

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Research Project Entitled:
Faith Development Study on
Parents as Primary Faith Influencers

A Thesis Project Submitted to
The Faculty of Liberty University School of Divinity in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

By

Caarne L. White

Lynchburg, Virginia

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Thesis Project Approval Sheet

Caarne L. White, Liberty D Min Student

Dr. R. Peter Mason, Liberty D Min Mentor

Dr. Adam McClendon, Liberty D Min Reader

THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

Caarne L. White

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, 2021

Mentor: Dr. R. Peter Mason

This research study intends to address a problem parents face as the assumptive primary faith influencers in their children's discipleship and spiritual development. The goal is to discover the support parents receive as World Changers Church International members while growing in the Christian faith as a family. The problem manifests when youth pastors and workers struggle to help student ministries make real-life connections through discipleship and mission. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the physical church closure is considered in exploring the study and further augment parents' struggles. In the discovery process, the study will assess how guidance through the Christian Education Department potentially affects children's and youth's discipleship across their lifespan. Exploring this problem will provide insight regarding how parents access church tools that undergird them as faith leaders of their family. The methodology used in this faith development study project is qualitative, comparing sample responses and analyzing perception data collected from a faith development survey. There is also a small focus group component, chiseling into survey responses and interviews with willing sample participants discussing practical next steps derived from small group sessions. The research will seek to bring a theological and theoretical perspective to the practice of ministry stakeholders' roles, such as pastors, youth workers, group leaders, and mentors in the lives of children and youth. The conclusion of the project provides questions derived from the study results. The questions offer the church direction in assisting parents as the primary faith influencers in their children's lives.

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Abbreviations (if needed)

DMIN *Doctor of Ministry*

LUSOD *Liberty University School of Divinity*

Chapter 1: Introduction

"Do you want to influence faith development support in your home and church?"

This question requires Christians to consider their role in faith development. Even leaders in church contexts may wonder if they have the authority to answer yes. Then if they answer yes, what happens next? This question is why faith development research studies are necessary. Research on faith development helps the church determine who is responsible for children and youth's discipleship process.

With this in mind, this research study addresses the problem of support offered to parents as primary faith influencers in their children's discipleship and spiritual development. The goal is to discover the support parents receive as members of the World Changers Church International ministry while growing in the Christian faith as a family. Further, the study will address the nature of spiritual support from the church and how it potentially affects children's and youth's discipleship across their lifespan. Exploring this problem will provide insight into how parents access tools from their church necessary to undergird them as faith leaders of their family. The research will seek to bring a theological, theoretical and practical perspective to the role of other practicing ministry stakeholders, such as pastors, youth workers, group leaders, and mentors in the lives of children and youth. This chapter will discuss the ministry context, the presenting problem, purpose statement, basic assumptions, definitions, limitations, delimitations, and thesis statements.

Faith development can affect several areas of a person's life. Individuals with better mental and physical health tend to have a religious affiliation, demonstrating well-being over

their life span.¹ Their well-being connects to the environment and influence. In the Christian faith, discipleship begins with how one accepts and connects through influences and examples. A 2020 Pew Research Study of over 1,800 teens revealed when it comes to the importance of religion to the parent, 73% of teens give the same answer as their parent. Further, 68% of parents answer the same as their teen about how important religion is to their teen. The 5% difference indicates how parents perceive religion's importance in their teen's life versus how teens view their religion.²

The perception Christian parents have on how they influence their children regarding faith development can potentially impact the support they seek and embrace in their local church fellowship. Therefore, parental influence on children's faith remains high and indelible.

Ministry Context

Location and Demographics

World Changers Church International, or WCCI, is located in the City of College Park, Georgia, a community located within the Atlanta, Georgia metropolitan area. The College Park population is 14,360, with a median age of 31.8 and median household income of under \$30,000 yearly.³ The population is 78.5% Black or African American (Non-Hispanic), 14% White (Non-Hispanic).⁴ The population demographics within College Park mirrors the membership of WCCI.

¹ Koenig, Harold G. (Harold George), Dana King, and Verna Benner Carson. *Handbook of Religion and Health*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 130.

² Diamant, Jeff and Sciapac, Elizabeth P., “10 Key Findings About the Religious Lives of U.S. Teens and Their Parents”: *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/10/10-key-findings-about-the-religious-lives-of-u-s-teens-and-their-parents/>

³ Data USA. “College Park GA”, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/college-park-ga>

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

The city has 35.1% of its population below the poverty level, which is more than double the statewide poverty level. One-third of native-born residents live below the poverty level.⁵

The WCCI headquarters located in College Park, GA, is the global ministry's main campus. However, WCCI comprises 24 additional satellite locations, with an entire campus and church tower in New York City.⁶ There are more than 25,000 members at the College Park location alone. The main sanctuary on this campus, called the World Dome, seats 8,500 people. Since the church has many sites, a comprehensive ministry model fits that specific location's members, leadership, locale, and discipleship approach. Although it all stems from the larger vision of Pastors Creflo and Taffi Dollar, there is autonomy within each church locality to meet those congregants' needs and the community in which they sit. Many of these satellite churches have traditional edifice buildings, while others use non-traditional facilities, such as hotels and YMCA structures. Some churches have entire campus ministries, such as Houston, TX, with a pastoral leadership that operates as an extension of WCCI. The research takes place at the College Park, GA location of WCCI.

History

Dr. Creflo Dollar founded The World Changers Church International. Dr. Dollar is an author, conference speaker, and Bible teacher. Over thirty years, Dollar has provided leadership locally, nationally, and internationally on practical teaching and understanding the Bible. The ministry was established in 1981 and began as a Bible study. Following marriage in 1986 to his wife and co-pastor, Taffi Dollar, the World Changers Ministries held its first service. By 1991, the congregation had grown to over 10,000, and the 8,500 seat World Dome opened without debt

⁵ City-Data.com. "College Park, Georgia Poverty Rate Data", <http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-College-Park-Georgia.html>

⁶ World Changers Church International. "Satellite Locations", <https://fellowship.creflodollarministries.org/>

or bank financing.

Central Rituals to Church Culture

There are rituals central to the WCCI congregation in the College Park worship experience within the church culture and are unique to the fellowship. For example, most African American protestant congregations serve the Lord's Supper once a month. World Changers ceremonially partakes of communion every Sunday before the sermon. However, in the children's department, exposure to and partaking communion depends on when the teachers determine students are at an appropriate age.

A research study on ritual learning for the development of child faith revealed, "In the case of present-day churches who segregate children during church, these rites (specifically communion) are at risk of losing their long-standing theological and practical significance.... Since, however, it is separate from regular church life and leaders, it does not provide apprenticeship into core church practices."⁷ Children rarely witness baptism and communion to participate with their parents. Therefore, this prolongs the understanding and application of these sacraments.

Another instance of ritual culture would be the affirmations, prayers, and speaking in a heavenly language before the worship hour. This time frame is called corporate prayer, reserved for openly verbal prayer using the gift of the evidence of speaking in tongues. This engagement is not mandated. However, it is expected by all who can participate and prepares the sanctuary spiritually for the worship hour(s).

Local Children and Youth Ministry

Several buildings are designed for Christian education on the College Park campus,

⁷ Cavanaugh, Julie, "The Importance of Ritual Learning for the Development of Child Faith." *Crux* 55, no. 2 (2019): p. 29-30

including five specifically for children and youth's spiritual development ages 0-18. These include children, Little Lambs: 6 weeks to 1-year-old (not walking), Turtle Doves: 1 to 2 years old (not potty-trained), Grasshoppers: 2 to 3 years old (fully potty-trained), Praisers: 4 years old to kindergarten, Super Church: Elementary grades 1 to 5, and Mighty Conquerors: Children with special needs.

For youth, this includes the World Changers Youth Experience, or WCYE, split between grades 6-8 and grades 9-12. The youth ministry also extends into 12 campuses nationally.

There is a scan card check-in and out system, implemented for more than nine years, to ensure the safety of children, workers, and parents within the ministry during worship and fellowship meetings. If a child or youth within the church visits more than once, parents are encouraged to obtain a scan card for convenient, secure access while navigating the campus. There are workers trained for each age group to facilitate bi-weekly lessons and various outreach programs, sports, and fine arts activities participated in by children within the church.

Central to the children and youth ministry's culture is teaching grace as the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This church-wide thematic approach to developing as a Christian across the life span. These are direct quotes of the ministry core beliefs:⁸

- That Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that He was crucified, died, and was buried. On the third day, He rose from the dead, and later ascended into heaven, where He remains at the right hand of God Almighty.
- That after death, eternal life continues either in heaven or hell, based on your decision to make Jesus Christ your Lord and Savior. That when the Rapture occurs, the dead in Christ will rise first, and then those who are alive and remain (those who have accepted

⁸World Changers Church International. Statements of Belief. <https://www.worldchangers.org/our-beliefs>, 2018.

Jesus as their Lord and Savior) will be caught up to meet Him in the air.

- The Bible was written and inspired by God.
- Faith is a practical response to the Word of God.
- In water baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- In the authority of Jesus' name.
- In the indwelling and baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues.
- In divine healing—the restoration of health to those who believe and act on the truths written in God's Word. We further believe that Jesus is our Healer, and that by His stripes, we are already healed.
- Tithes and offerings should be freely given to your local church.
- That the local church is the place of membership where God has called you to receive His Word on a consistent basis and to grow spiritually.
- In giving alms to the poor, sick, homeless, and others in despair.
- Biblical Equality: We believe in the Biblical equality and value of all human persons, as men, women, and children of all races were created in the image of God and are called to His service. (Gen. 1:27; John 1:12; Gal. 3:28; Joel 2:28, 29)

The researcher's relationship to the study enters as a member, youth worker, minister, and parent. Further, the researcher is committed to the church's vision and mission and is fully involved from both a ministry and family perspective, serving for almost ten years. Several regular activities connect to the research. These include the morning worship pick up and drop off between parents, leaders, and children/youth. Also, there are traditional programs, such as boy scouts, girl scouts, theater ministry, praise teams, and youth leadership teams, that include

both parent and church stakeholder's involvement. Community groups are another ministry within the church that intends to connect families within their neighborhoods. The College Park location comprises a commuter fellowship. However, there is no formal training outside the worship and Bible study that equips parents to lead their families spiritually beyond their faith development.

Youth ministry resources are made available to parishioners regarding finances, people, time, and influence. These resources funnel through the many dozens of dedicated youth ministry workers who seek to create a friendly, supportive environment for both students and parents when matriculating through the Christian education department. There are directors and pastoral leaders for each age group, and they are integral to connecting to parents and supporting their efforts to bring their family to church and be placed in the correct location. The functioning of the ministry takes a great deal of ongoing strategy and preparation. These departments' funding comes directly from the central church umbrella and recently included a financial campaign to extend the children and youth education departments' building and resources.

Within the past year, the leadership in the children's department has changed. Over the past ten years, there has been a relatively high turnover rate, installing new departmental leadership on average every three years. Low retention of leadership impacts the Christian education of children participating in the ministry. The retention of youth ministry staff is not unique to the WCCI fellowship, as early 21st-century research forecasted and brought attention to the topic.

Strommen, Jones, and Rahn highlight issues with the youth ministry career in their book, discussing the hopes, frustrations, and effectiveness of today's youth workers. The problems highlighted by the authors contend that youth pastor retention is a challenge because there's not

much known regarding youth pastors' fundamental career concerns.⁹ The early research they offer argued that job satisfaction, youth pastor's effectiveness, and longevity require more information to shift the perception of the higher youth ministry turnover.¹⁰ More research is needed to understand the nuances surrounding careers in youth ministry. Although this is true, the turnover rate potentially affects how parents receive support for their families' discipleship over time. The current children staff overseeing the department were leaders within the church before, returning to serve the department within the last year, managing the division by pastoral request.

Leadership shifts happen every three years in the ages 0-18 ministry. Youth workers' training has primarily stayed the same. This training still focuses heavily on customer service, safety, facilitating biblical curriculum, and children's assimilation during the worship and mid-week Bible study services.

A bridge ministry exists, connecting youth ages 18 and over into a young adult and adult Christian education and worship fellowship. This ministry is called SHiFT, a College & Young Adult Ministry at WCCI, with a mission to “re-present” God as “I Am.” Students transition into the emerging adult ministry within the church. This progress in the evolution of a student's transition depends on their readiness. Readiness to move beyond the children and youth departments' learned worship style is an individualized shift, unique to the young believer's development spiritually. The study did not address the nuances of these transitions throughout the entire ministry for emerging adults. The study does, however, consider how stakeholder

⁹ Strommen, Merton P., Karen E. Jones, and Dave Rahn. *Youth Ministry That Transforms : a Comprehensive Analysis of the Hopes, Frustrations, and Effectiveness of Today's Youth Workers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties/Zondervan, 2001), p. 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.36.

influences the process into adult Christian living.

Problem Presented

The problem addressed is the challenge facing parents as participants in their children's discipleship and faith development at WCCI and how this subsequently affects children and youth's discipleship across their lifespan. The problem manifests when youth pastors and workers struggle to help student ministries make real-life connections through discipleship and mission. The challenge increases when parents attempt to equip their children outside of the church through family discipleship to advance their faith. Being in a mega-church context without a thriving parent ministry further makes faith development over the lifespan a challenge between and during milestones. The problem exists because although the children and youth ministry have a theological premise and Christian education structure for discipleship, parents and ministry workers view the time spent on the church campus as opportunities for childcare during adult worship. Therefore, the church's perspective on parents as primary or secondary disciple-makers of their children and youth is virtually non-existent.

One of the reasons this problem requires the church's attention is because, as of 2011, 43% of young people drop off from church engagement between their teen and early adult years.¹¹ The Barna Group reported in 2011, 59% of young people with a Christian background stated they have dropped out of church attending after going regularly. This number jumped to 64% in 2019. A 5% increase in church drop out of young people in eight years demonstrates local congregations should be concerned about what determines the longevity of church attendance in the next generation. Further, if parents continue to be one of the most influential stakeholders in children and youth's lives, what role does the church play in supporting parents

¹¹ Kinnaman, David. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*. (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 2011), p. 22.

to disciple families? Parenting, discipleship, modeling, influence, faith sharing, and identity are topics of consideration, reflecting from the premise that parent ministry means supporting parents as primary spiritual formers of their children.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry action research project is to determine how the church currently supports parents as they develop the faith of their children and families. The problem is both researchable and significant for this ministry context. The localized context will allow for a critical, qualitative study of how the members and staff genuinely feel about parents wanting, needing, or expecting additional care and support on spiritual matters.

Many parents within the department rarely sit alongside their children during morning worship. Without this knowledge, parents may not understand the worship script's purpose and subsequently find it difficult to transition the lessons taught into practical living as a Christian. Accepting Jesus as savior, the sacrament of baptism, scripture memorization, and applying biblical stories may be conceptualized differently between parents, youth workers, and church leadership. For instance, there is an emphasis on the invitation and acceptance of Christ closer to later elementary and middle school age groups. Parents not knowing this may feel their child is ready to begin this process earlier and wonder why it has not happened for their child.

This disconnect in communication can concern a parent who does not embrace authority in influencing their child's faith. Parents inquire about participation within the discipleship department, have concerns about their role in their family's spiritual growth, and often reach out to the ministry leaders for direction. Being in a local church context gives the researcher some immediate access to the sample participants. Further, research is abundant within this field of church development on current data trends and parent/church discipleship

collaboration.

As the study evolved, the researcher determined there was a basis for strengthening family ministry by supporting parents as faith influencers of their children. In particular, it became essential to evaluate if this kind of support ministry would help parents become “disciples who make disciples.” Although there are many sources of research studies regarding how parents, churches, and students perceive parents and their role in Christian education and development, the construct's practicality and employment may present a different set of challenges.

Basic Assumptions

Through experience, the researcher believes some basic assumptions were true about how church leaders equip parents for ministering to their children outside the church. First, the researcher's almost ten years of experience within the ministry as a parent and with the children's department, including enrolling children in Sunday school activities, tracking systems, weekly assignments for students and parents through newsletters and fliers sent home, and invitations to extended activities beyond weekly worship services. Second, the researcher assumed the small number of sample participants does not fully represent parent influence on children's faith within the church. A third assumption pertains to how research participants were engaged in the study, as the church had several concerns about image and member anonymity. Coupled with the church's reservation to release personal information to access the members is the sample's perception as members within the WCCI fellowship, supporting the church mission and vision. There is an assumption the members prefer not to project an image that does not seem supportive of the church. In protecting the church's brand, participants may feel inclined to inflate or deflate answers, such as what the ministry offers, their own Christian experience in the

fellowship, and their connection with discipleship within their family.

There is also a basic assumption that parents' and youth workers' mindsets will be similar yet slightly different regarding the support expected and desired regarding family faith development. Youth workers within the department often use the phrase “labor of love” when discussing their role in the lives of volunteer church engagement. It is a phrase of endearment to demonstrate their appreciation and dedication within the ministry to disciple the young. Likewise, parents are exceedingly gracious and grateful for the youth leader’s faithfulness in caring for the children and youth during worship and Bible study hours. This response of gratitude for the time parents are allowed away from children to listen to the pastor(s) sermon without distraction may leave little room for critique of ministry support beyond regularly scheduled fellowship. There is a basic assumption that parents and workers are doing the best they can with the time they have and should not anticipate other means of faith development from each other.

This study's challenge is also the study’s beauty, as members protect what they believe about their faith community. “Any negative publicity associated with the organization may have adverse effects on the participation of its active and non-active members.”¹² The researcher accepts the juxtaposing emotion across the ministry regarding fear and trust. Fear and trust relate to releasing church information on the membership and its use within the project. As a general concern in all church fellowship areas, this dubious feeling of exposure is a protective mechanism woven into the tapestry of African American Christian ministry culture. Members and leaders grapple with the coexistence of prudence and honesty concerning what the church fellowship does and does not do well in supporting children, volunteers, parents, and staff. Fear

¹² Riza Casidy, “How Great Thy Brand: The Impact of Church Branding on Perceived Benefits. *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*. 18, no. 3 (2013): pg 231–239.

and trust are natural tendencies within faith communities as parishioners entertain others' examination, even those extending well-meaning intentions with and for the ministry's sake.

Definitions

There are words within the study used interchangeably. Ministry and church used within the context of the study mean the activity of the fellowship. However, the ministry also denotes a specific area functioning independently as a sub-department based on age, function, or relevant connection to the church at large. Examples are children's ministry and youth workers ministry, which both come under the Christian education department as a branch within the overarching WCCI church fellowship.

Children and youth primarily denote those who experience church ministry by participating in the under age 18 departments within the church, such as church school, Bible study, fine arts, sports, and recreational engagement. Youth workers and volunteers used interchangeably in the study indicate individuals who offer unpaid time to teach and facilitate campus and online lessons, discipleship, and worship engagement with children, youth, and young adults.

Employees of the church are staff members, considered paid personnel of the church, either currently or in the past. Some staff members serve multiple roles as leaders, workers, and parents. The research methodology, result, and conclusion intend to differentiate as needed for those within the participant sample that fall into this category.

Parents' role as primary faith influencers in children's spiritual development remains an essential consideration within this research context. Primary influencers used within the study denote the unique position adult stakeholders have in the lives of children. The literature review further explores this assumption. Parents as chief in children's faith influence implied in the

research's discovery process considers previous research on the topic.

As defined by The Hartford Institute, the word megachurch describes the congregation's size as being unusually large, with more than 2,000 members affiliated with the ministry.¹³ The widely used definition encapsulates the term and experience of megachurch ministry. The word ministry describes the church at large. Ministry also signifies different departments within the church. When using the word ministry as a branch within the church, it is generally preceded by a descriptive name such as youth, young adult, parent, or volunteer, to denote a specific area.

Limitations

There are several limitations with this study beyond the control of the researcher. One limitation involves accessibility to leadership. Upon commencement of the study, the researcher, permitted by the administration, accessed a specific group of leaders within the ministry, including the children's and youth ministry workers. There was limited access to leadership to gather relevant information on parent involvement and training.

