever visited a sporting, dancing or any type of event of a student from CLBC?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 18 | 82% |
| No | 4 | 18% |
| Total | 22 | 100% |

Again, this is connected to expectations for adult leaders. It is modeled by the Student Pastor and expected of adult leaders to not only be involved with students through ministry and mission, but also through community opportunities as well. Keeping students connected to the

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[86] Ross, *Transforming Student Ministry*, 67.

church takes more than teaching a lesson or leading a Bible study. In *Simple Student Ministry*, Geiger and Borton explain, "Developmentally, adolescents find their identity through their relationships. They adopt the moral values of those closest to them, and their faith is very interdependent with those they trust and respect."[87] It seems that CLBC adult leaders being involved with students outside of church is another contributing factor to the success of the ministry.

Adult leaders from the student ministry have served in the concession stand at the local high school for over 10 years, as well as hosted end of the year banquets for the football team, boys and girls basketball teams, track team, and band. These practices, along with many other service opportunities, have been helpful in building relationships outside the church. The adult leaders are able to make connections with unchurched students and adults and encourage those students who attend CLBC.

Table 6: Have you ever participated in a church outreach event at CLBC?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 22 | 100% |
| No | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 22 | 100% |

Another connection to expectations is highlighted in this question. Adult leaders are expected to be involved in serving at CLBC. At CLBC students are not separated from adults. Adults and students serve together within the church and through outreach and missions. Ben Trueblood, in *Within Reach* writes, "Our research clearly identifies the investment of a variety of

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[87] Geiger and Borton, *Simple Student Ministry*, 21-22.

adult voices speaking into students' lives as one of the most influential aspects of their spiritual development."[88] Considering that 100% of respondents participated in outreach, the model at CLBC encourages a variety of adults being involved in the life of students. This result also highlights the involvement of student ministry leaders in the life of the church.

This type of commitment strengthens relationships between adults and students. Serving together has proven to be helpful in keeping students connected to the church after high school. Relationships built through adult leaders being involved in the lives of students, by both church and community activities, make an impact on students. The many opportunities given at CLBC to do community outreach events is another way to intentionally build relationships between adults and students.

Table 7: Have you ever participated on a North American Mission Trip with CLBC?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 17 | 77% |
| No | 5 | 23% |
| Total | 22 | 100% |

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[88] Trueblood, *Within Reach*, 24.

Table 8: Have you ever participated on an International Mission Trip with CLBC?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 14 | 64% |
| No | 8 | 36% |
| Total | 22 | 100% |

In *Transformission*, Michael Wilder and Shane Parker call for the use of short-term missions in discipling students. They write, "Short-term team building holds great possibilities for the formation of new relationships or the deepening of existing ones. It is natural, then, that other student and adult short-term members possess huge influence potential."[89] In table seven and eight, the importance of connecting adults and students on the mission field is evident. The study shows that 77% of adult leaders have participated in at least one North American mission trip and 64% have participated on at least one international mission trip.

Mission team work, away from home, is a great opportunity to build and strengthen relationships. The faithfulness of adult leaders at CLBC in serving on mission is evident and effective, while the interaction between students and adults remains important. The structure of the student ministry at CLBC is built around the idea of discipleship and long-term relationships. These relationships build over time and have proven to be helpful in keeping students connected with church.

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[89] Michael S. Wilder and Shane W. Parker, *Transformission: Making Disciples Through Short-Term Missions* (Nashville: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 184.

Table 9: How long have you served in the CLBC Student Ministry? (Note: 20 of 22 responded to this question.)

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage of Responses |
|---|---|---|
| 0 to 3 years | 5 | 25% |
| 4 to 6 years | 7 | 35% |
| 7+ years | 8 | 40% |
| Total | 20 | 100% |

Longevity in ministry is important. In order for a student ministry to have a lasting impact, there must be consistency and commitment from leadership. In *Life in Student Ministry*, Tim Schmoyer writes,

> There's no substitute for a well-trained, passionate youth leader. Curriculum only lasts a few weeks, but a leader who loves what he does and feels confident and supported by the church will do it for a long time. And we all know that longevity in youth ministry is essential for effective ministry.[90]

The questionnaire reveals that 15 of the 20 (75%) current or former leaders have served 4 or more years in student ministry at CLBC. Of the respondents who indicated they were still serving in the student ministry at CLBC, 9 of 12 (75%) have served 4 or more years. It is likely this number is impacted by the training, attention, and clear expectations for student ministry adult leaders as highlighted in tables one through three.

Providing the adequate amount of attention to student ministry, properly training adult leaders and setting clear expectations has led to long tenure in serving at CLBC. Having adult leaders serve alongside one another and students in local, domestic, and international mission opportunities, has helped to build strong and lasting relationships.

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[90] Tim Schmoyer, *Life in Student Ministry: Practical Conversations on Thriving Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 124.

The information gathered in the study of adult leaders is helpful when paired with the information gathered from students. Structure built around adequate training, adequate attention from pastoral staff, and clear expectations prove to be helpful to the adult leadership and beneficial in keeping students connected to the church. After an examination of the student questionnaires, the adult leader information will be compared to the information from students in order to draw conclusions on effectiveness.

## Student Questionnaire Responses

The student questionnaire is comprised of twenty-three questions designed to establish how many students who attended the CLBC student ministry are still engaged in church after high school. This examination of the responses provides an abundance of potentially helpful information. The results will be split into three sections. The total numbers will be presented. Some conclusions will be drawn from the total numbers, but the major conclusions will be drawn when considering the responses of those still attending church side by side with those who no longer attend church. As is indicated at the end of this section, 50 of 72 (69%) of respondents are still involved in church. Given the focus of this study conclusions will be made with this number in mind.

Total Numbers

Table 10: How many years were you a part of the Student Ministry (Grades 6-12) at CLBC?

| Years involved | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| <1 - 2 | 14 | 20% |
| 3 - 5 | 21 | 29% |
| 6 - 7+ | 37 | 51% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

When asked how long they were involved in the CLBC student ministry 55 of 72 respondents (76%) participated for four or more years. Adult leaders are more likely to make connections with students over a longer period of time. These responses indicate a connection to the time involved in student ministry and continued connection to the church. Practically, the longer students are exposed to godly adults and form relationships with those adults, the more likely they are to stay connected to the church.

Table 11: What year did you graduate high school?

| Graduate Year | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 2003 - 2005 | 6 | 8% |
| 2006 - 2010 | 18 | 25% |
| 2011 - 2015 | 27 | 38% |
| 2016 - 2019 | 21 | 29% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

There is a good distribution of students through the years under the current student pastor. At CLBC, since 2003, the strategy of building relationships and beginning a process of

discipling students has been the focus of the student ministry. This focus has been an integral part of keeping students in church after high school graduation.