A second limitation concerns access to the youth department materials due to the church closure during the Coronavirus pandemic, also known as COVID-19. There are no face-to-face worship gatherings or ministry meetings on campus at this time. COVID-19 prevented the study from considering physical resources the researcher desire to use in collecting data. A Pew Research Study revealed among U.S. adults who attend religious services at least monthly; historically, Black Churches have the least church closures at 79% closed. The largest group, at 7%, still gathering at their house of worship during the pandemic. Christian, protestant, evangelical, mainline, and Catholic all have more than 90% closed edifices.¹⁴ There are fewer

¹³ The Hartford Institute for Religious Research, "Mega Church Definition". <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/megachurch/definition.html>, 2020.

¹⁴ Pew Research Center, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/30/few-americans-say-their->

leaders and parents to connect with, and it takes additional preparation and scheduling to have both phone and video conferences. Third, it was challenging to survey and poll participants, as the church administration provided no contact information on membership. The church administration also refused to send out emails to advertise the study. However, the ministry leaders did permit and encourage the researcher to use personal connections to engage sample participants in the congregation.

The pastoral staff made clear there will not be any ministry implementation to determine how parent training aspects in the children's discipleship impact the families, youth ministry, or church at large. In his book on action research, Ernest Stringer encourages this to be essential during the beginning stages of a research project, making contact with stakeholder groups as quickly as possible to inform them of events and needs about the research process.¹⁵

Delimitations

One of the delimitations during this research was the topic only focusing on supports within the ministry. Second, the study had a narrow population sample, specifically targeting leaders, parents, children, and youth. Other ministry departments and community affiliations are not necessarily a priority in the methodology or approach. A third delimitation is the researcher did not consider studying parents and leaders who have transitioned out of the children and youth ministry departments. Therefore, the study does not determine how successful or unsuccessful past parent influence had on children and youth's discipleship into adulthood. Finally, the researcher was limited in communication with personnel relevant to the study based on recent societal norms resulting from COVID-19.

[house-of-worship-is-open-but-a-quarter-say-their-religious-faith-has-grown-amid-pandemic/](#), 2020.

¹⁵ Stringer, Ernest T. *Action Research*. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), p. 76.

The study did not intend to negate the current ministry practices regarding how parents are engaged. The researcher acknowledges the benefits of the ministry's mission to provide a loving, empathetic environment, emphasizing grace-based teaching and believing. The researcher also accepts the uniqueness of the large ministry setting, with varying populations. With this consideration, the researcher understands the ministry's expectation of customer service, order, and careful management of children. The church values the needs for safety on the church campus and appropriate adult-to-children number ratios in classroom contexts.

Thesis Statement

Suppose WCCI discovers the power of supporting parents as primary disciplers of children and youth? In that case, the youth workers and volunteers can be intentional in guiding parents through the process of discipleship with their families. Cognitively, there is a shift needed among adult stakeholders in children and youth's lives. They are responsible for facilitating faith talks, biblical knowledge and understanding, critical thinking of scriptural application, and processing lessons taught to develop Christian living aspects.

Faith talks are formal and informal moments young people have with adults and peers on becoming and evolving as a Christian. Biblical precepts generally are communicated through basic worship lessons but can be taught and reinforced in other ministry activities and home contexts. Understanding Scripture requires critical thinking, facilitated by those with biblical training. It is an undertaking of the discipleship procession, transitioning Scripture memorization into life implementation and character development. This process develops the lifestyle of Christian existence.

Therefore, the individual(s) making a consistent impact in this area of faith development helps determine where students will return to for guidance across their lifespan. The responsible

party's question may not be relevant in the beginning elements of church experience for children. However, it becomes imperative as teens become more independently capable of forming ideas about their own spiritual identity. As teens mature, they determine if they believe it is necessary to follow their parents' footsteps.

Outside sources may eventually impact the infrastructure of faith development, such as institutions of learning, peer relationships, and media. Over time, if the primary responsibility of making disciples of children is not definitive from generation to generation, it places both stakeholders and youth in challenging predicaments. The basis of having faith at all comes into question in particular as emerging adults determine if they will hold on to Christian precepts throughout their lifespan.

Spiritual growth over the lifespan is crouched in foundational core beliefs from childhood through emerging adulthood. Christian education through the church for parents as primary influencers of their children's faith will develop parental discipleship skills to demonstrate biblical precepts and practical life application for Christian living.

Faith and culture can run in tandem and experience collisions when the guardrails of authority are not in place. Youth and young adults begin seeking beyond their parents and the church to influence their faith if they lack molding and mentorship. The early interactions between child and caregiver are at the core of the theory of attachment. The bond developed as early as infancy with a caregiver is the developmental nucleus of identity formation, intrapersonal regulation, and interpersonal attitudes.¹⁶

Perceptions of faith begin to develop in early childhood. Therefore, when the primary caregiver does not adequately address or answer religion and faith questions,

¹⁶ Levy, Kenneth N. and Benjamin N. Johnson. "Attachment and Psychotherapy: Implications from Empirical Research." *Canadian Psychology* 60, no. 3 (08, 2019): p. 178

children over time feel vulnerable and without a clear shepherd. These insecurities may initiate attachment to other belief systems beyond the auspices of church fellowship and parental leadership. With this in mind, this study aimed to determine if parents are the prominent influencing presence in a child's life. Suppose previous literature provides a basis for this assumption within the project. How does the church consider the implications and begin efforts to facilitate Christian education that prepares parents to disciple children?

The methodology used to advance this study is a qualitative approach, exploring the varying aspects of church engagement with families, specifically adult parental guardians. Through a survey of faith development, the researcher examined the discipleship ideology of congregants as they navigate the campus and extend their spiritual understanding into day-to-day life.

The researcher compared the collection of responses within the different sample categories. These results intend to provide direction for the church's next steps in building capacity within leaders serving the Christian education department. Additionally, these findings are dialogue tools for parents to begin an engaging conversation about practically teaching and practicing the fellowship's tenets of the Christian faith. The research gleanings sought to preemptively assist parents as they infuse confidence into their approach to child-rearing and overall Christian living example.

Finally, the study's results provide youth workers and volunteer the beginning steps of strategy that guide the direction of their calling in the lives of the children they serve. Youth leaders can further use the concluding questions to brainstorm creative ways of helping parents extend their stewardship in their children's spiritual journeys.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

This chapter includes the literature review, theological foundations, and theoretical foundations that expand the thesis project introduction. It explains the themes found in most of the literature through paraphrases and footnotes regarding faith development and parents as primary influencers. The theological context and theoretical foundation are expanded in this section and considers specific areas that lean into the research study.

The literature review demonstrates the main areas explored in the research design. These areas include parenting, discipleship, modeling, influence, and identity. These sections will offer previous and current scholarly evaluation as it pertains to the thesis. The literature review gathered exposes gaps in the research and provides insights in approaching the study's qualitative methodology. Further, the literature review helped the researcher discern gaps in understanding the church had not considered, like the importance of shaping parental influence on children's faith while engaging through weekly ministry. Grappling with these gaps gives research direction on how local churches view parental guidance in undergirding children's spiritual development into adulthood and across their life span.

The theological foundations reflect the scriptural fundamentals considered when approaching the basic assumptions of parental role related to children's faith. This heading explores the Old and New Testament precepts and stories that provide admonitions concerning parenthood in the Bible. This section lays out specific biblical references and expectations of fathers' and mothers' parental influence as leaders and is foundational to the presented research model.

Finally, the theoretical foundation section references work necessary to the analysis of the research. Historical, purposeful, exemplary status, God relationship, and relevant youth

ministry foundations are explored, demonstrating the research study's basis. Christianity's history is the backdrop against the tapestry of denominational, ecclesiastical, and Jesus Christ's catechism as savior. This section provides some review of the importance of history in Christian education. Further, theory as it pertains to the individual purpose and the exemplary status of children offered. As the study evolved, the researcher discovered the unique relational aspects between God and young believers. The God-child relationship is also a thoughtful consideration in youth ministry within and foundational to the culture of African-American, urban church reality.

Literature Review

Parenting

Paul Tripp describes the silent but deadly problem afflicting many parents as their gap in understanding, celebrating, and relying upon God's grace.¹ In the absence of parents acknowledging grace, Tripp suggests, they get lost in doing lots of things, good things, losing sight of what they are working on and building.² With this in mind, is the church positioned to teach this model of grace to undergird the specific role and influence of the parental relationship? Further, how can the church support parents when they fail to consider grace in their rearing and example as Christian leaders? According to Chap Clark, most churches include parent ministry as part of student education, developing a family ministry, with an intergenerational fellowship approach as part of the inclusive youth ministry strategy.³ However, parent ministry design may

¹ Tripp, Paul, *Parenting: The 14 Radical Gospel Principles That Can Radically Change Your Family* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), p. 33.

²Ibid., p. 11.

³ Chap Clark, *Adoptive Church: Creating an Environment Where Emerging Generations Belong* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), p. 64.

not come from a place of grace, intention, and influence.

A study by the Barna Group on pastors and parents differing on youth ministry goals revealed seven out of ten parents with teenagers regularly attending youth groups say there is a “major expectation” for the youth pastor to disciple their children.⁴ This mentality of Christian parents does not necessarily make them irresponsible parents. Strommen and Hardel offer that parents may believe their children's discipleship's accountability encompasses transporting their children to church. These parents are unaware of how to model faith, considering it was not modeled to them as they were growing up.⁵ These authors insist all is not lost for parents to take the lead on faith with their children and develop the “family-congregation partnership.”⁶

The idea of parents as the primary influence of their children’s faith has emerged in recent literature. Brian Haynes describes parents having the direct influence of their children’s faith as the first milestone in a series of milestones across the Christian faith’s lifespan.⁷ Another Barna Group study on parents and pastors as partners in Generation Z discipleship found that “three out of five engaged Christian parents feel primarily responsible for developing their teen’s faith. Thirty-six percent say that it’s mostly them, with the help of church leaders.”⁸ David Briggs offers results from a landmark study on youth and religion.⁹ The results contend that mothers and fathers who practice what they preach and preach what they practice have a much more significant influence on adolescents maintaining faith into

⁴ Barna Group, Pastors and Parents Differ on Youth Ministry Goals, March 2017, <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-parents-differ-youth-ministry-goals/>

⁵ Strommen, Merton P. and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Minnesota: Saint Mary’s Press, 2000), 17.

⁶ Ibid., p.17.

⁷ Haynes, Brian, *Shift: What It Finally Takes to Reach Families Today* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009), p.54.

⁸ Barna Group, Parent and Pastors: Partner in Gen Z Discipleship, July, 2018, <https://www.barna.com/research/parents-and-pastors-partners-in-gen-z-discipleship/>

⁹ David Briggs, “Parents are Top Influence in Teens Remaining Active in Religion as Young Adults”, *The Christian Century*, (2014) p.17.

their twenties.¹⁰

Responsibility for children and youth's discipleship is an ongoing discussion, but the church equipping parents with tools to be leaders in their homes is critical. Growing young through key chain leadership is a model Powell, Mulder, and Griffin discuss as an opportunity to build capacity in next-generation Christians.¹¹ The authors contend the one that holds the keys holds power.¹² The analogy of key holding denotes the power children and youth have when capacity is built in their spiritual journey, demonstrating trust regarding their ministry service and their relationship with God.

Jared Wilson, in his book, *A Gentle Manifesto Against the Status Quo: The Prodigal Church*, extensively examines young families' intentions and why they begin at a specific church. These young families transition from the goal of having a high-impact children's ministry and worship style fitting for mothers and fathers to a church that is student-driven. Wilson further explains that as the kids get older and the parents also, worship may not resonate with one or all family members, exposing the church's reality did not win over the family. However, it was the menu of services offered at any particular period in the growing family's life.¹³ As families begin to grapple with their church context and find their place in the fellowship, parents can start considering how their belief system is demonstrated by what they say and do inside and outside the church building.

Parents teaching children the Christian faith's belief system and how those beliefs curate into values do so by their commitment and reasoning in church fellowship, attendance, and service. However, this study considers additional aspects of parental faith influence as missing in the context in which the sample derives. This local church studied is not unique in separating children, youth, and adult worship

¹⁰ David Briggs, "Parents are Top Influence in Teens Remaining Active in Religion as Young Adults", *The Christian Century*, (2014) p.17.

¹¹ Powell, Kara, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: Six Essential Strategies to Help Young People Discover and Love Your Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2019), p. 52.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 52.

¹³ Wilson, Jared. *A Gentle Manifesto Against the Status Quo: The Prodigal Church*. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), p. 36.

and activities. In doing so, there are ritualistic considerations children may not understand or be exposed to until later in their Christian experience. Repetition is essential for child learning, and rituals do offer a repetitive learning environment and so much more.¹⁴

In an article studying the importance of ritual knowledge for child faith development, Julie Cavanaugh asserts Sunday school teaches elements of what it means to be a Christian by telling stories and faith traditions. However, it is the act of rituals that teach how to be a Christian. An example is by enacting those stories and practices through the church community's ritual actions, such as the dying and rising experience in baptism and the grateful reception of communion.¹⁵ This theoretical consideration confirms the researcher's supposition that although Christian education departments provide critical instruction, these branches within the ministry may also, if not careful, negate the modeling moments parents have in the worship experience that make that instruction real and palpable.

Discipleship

Opoku Onyinah, in an article on the meaning of discipleship, encourages becoming more like Christ in everything is the essential view of discipleship.¹⁶ The author offers this perspective:

When handling a topic like 'The Meaning of Discipleship', there is often a conflict between my pastoral and academic sides. As I was a pastor for 20 years before getting into academia, the two often seem incompatible. Discipleship cannot just be made from academia. Disciples are made hands-on, by practitioners. Yet, it is the academics who produce the tools for the practitioners to work with. There is always the need for a "missionary" to make the two compatible.¹⁷

The tools of the practitioners reflect how discipleship occurs. Terry Linhart explains that

¹⁴Cavanaugh, Julie. "The Importance of Ritual Learning for the Development of Child Faith." *Crux* 55 (2): 24–34. (2019), p. 30.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹⁶ Onyinah, Opoku, "The Meaning of Discipleship." *International Review of Mission*/Volume 106, Issue 2: (December 2017) p. 12.

¹⁷ Onyinah, *The Meaning of Discipleship*, 12.

when students are taught the Bible and following Jesus, more happens than just disseminating information.¹⁸ He continues that the role in partnering with the Holy Spirit in the process should be that of a servant in spiritual formation.¹⁹ Now, how do parents enter the space of spiritual formers? Brian Dembowczyk discusses milestone celebrations for parenting that show God prioritizes parents and grandparents as often forgotten stakeholders in churches.²⁰

Recent Barna research revealed the top two highest priorities in youth ministry goals by seven out of ten senior pastors, and youth leaders are discipleship and spiritual instruction.²¹ Analysis by *The Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* provides insight into parents and family discipleship concerning views on the primary location of Bible teaching. The study notes the more a person agrees the church is the main place children receive Bible teaching, the less the person's engagement is likely to occur for home-based family discipleship actions.²²

The research further presented that these same parents are also less likely to engage in conversation about their families' spiritual development.²³ However, culture has an impact on how parents perceive their role in discipleship. David Briggs's article on parents having main influences on teenagers determined that cultural messaging that encourages parents to turn their

¹⁸ Linhart, Terry. *Teaching the Next Generations: A Comprehensive Guide for Teaching Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers Publishing, 2016), p. 34.

¹⁹ Linhart, Terry. *Teaching the Next Generations: A Comprehensive Guide for Teaching Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers Publishing, 2016), p. 34.

²⁰ Linhart, Terry. *Teaching the Next Generations: A Comprehensive Guide for Teaching Christian Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Bakers Publishing, 2016), p. 162.

²¹ Barna Group. *Pastors and Parents Differ on Youth Ministry Goals* (March 2017), <https://www.barna.com/research/pastors-parents-differ-youth-ministry-goals/>

²² W. Ryan Steenburg. "Research Brief: Effective Practices for Training Parents in Family Discipleship," *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry*, (Spring 2011), p. 47

²³ Steenburg, *Research Brief: Effective Practices for Training Parents*, p. 47.

children over to experts consider faith formation to be the primary responsibility of Sunday schools, youth groups, and clergy.²⁴

Modeling

Being a disciple example within families encompasses modeling the behavior of Christ. Representing God as a giver of grace, communicating that grace, and showing children they need grace means modeling grace in speech and actions toward children in grace.²⁵ Further, authority is a foundational heart issue for children; therefore, modeling authority's protective beauty is a good parent practice.²⁶ When responsible adult leaders (parents, pastors, ministry workers, etc.) enter students' lives, students move toward responsibility and self-reliance, as the main approach students learn through modeled behavior of others who inspire them.²⁷

Modeling in worship is another aspect of spiritual formation and discipleship. Setting expectations unintentionally occurs when modeling a certain level of worship, and modeling reverence through quiet, orderly participation. Terry Linhart suggests these occurrences are not necessarily discussed in worship-planning meetings yet show respect for God and others.²⁸ David Briggs's findings at the Yale Divinity School demonstrate no more significant influence on religious faith than parents' influence.²⁹

²⁴ David Briggs, "Parents are Top Influence in Teens Remaining Active in Religion as Young Adults," *The Christian Century*, (2014), p. 18.

²⁵ Tripp, Paul, *Parenting: The 14 Radical Gospel Principles that Can Radically Change Your Family* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), p. 62.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

²⁷ Richard Ross, "Youth Ministry in Thirds: To Accelerate the Development of Lifetime Faith," *Journal of Youth Ministry*, (Spring 2018), p. 98.

²⁸ Linhart, *Teaching the Next Generations*, p. 50.

²⁹ Briggs, *Parents are Top Influence*, p. 17.

Influence

Brian Haynes writes that the church's expectations for families to impact children and young people require giving parents tools to have faith talks, celebrate milestones, and make the most of seeing God.³⁰ Research on faith across the lifespan by Richard Ross shows that parents of adolescents have the distinct, most important social influence on their religious and spiritual lives.³¹ With this in mind, although there may be several impeding factors to spiritual growth, parents still have the most significant impact. The previously mentioned Yale Divinity School study noted by Briggs showed no more palpable influence on religious faith than parents.³² More to this point, Strommen and Hardel conclude that although social forces often diminish influence, families have tremendous power to shape their children's lives.³³

Sharon Ketcham contends that churches are competing for attention, as religion is less influential across society than ever before; as conditioned consumers, Christianity can instantly become a mere consumable product.³⁴ Part of consuming is the art of being a learner or student. This kind of consumption may be the most salvific for the next generation Christian, initiated by stakeholders in the church such as youth pastors, leaders, mentors, and parents. Terry Linhart suggests a person becoming is greatly influenced by the role learning plays, especially when the

³⁰ Haynes, Brian. *Shift: What It Finally Takes to Reach Families Today*. (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, 2009) p. 113.

³¹ Richard Ross, "Youth Ministry in Thirds: To Accelerate the Development of Lifetime Faith", *Journal of Youth Ministry*, (Spring 2018), p. 94.

³² David Briggs, "Parents are Top Influence in Teens Remaining Active in Religion as Young Adults", *The Christian Century*, (2014), p. 17

³³ Strommen, Merton P. and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry*. (Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 2000), p.7.

³⁴ Sharon Ketcham, "Embodied Pathways to Joy: Family Instability and the Lament of Faith Communities", *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, (2019), p. 19-20.

teacher realizes they impact the identity, vision, and self-perception of a student.³⁵ The author offers this becoming shapes a person, providing an understanding of their role in the world.³⁶

Christian instruction's learning moment often fashioned by parent's attitudes, connection with God, and perspective on the parent-child relationship's sanctity makes a difference in the faith journey. In a study on the dimension of religiousness that influences parenting, Weyand, O'Laughlin, and Bennet revealed that a parents' function is less likely to impact parents who sanctify the relationship with their child, especially when parenting a child with behaviors.³⁷ Within this research, sanctification is a term used to describe a person's tendency to connect spiritual or religious significance to certain parts of life, such as a child's birth or near-death experience.³⁸

Passing the baton of faith from generation to generation comes from the continuous plan that God initiated. There is a basic pattern that allows for youth to receive from their elders the church's mission.³⁹ The Vision Quest Research Project at ITC cited specific deep questions to address youth regarding faith and life, such as: "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" "Why is life so hard?" and "What has God got to do with it?"⁴⁰ These questions aid in the processing of sharing faith, assisting parents, families, ministries, and students in determining how faith connects to life.

³⁵ Linhart, *Teaching the Next Generations*, p. 108.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Weyand, Chelsea, Liz O'Laughlin, and Patrick Bennett. "Dimensions of Religiousness That Influence Parenting." *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no. 3 (August 2013): 182–91. doi:10.1037/a0030627, p. 189

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴⁰ Ann E.S. Wimberly, "Black Youth Speak Out: An Urgent Call for Hope-Bearing Response", *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 25, no.2, July (2016), p. 6.

Ann Wimberly writes on the response to Black youth reaching out. Wimberly's study showed that sharing parents' religious beliefs is likely to continue if there is a strong attachment relationship, even as youth emerge into adulthood.⁴¹ Attachment relationship between fathers in African American Christian faith communities also makes a difference in the extension of faith into adulthood for Black youth. Johnny Hill writes on modern Black ministry, suggesting that when it comes to the Black church, there is a core belief that when churches intentionally minister to Black fathers' needs, there is a path for stronger, healthier families with ministry rooted in Scripture.⁴² The essential question is if parents are to be influencers of their children's faith in any capacity, primary, secondary, or other, what is the church's role to equip, support, and nurture this from a familial perspective?

Christian parents' concerns and expectations can further evidence faith-sharing morphing into the youth's ability to explain their faith. A Barna Group study revealed certain expectations of 9 out of 10 engaged parents who identify as Christian, regularly attend church, and have orthodox beliefs. These parents considered it imperative their child is equipped to explain Christian faith and be engaged in service to have overall strong faith in adulthood.⁴³ Further, the study demonstrated sharing time in worship together also impacts the faith of teens. However, David Briggs contends teens more likely to be actively religious as young adults had parents who attended worship with them.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Kathleen Leonard, Kaye Cook, Chris Boyatzis, Cynthia Kimbal, and Kelly Flanagan, "Parent-Child Dynamics and Emerging Adult Religiosity: Attachment, Parental Beliefs, and Faith Support" *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, (2013), p. 7.

⁴² Hill, Johnny B. *Multidimensional Ministry for Today's Black Family*. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007). p. XVIII.

⁴³ Barna Group, "Parent and Pastors: Partner in Gen Z Discipleship", Barna.com, July, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/parents-and-pastors-partners-in-gen-z-discipleship/>

⁴⁴ David Briggs, "Parents are Top Influence in Teens Remaining Active in Religion as Young Adults", *The Christian Century*, (2014), p.18.

Urie Bronfenbrenner developed a model widely known in the theory of human development.⁴⁵ The PPCT model is a theoretical approach Bronfenbrenner developed to consider process-person-contact-time, measuring reciprocal interactions in an environment.⁴⁶ Michael A. Goodman and W. Justin Dyer were able to use this model to investigate whether there were different effects of parent religiosity on adolescent religiosity's trajectory. Further, their research explored what family and adolescent factors were related to these differential effects.⁴⁷ The study's findings suggested that parental religiosity positively impacts the transmission and development of adolescent faith. The results further suggested parental impact is not necessarily uniform in nature for all adolescents. On average, the study showed adolescent religiosity decreases somewhat from the ages of 13 to 19.⁴⁸

Identity

Parents shape the identity of children in precise ways. Leonard, Cook, Boyatzis, Kimbal, and Flanagan, in an article on parent-child dynamics site J.W. Fowler on the stages of faith, noting that adolescents have synthetic-conventional faith, also known as conforming, or noncritical faith.⁴⁹ Further, Fowler asserts that emerging adults, in contrast, have an individually reflective faith, which is more owned in that the identity and worldview developed during one's upbringing is critically scrutinized and perhaps revised or abandoned. The authors reveal that

⁴⁵ Michael A. Goodman and W. Justin Dyer, "From Parent to Child: Family Factors That Influence Faith", *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, (2020), p. 180.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 188.

⁴⁹ Kathleen Leonard, Kaye Cook, Chris Boyatzis, Cynthia Kimbal, and Kelly Flanagan, "Parent-Child Dynamics and Emerging Adult Religiosity: Attachment, Parental Beliefs, and Faith Support", *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, (2013), p.6.

research supports this kind of growth in identity and faith during emerging adulthood.⁵⁰

In an article on lasting faith, Barry Gane suggests that youth begin to separate from their parents as adolescence approaches adulthood, establishing their own identity and set of beliefs.⁵¹ Strommen and Hardel continue with this thinking, considering if parental faith, discipleship, and identity shaping did not play a role in faith-building. Their influence may not engraft into the emerging adult's hybrid individuality. Intergenerational life has a significant function in transmitting stories and promises which identify the family, as new generations demonstrate an inheritance that offers purpose, vocation, identity, and roots.⁵²

Adolescent spirituality, when supported by adults, shapes identity uniquely. Parents and guardians, church leaders, and workers must consider children's autonomous identity development, specifically through adolescence. It would be well to note that youth culture's guidance and support impact spiritual exploration and responsibility for life and adult citizens.⁵³

There are often challenges to familial support of the faith of children. One major challenge to youth is during divorce or separation. Divorce, in particular, is a permeating issue facing children and adolescents in the Christian faith and affects their identity. For instance, divorce disrupts children's existence, fundamentally dividing their reality and shifting their entire narrative.⁵⁴ The Journal of Youth ministry wrestles with divorce, offering research regarding

⁵⁰ Kathleen Leonard, Kaye Cook, Chris Boyatzis, Cynthia Kimbal, and Kelly Flanagan, "Parent-Child Dynamics and Emerging Adult Religiosity: Attachment, Parental Beliefs, and Faith Support", *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, (2013), p.6.

⁵¹ Barry Gane, "Adolescent Faith That Lasts", *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, (2014), p. 44.

⁵² Strommen, Merton P. and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 2000), 28.

⁵³ Anastasia Apostolides, "Adolescent Spirituality with the Support of Adults", *HTS Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 73, no. 4 (2017), p. 5.

⁵⁴ Andrew Root, "Divorce, Young People and Youth Ministry: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being" *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, (Fall 2011), p. 80.

youth ministries and their lack of preparedness to help youth grapple with their core sense of being before, during, and following a divorce. It further explores the loss of identity amid vast familial changes reinforced by community support and a sense of belonging.⁵⁵

Sexual identity and faith also intersect when parents face cultural norms that affect adolescents' choices into young adulthood. The *Journal of Religion and Health* studied socialization and religiosity. Taggart et al. commend that religiosity is a by-product of religious socialization, specifically from parents and extended family members. Further, they determined the reinforcement of socialization through religiosity reduces the likelihood of adolescent sexual commencement.⁵⁶ This research reveals that parents can influence intimate topics when engaging the Christian faith's talks with their children.

Theological Foundations

Old Testament Foundations

The relevance of parental impact on experiencing God across the lifespan has intentional roots in the Old Testament. In an article on raising children the Christian way, Peter Gentry refers to Proverbs as a handbook or manual for parents. In Proverbs, Gentry exclaims the king of Israel trains and instructs his son to live well and speak skillfully concerning the covenant in Deuteronomy.⁵⁷ Gentry contends that Deuteronomy 6:6 is a biblical acknowledgment that all aspects of instruction and living, from boundary markers on farm properties to boundary markers

⁵⁵ Andrew Root, "Divorce, Young People and Youth Ministry: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being", *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, (Fall 2011), p. 70.

⁵⁶ Taggart, Tamara, Nisha Gottfredson, Wisdom Powell, Susan Ennett, Linda M Chatters, Lori Carter-Edwards, and Eugenia Eng. 2018. "The Role of Religious Socialization and Religiosity in African American and Caribbean Black Adolescents' Sexual Initiation." *Journal of Religion and Health* 57 (5): (2018) 1889–1904. p. 1892.

⁵⁷ Peter J. Gentry, "Equipping the Generations: Raising Children, the Christian Way." *The Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 2.2 (2012): p 96.

in sex, reflect parental influence and teaching. The Scripture says, “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.”

Another Old Testament consideration is that of Exodus 12:26-27, ESV⁵⁸. The Scripture says, “And when your children ask you, ‘What does this ceremony mean to you?’ then tell them, ‘It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians.’ Then the people bowed down and worshiped.” Victor Hamilton offers commentary on Exodus 12, explaining when Moses articulated his anticipation of the coming day. Once the Israelites settled into Canaan, the children will ask their parents the meaning of the Passover ceremony.⁵⁹ This expectation of questions by the children and answers by the parents, Hamilton further highlights, is echoed in Exodus 13:14-16, Deuteronomy 6:20-25, and Joshua 4:6-7, 21-22.

Further, Hamilton leans into the Scripture in the Exodus Scripture, seeing similar instruction in Deuteronomy 6:8. This Scripture exclaims, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.” It was a pattern for God's people to explain what happened and its significance, why it is vital to the whole community and the individual child.⁶⁰

Another Old Testament scriptural reference regarding parents and children is 1 Samuel 1:27-28 “For this child I prayed, and the LORD has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore, I have lent him to the LORD. As long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD.” In a

⁵⁸ Exodus 12:26-27, English Standard Version (ESV). Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references in this thesis project will be from the English Standard Version of the Bible.

⁵⁹ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Academic, 2011). ProQuest Ebook Central, p. 196.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

commentary on 1 Samuel, Ralph Klein explains how Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, named her son Samuel, which means ask, and once he is weaned, he would be given back to Yahweh.⁶¹ Hannah gave Samuel to Eli, and as a mediator of the blessing in boy, Eli passed his leadership to Samuel. This process of giving children back to God is a church practice orchestrated differently in various denominations. However, a parents' act of dedicating children to God has significance to the child's life and directly influences the children's spiritual maturation.

New Testament Foundations

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus makes grand pronouncements regarding his feelings toward the significance of children. In Matthew 18, there was a great debate on who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus surprised them all by not naming one among the disciples but summoning a little child in the middle of them. Matthew 18:4-5 says, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever received one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and be drowned in the depth of the sea."

The drama of this answer demonstrates the seriousness in which Jesus viewed children and their way of being. Characteristics such as humility and impressionability of children were of high regard and used as an example to skilled, disciplined, and religious men entering the kingdom of heaven. In a commentary on Matthew, Jeannine Brown explains that Jesus used a child to demonstrate how misguided the disciples were in seeking greatness in the kingdom.⁶²

⁶¹ Ralph Klein, *1 Samuel, Volume 10: Second Edition*, (Grand Rapids: Harper Collins Christian Publishing, 2014), p. 65, 66.

⁶² Jeannine K. Brown, *Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 2015), p. 209.

Brown contends the scripture reveals that the disciples should be assuming the lowest status within the kingdom community.⁶³ In another commentary on the book of Matthew, Rodney Reeves examines the intent of the question by the disciples and determines the ultimate goal was honor.⁶⁴ Honor was a highly competitive, sought-after recognition at this time, as some received it by their position of king, priest, or being fathers, and others through social approval.⁶⁵ In addition to the conversation about status, Jesus contributes the importance of not causing a child that believes in Him to stumble. The influence upon a child, or those who humble themselves as children, implies expecting to prevent children from stumbling. Therefore, there is certain stewardship of children required by Jesus.

In the article mentioned above by Peter Gentry, there is an expounding of parents' role in children's lives. The author offers that the Bible does not divide up education into subjects, some of which are sacred and others secular. Gentry offers on the parent's role, "When in Ephesians Paul says, "bring them up," this verb is referring to all aspects of education, whether we are talking about mathematics or moral training."⁶⁶

In the book of Mark 10:13-16, Jesus again exalts the embodiment of childhood by saying, "And they were bringing children to him that he might touch them, and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it, he was indignant and said to them. 'Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does

⁶³ Ibid., p. 209

⁶⁴ Rodney Reeves, *Matthew*, (New York, NY, Harper Collins Christian Publishing, 2017), p. 360.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 360.

⁶⁶ Gentry, Peter J. "Equipping the Generations: Raising Children, the Christian Way." *The Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* 2.2 (2012): 96–109., p. 97

not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.’ And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.”

In a commentary on the book of Mark, Grant Osborne suggests that with one statement, Jesus gave children a critical place in the church’s strategy, placing child evangelism as a priority.⁶⁷ This reference sustains the necessity for children to be part of the church and receive healing of all sorts through Christ. Osborne continues explaining how Jews viewed children more a burden than a blessing, and Jesus elevates their status to ones who have ownership in the kingdom of heaven.⁶⁸ The author notes two truths Jesus highlights about children. First, they represent the lowly and rejected, and He especially relates to children for this reason. Again, the second denotes ownership of the kingdom or who it belongs to, as children model vulnerability, trust, dependence, openness to Jesus’s truths, the signifies true discipleship. Children receive guidance from parents without question and copy the actions of their parents. Jesus welcomes and pours out blessings on children as a parental role model, exemplifying the nature of God and his children.⁶⁹

Fatherly Instructional Foundation

Fatherhood is a theological construct, thematic throughout Scripture, often accompanied by the idea of instruction and learning. Ephesians 6:4 says, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.” Paul directs fathers expressly to refrain from provocation parents often find themselves evoking when dealing with children. As a direct, adverse response, Paul considers training and instructional exercises that

⁶⁷ Grant R. Osborne, *Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), p. 173.

⁶⁸ Grant R. Osborne, *Mark*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2014), p. 173.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

heed the Lord's direction as more profitable in the parent-child relational experience.

In an article on restructuring the Christian fatherhood model, Juanita Meyer offers, "Indirectly, a present father supports the mother emotionally and works in a collaborated effort into decisions regarding educational matters and the health and well-being of the children." Meyer further expands the thought of the father's influence, conceptualizing the meaning of 'patriarch,' understanding it also as the reign of a father, which is incredibly dominant in Christian discourses around fatherhood, attaching godlike authority to the role of the father and husband.⁷⁰ A South African study on Christian fathers' views of their role as mentors by Freeks, Greeff, and Lotter provides perceptions into the transmission of values within the family context. Participants reported that fathers were leaders in the family, being called by God to do so, believing as Christians that there was something inside their family members placed there by God.⁷¹

Motherly Instructional Foundation

Mothers are foundational to the instruction and training of children in an impactful yet different way than fathers. Again, the Proverbs provide some conversational exchange between mother and child, commending the young to listen to fatherly instruction and consider their means of trust in God. Proverbs 31 extends an oracle that King Lemuel's mother taught him about women, sobriety, altruistic behaviors that demonstrate empathy toward others in becoming a righteous judge. Another wisdom truth of many in Proverbs can be found in chapter 29, verse 15, imploring, "A rod and a reprimand impart wisdom, but a child left undisciplined disgraces its

⁷⁰ Meyer, Juanita. 2018. "Restructuring the Christian Fatherhood Model: A Practical Theological Investigation into the 'Male Problematic' of Father Absence." *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 74 (1): 1–11. doi:10.4102/hts.v74i1.4870. p.2

⁷¹ Freeks, F., M. Greeff and G. Lotter. 2015 "Views of Christian Fathers of Their Role as Mentors in the Transmission of Values Within the Family Context.", *Journal for Christian Scholarship*, 2:2 (2012): p. 9-10.

mother.”

A study on mothers and media’s role on emerging adults’ religious faith, Barry, Padilla-Walker, and Nelson provide insight into faith practices into adulthood. As anticipated in their research design, emerging adults had higher religious faith levels. Emerging adults were more likely to have prosocial values internalized when perceiving their current relationship with their mothers as nurturing and reassuring, having opportunities for companionship, and opening to intimate disclosure.⁷²

In her book entitled *Guilt-Free Motherhood: Parenting with Godly Wisdom*, Juliana Slattery reminds parents to teach children the fear of the Lord by parental example. Slattery contends that the foundation for guilt-free motherhood is fear of the Lord, forcing mothers to relinquish the illusion of wisdom and claims of ownership of children. Through this robust response, Slattery extends understating the Scripture Psalm 139:13 “For You formed my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb.”⁷³

Theoretical Foundations

If the theological framework were to play out entirely, the theoretical foundation mirrors the application. There are four areas explored to demonstrate the praxis of these biblical examples of parent influence in children’s knowledge and discipleship: historical, purposeful, exemplary status, and relationship to God.

Historical Foundations

Historically driven reasoning for worship, celebration, cultural and religious identity is

⁷² Carolyn, McNamara Barry, Laura Padilla-Walker, and Larry J. Nelson. "The Role of Mothers and Media on Emerging Adults’ Religious Faith and Practices by Way of Internalization of Prosocial Values." *Journal of Adult Development* 19, no. 2 (06, 2012): 66-78, p. 74.

⁷³ Slattery, Julianna. *Guilt-Free Motherhood: Parenting with Godly Wisdom*. (Deerfield Beach, FL: Faith Communications, 2004), p. 98, 99.

consistently encouraged throughout the Scripture. As stated in the theological foundations, the Passover's reference is deeply rooted in experiencing God as the ultimate protector and eludes to the LORD's deliverance. Theoretically, when biblical history is explained to children, especially being of the Christian heritage, there is an understanding of celebrations and why these celebrations pertain to their inheritance and ownership of biblical foundations.

In practice, Christian education both inside the church and in the home is necessary. Unlike many churches and families today, Moses never questions if the children will believe or respect the Passover's historical context and identification. Suppose the Christian education department values the historical relevance of God's people being protected by the blood over the doorpost and the bloodshed of Christ as the ultimate sacrifice of sin. In that case, parent ministry has a specific purpose in children's lives, and the expectation has always been there. As the church embraces the simplicity of teaching parents basic biblical history, significance, and heritage, families incorporate it into their study and lifestyle. The children and youth are allowed the opportunity to have their Christian identity shaped by more than just memory verses and special festivities.

Purposeful Foundations

The purpose of children is another driving force behind the kind of influence stakeholders like pastors, youth workers, and parents have in the life of children and youth. In a book entitled, *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and how to Connect with Them*, the Barna Group reported four out of five want their life to make a difference in the world. At the same time, 75% contend a clarity regarding their life's meaning and purpose.⁷⁴

As Hannah had a purpose for her son, and God gave her favor to have a son, it is

⁷⁴ Barna, George and David Kinnaman, ed., *Churchless: Understanding Today's Unchurched and How to Connect with Them*, (Austin, TX: Tyndale House Publishing, 2014), p. 42.

imperative that Christian parents feel purposeful and have meaning beyond procreation and subsequently raising children. As the research evolves on the difference parents make in the influence of their child's Christian experience across the life span, there will ideally be embedded a sense of purposeful training and spiritual expectation as a result. The church has a unique opportunity to broaden perspectives on worship, Sunday school, weekly activities, and the sacraments related to equipping parents as an example and co-laborers in developing the Christian identity of children and youth. As this plays out within the church ministries' crevices, the parents and leaders increase confidence in the young student's longevity, stamina, and understanding of being a disciple of Christ.

Other studies provide more considerations for religious identity. In a Brigham Young University research study on identity-centered religious calling, being, and action among parents, Dollahite, Marks, Kear, Lewis, and Stokes provide insights into a mother and father's calling. The study included 29 married couples between the ages of 27 and 62. The article revealed the most striking pattern within mothers' and fathers' responses was their stress on what they felt called to *be*. Further, the study showed that of the parents, 85% brought their calling up in their responses. The three main aspects parents focused on were being an example, authentic and consistent.⁷⁵ The study showed two additional thematic schemes concerning mothers, fathers, and children. One was that mothers and fathers provide support, love, and help, and two was that mothers and fathers teach religious values, faith traditions, and religious identities.⁷⁶ The above study's sample affiliated with various religious backgrounds; however, they all had the

⁷⁵ David C. Dollahite, Loren D. Marks, Taleah M. Kear, Brittany M. Lewis, and Megan L. Stokes, ed. "Beyond the Bucket List: Identity-Centered Religious Calling, Being, and Action Among Parents", *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 44–54, (2017), p 48.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p 51.

commonality of desiring for their religious affiliations to show them how and what to be, modeling their relationship before their children, aligned with their belief in God.⁷⁷

A study on the mechanisms behind religiosity and spirituality's effect on mental health, quality of life, and well-being revealed that meaning and peace were the most critical aspects of purposeful identity.⁷⁸ Although this was true, the study also confirmed that most religious persons had more meaning and peace than the less religious. As parents help children find purpose, considering the meaning and peace-related to Christian faith can connect deeply with purposeful identity.