Table 12: At what age did you come to know Jesus Christ as your Savior?

| Age | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|-----|------------------------|------------|
| Before 11 | 34 | 47% |
| 11 - 13 | 22 | 31% |
| 14 - 18 | 13 | 18% |
| 19+ | 3 | 4% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

It is important for the student ministry plan to include a connection to the children's ministry in the church. With 47% of students coming to know Christ before age 11, a strategic plan for cooperating strategies between the children's ministry and student ministry is important. In other data collected of those who came to know Christ before age 13, 16 indicated they came to know Christ through the ministry of CLBC and 18 indicated otherwise. While this data indicates that it was not necessarily the children's ministry at CLBC that led to continued church activity, it stands to reason that cooperation with children's ministry is important.

Table 13: Have you been baptized?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes, at CLBC | 50 | 69% |
| Yes, at another church | 20 | 28% |
| No | 2 | 3% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

Introducing students to Jesus and helping them to follow through with Believer's Baptism is an important part of the student ministry at CLBC. The fact that 97% of students responding to the questionnaire indicated they had followed through with baptism indicates its importance at CLBC. The correlation of those baptized at CLBC and those who continued their connection to the church will be studied in the next section.

Table 14: Who did you attend CLBC with?

| Attended With | Total | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Father & Mother | 50 | 69% |
| Father only | 1 | 1% |
| Mother only | 10 | 14% |
| Grandparent only | 2 | 3% |
| Friend only | 7 | 10% |
| Alone | 2 | 3% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

The emphasis on student ministry from the pastoral staff at CLBC is highlighted by the fact that 84% of respondents attended with at least one parent. Encouraging adults to be involved

and serve alongside their children seems to have been effective in helping to keep students connected to the church after high school. This fact again highlights the need to have a quality children's ministry and engage families in order to encourage them to be involved at CLBC.

Table 15: On average, how many services did you attend at CLBC weekly while in high school?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Less than 1 | 5 | 7% |
| 1 | 14 | 20% |
| 2 | 29 | 40% |
| 3 | 24 | 33% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

Students who participated two or more times a week correlates almost exactly with the number of students still engaged in church. While 53 of 72 (73%) indicated they were involved two or more times a week, 50 of 72 (69%) are still involved in the church. A specific breakdown of those still attending in contrast to those no longer attending will be addressed in the next section. These numbers suggest the importance of building relationships, highlighted by 73% of respondents attending two or more services a week. More involvement leads to increased exposure to positive Christian role models and instruction in God's Word. As presented earlier, meaningful relationships and discipleship are major factors in keeping students connected to the church following high school graduation.

Table 16: While a part of the CLBC Student Ministry, how many local or North American mission projects did you participate in with CLBC?

| Number of Projects | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | 14 | 19% |
| 1 | 8 | 11% |
| 2 | 10 | 14% |
| 3 | 10 | 14% |
| 4+ | 30 | 42% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

The CLBC student ministry emphasizes the importance of serving the community. Through their time in the student ministry, 81% indicated that they served on one or more local or domestic mission projects. As will be shown later in this study the rate of participation correlates to a connection of serving and staying connected to the church after graduation. The structure of ministry at CLBC allows adults and students to serve together. Considering the rate of participation, there are many opportunities for students to form relationships with more adults.

Table 17: While a part of the CLBC Student Ministry, how many international mission projects were you a part of with CLBC?

| Number of Projects | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | 36 | 50% |
| 1 | 13 | 18% |
| 2 | 5 | 6% |
| 3 | 9 | 13% |
| 4+ | 9 | 13% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

The rate of participation in international mission projects is expected to be less than the rate of participation in local and North American mission projects. International travel is expensive and time consuming. While local projects and even North American mission projects can be short and low in cost, such is not the case for international projects. In considering the responses, 50% of students participated in at least one international mission project while 26% participated in three or more. This level of commitment while attending the CLBC student ministry is promising. Considering the higher level of commitment surrounding international travel, 50% of respondents participating is impressive.

Table 18: In the years immediately following High School graduation did you attend church at least two times a month? (Note: At the time of completing the questionnaire for some the question was not yet applicable.)

| Year | Yes | No | N/A |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Year 1 | 53 (81%) | 18 | 1 |
| Year 2 | 51 (74%) | 18 | 3 |
| Year 3 | 38 (72%) | 15 | 19 |
| Year 4 | 31 (70%) | 13 | 28 |

This data shows a drop-off in percentage of engagement from freshman year to senior year in college. It is possible that internships, school workloads, or other type of preparation for various career choices impacted these numbers. The number of those involved in church during college is encouraging and does not change much in comparison to the 69% who responded they are currently attending church. It is encouraging to see the high percentage continuing connection to church while in college.

Table 19: In the years immediately following high school graduation did you actively serve through teaching or leadership in a specific ministry in a church? (Note: At the time of completing the questionnaire for some the question was not yet applicable.)

| Year | Yes | No | N/A |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| Year 1 | 19 (28%) | 50 | 3 |
| Year 2 | 20 (31%) | 45 | 7 |
| Year 3 | 16 (31%) | 35 | 21 |
| Year 4 | 13 (29%) | 32 | 27 |

Excluding those who indicated "N/A", students serving in a church during college is consistent at around 30% all four years. It is encouraging to know around 30% of students from

CLBC serve in a local church in some way during their college years. The connection to serving

and staying connected with the church will be further highlighted in the following section of this

study.

Table 20: Have you been on a mission trip or actively participated in a mission opportunity with a church within the last two years?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 33 | 46% |
| No | 39 | 54% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

Considering the responses of all participants it is encouraging to see that 46% of all

students have participated in a mission opportunity within the past two years. This number can

be compared with Table 16 to indicate an 81% participation rate in at least one mission

opportunity while in student ministry. After high school, the demands of life often change and

students may have less opportunities to participate in mission opportunities. A more detailed

breakdown will be presented in Tables 23 and 24.

Table 21: Do you still have contact with anyone who served in the Student Ministry while you were attending CLBC?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Yes | 56 | 78% |
| No | 16 | 22% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

One major focus of the CLBC student ministry is meaningful relationships. According to

the adult leader questionnaire Table 4, 86% of current and former leaders still have contact with

a former CLBC student. The fact that 78% of students still have contact with someone who served while they were attending CLBC is reassuring. Continued contact after graduation has helped to keep students engaged in the church.

Table 22: Are you currently attending church?

|  | Number of Participants | Percentage |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Yes | 50 | 69% |
| No | 22 | 31% |
| Total | 72 | 100% |

The number of CLBC students still engaged in church is higher than expected. In *Within Reach*, Ben Trueblood writes, "In a study done earlier this year with LifeWay Research, we found that 66 percent of students who were active in their church during high school no longer remained active in the church between ages 18-22."[91] The rate of retention in this study is more than double that of the LifeWay Research results.