Exemplary Status Foundation

Elevating children's status in their parent's and church leaders' eyes is both a biblical mandate of Jesus and an example of the delicate nature involved when handling and instructing children. As the greatest in the kingdom, discipleship should be a labor of love for the church's workers. It is also essential for parents to see their distinctive role in pursuing the foundational promises within the Bible.

In theoretical practice, Jesus regards children as the highest in the kingdom. When considered in youth work and parenting, Jesus' sentiments shape how lessons are taught, demonstrating humility and consciousness of adult actions and motives. The research presented reflects a need to strengthen parental participation in children's lives; the expectation is that both the leaders and families work together to create an atmosphere for growing understanding of Christian living precepts and biblical application.

⁷⁷ David C. Dollahite, Loren D. Marks, Taleah M. Kear, Brittany M. Lewis, and Megan L. Stokes, ed. "Beyond the Bucket List: Identity-Centered Religious Calling, Being, and Action Among Parents", *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 44–54, (2017), p 51.

⁷⁸ Peres, Prieto, Mario Fernando, Helder H. Kamei, Patricia R. Tobo, and Giancarlo Lucchetti. "Mechanisms Behind Religiosity and Spirituality's Effect on Mental Health, Quality of Life and Well-Being." *Journal of Religion and Health* 57, no. 5 (10, 2018): 1842-55, p. 1852.

For example, suppose the qualitative research questions are free of projection by the church, researcher, and leaders. In that case, there will be more reliability in the data presented on how children perceive influence in their discipleship. It is important to remember that when parents become more involved, the theological foundations have an incredible impression on the home's shifting discipleship priorities. This research also considers how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted how well Christian parents prepare to lead their families, specifically in crisis over an extended period. The study further considers how the COVID-19 pandemic affects the ministry delivery model's practice by youth workers, further explored in the theoretical foundation subsection.

God Relationship Foundation

As parents become more confident in their children's discipleship, the example relationship between parent and child becomes a God-child relationship model. Children anticipate the expectation to be obedient to their parents. However, as stated by Moses, when (not if) the children ask about a celebration such as Passover, and the symbolic reconciliation of Jesus's bloodshed, be prepared to answer them. Parents who can confidently explain the symbols, rituals and purposes in Christian activity give credence to the faith's nuances—further, their influence aids in instilling the meaning of such actions in their children.

Children are continually asking the question of “why” a particular thing happens or matters. Although parents may have a certain standard within the household to address those “whys” of the Christian faith, parents may be unable to explain why that standard exists and how it pertains to the Christian faith. The devoted, obedient behavior of a child reflects how they receive instruction in discipleship and spiritual growth, placing parents as central stakeholders impacting and role-modeling the God-child relationship.

Children have significant buy-in when they feel ownership in their home, school, community, and worship place. It shapes their identity and extends confidence in their stakeholders, especially their parents. Theoretically, the child or youth's age and the parent's relationship may significantly impact how accepting the parent's view as primary disciple-maker will be within the church. These are legitimate concerns that will shape the research variability and considerations for strategies to support parents as they become emerging leaders of faith in their households and children.

Relevant Youth Ministry Foundation

Youth and children's ministry workers lay the foundation of Christian education for children and youth during worship and Bible study attendance. Leaders of children's ministries are beneficial to those they serve when they possess a high level of training on educational theory and spiritual development. Using these skills creates environments that support children's spirituality. The guidance of youth ministry leaders is also helpful to parents reinforcing lessons taught. Valuing the child's play over the work of the adult creates an environment nurturing spiritual thought processing.⁷⁹ Further, student-centered Christian education permits us to grow in the faith at an individualized pace.

Research demonstrates that in churches where youth pastors succeed in developing a caring relationship with youth, adolescents are more likely to have enduring faithfulness and be satisfied with the church and denomination they are presently attending.⁸⁰ The relationship between youth leaders and children strains during crises. One study evaluating youth ministry

⁷⁹ Ingersoll, Heather Nicole, "Making Room: a Place for Children's Spirituality in the Christian Church", *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 19:3-4, (2014) 164-178, p.174

⁸⁰ Ji, Chang-Ho C., and Tevita Tameifuna. "Youth Pastor, Youth Ministry, and Youth Attitude Toward the Church." *Review of Religious Research* 52, no. 3 (2011): 306-22.

workers' response to crisis demonstrated how stressed these relationships could become, particularly in urban and inner-city church ministries, such as the localized setting in which the researcher's study takes place. More current research examines the influence of spiritual and religious resources used to cope with crises in these areas.⁸¹

COVID-19 has been an incredible crisis across the United States, especially impacting urban, Black and Brown communities.⁸² The data presented assessed different impacts of COVID-19 on Black communities, which had significantly higher rates of COVID-19 diagnoses and deaths.⁸³ The analysis showed how disproportionately the pandemic affected Black counties compared with other counties. Additionally, the research revealed other compounded health disparities present before the epidemic in these communities, such as more significant diagnoses of diabetes, deaths from heart disease, and deaths related to cerebrovascular disease.⁸⁴

Another study on youth ministry leaders assessed the internal dispositions, or postures, of exemplars in urban youth ministry following crises. This research is notable considering the epidemic mentioned above.⁸⁵ The study offered implications for supporting urban youth ministry workers. Specifically, understanding how important it is to be aware that those ministering to

⁸¹ Fort, Christin J., Cynthia B. Eriksson, Ann Y. Gottuso, and Ashley M. Wilkins. "Posture in Relation to God and Ethnic Background: A Qualitative Analysis of Urban Youth Ministry Workers' Responses to Crisis." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 45, no. 2 (Summer, 2017): 119-32, p. 119.

⁸² Gregorio A. Millett, Austin T. Jones, David Benkeser, Stefan Baral, Laina Mercer, Chris Beyrer, Brian Honermann, Elise Lankiewicz, Leandro Mena, Jeffrey S. Crowley, Jennifer Sherwood, Patrick S. Sullivan, Assessing Differential Impacts of COVID-19 on Black Communities, *Annals of Epidemiology*, Volume 47, 2020, 37-44, p. 38

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁸⁵ Fort, Christin J., Cynthia B. Eriksson, Ann Y. Gottuso, and Ashley M. Wilkins. "Posture in Relation to God and Ethnic Background: A Qualitative Analysis of Urban Youth Ministry Workers' Responses to Crisis." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 45, no. 2 (Summer, 2017): 119-32, p. 119.

these vulnerable populations' posture with God is variable. Meaning the relationship is not necessarily fixed. Youth workers are affected spiritually, in the same as many families they serve. Youth workers in crisis are understandable in this particular health crisis, as it has equally impacted the families of youth ministry leaders in many cases. Therefore, ministry workers require additional spiritual guidance and resources to connect with those youth therein.

The research directs for more evaluation of how ministry workers may maintain a posture of openness to engagement, even if there is an expression of anger, confusion, or feelings of distance in the relationship leader-student.⁸⁶ The results further indicate that it is possible to posture oneself toward or away from God and that these dispositions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, it offers implications for ministry settings and may ultimately inform clinical work that seeks to incorporate spirituality or religious coping themes.⁸⁷

Youth ministry leaders make connections to families over time, and it is essential to their overall effectiveness in guiding children in youth in understanding and committing to their faith. The kind of connection youth workers have to parents determines how parents believe they can reach out for help when behavioral, personal, social, sexual, or academic issues arise with their children. In an article that considers making connections with Black youth calling out for help and bearing hope, Wimberly and Streaty assert that healing practices are vital in making connections with disconnected youth. Relationship building is at the center of it all. It references the YHBA Vision Quest study in which youth ministry leaders determined connection with youth is a necessity of the leader's relational aptitude. Further, getting to know young people

⁸⁶ Fort, Christin J., Cynthia B. Eriksson, Ann Y. Gottuso, and Ashley M. Wilkins. "Posture in Relation to God and Ethnic Background: A Qualitative Analysis of Urban Youth Ministry Workers' Responses to Crisis." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 45, no. 2 (Summer, 2017): 119-32, p. 130

⁸⁷ Ibid.

best occurs in their daily life locations, such as the home, school, and neighborhood.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Wimberly, Anne Streaty. "Black Youth Speak Out: An Urgent Call for Hope-Bearing Response." *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 26, no. 2 (July 2016): 102–20.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The researcher began this journey by designing a project to address a problem in a local church. The IRB decided the researcher's project did not require IRB supervision because it focused on one ministry setting. The research goal was to implement a project to address the problem and measure change. However, due to the church culture and factors related to COVID-19, the researcher could not implement a project and shifted focus into an assessment model. The research identifies a ministry problem and demonstrates biblical precedence for addressing the problem. The researcher did significant research into what has already happened historically to address the problem.

Meeting with volunteers, the researcher explored ideas church leaders may want to consider when addressing the problem in the future. This section provides a complete description of the explorative qualitative design and an accurate narrative of how the study evolved. The comparison method used in the study analyzed the sample responses and examined perceptions collected from the faith development survey. Small focus groups chiseled into responses from the survey.

Finally, interviews with willing sample participants discussed practical next steps derived from the small group sessions. There are a few ethical considerations regarding the researcher, such as the researcher's relationship to the participants, role in the setting and research site, and biases or assumptions brought to the study. The researcher has been a church member for almost ten years and knows many of the staff, workers, parents, and children within the ministry. The researcher, therefore, has a familiarity with the inner workings of how the church carries out weekly and day-to-day processes within the various branches of ministry, specifically the Christian Education Department. The researcher's family participates in numerous activities, attending weekly services, meetings and frequenting the church bookstore.

In theory, the church campus was the research site, as the sample participants engage in ministry activities at this location. However, due to COVID-19, there was minimal access to the campus. There have been no face-to-face meetings in a year. As a result, this study's mode of collecting responses was online through surveys, video meetings, and phone interviews.

Finally, the researcher acknowledged biases in the study as an active member within the church fellowship, a leader participant youth worker, and a parent with four children under ten actively engaged in the ministry. Biases considered include the following:

- The researcher believes the church ministry is a valuable resource to the community and has the highest spiritual development at heart for all visitors, members, volunteers, staff, and local businesses.
- The researcher is partial to the worship and overall church experience and believes it aligns with God's Word for the Body of Christ.
- The researcher believes the pastors attempt to structure ministry to reach the total person's spiritual and faith development needs.
- The researcher believes the extended ministry branches seek to touch all age groups and provide an opportunity for fellowship connection through mental health support, workout facility, athletics, culinary/fine arts, marriage, singles, senior, worship ministry, and others.

Considering these biases, the researcher constructed the faith development surveys in a format that was as uniform as possible across the samples. The goal was to minimize projecting these biases through the use of questions and rating scales. The questions sought to answer the original purpose, problem, and thesis statement regarding the youth ministry's parents' support as primary disciple-makers of children.

These biases mean the researcher had certain assumptions in approaching and constructing the research strategy. Again, acknowledging these assumptions is to decrease projecting specific outcomes and minimize partiality within the methodology. These assumptions include:

- The Christian Education Department ministry within the church that supports the faith development of ages 0-18 lacks dimension when reaching out to and connecting with parents.
- Children and youth may or may not be aware of how the church can help them and their families learn more about their faith.
- Parents may or may not believe they should receive support and direction from the church regarding personal and familial discipleship.
- Parents may or may not be aware of how the church already provides means to help them and their families learn more about their faith.
- Church workers and volunteers may or may not believe they should be providing support and direction in family discipleship.
- Staff may or may not believe the ministry needs to extend beyond the present watch care and Christian education to provide more support and direction in family discipleship.

These biases and assumptions inform but do not determine the complete intervention design implemented within the faith development study on parents as primary disciple-makers. The researcher intends for the research to be a discovery process, revealing what is known and unknown. Particularly regarding the perceptions of all stakeholders involved in the ministry. Therefore, the main goal for the findings is to provide implications for possible intervention(s)

the church can consider to enhance parents' and families' support.

Research Design

Addressing the Problem

The research design primarily addressed the problem, which considered the support parents receive as primary faith influencers of children. Although the problem is present, there were some practices to reach parents in the normalized youth ministry setting before COVID-19:

- The ministry occasionally provided take-home information with children to describe the lesson at home for further discussion.
- The worship service included announcements about upcoming departmental activities for children and youth.
- Parents invited to participate in celebrations of transition, primarily focused on grade-level promotion between pre-kindergarten to elementary, elementary to middle school, middle school to high school, and high school to college or post-secondary selections.
- Parents invited to departmental campaigns such as volunteer drives and partnerships supported the ministry's mission to build and enhance facilities through fundraising.
- Parents must sit with their children in the back of the sanctuary when volunteer-student ratios go above the capacity limit set by the church.
 - Currently, there are some practices to reach parents in the youth ministry setting since COVID-19:
- Parents have been invited by email and mail to encourage their children and teenagers to participate in the virtual church ministry, pre-recorded and shown on Sundays via the social media streams of YouTube and Facebook.
- Packets mailed home addressed to the children provide activities parents must assist in

facilitating. Sometimes these are seasonally thematic or coincide with a pre-recorded lessons on the social media streams.

The following is currently true about the challenges of not having a straightforward process to equip parents with developing their child's faith outside of the church as supported by the project literature review:

- Parents are struggling to keep children engaged in Christian discipleship as they are growing up.
- COVID-19 has increased this difficulty in the parent's discipleship of children, considering there are no physical aspects to church engagement at present.
- Church workers are struggling to keep children engaged in Christian discipleship as they are growing up.
- Students in middle school and higher tend to be more engaged with the lessons and activities than elementary and younger.
- Both parents and ministry leaders desire for children to grow spiritually.
- The church has not yet fully equipped parents and workers to engage faith at home or outside of the regular worship services.
- With the proper support and tools, parents can help their children understand the Christian faith and how it connects to their purpose.

Comparing Engagement

After the surveys were completed and analyzed, the researcher provided questions the ministry could ask, leading to strategic thinking within the department, targeting youth leaders' support for family faith development within the home, considering parental influence. There are also implications in the wake of COVID-19. The purpose of this comparative process is to

determine the following:

1. What were some differences in, before and since COVID-19 regarding how supported parents felt in developing their children's faith?
2. How have mindsets shifted on parental roles in faith development since the start of COVID-19?
3. Did the responses gathered necessitate new strategies to increase parent support as they disciple and spiritually support their children?
4. Did the responses determine each stakeholder's understanding of the discipleship process?
5. Did the responses reveal a desire for support in the discipleship process?

Proposed Ideas for Future Intervention Plans

Proposed ideas for future intervention plans derived from implications gathered by the following research methods. (1) Surveying current church staff, workers, parents, children, and youth to determine their understanding of faith development and discipleship by parents with children and youth. These will involve basic scaling questions and short answers. (2) Defining participants within the study sample to include staff, workers, parents, children, and youth. The church staff provides leadership to workers, members, and visitors regarding the family households' discipleship, including parents (guardians), children, and youth.

Workers are those (non-employed) volunteers/leaders specifically trained to carry out the duties to facilitate participants' worship, discipleship, and fellowship experience. These participants include members and visitors regarding the family households' discipleship, including parents (guardians), children, and youth. Parents/guardians are responsible for the children and youth who participate in the ministry and represent separate households. For

example, a husband and wife, parent, and grandparent would be considered one participant household within the study.

Children are the individuals within the church's student ministry ages 5-11, divided by kindergarten through grade level five. Finally, Youth are age 12-18 and divided by grade level six through twelve in the church's student ministry.

1. Based on gathered responses, the researcher discovered gaps in addressing discipleship and faith development. Provided are implications for the children and youth departments to support parents on faith development and discipleship within the home.

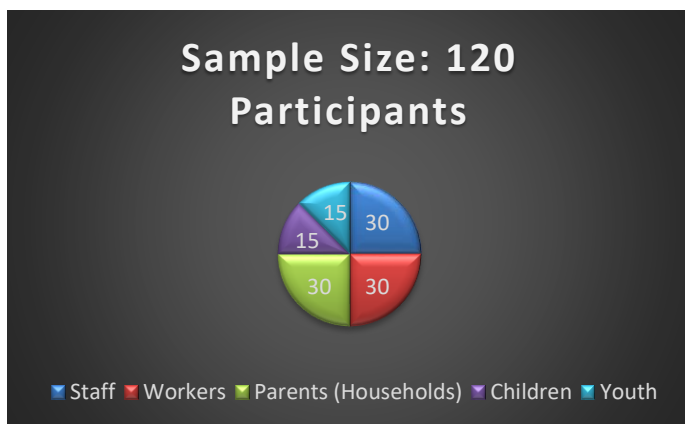


Figure 1. Sample Size Participant Goal

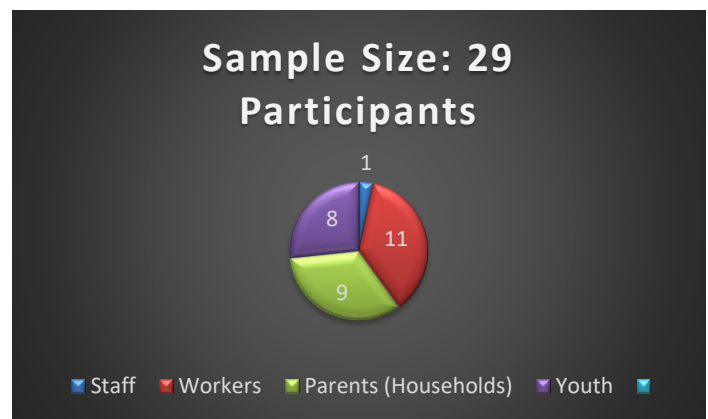


Figure 2. Actual Participant Sample Size

2. These responses collected as active research used a qualitative methodology.
3. Figure 1 is the sample size the researcher anticipated. Due to COVID-19 and the cancellation of in-person worship services, Figure 2 represents the actual number of participants.

Time Frame

Table 1 shows the estimated timeframe for the entire research process was two months.

The researcher was able to accomplish this goal. Participants were not engaged in each aspect of the research the whole time yet were prompted to participate in the different capacities as the investigation evolved.

Table 1. Research Timeline

Sample Groups	Solicit Participation	Survey (Google Forms)	Focus Groups (Zoom)	Interview(s) (Phone)	Results
Staff	December 2020	January 2021	February 2021	February 2021	March 2021
Parents	December 2020	January 2021	February 2021	February 2021	March 2021
Youth Workers	December 2020	January 2021	February 2021	February 2021	March 2021
Children/Youth	December 2020	January 2021	February 2021	February 2021	March 2021

Documents for Sample Participants

This research study evolved over seven months. The documents below were added to the thesis project to demonstrate how the process of soliciting, recruiting, obtaining consent, surveying, and interviewing began. The Institutional Review Board (or IRB) and WCCI church administration received these documents. These included the Research Participant Flyer, Letter to Church Leadership, Letter to Research Participant, Permission to Proceed, and Consent Form.

The church decided that some privacy issues would prevent the dissemination of the flyer by the church. The flyer circulated to participants through the youth worker/leader volunteers. The letters and permission to proceed preceded the change in how the church allowed contact with members. It is also important to note the consent form went through the background information, procedures, risks and benefits of being in the study, compensation (although there was none), confidentiality, voluntary nature of the study, and contact information for questions and concerns. The administration felt this was adequate for consent, with the research shifting into a "word of mouth" solicitation for participants.

These documents were a significant piece in the study design development to explicitly demonstrate the intended problem, purpose, and goal. The flyer asked this question to potential

participants: "Do you want to influence faith development support in your home and church?"