Table 23: 2003 - 2011 Graduates and continued connection to the church.

| 2003-2011 Graduates | Currently Attend | Currently Serve | Mission Trip in Past 2 years | Continued Contact |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Yes | 19 | 12 | 11 | 21 |
| No | 7 | 14 | 15 | 5 |

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[91] Trueblood, *Within Reach*, 12.

Table 24: 2012 - 2019 Graduates and continued connection to the church.

| 2012-2019 Graduates | Currently Attend | Currently Serve | Mission Trip in Past 2 years | Continued Contact |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Yes | 31 | 13 | 22 | 35 |
| No | 15 | 33 | 24 | 11 |

Tables 23 and 24 cross-reference several questions. Of the students who graduated in 2011 or before and are currently attending church, 42% have participated in a mission opportunity in the past two years and almost half are currently serving in a specific ministry. Regarding continued contact 81% of those students still have contact with someone who served in the student ministry when they were in student ministry. These findings highlight long-term commitments to the church from those who are well beyond college age.

Table 24 shows similar numbers to Table 23. The most significant difference is among those who indicated they are currently serving. This could potentially be impacted by current situations regarding college. Participation in a mission opportunity is slightly higher from those graduating since 2012. Perhaps this is a result of those who have graduated from high school most recently participating while still in student ministry.

These numbers give insight into the likelihood of long-term commitments from those who participated in the CLBC student ministry. Given the positive numbers found among those who have been out of the student ministry for 10 or more years, there is a measure of validation to the current structure of the CLBC student ministry. The continued contact between adult leaders and students who served in the student ministry is amazing. It is equally remarkable that students are involved in serving and mission opportunities at a high rate, especially among those who graduated a decade ago.

Side-by-Side Comparison

Information gathered by examining the total responses from students is helpful in understanding areas of success and areas in need of improvement. The following information comes through an examination of those who are still involved in church in contrast to those no longer involved in church. Below the information gathered will be separated to show the responses of those still attending church side by side with those who no longer attend. The idea is that more specific information will be revealed through this comparison of data.

Table 25: How many years were you a part of the Student Ministry (Grades 6-12) at CLBC?

| Years Involved | Currently Attending Church | No Longer Attending Church |
|---|---|---|
| <1 to 3 | 9 (12%) | 8 (11%) |
| 4 to 7 | 41 (57%) | 14 (20%) |
| Total | 50 | 22 |

There seems to be a clear connection between the number of years involved in the CLBC student ministry and continued connection to church. Of the 55 respondents indicating four or more years of involvement, 75% are still attending church. There were 17 responses indicating three or less years of involvement with 53% still attending church. In order to help facilitate involvement there must be a strategy to engage the children's ministry at CLBC. Engaging with young families and showing the importance of involvement is key to continued success in retaining students.

Table 26: What year did you graduate high school?

| Graduation Year | Currently Attending Church | No Longer Attending Church |
|---|---|---|
| 2003 - 2005 | 6 (8%) | 0 (0%) |
| 2006 - 2010 | 11 (15%) | 7 (10%) |
| 2011 - 2015 | 17 (24%) | 10 (14%) |
| 2016 - 2019 | 16 (22%) | 5 (7%) |
| Total | 50 (69%) | 22 (31%) |

One of the major assumptions at the outset of this project was that pastoral tenure would impact the continued connection of students to the church after high school graduation. If so, the rate of retention would increase as the years progress. The rate of retention among respondents from 2003 to 2005 responded at a rate of 100% concerning continued connection to the church. Considering this category had the least number of responses, it is helpful in validating the consideration of tenure and retention. Continued connections to the student pastor and adult leaders 15 years later is likely the primary reason these students responded. Of those who responded in the last three categories, retention increases with each segment of respondents. While the information in this study does not provide overwhelming evidence that tenure is a key factor in retaining students, it certainly has some indictors that it has an impact on the rate of retention among students following high school.

Table 27: At what age did you come to know Jesus Christ as you Savior?

| Age | Currently Attending Church | No Longer Attending Church | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| Before 11 | 27 (37%) | 7 (10%) | 34 |
| 11 - 13 | 10 (14%) | 12 (17%) | 22 |
| 14 - 18 | 10 (14%) | 3 (4%) | 13 |
| 19+ | 3 (4%) | 0 (0%) | 3 |
| Total | 50 (69%) | 22 (31%) | 72 |

This table again highlights the importance of children's ministry communicating the Gospel to children. Of the students who are still attending church, 54% came to know Christ before age 11. The group that has the least retention is the group aged 11 to 13. There are many potential reasons for this fact. Anecdotally, it seems that students often question their faith in high school. When students make decisions at an older age it seems to impact their faithfulness to the church. This table shows those who indicated they came to know Christ at 14 years old or older stayed connected at a rate of 81%. This is great news.

Table 28: Who did you attend CLBC with?

| Attended With | Currently Attending Church | No Longer Attending Church |
|---|---|---|
| Father & Mother | 36 (50%) | 14 (20%) |
| Father only | 1 (1%) | 0 (0%) |
| Mother only | 7 (9%) | 3 (4%) |
| Grandparent only | 2 (3%) | 0 (0%) |
| Friend | 2 (3%) | 5 (7%) |
| Alone | 2 (3%) | 0 (0%) |
| Total | 50 (69%) | 22 (31%) |

With a total of 72 responses, 50 indicated attending church with both their father and mother. Of the 61 who attended with at least one parent, 44 of the 61 (72%) currently attend church. While the sample size is small, those attending alone stayed connected at a much higher rate. It is interesting that those attending with a friend stayed connected to the church at the lowest rate. It has been an observation through the years that sometimes students bring friends in order to keep from connecting with others in the student ministry. This cannot be proven, but it deserves to at least be considered. If this is the case, it would be consistent with the data that suggests meaningful relationships with adults in the church is crucial in keeping students connected to the church.

Table 29: On average, how many services did you attend at CLBC weekly while in High School?

| Weekly Attendance | Currently Attending Church | No Longer Attending Church |
|---|---|---|
| 1 service or less | 11 (15%) | 8 (11%) |
| 2 to 3 services | 39 (54%) | 14 (20%) |
| Total | 50 (69%) | 22 (31%) |

For the students who attended one service or less weekly, the percentage between those currently attending church and those no longer attending church is similar. For those who attended two to three services weekly the number currently attending church is almost three times the number of those no longer attending. The added involvement suggests more opportunity for engagement.

Table 30: While a part of the CLBC Student Ministry, how many local or North American mission projects did you participate in with CLBC?

| Mission Opportunities | Currently Attending Church | No Longer Attending Church |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | 8 (11%) | 6 (9%) |
| 1 or more | 42 (58%) | 16 (22%) |
| Total | 50 (69%) | 22 (31%) |

Among those who did not participate in a local or North American mission project the difference between those currently attending and those no longer attending is minor. In comparison the difference of those who participated on at least one local or North American mission project currently attending church is 2.5 times more than those who indicated they no longer attend church.

Table 31: While a part of the CLBC Student Ministry, how many international mission projects were you a part of with CLBC?

| Mission Opportunities | Currently Attending Church | No Longer Attending Church |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | 20 (28%) | 16 (22%) |
| 1 or more | 30 (41%) | 6 (9%) |
| Total | 50 (69%) | 22 (31%) |

There were fewer students who took part in an international mission project. As mentioned previously, the cost and time commitments of international mission projects impact the number of students who can participate. As in previous tables the rate of those currently attending church and those no longer attending church is similar among those who did not participate in an international mission project. Those who participated in one or more international mission projects were 4.5 times more likely to indicate they are currently attending church. Tables 30 and 31 draw a clear correlation between mission involvement and continued connection to the church after graduation. The mission structure at CLBC mixes teams with both adults and students. This structure helps students to build additional adult relationships and be more involved in the overall life of the church instead of student ministry alone.

Table 32: In the years immediately following High School graduation did you attend church at least 2 times a month? (Note: At the time of completing the questionnaire for some the question was not yet applicable.)

Students currently attending church:

| Year | Yes | No | N/A |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | 40 | 9 | 1 |
| 2 | 40 | 8 | 2 |
| 3 | 31 | 4 | 15 |
| 4 | 25 | 2 | 23 |

Students no longer attending church:

| Year | Yes | No | N/A |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | 13 | 9 | 0 |
| 2 | 11 | 10 | 1 |
| 3 | 7 | 11 | 4 |
| 4 | 6 | 11 | 5 |

Contrasting the patterns of attendance through college years shows an increased percentage each year for those who are currently attending church, while those no longer attending church attended at a lower percentage each year. Keeping students engaged in church during college seems to be a key in retaining them in the church. This strategy works together with the building of relationships during their time in student ministry and opportunities to serve while in student ministry.

Table 33: In the years immediately following High School graduation did you actively serve through teaching or leadership in a specific ministry in a church? (Note: At the time of completing the questionnaire for some the question was not yet applicable.)

Students currently attending church:

| Year | Yes | No | N/A |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | 15 | 33 | 2 |
| 2 | 18 | 28 | 4 |
| 3 | 15 | 19 | 16 |
| 4 | 12 | 17 | 21 |

Students no longer attending church:

| Year | Yes | No | N/A |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| 1 | 4 | 17 | 1 |
| 2 | 2 | 17 | 3 |
| 3 | 1 | 16 | 5 |
| 4 | 1 | 15 | 6 |

Among the students actively engaged in serving during the first four years after high school graduation the difference between those currently attending and those no longer attending is significant. Considering the responses from year one, students who indicated that they served in a specific ministry were almost four times more likely to indicate they were currently attending church. In years two, three, and four, students who indicated they served in a specific ministry were much more likely to indicate they were currently attending church. At CLBC, students are given many opportunities to serve while a part of the student ministry. By serving at CLBC, students are prepared to serve when they leave. The idea is that students who leave

CLBC will be an asset to a church in their new location. Given the data received in this study it

greatly increases the likelihood that students will stay connected to the church after high school

graduation when they choose to serve.

Table 34: Are you currently serving through teaching, leading or in some way in a specific ministry in a church? (Note: This table includes only those who indicated they are currently attending church.)

| Currently Serving | Currently Attending Church |
|---|---|
| Yes | 24 (48%) |
| No | 26 (52%) |
| Total | 50 |

When the previous information on students leaving the church is considered this data

shows a great success at CLBC. Again according to Trueblood, "66 percent of students who were

active in their church during high school no long remained active in the church between ages 18-

22."[92] Considering this statistic, students from CLBC continue in the church after graduation at a

rate of 69% as opposed to the 34% recorded in the LifeWay study. When this data is considered

within the total responses, 33% of CLBC students serve in a specific ministry. This number is

1% less than the number recorded by LifeWay research concerning students who remain in

church. This data is encouraging for the CLBC student ministry.

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[92] Trueblood, *Within Reach*, 12.

Table 35: Do you still have contact with anyone who served in the Student Ministry while you were attending CLBC?

| Response | Currently attending church | No longer attending church |
|----------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| Yes | 43 (60%) | 13 (18%) |
| No | 7 (10%) | 9 (12%) |
| Total | 50 | 22 |

Continued contact by adult leaders from CLBC is an obvious influence on students who continue to attend church after graduation. It is imperative that students are encouraged to stay connected to the church after high school. Continued contact from leaders who care about their commitment to Christ is extremely helpful in keeping students connected to the church. Those who indicated they still have contact with someone who served in the student ministry while they were attending were over three times more likely to be currently attending church.

**Qualitative Results**

Students were asked the top three reasons for continuing to attend church or the top three reasons why they no longer attend in order of priority. The tables below show the top three categories of reasons given for continuing to attend church in order of priority. A complete list of responses can be found in Appendix A. Understanding better why some students are still connected while others are not will hopefully be helpful in improving retention of students after high school graduation. To better understand this information, answers were separated into categories based on similar responses.

Students Currently Attending Church

Table 36: Please list 3 reasons why you are attending church in order of priority - #1
*49 total responses

| Response | Currently Attending Church |
|---|---|
| Spiritual Growth | 26 |
| Community | 12 |
| Obedience/Worship | 9 |

Table 37: Please list 3 reasons why you are attending church in order of priority - #2
*48 total responses

| Response | Currently Attending Church |
|---|---|
| Community | 17 |
| Spiritual Growth | 14 |
| Serving | 5 |

Table 38: Please list 3 reasons why you are attending church in order of priority - #3
*38 total responses

| Response | Currently Attending Church |
|---|---|
| Community | 12 |
| Serving | 9 |
| Spiritual Growth | 6 |

The similarities of the responses are interesting, especially upon the consideration that no prompts were given. Recalling information shared earlier, discipleship has consistently been indicated as a key in keeping students connected to the church after high school. Discipleship is typically focused on learning and living out God's Word. It is also worth noting that spiritual

growth is the number one priority given; it appears in the top three on each priority chart. At CLBC discipleship is a focus of the ministry. Adult leaders are encouraged to spend time with students outside church in order to build a biblically influential relationship. Having the ability to advise students on life situations is another way to disciple students.