This question was to engage the participant's interest. The methodology design had this in mind, as each participant's insights fed the study's process and outcome. The responses contribute to discovering how church fellowship supports families in church and home to disciple children and youth. Further, each sample category is considered a stakeholder in developing strategies that help parents help children grow in the Christian faith.

A statement following the question encouraged participation. "If you answered yes to either of these questions, you might be eligible to participate in a faith development research study." This statement was to let them know if they want to influence faith development, the research is a way to consider doing so.

Research Participants Needed

Faith Development Study



- Are you 6-18 years of age or older?
- Do you want to influence faith development support in your home and church?

If you answered **yes** to either of these questions, you might be eligible to participate in a faith development research study.

The purpose of this research study is to compare the effectiveness of current parent supports within the church ministry to help them be primary influencers in their children's faith, spiritual growth, and discipleship. Participants registered are asked to complete participation from the faith development survey, be part of a focus group, and conduct a one-on-one interview.

The study is being conducted online and begins with the following link:

[Research Participant Form](#) (right-click to open)

My name is Caarne L. White, a doctoral candidate in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study. **Please contact Caarne L. White at 678-855-5468 or cwhite175@liberty.edu for more information.**

Liberty University IRB – 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515

Figure 3. Research Participant Flyer

Letter to Church Leadership

November 22, 2021

Dear Jon & Debra Carr:

As a graduate student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am doing research study as a requirement in the Next Generation Ministry Doctoral Program. The title of my research project is Faith Development Study on Parents as Primary Faith Influencers. The purpose of my research is to determine how the church currently supports parents as they develop the faith of their children and families.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research with World Changers Church International staff, workers/leaders, parents/guardians, and children/youth. I will request any additional data the church can provide regarding how parents are supported within the ministry.

Participants will be asked to complete the following participation form and complete the consent form and survey based on their role. They will then be directed to contact me to schedule an interview and focus group time. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to cwhite175@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,

Caarne L. White

Caarne L. White
Liberty University Doctoral Student

Letter to Church Leadership

November 22, 2021

Greetings WCCI Research Participant:

My name is Caarne L. White, and I am a Liberty University Doctoral Student in the Next Generation Ministry Cognate. For nearly two years, I have engaged in a study on parents as primary influencers and their children's discipleship. Through this journey, I have gained a great deal of prayerful admiration from the pastors, ministers, workers, parents, children, and youth that serve within the World Changers Church International Ministry. With this, I have determined it would be an augmentation to this great ministry of ministry to focus on supporting parents as they participate in their families' faith development and spiritual growth. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study, and grateful for your consideration to be part of the research process as a sample of the ministry, specifically at the College Park Campus. Participants will range from ages 6 to 18 and over. However, participants under 18 will require parent permission.

If willing, participants will be asked to complete a series of survey questions and participate in a focus group and individual interviews. It should take approximately 4-6 hours over two months to complete the procedures listed. Participation will be completely anonymous. Personal, identifying information will be collected, however names and other identifying information requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

The following is a link to participate in the research study: [Research Participant Form](#), which you can right-click to open, or place in your browser:

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeXan0QrcvIhPsBE2fkNNcI3oIvrMABUG7RH0RUwgFfLNt8kw/viewform?usp=sf_link. Once completing this form, you will be prompted to complete the

survey online, added for your particular role in the ministry. Once finished, please contact me to schedule an interview and focus group time at cwhite175@liberty.edu. A consent document is included in the Research Participant Form. The informed consent document contains additional information about my research. It will only require an electronic signature to indicate that you have read it and would like to participate in the study.

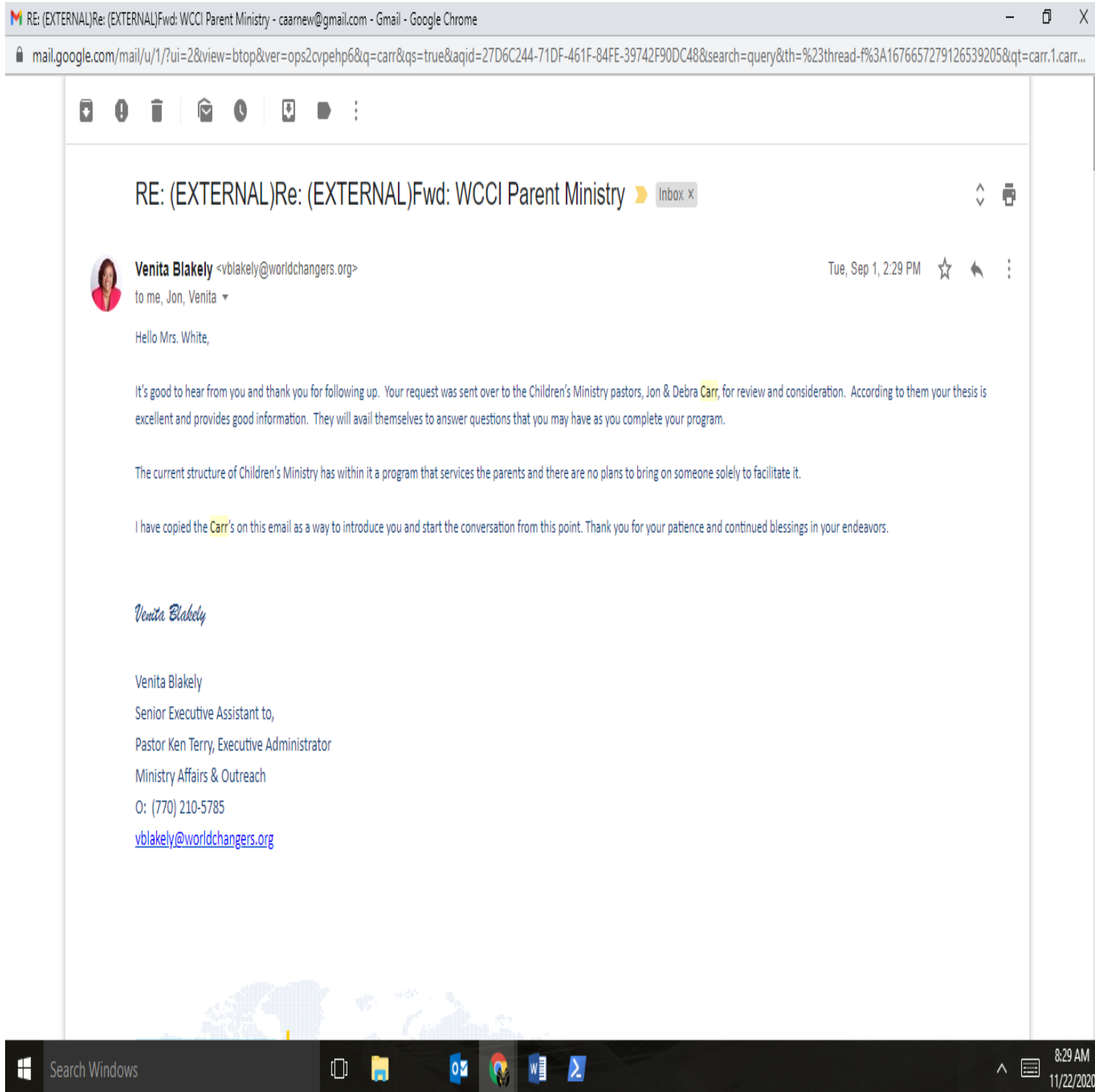
If there is anything within this particular packet you need further clarity on, or in the process of journaling, focus groups, interviews, or survey analysis, please feel inclined to message me at cwhite175@liberty.edu or call 678-855-5468. Again, your time and your thoughts are of considerable meaning to this project. Thank you for taking a moment to contribute to the process.

Sincerely,

Caarne L. White

Caarne L. White
Liberty University
Next Generation Ministry Doctoral Candidate

Church Permission to Proceed



RE: (EXTERNAL)Re: (EXTERNAL)Fwd: WCCI Parent Ministry - Gmail - Google Chrome

mail.google.com/mail/u/1/?ui=2&view=bt&ver=ops2cvpehp6&q=carr&qs=true&aqid=27D6C244-71DF-461F-84FE-39742F90DC48&search=query&th=%23thread-f%3A1676657279126539205&qt=carr.1.carr...

RE: (EXTERNAL)Re: (EXTERNAL)Fwd: WCCI Parent Ministry Inbox

Venita Blakely <vblakely@worldchangers.org> Tue, Sep 1, 2:29 PM

to me, Jon, Venita

Hello Mrs. White,

It's good to hear from you and thank you for following up. Your request was sent over to the Children's Ministry pastors, Jon & Debra Carr, for review and consideration. According to them your thesis is excellent and provides good information. They will avail themselves to answer questions that you may have as you complete your program.

The current structure of Children's Ministry has within it a program that services the parents and there are no plans to bring on someone solely to facilitate it.

I have copied the Carr's on this email as a way to introduce you and start the conversation from this point. Thank you for your patience and continued blessings in your endeavors.

Venita Blakely

Venita Blakely
Senior Executive Assistant to,
Pastor Ken Terry, Executive Administrator
Ministry Affairs & Outreach
O: (770) 210-5785
vblakely@worldchangers.org

Search Windows

8:29 AM
11/22/2020

Figure 4. Permission to Proceed

CONSENT FORM

Determining Outcomes of Developing a Parent Ministry to Support Parents as Participants in the Discipleship of Their Children.

Caarne White Liberty University School of Divinity

You are invited to be in a research study to determine how supporting parents as participants in their children's discipleship helps with faith development over their life-span. You were selected as a possible participant because you have participated as a church staff person, worker/leader, parent/guardian member, or child/youth active within the ministry. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Caarne L. White, a D. Min. candidate in Liberty University's School of Divinity.

Background Information

It is well known that WCCI provides worship for families in the College Park community and beyond. Specifically, the children and youth department have specific opportunities to experience Christian education and faith development. These departments are vital to the fellowship as growing next-generation believers. The researcher hopes that this research's findings may enhance the family ministry experience and provide support to parents as influencers in their families' spiritual growth. The researcher hopes to deduce whether an implemented parent ministry would increase the faith development of the next generation within the church across their lifespan.

Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1) Complete an online, anonymous survey. The survey should take no longer than 15 minutes.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study

The risks of participating in this study are minimal (no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life).

Participants will not receive any personal benefits. The researcher hopes that this research's findings may serve to enhance the fellowship experience for church members.

Compensation

Participants will not receive compensation for taking part in this study.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In any report published, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home, and only the researcher will have access to the documents. The records are retained for three years. After three years, the records will be deleted.

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 not to answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting that relationship.

Contacts and Questions

The researcher conducting this study is: Caarne L. White. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at 678-855-5468 or cwhite175@liberty.edu. Mrs. White's faculty mentor is Dr. R. Peter Mason.

Dr. R. Peter Mason can be contacted at 518-369-9869 or rpmason@liberty.edu.

Suppose you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s). In that case, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep 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.

Participants Name or Consenting Parent/Guardian

Date

Online Focus Group

Small Focus Group Discussions

All individuals registered in the 29-participant sample were asked to participate in their category's small focus group. The goal was to gather perceptions on:

1. Parent Involvement: perceptions from all stakeholders.
2. Staff and Leader Training for Ministry Work.
3. How the staff and leaders already help parents equip children in discipleship and faith development?
4. How can this be done in a more significant partnership to develop Christian faith across families' lifespan?

Individual Interview Questions

The individual interview questions intend to provide an acute look into the ideas of those most immersed in the ministry experience for three years or more. Two individuals from each of the participant categories interview directly with the researcher, elaborating on the following areas:

- Church Effectiveness in Supporting Parents
- Christian Education in general
- Faith Development Across the Lifespan Reflective of Sample Groups
- Parent Involvement
- Staff, Worker/Leader, Parent/Guardian, Youth & Children Understanding in

Training, Discipleship, Evaluation and Expectations

- Suggestions for Systemically Developing Parents as Faith Influencers

Results

The responses collected and the research study's conclusion are available to the participants and leadership when the church administration permits the release. The results are offered first to the ministry staff. Second, with approval, to church workers and leaders. Third, with permission, to research participants. The results provide, in brief, the research collection, analysis, and implications.

How the Results Shifted the Problem

The results shifted the problem as the sample's perspectives brought form to the research study and discovery process. The original methodology had intervention within the design. Instead of the intervention, the researcher began to focus on analyzing the unsaid in the responses. The unsaid discovery was the parents and youth may not know what they should want or expect from leaders in the church. The unsaid discovery was the staff, and youth worker mindset may know what would be beneficial to families but are unsure if they have permission and authority to empower parents. The next chapter's results expound on the discovery and shift toward questions that lead to the next steps.

Informing Project Participants

It was essential to keep the leaders and parents informed regarding the project flow. As stated earlier in the methodology, the primary collection of responses was through an electronic process in light of church closures due to COVID-19 and limited access to the congregation. There was total transparency with the project. Any questions were answered within 24-48 hours regarding the expectations before, during, and after the study process.

Approvals for Research Design Process

The researcher prepared all necessary IRB documentation, submitted supplemental

documents to the mentor for analysis, and forwarded the final version to the IRB office after the mentor's approval. The researcher received approval from the associate pastor, the administrative department, and the children's leaders to begin the research project. The permission provided by the leadership allowed survey dissemination to the target groups. It may require additional consent to connect in one-on-one interviews with workers, families, and church staff.

Participant Consent and Request for Additional Materials

Participants consented to the research study and their involvement in response collection as a requirement. Consent completion by electronic signature in the registration form was sent in advance for the WCCI administrative staff's approval before being disseminated to congregants.

The researcher scheduled the video interviews in advance. There was a request for additional documents that may contribute to the study regarding the department's outreach to parents, but the administration did not provide additional documents. There was a request for literature examples distributed to the children and youth departments; however, this was also not provided.

Explaining the Project to the Participants

Here is the process by which the researcher explained the project to the participants. The researcher provided participants with: (1) a flier and letter overviewing the intent of the research project, (2) details regarding how information collected through surveys, small groups, and interviews, (3) a written agreement, ensuring their anonymity to the church and the university, and (4) access to the results as allowed by the leadership within the church when the research project is complete.

Overview of the Research Project

The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry action research project was to determine how the

church currently supports parents as they develop the faith of their children and families. The methodology of this Doctor of Ministry action research project surveyed a church sample and determining implications for parent ministry within the church, wherein staff and workers/leaders equip parents to support the faith development and discipleship of their families and children/youth.

Survey

These surveys determined the perspectives church staff, workers/leaders, parents, and children/youth have on the Christian faith's parental influence on their families and children.

Written Agreement

Data-Based Interventions and Strategies

- Approved by Church Staff
- Implemented with fidelity within 2-3 month periods
- Data disaggregated and analyzed

Anticipating Changes in Participation

In case some participants did not want to participate or drop out during the research project, the researcher respected this decision and consulted church leadership as needed. Further, the researcher explained upfront the time involved, as detailed in the statement above, and stayed in constant consultation with those who have the study's buy-in, especially youth workers, who helped to prevent losing participants as the research evolved.

Tools Used for Data and Measuring Sorting Implications

Here are the specific tools used to gather data and sort possible implications: (1) Data the church can provide on parent involvement and parent education for supporting their children's Christian discipleship. (2) Surveys through google forms to ask basic questions of leaders,

parents, and children to indicate how they view parents as leaders in children's faith development. (3) Sorting through the implications will be carried out by scaffolding the information received to determine what practical strategies had the least, some, or most impact on their child/family's spiritual development. (4) Finally, perception data will be gathered and analyzed regarding how the participants believe the ministry experience supports them spiritually.

Methods for Gathering Data

Qualitative data through surveys, interviews, and focus groups gave the researcher a panoramic view of what is currently happening with the parents' impact on their children's faith and how the implications support their role as one of the primary influencers of their family's faith. The text on action research was used as a companion guide, providing the researcher awareness of how each participant's biases influence the study and outcomes. Reflecting on the process brought basis to the research study.

Table 2. Survey Question Categories

Participant Sample	Category 1 Christian Faith Talks	Category 2 Steps to Discipleship/Salvation	Category 3 Modeling	Category 4 Influence	Category 5 COVID-19
Staff	<p>Workers/leaders within the ministry are trained to help parents/guardians facilitate Christian faith talks with children.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>What does this training consist of? What resources are used?</p>	<p>Workers/leaders within the ministry are trained to help parents/guardians facilitate Christian steps to discipleship/salvation with children and youth.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>What does this training consist of? What resources are used? What is the duration of the training?</p>	<p>Please select the top two areas workers within the ministry are expected to model Christian behaviors that influences faith development for parents and families:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Fellowship <input type="checkbox"/> Discipleship <input type="checkbox"/> Ministry Involvement <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all prepared and 10 being highly prepared, how would you rate the effectiveness of the training offered workers within the ministry to model Christian behaviors? In your words, explain what modeling Christian behaviors looks like among workers within the ministry.</p>	<p>We equip our workers/leaders to help parents influence their children's faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>As staff members, we are equipped to help parents influence their children's faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>Choose which ones apply to the ministry. The following are used as opportunities to influence the personal faith of parents/guardians.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Bible Studies <input type="checkbox"/> Small Groups <input type="checkbox"/> Trainings <input type="checkbox"/> Christian Literature/Materials <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>Prior to COVID-19, I believe ministry participants depended mostly on church activities and worship to influence their faith and the faith of their family?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>Since the start of COVID-19, I still believe ministry participants depend mostly on church activities and worship to influence their faith and the faith of their family?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10 being no desire and 10 being highly desire, how would you rate your desire to offer more information on learning about faith to ministry participants?</p>
Workers	<p>A worker/leader within the ministry I feel equipped and trained to help parents/guardians facilitate</p>	<p>As a worker/leader within the ministry I feel equipped and trained to help parents/guardians facilitate Christian steps to</p>	<p>Please select the top two areas you as workers/leaders within the ministry are expected to model Christian behaviors that</p>	<p>We as workers/leaders equip parents to influence their children's faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure</p>	<p>Prior to COVID-19, I believe ministry participants depended mostly on church activities and worship to influence their faith and the faith of their family?</p>