Community is also consistent across all three tables. As shared earlier the retention rate among students is higher when multiple adult relationships are made. Students have many opportunities to form relationships with other students through student meetings and service opportunities. Students also have many opportunities to form relationships with adults through serving at the church and on mission. Local outreach opportunities, domestic mission opportunities, and international mission opportunities maximize opportunities for intergenerational community. While community was not first in Table 36, it was the most consistent through the three tables. The importance of community cannot be overlooked. This can often be challenging during the teenage years. Adult leaders must be intentional in providing opportunities for students to make meaningful connections with one another and with other adults throughout the church.

Several answers in the first table dealt with obedience or worship in some way. This trend also appeared in priority two and three, but was not in the top three. One's view of God is essential in building a lifelong connection to Christ and the church. This relationship can be correlated directly to spiritual growth. If students understand God's Word and realize God should be their first priority, they are most likely to continue attending church. This answer again highlights the need for adequate discipleship among students.

Serving is connected to a proper view of Scripture. Serving is in the top three in Tables 35 and 36. Service is a large part of community at CLBC. The structure of the student ministry

intentionally connects community and serving. Mission opportunities are not broken into youth

trips; rather, all serving opportunities are open to adults and students. Students are given

opportunities to lead and at times adults are serving in areas where students are in the lead role.

This approach has proved helpful in preparing students for serving in the church.

## Students No Longer Attending Church

Table 39: Please list 3 reasons why you are not attending church in order of priority - #1 *21
total responses

| Response | No Longer Attending Church |
|---|---|
| School/Work/Time | 10 |
| Lack of Community | 3 |

Table 40: Please list 3 reasons why you are not attending church in order of priority - #2 *20
total responses

| Response | No Longer Attending Church |
|---|---|
| School/Work/Time | 8 |
| Lack of Community | 6 |

Table 41: Please list 3 reasons why you are not attending church in order of priority - #3 *10
total responses

| Response | No Longer Attending Church |
|---|---|
| School/Work/Time | 6 |
| Lack of Community | 1 |

The standard response for not attending church was related to time which indicated a lack

of priority concerning God. Students no longer attending church do not see the need to allocate

time for spiritual growth. It is implied that at some point, these students decided God was not a necessary priority in their lives. This trend once again highlights the need for continued contact with students after high school. At CLBC it seems that students most often attend college out of town. When students relocate it is easier to get out of the habit of attending church.

As it relates to community, the answers were stated in different ways. Some related it to their time at CLBC, others expressed not yet being connected to a church for various reasons. Nevertheless, community is expressed among the primary reasons for no longer attending church. This again is possibly related to relocation that often takes place for college. Student ministries must be intentional about keeping students connected to the church after graduating high school.

When reasons for both those currently attending church and those no longer attending church are examined, the structure at CLBC is highlighted as a connection to continued contact. The structure of the ministry at CLBC encourages spiritual growth, service, and community. The reasons stated for continued church attendance validates the structure at CLBC, especially when considering the high rate of retention among high school graduates.

**Summary**

The results of the research in this study provides helpful information for institutions seeking to make changes and increase the likelihood that students will continue attending church after high school. The connection to ministry structure and retention of students is clear: it is the relationship between staff and adult leaders that is foundational to keeping students connected to the church. The correlation to mission involvement is also key in understanding what keeps students engaged. The information found in this study, as it is related to current and former adult

leaders and former students, is essential in strengthening the student ministry in order to keep students connected to the church after high school graduation.

This study reveals an effective structure within the CLBC student ministry and a good working relationship between adult leaders and pastoral staff. The adult leaders are well trained and consistently meet expectations. The continued commitment of adult leaders has been instrumental in keeping students connected to the church following high school. Students are more connected than those in comparable studies. As an anonymous study that spans 17 years of student ministry the data is trustworthy.

**CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this study is to understand better the impact of ministry structure and adult leadership in retaining students in church following their high school graduation. This study also seeks to link the impact of staff and leadership tenure to continued connection of students to the church. This study suggests that intentionality in ministry structure and adult leadership can positively impact students concerning church attendance following high school graduation.

This dissertation reiterates a major problem in the church. At this point it is well documented that many students are leaving the church after high school graduation. In Matthew 28:19-20 Jesus calls His followers to, "Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." It is not enough to merely hold events and inform students of their need for forgiveness. Student ministries should seek to be missional and as a result disciple students.

For many years student ministry was event driven and concerned mostly with getting large numbers of students together for various events. While the gathering of large numbers was successful, it did not connect students to a lifelong commitment to Christ and the church. There are many negative impacts that resulted from the traditional event driven style of student ministry. The most damaging effect of the event driven ministry was the separation of students from adults and ministry. As stated before in *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, Mark DeVries writes, "We can find the primary cause of the current crisis in youth ministry in the ways that our culture and our churches have systematically isolated young people from the very relationships

that are most likely to lead them to maturity."[93] From youth camps to youth mission trips, everything revolved around youth. The unfortunate result of this type of ministry was a generation of students who did not understand their role in the church.

Given that youth ministries were not systematically discipling students there was not a great need to disciple adult leaders. In the past the focus was in the wrong place resulting in many unintended consequences. Without adequate training leaders have not been equipped to accomplish the task of discipleship. In many cases students have gone through student ministry without the most basic understanding of Scripture. Regarding the importance of the Bible in student ministry Ben Trueblood writes, "Bible reading and prayer are two of the most significant indicators that someone will continue to be plugged into the church and be discipled."[94] Without leadership focused on discipleship there will be no need for a change to occur. The whole concept of youth ministry must shift to become an intentional discipleship ministry creating deep devotion to the Word of God.

The student ministry at CLBC focuses on discipleship of adult leaders. Intentional training is done on a large-scale conference style training as well as individual discipleship in an organic relational style. A large training event is held annually at CLBC for those who serve in the student ministry. There are also occasional opportunities for adult leaders to attend out of town conferences. There are meetings throughout the year that serve as opportunities to train adult leaders. These meetings also encourage communication and community among leaders. This writer intentionally invests in the lives of adult leaders in order to have well-discipled leaders.

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[93] DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 36.

[94] Trueblood, *Within Reach*, 70.

Various ministry areas have specific leaders. The student ministry areas of leadership are delegated to different adults. In order to keep adults engaged with the student ministry as a whole they are given specific areas of leadership requiring communication between different areas of ministry. This intentional training of leaders is a key part of the student ministry. Clearly communicated expectations also contribute to the success of the CLBC student ministry. Well trained leaders with clear expectations are invaluable in student ministry. When leaders are well trained, have clear expectations, and agree to serve, they are likely to meet expectations and make long-term commitments, increasing the likelihood that the vision of missional student ministry will be accomplished.

Student involvement in the overall ministry of the church is another key component in maintaining their continued connection to the church after high school. Students must be integrated into the life of the church. Have them serve as teachers, ministry leaders, mission team members and mission team leaders. Students only participating in student ministry is not enough. At CLBC mission opportunities are open to everyone, and age restrictions are only applied when necessary on certain mission opportunities. As a general rule, students can participate in any mission opportunity, while adults are always involved in mission opportunities. The CLBC student ministry actively involves various church leaders, deacons and senior adults to participate in the student ministry. The research data suggests that integration of student ministry into the life of the church has proved to be helpful in connecting students to the church.

CLBC's ministry structure has positively impacted students. At CLBC, student ministry leaders tend to serve for many years. Continuity with adult leaders makes it easier to disciple students properly and affords students opportunities to make lasting relationships with adults.

The mission involvement of students at CLBC has been key in keeping students connected to the church after graduation.

This study assumed that the percentage of students attending church from the CLBC student ministry after graduation would be higher than the average. It also assumed that the impact of well-trained adult leaders and staff tenure would have a positive impact on students and their continued connection to the church. Furthermore, this study assumed that those students who were engaged in serving would be more likely to stay connected to the church after graduation.

The results of this study suggest that ministry structure can have a major impact on keeping students in church following high school graduation. Considering the areas examined, correlations were made in various areas concerning continued connection to church. The reality of this study is that many of the strategies currently being used at CLBC are helpful in retaining students. This study also makes it apparent that the problem of students leaving the church will not be solved with a few simple changes. The process of keeping students engaged in the church after high school graduation is complex and requires time and attention. Below the most helpful principles from the research will be discussed along with practical ideas for implementation.

**Adult Leader Research Summary**

Considering the responses from adult leaders it seems accurate to conclude that sufficient training, adequate attention from pastoral staff, and clear expectations are all beneficial in developing a student ministry that keeps students connected to the church after high school. When the results from the student surveys are considered they highlight the effectiveness of CLBC's ministry structure. Having expectations for adult leaders to participate actively in the

mission ministry of CLBC and to have contact with students outside the church is important for the long-term retention of former students in the church. The CLBC expects adult leaders to be involved in the life of the church, serve on missions, and build relationships with students. Expectations are high in the CLBC student ministry, and that's a positive. Consider Tim Schmoyer's remarks in *Life in Student Ministry*,

> Nothing communicates to a teen "you're not that important to me" more than showing them you don't have time for them. For the sake of your teens don't let adults do that to them if you have the authority to prevent it. Ask your volunteers to commit to a higher standard, then hold them to it. It's better to have one or two committed adults than ten half-committed ones.[95]

All 22 adult leaders surveyed confirmed participation in an outreach event at CLBC. Even more encouraging, 17 of 22 participated in a North American mission trip and 14 of 22 participated on an international mission trip with CLBC. When asked about contact with students who have graduated high school, 19 of 22 respondents indicated they had contact with a student formerly in the CLBC student ministry. Of the adult leaders participating in the survey, 18 of 22 confirmed being present at a sporting, dancing, or some type of event outside of church for a student from CLBC. Given the responses of the adult leaders, clear expectations have led to success in keeping students connected to church after high school graduation.

In this study, 75% of adult leaders who responded indicated they served for four or more years. When considered with the basic assumption that tenure of leadership has an impact on the retention of students, this response is helpful. Practically, when adult leaders make a long term commitment, they are more likely to make lasting relationships. A well-structured ministry with adequate training and clear expectations prepares leaders to succeed. In the leader questionnaire, 95% of respondents indicated they were adequately trained and 100% of respondents indicated

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[95] Schmoyer, *Life in Students Ministry*, 116.

they had clear expectations. A high percentage of leaders also participated in mission opportunities, had continued contact with students, and participated in the lives of students outside of church meetings.

<div align="center">Practical Steps Regarding Adult Leaders</div>

Student ministries should consider taking practical steps towards discipleship. The key to making disciples is to have adults who are being discipled and take seriously their opportunity to impact the lives of students. The recruiting process must be intentional. Disciple making leaders are not generally found through a church wide email or an announcement from the pastor. Disciple making leaders are found through time and investment in the lives of those who are in the congregation. It has been the experience at CLBC that age should rarely be a factor in recruiting leaders. The age range of leaders in the student ministry at present is between 22 and 88, not counting students who are leading.

When disciple makers have been identified the process of discipleship with that recruit should begin. This process may vary in approach, but must be intentional. Part of the discipleship process is to clearly explain the expectations of leaders in the student ministry. When leaders receive clear expectations they are more likely to make a long term commitment. Regardless of the number of pastors a church might have, student ministry leaders should have the full support of the pastoral staff. The pastor responsible for student ministry should reach out to adult leaders in order to hold them accountable and encourage them to grow in their relationship with Christ. The goal should be to have adult leaders who can help disciple other new leaders. If a student ministry is just starting, it will take time train people to disciple other adult leaders. It is time consuming and difficult, but necessary so that in the future the ministry will be prepared to equip multiple leaders at one time.

Training is key in helping adults become disciple makers. Church settings vary, but there are many training opportunities available. Southern Baptist Churches are typically part of a local association and a state convention made up of Southern Baptist Churches. There are other denominations with a similar structure. These entities are good places to start if a church does not have the needed resources to provide their own quality training. Virtual trainings are now being offered more often and can save time and money. If there is money budgeted for student ministry it would be worthwhile to use some for training adults. It doesn't matter how much money you put into events and activities; without well-trained adults these events and activities will reap very little rewards.

Outreach and mission opportunities are imperative in the development of both students and adults. Adult leaders need to be involved in serving. According to where a ministry is in mission ministry, opportunities may need to be created. Mission opportunities are great for relationship building between students and adults and can serve as a great mode for discipleship. As referenced earlier, most current and former adult leaders responding to the questionnaire participated in mission opportunities. Adult leader responses revealed 77% participated in at least one North American mission opportunity and 64% participated in an international mission opportunity. This high level of participation is not coincidental. Leader participation in mission opportunities is a core expectation of adult leaders. The clear communication of expectations and readily available mission opportunities have contributed to the success of the CLBC student ministry.

## Student Research Summary

It is necessary to engage students as early as possible. While the data collected did not indicate specific involvement in the children's ministry at CLBC, 27 of the 50 currently attending

church came to know Christ before age 11. As reflected in Table 25, there is little difference in continued attendance from those who were involved three years or less. Those involved four or more years were 2.5 times more likely to continue attending church after high school graduation.

Active involvement in student ministry is another key factor linked to continued church attendance. Students who attended two or more services continued attending church after high school at a much higher rate than those only attending one service a week. The assumption is that students attending only once a week would be less likely to establish lasting relationships and build the community needed to keep students engaged in the church.