	<p>Christian faith talks with children.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>What does this training consist of? What resources are used?</p>	<p>discipleship/salvation with children and youth.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>What does this training consist of? What resources are used? What is the duration of the training?</p>	<p>influences faith development for parents and families:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Fellowship <input type="checkbox"/> Discipleship <input type="checkbox"/> Ministry Involvement <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all prepared and 10 being highly prepared, how would you rate the effectiveness of the training offered to you as a worker/leader within the ministry to model Christian behaviors? In your words, explain what modeling Christian behaviors looks like as a worker/leader within the ministry.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>When parents/guardians engage in ministry, we are confident they are provided the tools necessary to influence their children's faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>Choose which ones apply to the ministry. The following are used as opportunities to influence the personal faith of parents/guardians.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Bible Studies <input type="checkbox"/> Small Groups <input type="checkbox"/> Trainings <input type="checkbox"/> Christian Literature/Materials <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>Since the start of COVID-19, I still believe ministry participants depend mostly on church activities and worship to influence their faith and the faith of their family?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10 being no desire and 10 being highly desire, how would you rate your desire to offer more information on learning about faith to ministry participants?</p>
Parents (Households)	<p>As a parent/guardian within the ministry I feel equipped and trained to help parents/guardians facilitate Christian faith talks with children.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>What does this training consist of? What resources are used?</p>	<p>As a parent/guardian within the ministry I feel equipped and trained to help parents/guardians facilitate Christian steps to discipleship/salvation with my children.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>What does this training consist of? What resources are used? What is the duration of the training?</p>	<p>Please select the top two areas you are taught by the ministry leaders and encouraged to model regarding Christian behaviors that influences faith development for parents and families:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Fellowship <input type="checkbox"/> Discipleship <input type="checkbox"/> Ministry Involvement <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all prepared and 10 being highly prepared, how would you rate the effectiveness of the training offered to you as a parent/guardian within the ministry to model Christian behaviors? In your words, explain what modeling Christian behaviors looks like as a parent/guardian within the ministry.</p>	<p>As a parent I feel equipped to influence my children's faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>When my children engage in ministry, I am confident they are provided the tools necessary to influence their children's faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>Choose which ones apply to the ministry. The following are used as opportunities to influence the personal faith of my children:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Bible Studies <input type="checkbox"/> Small Groups <input type="checkbox"/> Trainings <input type="checkbox"/> Christian Literature/Materials <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p>	<p>Prior to COVID-19, I depended mostly on church activities and worship to influence my faith and the faith of my family?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>Since the start of COVID-19, I still depend mostly on church activities and worship to influence my faith and the faith of my family?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10 being no desire and 10 being highly desire, how would you rate your desire to have more information on how to disciple your children and support their spiritual growth?</p>
Children	<p>Do you have Christian faith talks with your parents/guardians?</p> <p>How often do you have Christian faith talks with your parents?</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, one being never and 10 being all the time, how often do you use these talks in your school or home life?</p>	<p>Have you been through the steps to salvation with your parents/guardians or youth worker/leader?</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, one being not at all and 10 being I could do it with little help, how confident do you feel about sharing your faith with others?</p> <p>In your own words, explain the plan of salvation.</p>	<p>Which of these have your parents/guardians showed you how to do at church or at home?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Fellowship <input type="checkbox"/> Discipleship <input type="checkbox"/> Ministry Involvement <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all prepared and 10 being highly prepared, how confident are you in modeling your faith to others?</p> <p>In your words, explain what acting like a Christian looks like.</p>	<p>My parents influence my faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>My friends and/or community influence my faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>Choose which ones apply to you at church. The following are things I participate in that influence my personal faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Bible Studies <input type="checkbox"/> Small Groups <input type="checkbox"/> Trainings <input type="checkbox"/> Christian Literature/Materials <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>Does your family use or look for ways outside of the church to help you in your faith? If yes, what kinds?</p>	<p>Prior to COVID-10, I about faith mostly at church.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>Since the start of COVID-19, I learn about faith:</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> With my family. <input type="checkbox"/> With online church service. <input type="checkbox"/> With family and online service. <input type="checkbox"/> Not at all at this time. <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, 1 being no desire and 10 being highly desired, how would you rate your desire to have more information on learning about faith?</p>
Youth	<p>Do you have Christian faith talks with your parents/guardians?</p> <p>How often do you have Christian faith talks with your parents?</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, one being never and 10 being all the time, how often do you use</p>	<p>Have you been through the steps to salvation with your parents/guardians or youth worker/leader?</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, one being not at all and 10 being I could do it with little help, how confident do you feel about sharing your faith with others?</p>	<p>Which of these have your parents/guardians showed you how to do at church or at home?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Fellowship <input type="checkbox"/> Discipleship <input type="checkbox"/> Ministry Involvement <input type="checkbox"/> Prayer</p> <p>On a scale of 1-10, 1 being not at all prepared and 10 being</p>	<p>My parents influence my faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>My friends and/or community influence my faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p>	<p>Prior to COVID-10, I depended mostly on church activities and worship to influence my faith.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p>Since the start of COVID-19, I still depend mostly on church</p>

these talks in your school or home life?	In your own words, explain the plan of salvation.	highly prepared, how confident are you in modeling your faith to others?	<input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree	activities and worship to influence my faith? <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Unsure <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree
		<input type="checkbox"/> In your words, explain what modeling Christian behaviors looks like.	Choose which ones apply to you at church. The following are things I participate in that influence my personal faith. <input type="checkbox"/> Worship <input type="checkbox"/> Bible Studies <input type="checkbox"/> Small Groups <input type="checkbox"/> Trainings <input type="checkbox"/> Christian Literature/Materials <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____	On a scale of 1-10, 1 being no desire and 10 being highly desired, how would you rate your desire to have more information on learning about faith?
			Does your family use or look for ways outside of the church to help you in your faith? If yes, what kinds?	

Small Focus Groups

The small focus group's purpose was to gather perceptions on parent involvement. These perceptions are from all stakeholders, staff, and volunteer training for ministry work with parents and developing partnerships with parents to equip children in discipleship and faith development.

Interviews

There were two interviews by participant samples. These questions gauged a genuine understanding of the need to develop more intentional parent supports within the ministry that undergirds family spiritual development within the church. The interview responses were recorded and made available to the leaders upon request and the IRB mentor. These recordings were kept confidential and only shared to explain research findings that will aid in the considered implications for recommended intervention(s).

Implementation of the Study Design

Beginning the Project

The research project began once approved by IRB and through direct collaboration with the children and youth department leadership to start the research. Two weeks into the study timeframe, the pastors informed the researcher the study could not commence. They raised ethical concerns about the use of member's information. The researcher subsequently requested a

meeting with leadership to explore options for completing the project. In the meeting, the researcher and campus pastor came up with a strategy beneficial to gathering information and maintaining how the church viewed membership privacy. The researcher was encouraged to connect with those needed for the sample through social media, email, or personal contact. After this, the research design shifted from an intervention model to an evaluation and assessment model, proposing future implementation implications within the church.

Determining a Successful Outcome

A successful outcome in this study involved giving church workers, parents, and children greater awareness of discipleship's importance in parents' and caregivers' hands. The implications provided general ideas about the significance of biblical foundation and creative ways for parents to support how faith developed with children and youth. Finally, suppose each stakeholder can articulate the study's purpose, discussing the findings with fidelity and how it impacted their thoughts about understanding their role in discipleship. In that case, this is a significant outcome success to the research study and intervention(s) provided. The study's success was not measured in the number of participants or implementing a program model. Success was completing the evaluation, considering the limitations, and beginning a conversation on the primary influence on children's faith.

Comparing Implications of the Research Study

In comparing the research study's implications and outcomes, charts provided help sift through the current practices, expectations, and follow-through with these practices in the present support ministry to parents as faith influencers. The results offer insight in light of careful evaluation and consistent methods through question and response, considering the possibilities for future ministry engagement. The results discuss gaps in the church faith development process

across the life span.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter outlines the results gleaned from the data collected in this faith development study. It will navigate from the beginning of the research process to the individual survey responses. The small group conversations are an augmentation of the questions from the surveys. Finally, we will transition into one-on-one conversations with youth workers who have a great passion for the ministry's progress and connect with families. Figures 5-10 show the research participant data.

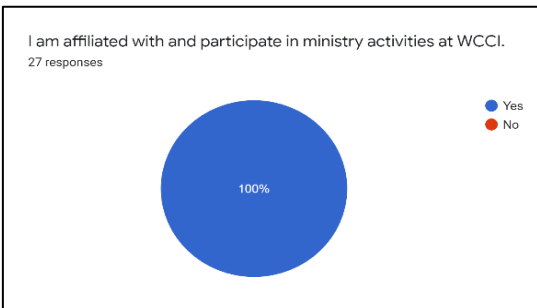


Figure 5. Survey Response 1

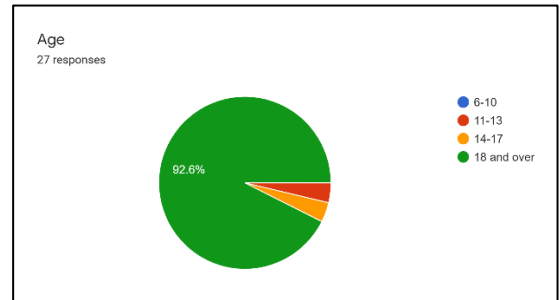


Figure 6. Survey Response 2

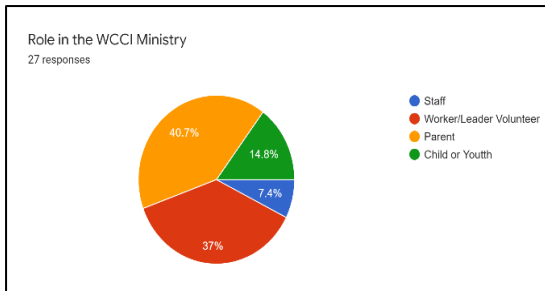


Figure 7. Survey Response 3

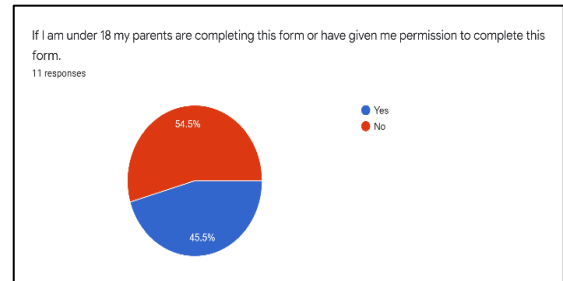


Figure 8. Survey Response 4

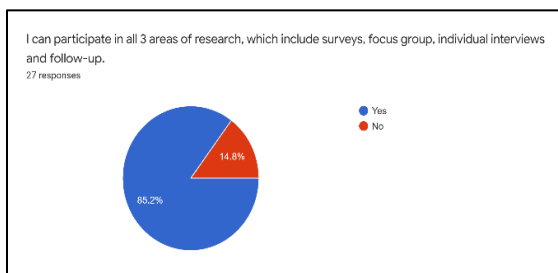


Figure 9. Survey Response 5

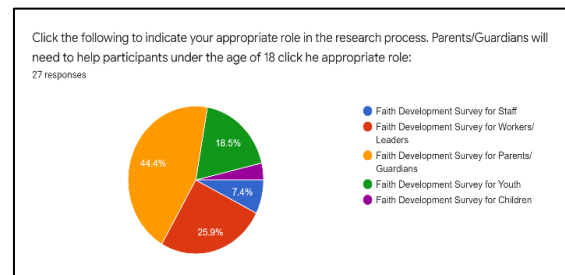


Figure 10. Survey Response 6

Church and Participant Support

The church and participant support changed as the researcher approached the beginning of the study. The church was concerned about the privacy of the members and how to release information ethically. The researcher needed permission to advertise to parishioners and subsequently request those who were interested in participating. There was a delay in response to the final approval to utilize information through or from the church administration and pastoral department.

After two weeks, the researcher received an email that the researcher could not use the congregation as a research sample. After a clarifying meeting and phone call from the campus pastor, there was an agreement to allow the researcher to use social connections with families and leaders in the ministry. It was a challenge to the research approach. Therefore, some aspects of the research were decreased or condensed because of access and opportunity. There were anticipated limitations, considering the church is closed physically due to COVID-19 precautions.

However, making connections with members who would fit into the sample was further compressed by lack of direct contact information to begin outreach. Also, the researcher agreed with the church to decrease the research sample goal by two-thirds. The adjustment meant 50 individuals or less would be part of the study instead of the initial 150 sample goal. There were 29 participants total, with only 27 completing the survey, eight within small focus groups, and 2 for individual interviews. The research sample categories were based on participant connection to the church, age, role, participation commitment, survey, and interview completion.

Church Connection

Making connections to the congregations was done primarily using two resources. The

first was by word of mouth through the youth department leaders and workers. They were intentional about spreading the word to other youth workers and as many families as they could reach, considering the pre-COVID-19 face-to-face interactions would not be an option. The second was through social media connections to various WCCI group pages that involved families, such as the children, youth, marriage, and young adult departments. These pages do not allow research solicitation, so the researcher went through fellow member relationships to disseminate fliers and surveys, gaining several individuals and families who agreed to participate.

Out of the 27 people who participated, 100% affirmed that they were affiliated with and participate in ministry activities at WCCI. Although several ministry campuses worldwide, the individuals who completed the research participant form were assumed as directly connected to the College Park campus.

Participant Age Groups and Roles

The research sample's largest age group was over 18 years old, with no participants in the 6-10 age group. The majority of those completing the research form agreed to complete all three parts of the study, with 15% declining to complete the study. The largest group of participants were the 11 parents, who made up 44% of the sample. Following were youth workers and seven volunteers, making up 26%. However, 11 youth workers filled out the initial research participant form. The youth made up 19%, totaling seven youth and children combined, as only one participant selected child but based on the age group belonged in the youth group. Finally, 7% were staff as one participant.

Participation Commitment

Following the research form, 88% of the registered participants moved to complete a

faith development survey. The appropriate faith development survey was a selection at the end of the research participation form. The researcher reminded participants to complete both parts; however, it was challenging to ensure the process's fidelity. Following the survey collection, calendar invitations disseminated via email requested participation in small focus groups sent out via email to all 27 participants. The parent group consisted of 4 participants, and the youth worker group consisted of 2 participants. There was a one-on-one interview with a youth worker. No other group responded to an invitation for a one-on-one interview.

Survey Data Analysis

Christian Faith Talks

Across the entire sample of staff, workers, and parent participants, the response strongly agrees or agrees that the church equips parents to have Christian faith talks with their children. (See Figures 11-12) There is also a general conceptualization as to what happens during training. The staff participant considers schooling, seminars, books, videos, and one on one training as a method the ministry uses to train parents on how to facilitate Christian faith talks with their children. However, youth workers thought much of this training came through the teaching of the pastors and leadership. The workers answered the question regarding Christian faith talks training as involving professional workshops and children's ministry lessons prepared each week.

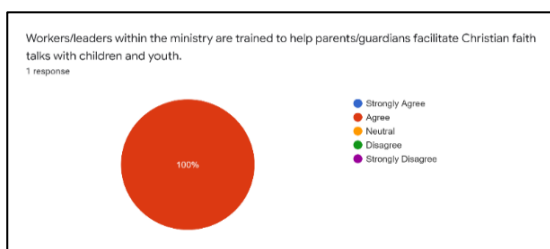


Figure 11. Survey Response 7

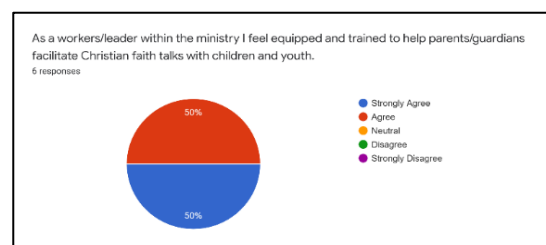


Figure 12. Survey Response 8

Faith talks did not directly deal with what the department does to help parents

specifically. Youth workers spoke more about what they were trying to do with children during worship and Bible study services and less about how the department supports parents to engage in family faith development and Christian talks outside of the church. One participant had this to say about Christian faith talks,

“As I shadowed the previous coordinator, I had one-on-one training that consisted of a detailed explanation and demonstration of learning styles and multiple intelligences presented in professional workshops, reinforced by children’s ministry lesson preparation...valuable information from a book entitled, *Grace Based Parenting*, encouragement from my pastors to study Scripture personally to gain understanding and practical application, and leadership training focused on inspiring and empowering others.”

Another youth worker participant had this to say about training parents on Christian faith talks, “The leadership manual, the Bible, teachings from our pastors, educational workshops, quarterly large group leadership training meetings conducted by our pastor or church appointed leader, and books recommended by the junior high youth pastors.” When youth workers think about Christian faith talks, they consider their youth work training more so than what parents are given from the Christian education department to facilitate these talks in their homes. This perspective, echoed by adult participants that much of the training parents receive comes from the Pastors in the preaching/teaching moment.

Parents expect most training to come during morning worship. Parents also confirmed this. One parent participant had this to say about the training for facilitating Christian faith talks, “Reading the word, watching service, talking about real-life issues and morals.” Another parent felt their training in the hospital ministry and years of church attendance contributed to their

support of facilitating Christian faith talks with their children. (See figure 13) Church attendance resonated through many of the adult responses. One parent said, “Regular church attendance and limited interaction with children’s ministry staff,” was their experience with Christian faith talks training by the ministry. Parents said some of the resources used during Christian faith talks were personal devotionals, Bible games, discussions at dinner time, and films. The parents mentioned Dr. Dollar and Pastor Taffi as supporting their ability to facilitate conversations with their children.

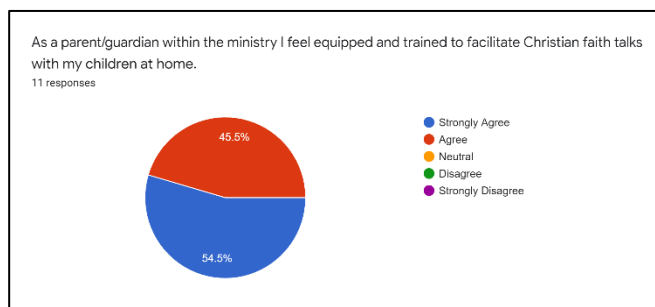


Figure 13. Survey Response 9

Children/Youth Response

Children and youth participants said they all had faith talks with parents, and 66% said this sometimes happened, while 33% said always (see figure 14). Children and youth also said they use faith talks at home or school, as indicated in the above chart, more than half the time with results closer to all the time versus never.

On a scale of 1-10, 1 being never and 10 being all the time, how often do you use these talks in your school or home life?
6 responses

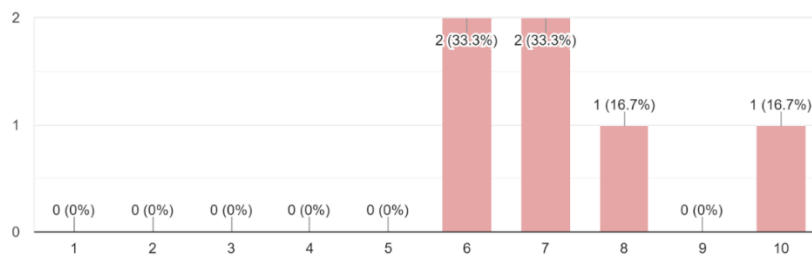


Figure 14. Survey Response 10

Discipleship and Salvation

The responses on discipleship and salvation were similar to those of Christian faith talks about training parents in facilitating these talks with their children (see figures 15-16). The adult participants strongly agreed or agreed that parents and guardians receive training to facilitate Christian steps to discipleship with their children (see figure 17).

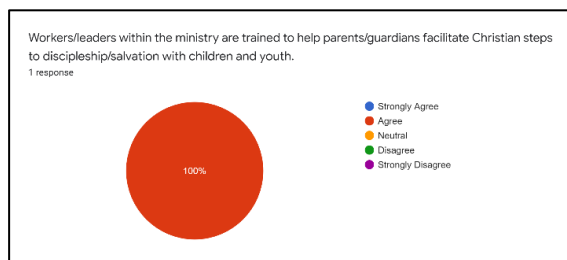


Figure 15. Survey Response 11

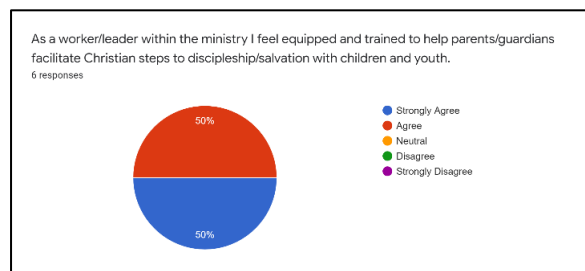


Figure 16. Survey Response 12

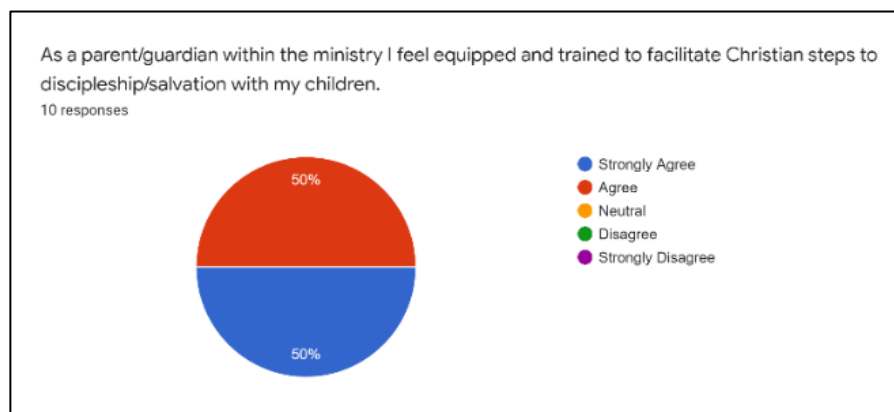


Figure 17. Survey Response 13

However, the responses were more about the training workers have to minister to children and church attendance by parents to learn about discipleship and salvation. The staff participants stated there were workshops, seminars, and books related to discipleship and salvation but did not indicate the implementation of these resources by the church directly to parents. One worker said, “I had training from other leaders on the salvation prayer and how to teach the meaning to children.”