Involvement in mission opportunities provided the deepest connection to graduates and continued church attendance. Tables 30 and 31 show students who participated in a North American mission project were 2.5 times more likely to attend church after high school and 4.5 times more likely if they had participated in an international mission opportunity. This connection to mission opportunities and continued attendance is hard to ignore. Mission opportunities are useful in building relationships between adults and students. The preparation, planning, and work involved in serving on mission is a great way to build relationships. The connections made from serving together often translate to continued interaction between team members long after the project is complete.

Of students who are currently attending church, 48% indicated they are currently teaching or leading in a specific ministry. Given the 69% retention rate recorded from this study at CLBC, it is encouraging that almost half of those who continue to attend church are serving in some way. The intentional discipleship and relationship building at CLBC has proven to be helpful in keeping students connected to the church after graduation.

When students were asked if they still had contact with an adult who served in the student ministry while they were in high school, students responding yes indicated they were currently attending church at a rate over three times more than those who no longer attend. Richard Ross wrote in a list of top ten factors leading to a lifetime faith and love for the church, "A teenager who actively serves and ministers with other generations as well as with peers."[96] This study seems to validate Richard Ross' assertion. It is also noteworthy that 18% of respondents who no longer attend church still have contact with someone who served in student ministry. This is encouraging, considering that continued contact may increase the likelihood that they will return to the church at some point.

When given the opportunity to list why they still attend church, students gave answers that are consistent with the assumptions of this study. Answers were separated into categories in order to better understand the data. Answers indicating spiritual growth, community, and serving were the most consistent answers concerning continued attendance. Those who responded that they were no longer attending church indicated that time and lack of community were their top reasons for no longer attending church. This line of responses validates the focus of building lasting connections with students through intentional discipleship and a setting that encourages adults and students to work together. Listing reasons in order of priority showed spiritual growth as the number one reason students continue attending church. It is reasonable to connect increased involvement in the student ministry and missions as factors leading to the desire to experience spiritual growth. Community was second on both lists, suggesting that leaders should be intentional in providing community for students.

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[96] Ross, *Youth Ministry That Lasts a Lifetime*, 76.

Practical Steps Regarding Students

A Gospel-centered children's ministry is helpful to student ministry. It introduces children to Christ and creates opportunities for involvement in ministry, making it easier to begin building relationships between adult leaders and students. Regular involvement with 5th grade students is recommended. Knowing students since their birth has been beneficial to adult leaders in creating relationships at CLBC. This is not the case for many serving in student ministry, but it is important to make a long-term commitment in order to see maximum impact. In some settings this could be unlikely. In that case a student pastor should be diligent in building a team of adult leaders who will be at the church long-term.

Be aware of who is attending. Taking attendance at student ministry meetings is helpful. Without knowing who is regularly participating it is difficult to make a plan for reaching out to those who are not participating. This practice also helps to establish patterns and makes it easier for adult leaders to identify possible problems in the lives of students. Irregularity in attendance can indicate problems at home, at school, at church, or some other personal problems that a student is struggling with. The research showed a connection to involvement in student ministry and continuing to attend church in the future. Being intentional in increasing the commitment of students to the student ministry is critical.

The student ministry must be significantly involved in the mission ministry of the church. Students should not be separated from adults when participating in mission opportunities; ideally, adults and students should serve together as a part of the church. Having students be an active part of the church can help build community and help students stay connected in the future. Serving together is beneficial in building relationships between adult leaders and students. If a church does not have an active mission ministry, the student ministry leaders can help to

shape the mission ministry. The pastoral staff must be actively involved in leading the church as well as being intentionally involved in creating a thriving mission ministry. New mission ministries should begin with small local mission opportunities. As the mission ministry is established the scope of mission opportunities can increase.

Continued contact with students after graduation is a highlight of the faithfulness of the adult leaders. The focus on discipleship and modeling of godly relationships has been helpful in developing relationships that continue after graduation. The model at CLBC is not a college ministry that takes over after high school. Many churches do not have the option to hire additional staff to have a fully functioning college ministry like many larger churches. Given the research presented here, one might conclude that an additional ministry is not needed, but rather a *stronger* student ministry. Student pastors should be diligent in communicating expectations to adult leaders when they are recruited to serve. Keeping adults connected with students is not something that can be controlled. Student ministry leaders should create a ministry structure that encourages interaction between adults and students.

**Areas for Further Study**

Active participation in missions should be examined in a broader context to establish a consistent link between serving in missions and continued connection to church following high school. It would also be helpful to gather data on a large number of students who occasionally attended church to gauge the true impact of elevated connection and participation. Further study should examine the impact of family-based ministry and church planting on student ministry. Family-based ministry that is focused on the connection of parents in the student ministry has been the alternative to traditional ministry. It will be interesting to see the impact on students and their relationship to church after high school. Church planting has been a focus in recent years. Church planting is different because often there is not an available dedicated space for small groups. This reality has given rise to home group meetings. Students often times do not have an option of meeting together with their peers in a discipleship setting. Information about the impact of church planting and retention of students after high school would give further perspective on exactly what students need to encourage lifelong commitments.

**Impact on Cross Lanes Baptist Church Student Ministry**

This study revealed many effective aspects of the structure and style of the ministry at CLBC. However, this writer identified many potential areas of improvement. Adult leaders at CLBC seem to be well structured and clearly meet the expectations of the CLBC student ministry. One deficiency of the ministry is having a specific way of tracking students after high school. Considering that 31 of the 72 respondents in the survey are not currently living within 30 minutes of CLBC, there should be a better way to communicate and continue contact. Everything concerning students must be done with great intentionality. While connections were made with 72 participants for this study, it should have been possible to reach more. This study revealed

that as a group the CLBC student ministry should spend more time and put forth more effort towards continued connection with students following high school.

This study did not show the connection between tenure and continued attendance after high school graduation. It was assumed the link would be easily noticeable within the research. While the direct link cannot be established as assumed, it is reasonable to conclude that this writer's long tenure has made a positive impact in keeping students connected to the church after graduation. The key principles of mission engagement, continued contact with students and the basic structure of the CLBC student ministry has remained consistent because of the long tenure of staff. The focus on discipleship of adult leaders has most likely been strengthened due to long-term relationships between adult leaders and staff.

**Summary**

The information collected in this study is encouraging to the CLBC student ministry. This study shows that CLBC students are staying connected to the church at a much higher rate than that of national studies. The most pertinent information collected from this study may be that there is not one single answer to this significant problem. It is easy to criticize student ministries and promote packaged solutions to the problem of students leaving the church. The goal for student ministry should be discipling students in order to create lifelong connections to Christ and the church. This problem does not seem to be determined by church size. The context of the church setting may guide the structure, but it should not dictate the concepts. The principles are clear and unchanging contextually.

# APPENDIX A
## Please list 3 reasons why you are attending church in order of priority:
Table 36 - Priority 1

My beliefs
Spiritual growth
Christian fellowship
To maintain fellowship with believers
Furthering my relationship with Christ
Important to take time away from the week to worship with fellow Christians
To worship And praise Jesus as part of church that is the Body of Christ
Strengthen relationship with Jesus
To grow and learn more in my relationship with God and to continue to glorify
Him.
To worship God
Obedience
To learn more about God
Faith
Jesus is my Lord and Savior. I live because of Him.
To learn
God commands us to be in community with fellow believers
Fellowship
God, Spiritual Growth and fellowship with other Christ followers
To glorify God
To be come closer to Christ.
Continued growth
To better my relationship with Christ
To worship God
spiritual growth/strengthen my relationship and daily walk with Christ
To be convicted and reminded of my sins and how to learn to be more like Christ
Faith
To be involved in worship and fellowship with other believers
To learn & grow
Realize my need for Christ even though we all still struggle.
Fellowship with other Christian Students
Grow in my faith
Become closer to God
Learning and anchoring life in the word
To further strengthen relationship with Jesus
It helps keep me closer in my relationship with Christ.
To strengthen my faith.
I believe it's a necessary part of growing in my relationship with God
Important to fellowship with other believers
To learn more about God
To learn more about God

To maintain my relationship with God
Biblical command to gather
Love God
To grow in my faith and relationship with God
Growing in my relationship with God.
Being connected to a body of believers through a church is greatly emphasized in the Bible.
Jesus told me to
Further my walk with Christ
Fellowship

**Table 37 - Priority 2**
My family
Community and encouragement
Trying out new kinds of churches, learning about their doctrines/beliefs
To be fed through God's word
Fellowship with other believers
To edify my spiritual needs
To continue to learn God's word and become more spiritually mature
Teach Scripture to others
To surround myself and family with brothers in sisters in Christ to help hold me accountable.
To learn more about Him
Worship
Obedience to God's Word
To learn more
Church allows me to have fellowship and community. Meet people to have conversations
To grow
We meet together for corporate worship, mutual encouragement, and teaching
Obedience
To fellowship with other believers
To grow and receive support from a community of believers
Experience of seeing passages in a different prospective than my own
To be active in praise band ministry
To fellowship with other believers
opportunities to spread the good news to others
Friendships/relationships with brothers and sisters in Christ
To study the bible
To help my walk in Christ by being taught about God's Word
To have a community of believers
I feel welcome at the Church and people there keep in touch and invest in my lives.
Renewing relationship with Christ
Arm myself with the knowledge given to us through the Bible
To learn about Christianity
Opportunity to ask questions
To further enhance knowledge of the scripture

It's the right thing to do/my responsibility as a Christian.
To grow in Christ and learn more about him personally and as Husband and wife.
Opportunities to serve and do mission trips
Important to stay in church while at school
To worship with my church family
To grow in my faith
To be encouraged
Spiritual growth and development
Discipleship
To seek Christian community
Community
I want to be surrounded by others who share my values and disciple me.
My community
Stay in the church
To help

**Table 38 - Priority 3**
My future family
Ministry/mission opportunity
To keep me and my family grounded in Christ
To help lead students closer to Christ
Habit
To learn how to better apply God's word to my life
Community
To teach my family about our Lord in hopes that they will come to know Him
Fellowship
Fellowship with believers
I teach 6th grade boys. They need Jesus as much as I do.
To be taught the truths of scripture on a deeper level
Praise
To learn more about Jesus Christ
interaction with people who actually care about how others feel and care if they know Jesus
To bring my children and keep them involved in church
To learn more about God's Word
fellowship
Habit
It's important to me
To have more opportunity to serve my community through blessing others & sharing the Word of God
The church I attend loves missions
Giving thanks for blessing received.
Meet likeminded friends
Meeting people
To make mom happy :)
Fellowship with friends

To fellowship with others.
The community and support from peers and teachers
Campus ministry isn't the same as a church
To fellowship with other believers
To look for women
Christian community
Community/service
To grow in Biblical knowledge and understanding
Mission Trips
I want to use the spiritual gifts God has given me to support a church body.
To serve
Commanded

**Please list 3 reasons why you are not attending church in order of priority:**

**Table 39 - Priority 1**
Location
I have stumbled off the path.
Have not found a church in my area that I prefer
Time constraints
Distance
Did not feel welcomed
Time
School
Lack of commitment
Work
No time
School
Haven't found one I truly feel comfortable at
Recent move
Not trying to be a jerk or anything but I'm an atheist.
I work long hours and many days a week.
Work
Church-hopping
Friends
Sleeping
Time

**Table 40 - Priority 2**
Schedule
I would like to return.
Work schedule
New community
Time
Felt targeted by senior members
Lost faith

Work
Haven't found a new church home
Tired
No time
Work
Don't feel I am respected at church
Recent move
However, that may be changing soon.
School
Haven't found a church to call "home"
Family
I don't have an excuse. I just don't go.
Work

**Table 41 - Priority 3**
I would like my boyfriend to attend with me.
Unsure of which local denomination to attend with
Work
People
Studying for Monday exams
Not enough time
See above
Your classic "busy" excuse
School
Now that I am not in youth, the preaching is boring
School

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# IRB EXEMPTION APPROVAL

**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 30, 2017

Brandon Carter
IRB Exemption 2852.053017: The Role of Ministry Structure in Connecting Students to a
Lifelong Commitment to Christ

Dear Brandon Carter,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board has reviewed your application in accordance
with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration
(FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you
may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved
application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under exemption category 46.101(b)(2), which identifies specific situations in
which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:101(b):

> (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement),
> survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless:
> (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified,
> directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects'
> responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil
> liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any
changes to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty IRB for verification of continued
exemption status.  You may report these changes by submitting a change in protocol form or a
new application to the IRB and referencing the above IRB Exemption number.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether
possible changes to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at
irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,


**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*
**The Graduate School**

**LIBERTY**
UNIVERSITY.
*Liberty University  |  Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

# IRB CONSENT APPROVAL

## CONSENT FORM
The Role of Ministry Structure in Connecting Students to a Lifelong Commitment to Christ
Brandon Scott Carter
Liberty University
School of Divinity

You are invited to be in a research study of church involvement at Cross Lanes Baptist Church for students, student leaders and student pastors from various churches. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Brandon Carter, a student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to better understand the impact of workers within the church concerning church involvement among students after they graduate from high school.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Take a brief survey about past and current church involvement. This will take less than 15 minutes.

**Risks and Benefits of Participation:** The risks of this study are minimal. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality: This study is anonymous.** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.
- The surveys will be stored on a private hard drive.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time prior to submitting the survey without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Brandon Carter. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at Brandon@crosslanesbaptist.org. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, David Wheeler, at dwheeler2@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

***Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.***

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)