Another worker relayed, “Presenting the message of demonstrated God’s Love expressed

as Jesus Christ in a straightforward, concise, illustrated manner on a level understandable to the child.” Additionally, another worker mentioned cartooned short videos sharing the story of Jesus and Bible school training.

Parents also viewed this question on discipleship training and salvation through the lens of facilitating their children through ministry participation and hospital ministry training. Further, one parent participant responded, “New membership orientation and classes were thoroughly structured to assist in understanding Biblical principles and provided a small group setting for individual questions.” Another parent responded, talking, praying, reading Scriptures, past experiences, and new teachings on grace-based salvation are part of discipleship and salvation training. Coaching, mentoring, family mealtime discussions, answering questions, and conversations with children were ways parents said children experienced discipleship. Parents also mentioned online resources, such as Bible reading, sermons, Christian books, movies, and media, as a means of discipleship.

The children and youth also had survey questions about discipleship and salvation. When responding to the survey, the youth unanimously said they had experience walking through the steps of salvation. (See figure 18) They even strongly agreed that they could explain those steps to someone else.

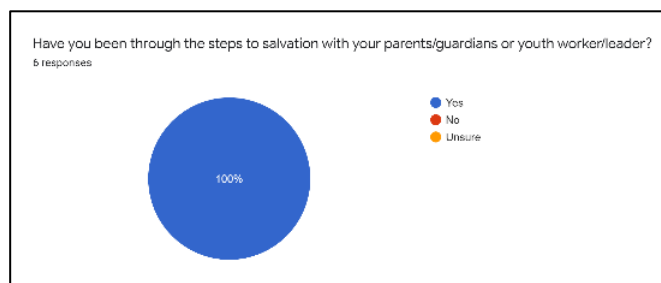


Figure 18. Survey Response 14

When asked about what the steps to salvation were, the youth had this to say, “I confessed that Jesus is real and the Lord in my life.” “God forgives me for all of my sins.” “The

plan of salvation is to receive the Gospel of Jesus Christ and His anointing and to accept Jesus as your Lord and Personal Savior.” “To accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior and let Him lead you in the plan God has for your life.” They were able to articulate the plan of salvation, yet there was no indication that parents directly influenced the understanding or process by which they accepted Christ.

Modeling

Modeling Christian behaviors was viewed slightly differently between staff and youth workers in comparison to parents. In the top two areas, staff and youth workers responded as expected modeling of Christian behaviors that influenced parents’ faith development was through worship and ministry involvement (see figures 19-20). However, the top two areas parents say they receive instruction by the ministry leaders and are encouraged to model

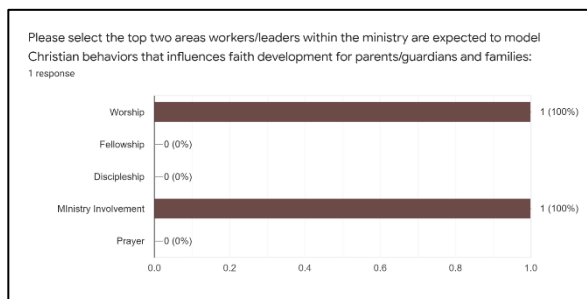


Figure 19. Survey Response 15

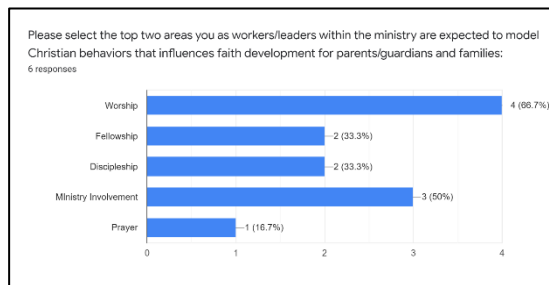


Figure 20. Survey Response 16

Christian behaviors that influence faith development are worship and prayer (see figure 21). There may have been several subjective ideas when responding to what modeling looks like and when one is supposed to expect Christian behaviors. The research lends insight that the staff

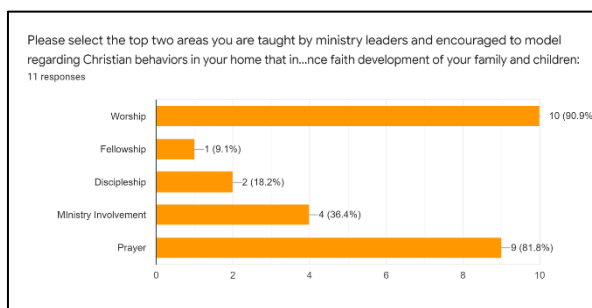


Figure 21. Survey Response 17

and youth worker may view modeling through their work in and faithfulness to the ministry. On the contrary, parents may glean through their experiences that they are encouraged to model through prayer. All three adult participant samples felt worship was a behavior modeled. The data revealed parents responded ministry involvement was the third highest form of modeling Christian behaviors by leaders in the church (see figure 22). This data again demonstrates the emphasis on worship service as a vehicle to understanding Christian leadership in the home with families. There were 5 out of 11 parent participants who felt highly trained to model Christian behaviors. Again, nothing indicated this training goes beyond worship and prayer, mainly learned from the worship experience.

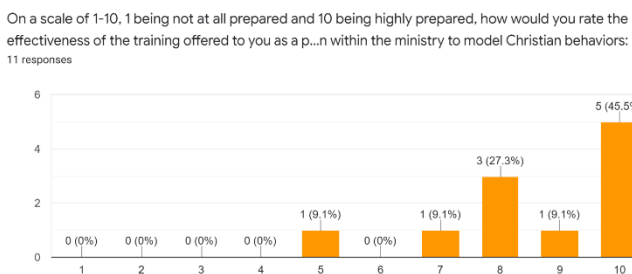


Figure 22. Survey Response 18

The youth sample answers aligned with parents regarding how they experienced Christian behaviors modeled through the worship experience and prayer (see figure 23). The researcher inferred from this data how parishioner's experience modeled Christian behaviors differentiate from what leaders believe they demonstrate.

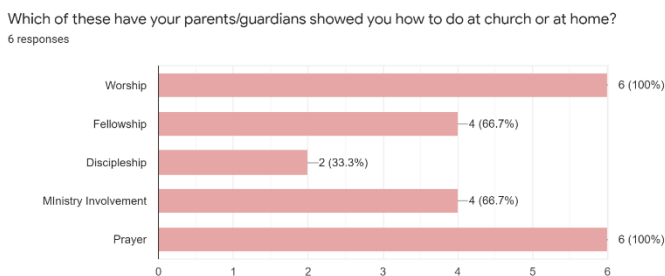


Figure 23. Survey Response 19

The staff participant responded to what Christian behaviors look like when modeled among workers in the ministry by saying, “In thought and action workers should exhibit the love of God to all we come into contact with.” Youth workers had similar thoughts, responding, “As a worker/leader, for myself and other workers/leaders, I expect compassion and understanding toward others. I expect patience and self-control toward our children. And I’ve come to expect our workers/leaders to “be merciful, as our Father is merciful (Luke 6:36).” Another worker responded to modeling Christian behaviors as being, “On time, prepared and spiritually ready to serve.”

A worker expressed positive role-modeling as, “Being faithful in knowing Christ, by having the mind of Him, and being a positive role model to others by spreading and sharing the Word. However, you have to maturely walk the walk and talk the talk.” One worker provided a thought on peer behavior modeling, saying, “I believe children or adults need to see their peers acting and speaking positive things towardsand of others will influence them to do the same. They have to see it being done in order to know what to do and how it should be done. They need to be in that environment regularly and often (see figure 24).”

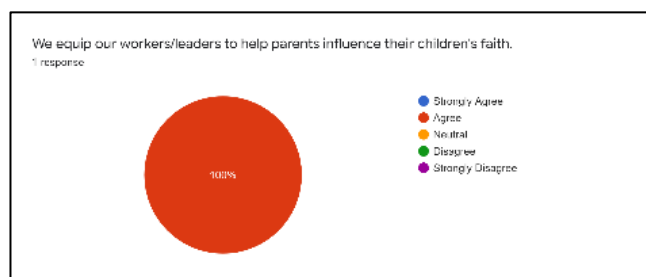


Figure 24. Survey Response 20

The youth response survey analysis offered compelling insight and gave a sense of what modeling looks like as they conceptualize it through their experience. One youth had this in response to modeling Christian behaviors, “Modeling Christian behavior would be leaning on God to help you through your hardships, being nice to others, giving people grace, and helping

people.” Another youth responded, “Showing God’s love through the love you show others. Showing people grace just like God shows us grace.” Showing an understanding of what modeling is, one youth participant explained, “It means to be Christlike.” The youth participant also responded, “Modeling Christian behavior to me means that you have to be Christlike by meditating on His Word. Also, to set an example or be a role model to those willing to accept Jesus. You also have to walk the walk and talk the talk.” Last, a youth pointed back to God when it comes to modeling Christian behaviors, saying, “Letting God speak through you, showing love to others.”

Influence

The modeling section of the survey segues into the influence section, discovering the impression made by and upon parents regarding Christian behaviors. The participant’s responses to questions regarding influence were vastly different. The staff agreed that leaders help parents influence their children’s faith in worship, Bible study, small group, trainings, and Christian materials (see figure 25-26). However, 17% of youth workers disagreed that they equipped parents to influence their children’s faith and provided them the necessary tools to do so (see figure 27). For the first time within the study, there is a drastic difference in opinion regarding how staff and workers view the support parents receive to support children’s faith development.

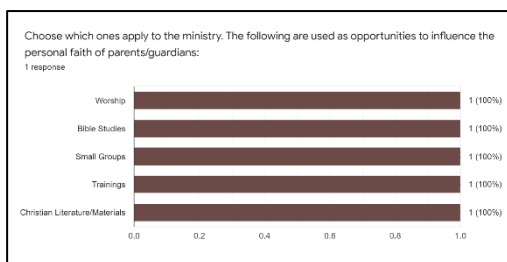


Figure 25. Survey Response 21

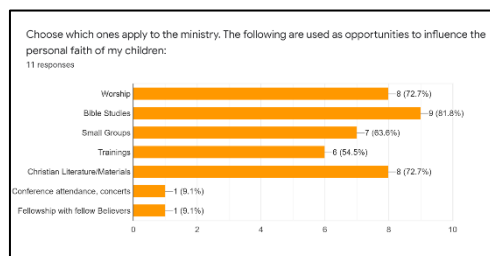


Figure 26. Survey Response 22

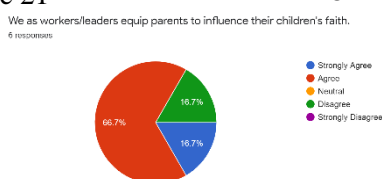


Figure 27. Survey Response 23

Although this is true, 67% of youth workers agreed, and 17% strongly agreed that they helped influence parents’ faith.

Youth workers and parents decided that Bible study was one of the main opportunities to influence parent’s faith. Parents also viewed Christian literature and materials as a significant influence. The researcher considered this to indicate that parents depend more on books and other resources to develop their faith (see figure 28).

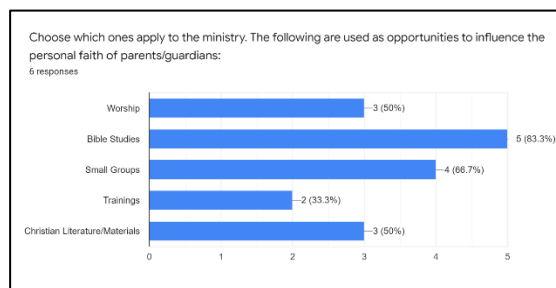


Figure 28. Survey Response 24

The youth participants also agreed, worship was the primary form of involvement influencing their faith. Also, 67% agreed their parents influenced their faith, while only half of that, about 33%, agreed their friends influence their faith. Yet, 50% were neutral about their friend’s influence on their faith. The data suggest their faith could sometimes be influenced by their friends, giving the ministry indication that peer relationships impact spiritual growth. (see figures 29-30)

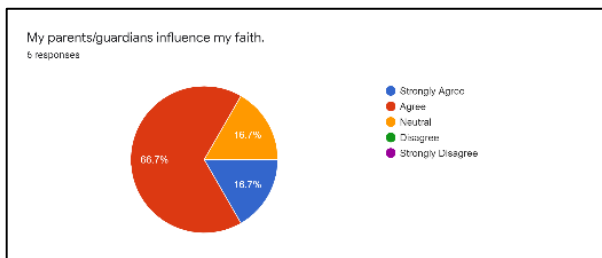


Figure 29. Survey Response 25

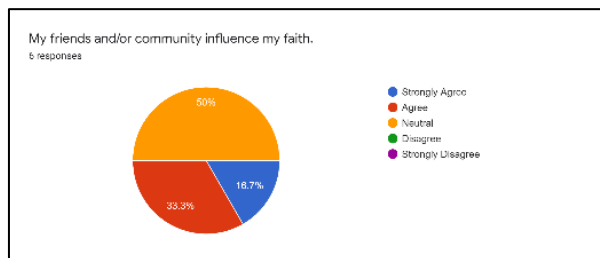


Figure 30. Survey Response 26

Influence on Faith amidst COVID-19

The Coronavirus global pandemic, also known as COVID-19, has forced church closures

around the nation and world. The staff participant strongly agreed ministry participants depended mostly on church activities and worship participation to influence their faith before the pandemic. However, respondents agreed that was still the case since the pandemic (see figure 31). When asked on a scale of 1-10, 1 being no desire and 10 being highly desired, the staff person rated a desire to offer more information on learning about faith to ministry participants at a 10 (see figure 32). Although this is a small sample, it provides an idea of how the church feels regarding the impact of physical church closure due to COVID-19. Youth workers also strongly agreed or disagreed that ministry participants depended mostly on church activities and worship experiences to influence their faith before the pandemic. Since the pandemic, youth workers responded at 50% neutral that ministry participants still depended mostly on church activities and worship experiences to influence their faith. The response demonstrates possible impact by the youth worker's inability to gauge the influence on ministry participants since not having face-to-face interactions for almost a year. When asked if they desired to offer more information on faith to ministry participants, using a scale of 1-10, 1 being no desire and 10 being highly desired, the youth workers all fell between a 7 and 10 on desire.

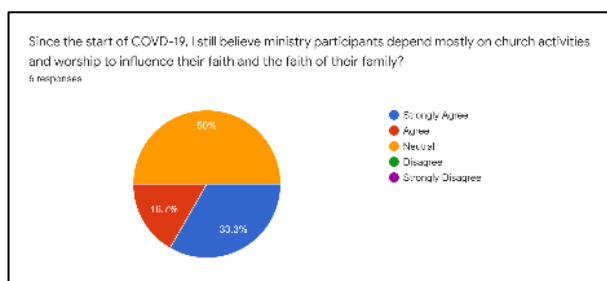


Figure 31. Survey Response 27

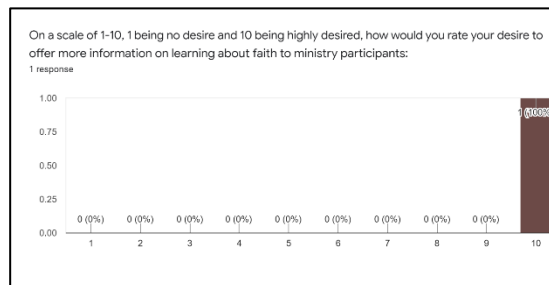


Figure 32. Survey Response 28

The youth aligned with staff and youth workers, with 64% strongly agreeing or agreeing that before COVID-19, most of the influence on their faith and their family's faith was from worship and church activities. However, more than 90% were neutral or disagreed that worship

and church activities are still a significant source of influence on their faith and their family's faith since COVID-19 (see figure 33). Youth participants demonstrate a different perspective on the influence the church presently has on faith during the pandemic, especially in comparison to

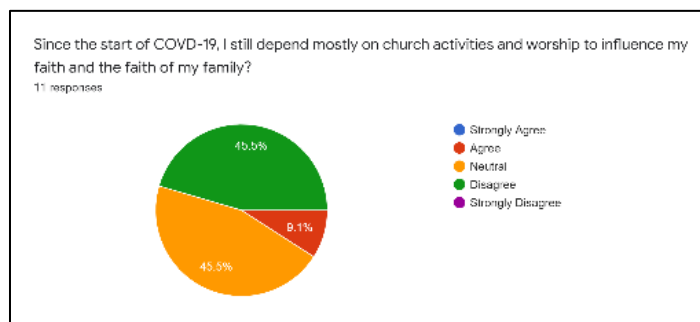


Figure 33. Survey Response 29

adult participants.

Small Focus Groups

Each research study participant received an email requesting them to join in an online video small focus group to discuss the different areas surveyed in more detail. The youth group did not respond to the small focus group, and the staff declined the small focus group. The parents and youth workers continued to the next research phase by participating in the small focus group for their particular sample. There were four parents in one focus group and two youth workers in another focus group.

Parent Small Focus Group

The parents were eager to share their thoughts on Christian faith talks. They believed most of the conversations they have with the families, and children, mainly come from the sermons they hear on Sundays and during mid-week Bible study. Also, they discussed youth church in great detail, appreciating the thematic nature of the lessons taught. One parent during the discussion reiterated that “My daughters were eager to discuss what they learned in youth church...they could relate to it.”

As the group discussed discipleship and salvation, most parents did not have much to say about this faith development area within the church. However, one parent added, “When it came to discipleship, it was clear the kids could not relate to the ministry in the “Dome” (or central sanctuary location). Although this is true, the Dome sermons were often also discussed in the teen church, demonstrating continuity of message throughout the church fellowship.

The topic of modeling Christian behaviors had more discussion and enthusiasm. Volunteering, showing kindness, having the ability to admit mistakes, and having role models who help children control anger were among the things parents said they did or others in the church did to model Christian behavior. One parent thought about it deeply and demonstrated vulnerability by adding, “Seeing Christianity modeled at church showed the more the children learned, the more they asked. That has been the biggest thing with the church school. Honestly, I need more practice in modeling.” They each agreed they needed more practice with modeling Christian behaviors yet appreciated the areas they have to lean on within the ministry to learn about exhibiting this kind of conduct in front of their children.

The parents’ discussion on external spiritual support directly connected to the dependency families had on worship and church activities to develop their faith. One parent said, “My girls listen to Michael Todd, a preacher who is very popular among teens and young adults. They also use Christian apps on their phones.” Popular, younger preachers not connected to the church were a central discussion point for those parents with older children in high school or just entering college. The parents with younger children felt it was important to seek outside of the church for role models since the pandemic and appreciated crafts the church mails out monthly that connect to the lessons. One parent added she had begun to purchase supplemental materials for the children to learn about faith while primarily at home since the pandemic.

As the group transitioned into a discussion on faith development since the COVID-19 pandemic began, parents did not have as much to say. One parent did add, “We have had confessions, Bible Study and Service online that helps, but I wish there was a way to be physically active and have praise and worship.” At this moment in the discussion, each participant resigned to the question: What more *can* the church do during this time when the church cannot physically meet safely?

Youth Worker Small Focus Group

The youth worker's small focus group talked about Christian faith talks with parents and the training they had to facilitate these discussions in great detail. They were very transparent and had different experiences regarding Christian faith talks. One worker offered, “There wasn’t much training as volunteers to assist parents on how to facilitate faith talks. The training focuses on customer service but no techniques for parents and children. Now, if a parent had a challenge with a child, they were referred to a particular coordinator.” The other youth worker added, “There was a lot of training, specifically on keeping children safe while they are in your custody. Also, if problems come about during service times. However, in middle school church, there were more options to support parents.” There was a consistent theme during the conversation suggesting older students and their parents received more support from the ministry’s student departments.

Discipleship and salvation were areas both youth workers felt they received training on and appreciated the additional resources sent home with children and youth so parents could reinforce lessons from worship service and Bible Study. However, youth workers agreed the church could do more to support parents. One youth worker added, “It could be better techniques and more workshops offered to parents for discipleship. There are more supports for those with

special needs children.” The other youth worker had been a staff member for some time, serving the children’s department, and had this to add about that experience, “Oftentimes, while a staff member, I knew what to do, but did not know how to implement it with parents. There is always so little time to minister to them personally.” The restraints on time was a point of contention during the youth worker small group, as they viewed the worship hour(s) where children and youth are in church school activities as not enough time to reach parents and offer support in the way they desired.

Modeling Christian behaviors and influence on faith were areas the youth workers felt should be approached as a collective responsibility among adult stakeholders. One worker added, “When answering the question, whose job is it to model and influence the children, it takes everyone. However, there is a fine line. In an ideal world, parents are the primary source for their children’s faith development, but the church should be the primary resource for supporting it.

The church should serve as a boost on top of what the parents do during the week. Also, the youth and children department should be the ones leading the family conferences, as we already have the interactions with the families to facilitate this kind of Christian education.” The other worker responded to modeling Christian behaviors and influences by saying, “When it comes to modeling, not every parent wants to hear what you have to say. You have to determine how receptive a parent is to embrace the modeling and influence a youth worker is trying to demonstrate. We are the “enhancer” of the children’s faith, but they are the primary influence.

Do parents think this? Not at all. They have lots of trust for us to keep their children safe, teach them biblical precepts, and make them happier than when they were dropped off for church school or Bible study.” Conceptually, the youth workers felt parents had very different perspectives on who should be primarily facilitating, supporting, and influencing their children's

faith. The survey responses were consistent with this line of thinking, as youth workers felt they needed additional tools to help parents in the process of influencing their children's faith. Parents felt the primary source of impact on children's faith development was during worship and church activities with youth workers.

The impact of COVID-19 brought a sober and somber moment during the youth worker's small focus group. One worker discussed the challenges to ministry amidst the pandemic crisis, sharing, "As a youth worker, I am not facilitating lessons online. I know they are happening, but I am not engaged with them. There is a children's service online on Sundays, but the volunteers are not part of facilitating it. There are families engaging online during these services, but it is only a fraction of our normal in-person populations. There are just a handful present. I often wonder, where are they? How are they? How can we find out? Why don't we know?" The desire to reach parents reverberates through the volunteer responses, reflecting how they miss working with children and youth weekly. These emotions provide insight into the unknown regarding the families of the student departments. The workers wondered where these families were in their faith development during this time. Specifically since the mode of church engagement has shifted over the past year.

The other youth worker added in agreement, "I notice, as a youth worker, the same families that come to church physically are making sure their children get online on Sundays and try to participate. Therefore, I do think there is a huge dependency upon the ministry, even in the midst of the pandemic, on what the church offers for faith development. Kids are still doing their activities, and parents post them online. So, there is not a huge turnover." Again, what was not said was the most resonating sentiment in the focus group conversation. The unanswered question left at the end of the discussion was where the families were and if they connected with

WCCI ministry in the online format. If they are not, where are they, and how can we find out?

Table 3 Small Focus Group Responses

Parents/Guardians Small Focus Group	Christian Faith Talks	Discipleship/Salvation	Modeling/Influence	External Spiritual Support	Insights of COVID-19
P1	<p>Much of the information for faith talks comes from the pulpit, through Bible stories, prayer, and salvation. Christian Faith Talks happened more as the children got older.</p>		<p>Volunteering helped me as a parent see what modeling looked like.</p>		
P2	<p>The teen ministry made excited, talking about the topics discussed. They said they could relate to it.</p>	<p>When it came to discipleship, it was clear the kids could not relate to the ministry in the “Dome” (which is where the main sanctuary is located). Although this is true, what was discussed in the Dome was often discussed in the teen church.</p>	<p>I see how demonstrating kindness in front of them has shown up in how they help others. Also, when Pastor messes up and admits it to the congregation, it showed me how to be apologetic to my children. This made them be more apologetic when they were wrong. Letting them know, it’s ok to ask for forgiveness.</p>	<p>My girls listen to Michael Todd, a preacher who is very popular among teens and young adults. They also use Christian apps on their phones.</p>	
P3			<p>I believe modeling Christian behaviors happens through the sports ministry. The men in the ministry have shown my boys Christian behaviors like controlling their emotions.</p>	<p>Yes, I have reached outside of the church for positive role models. I believe some things are missing since the pandemic and wish we could set up something at church to help with something like devotional supplements. The virtual services help.</p>	<p>We have had confessions, Bible Study and Service online that helps, but I wish there was a way to be physically active and have praise and worship.</p>
P4	<p>The information and themes in the youth department help break it down for kids.</p>		<p>Seeing Christianity modeled at church showed the more the children learned the more they asked. That has been the biggest thing with church school. Honestly, I need more practice in modeling.</p>	<p>I appreciate the crafts mailed to the children. I have added activity books into spiritual development at home.</p>	

Youth Worker Small Focus Group	Christian Faith Talks	Discipleship/Salvation	Modeling/Influence	Insights of COVID-19	Thoughts on Offering More	105
<p>YW1</p>	<p>There wasn't much training as volunteers to assist parents on how to facilitate faith talks. The training focuses on customer service but no techniques for parents and children. Now, if a parent had a challenge with a child, they were referred to a particular coordinator.</p>	<p>Steps to salvation is part of the training. There are also blurbs sent home, but nothing in depth to help train parents how and what to teach children.</p> <p>Often times, while a staff member, I knew what to do, but did not know how to implement it with parents.</p> <p>There is always so little time to minister to them personally.</p>	<p>When answering the question, whose job is it to model and influence the children, it takes everyone. However, there is a fine line. In an ideal world, parents are the primary source for the faith development of their children, but the church should be the primary resource for supporting it.</p> <p>The church should serve as a boost on top of what the parents do during the week.</p> <p>Also, the youth and children department should be the ones leading the family conferences, as we already have the interactions with the families to facilitate this kind of Christian education.</p>	<p>As a youth worker, I am not facilitating lessons online. I know they are happening, but I am not engaged with them. There is a children's service online on Sundays, but the volunteers are not part of facilitating it.</p> <p>There are families engaging online during these services, but it is only a fraction of our normal in person populations. There are just a handful present.</p> <p>I often wonder, where are they? How are they? How can we find out? Why don't we know? If I only had their numbers, I'd call them all.</p>	<p>I used to think only about the children. That when the children came to worship, no matter where they came from, who brought them, they were the main focus. However, now I see their parents influence means they need my support. It cannot only be about the children. Parents need the ministry to assist them in developing their children's faith. The time to develop these ideas was not always there.</p> <p>There is so much more to implement in the ministry, especially from those volunteers who are in education. They have</p>	
<p>YW2</p>	<p>There was a lot of training, specifically on keeping children safe while they are in your custody. Also, if problems come about during service times. However, middle school church, there were more options to support parents</p>	<p>There are take homes every Sunday to help children at home discuss what they learned about. This was specifically for the child and the parent is encouraged to help them with it.</p> <p>It could be better techniques and more workshops offered to parents for discipleship. There are more supports for those with special needs children.</p>	<p>When it comes to modeling, not every parent wants to hear what you have to say. You have to determine how receptive a parent is to embracing the modeling and influence a youth worker is trying to demonstrate.</p> <p>We are the "enhancer" of the children's faith, but they are the main influence. Do parents think this? Not at all. They have lots of trust for us to keep their children safe, teach them biblical precepts, and make them happier than when they were dropped off for church school or Bible study.</p>	<p>I notice, as a youth worker, the same families that come to church physically are making sure their children get online on Sundays and try to participate.</p> <p>Therefore, I do think there is a huge dependency upon the ministry, even in the midst of the pandemic, on what the church offers for faith development.</p> <p>Kids are still doing their activities and parents post them online. So, there is not a huge turnover.</p>	<p>It's definitely needed. People would gravitate to it. Tons of kids would love to have more from the department.</p> <p>I'd love to see more done for families. We could be busier doing this as a ministry.</p>	

One-on-One Youth Worker Interview

As the study evolved, the researcher expected several limitations concerning the membership's connections to be participants in the research sample. Even after requested several times, the staff declined to participate in the study. Lack of accessibility due to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis was not the central concern regarding staff participation. The pastors and church administration determined there was a possibility of privacy infringement of the membership. The parents and youth workers were eager to help support the research survey and small focus groups. However, these adults were hesitant to encourage their children to participate in the

small group process and one-on-one interview.

Throughout the two-month study, there was only one interview by a youth worker that provided insight regarding the student department's impact on parents as influencers of their children's faith. Although this is true, the youth worker one-on-one interview brought forth a textured experience. The individual is also a parent of three children (ages 16, 24, and 27), two of which have spent several years as learners within the student ministry. The youth worker has served eight years as a volunteer under at least three children and youth ministers. Last, the youth worker is a trainer for student leaders in fourth grade and above within the ministry.

The researcher asked the youth worker to describe her role with the children and youth student department of WCCI. The youth worker shared, "I started off at super church. This is grades first through fifth. After some time, I began to train all the student leaders. The student leaders start at 4th grade. I train them to become junior leaders, they help the teachers. They serve, play games with younger students, serve as mentors, and eventually turn into adult volunteers. These children and youth are used to disciple young disciples." The youth worker went on to describe the process by which the training begins. "My main role is to train youth leaders. Training begins at their readiness level. There is formal training and then a series of shadowing other adult and youth leaders. They take an exam at the completion of their training, and they get a feel as to where they are going to be working." She went on to describe the frequency of their volunteer support within the ministry, adding, "They can only serve two services a month. They will try to serve every Sunday if you let them. But they can serve any Wednesday they want. I keep track of them, see how they are doing at home. They are training on how to give back. Growing up to be a leader themselves."

The interview continued with what the department is doing to help families grow their

faith throughout the life span. The youth worker said, “It’s,(meaning more), is definitely needed. People would gravitate to it. Tons of kids would love to have more from the department. I’d love to see more done for families. We could be busier doing this as a ministry.

The researcher asked the youth worker if they had thought about what this “more” looks like in offering something both to leadership and families they may not be aware of or think they need? The youth worker responded, “The truth is, if you come to the Dome, (the main worship sanctuary for adults), you may never know what we are doing. Parents and leaders should come by the buildings. Families would see what’s out there. How are they going to know what they don’t know?”

The youth worker then began to share some ministry activities offered, but how they fall short of continuing the support at a certain point. “There is one parent session for the middle school transition. What happens after this? Where is the ongoing communication? Surveys, postcards, getting a heartbeat of what families are going through. There are things being done, but people don’t know. There are things not being done that could reach families. There could be so much more going on, even in my leadership role. We have to be a spiritual village.”

The conversation shifted to a miracle question. If resources were at your fingertips and you could reach families in the way you desire, how would that look? How would you do things differently? The youth worker responded, “I feel limited because of how many families I can reach out to. If church was open, I could plan more... there could be a grand community of that village I talked about. Just reach out more, check in more, and connect more with everyone. If we had more people we could reach out to, we could form more communities. If only my role could match my heart, as a parent, worker, and the heart of the youth, my role would be different, and I could make a bigger impact.”

The youth worker interview provided a voice from different vantage points of the ministry's connection to families. There was a genuine desire to support parents as they influence and develop faith within their families.

One-on-One Youth Interview

A youth participant within the sample completed one interview. The interview with the youth echoed the desire youth workers have to develop faith within families. The value placed on parents as leading influencers was evident as the child participant discussed her faith. The researcher and youth participants made several attempts to meet in the small focus group and through phone interviews but could not do so. However, the researcher recorded a video overview of their responses to the faith development survey. As a result, one of the participants listened and provided her feedback in an email on having parents who are very instrumental in her faith. She wanted to respond to some of the things mentioned in the recording.

The youth participant is 16 years old and has been part of the ministry for most of her life. She participated in several activities within the ministry and was eager to share her experience in the church. Her parents are active members of the ministry, serving in the children's department and having firsthand engagement in their daughter's spiritual journey. She has two older sisters in college and is very focused on her own academic goals. Although she is quite motivated with school education, she was very clear on the faith education from her home and experience in the ministry.

The youth participant said, "Many of the faith talks with my family happen all the time because it is often integrated into what we do on a daily basis." She was able to recognize faith talks as a regimen in her household, further stating, "These talks often include reading the Bible as a family." Additionally, she expressed the family consistently talks about things they got from

church service. Sermons and lessons, she said, were reviewed as a family, and therefore, there is an opportunity for deeper understanding.

The researcher used this youth participant's account as perception data. It contributed to the study's qualitative research design and implications for the results section of the project.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Results Compared to Previous Studies and Published Works

Implications of the Parents Role

While knitting together the intent of this study with the results, there is an excellent discovery of implications. These implications reverberate through staff, youth workers, and parents' views concerning their role in children's discipleship and faith development. The discipleship subheading of the literature review confirms the idea parents within the sample had about how they impacted their family's faith. In particular, if a parent feels more of the influence comes from the church engagement, there is less effort in home-based family discipleship actions.¹

Preaching and teaching from the pastors was a prominent undertone resonating with parents in the sample. Specifically, this was true as it pertained to how they support faith development with their children, considering their identity in the discipleship process. The parent's role in education was used as an example to describe how parents understand their responsibility of discipleship in the family. One of the parents, who is also a school counselor, felt parents have the least number of tools to advocate for their students educationally. Likewise, they lack the resources and knowledge the church workers and leaders have access to as it relates to making disciples of their children.

Regular church attendance was necessary to parents within the sample and how they viewed their Christian education process. The parent's view on church attendance aligned with previous studies mentioned in the literature review. In particular, is the research by David Briggs' on the topic of church attendance. He contends teens more likely to be actively

¹ W. Steenburg. *Research Brief: Effective Practices for Training Parents in Family Discipleship* (Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry, Spring 2011), p. 47

religious as young adults had parents who attended worship with them.¹ There was no clear understanding that parents thought Christian education they could use with their children outside of church derived from the ministry's student departments. Particularly ongoing support from church workers and leaders serving and teaching children while parents attend worship in the main sanctuary. The researcher gleaned this implicates how parents view delivering children to worship experiences as one of their main spiritual leadership roles. Similarly, a study on parents as top influencers in their teen's life found parents may believe their accountability in the discipleship process encompasses transporting them to church.²

This indirect form of discipleship presents the parent's role of influencers on faith development as secondary persons to grow their children in Christ, not immediate, primary shepherds. These are the questions echoing behind the parent responses within the sample: when it comes to Christian influence, modeling, and behaviors, is exposure to Christian experience in the church enough to impact the child's faith in God, understanding of purpose, and awareness of how to share and take ownership of spiritual growth in adulthood?

When parents within the sample elaborated on the church's support to disciple their children during the small focus group, they all agreed there could and should be more from the church. Practicing what you preach was mentioned in the parent small focus group. Parents agreed; they were often "called out" for not being the example they preached their children should follow. The Briggs study on parents as top influencers affirms this, asserting mothers and fathers who lived by what they said impacted adolescents maintaining faith into their

¹ David Briggs, *Parents are Top Influence in Teens Remaining Active in Religion as Young Adults* (The Christian Century, 2014), p.18.

² Merton P. Strommen and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing on the Faith: A Radical New Model for Youth and Family Ministry* (Minnesota: Saint Mary's Press, 2000), 17.

twenties.³

The parents wanted to give their children more in the discipleship process, but it was not clear they believed they could or should get this additional support from the church. Parents mentioned books, apps, and other resources outside of the church fellowship for guidance and believed they were the better for doing so. There was no expectation or hope expressed that the youth workers, trained staff, or hired ministry leaders would provide these tools and resources. The parent's feelings were a discovery that connected back to the Steenburg research study on effective practices for parents in discipleship.

The study revealed parents who feel like the church is the central place children receive Bible teaching are less likely to engage in home-based discipleship.⁴ The researcher then contemplated an appropriate follow-up question to parents' low expectation of getting support from the youth ministry for home-based discipleship. The first question was this: do parents believe the church is the primary Christian education resource for their children? Suppose the parents at WCCI and other church fellowships believe most Christian education should come from the youth department and not from them as parents. In that case, the researcher is not suggesting this is necessarily a skewed perspective. Overwhelmingly, parents still express they are the main stakeholders of ensuring spiritual development is accessible to their children. However, this leads to the second question: if there is ever errant teaching, questionable discipleship, or biblical precepts not rightly divided by youth leaders, at what point would the parent know?

³ David Briggs, *Parents are Top Influence in Teens Remaining Active*, 17.

⁴ W. Steenburg. *Research Brief: Effective Practices for Training Parents in Family Discipleship* (Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry, Spring 2011), p. 47

Further, when they prepare to correct something taught to their children by youth workers they disagree with, how challenging might it be to rewire teaching hardwired by their primary spiritual developer: the church? When learning is consistently and repetitively wrong, it is the equivalent of reading sheet music incorrectly while playing the piano. When piano playing is consistently and repetitively wrong, hardwired into the finger memory, it is challenging to reverse. Trusting youth pastors, workers, leaders, and volunteers to steer children and youth correctly in Christian faith tenets is an obvious expectation when families come to church.

Although this is true, as forerunners of their children's spiritual development, how will parents know when spiritual correction is necessary if they are not one of the primary teachers? Research shows church leaders believe parents should be primary in spiritual development. The Barna Research Group reported results from a study on who is responsible for children's faith formation revealed, "Despite the fact that church leaders overwhelmingly agree that parents are most responsible for a child's spiritual formation and development, the data demonstrates that churches place little emphasis on training and equipping said parents."⁵

Overall, the perception data revealed parents were pleased with the church's support and their families with Christian education, direction, and spiritual development. The researcher gathered, their faith in God and trust in their ministry are the foundation of this satisfaction. Although this is true, it does not negate a potential need for intentional discipleship training for parents; research shows parents have a more significant influence on their children.

Implications of the Youth Workers Role

The six youth worker participants who completed the survey had an enthusiasm that

⁵ The Barna Group. "Who Is Responsible for Children's Faith Formation?" Barna Updates, March 2019, the Barna Group, accessed March 1, 2021, <https://www.barna.com/research/children-faith-formation/>.

was evident in this study. This sample's survey, small group, and interview response demonstrated their responsibility and joy in serving children and youth. The researcher discovered the youth worker's great appreciation of children's faith development by parents was evident in their desire to do more for families in the worship experience. Caring relationships developed between adult trainers and youth leaders. One youth worker expressed that these youth trained to be leaders often did not want to transition to the next ministry level because of enjoying the ministry's leadership opportunity. A study in the literature review on youth attitude toward the church supported this evidence of enduring faithfulness due to youth pastors developing caring relationships with youth.⁶

One of the youth workers who also previously served as the children's pastor expressed concern for not knowing how families were coping during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, outside of the few responding to posts followed on the Christian education department's Facebook pages. A concern presented in this study's literature review on the effects crisis in urban communities has on youth workers as they minister to families, considering their own experience with the pandemic crisis.⁷ The problem of COVID-19 demonstrated the unknowns the youth workers thought of when missing the families they serve since the church closure in March of 2020.

It has been a year since the church closed physically for health safety and launched entirely virtually, except for outreach ministries offering basic needs to families in the community. These unknowns seemed to resound not only in the wake of the pandemic but

⁶ Ji, Chang-Ho C., and Tevita Tameifuna. "Youth Pastor, Youth Ministry, and Youth Attitude Toward the Church." *Review of Religious Research* 52, no. 3 (2011): 306-22.

⁷ Fort, Christin J., Cynthia B. Eriksson, Ann Y. Gottuso, and Ashley M. Wilkins. "Posture in Relation to God and Ethnic Background: A Qualitative Analysis of Urban Youth Ministry Workers' Responses to Crisis." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 45, no. 2 (Summer, 2017): 119-32, p. 119.

because there is such little time to get to know the families when they were physically able to attend church. The researcher had not considered these insights on connectivity. However, the small focus group with youth workers felt customer service was a more prevailing training point than getting to know families and their needs. The relational aptitude of youth ministry leaders determines their connection with youth.⁸ The researcher discovered from the responses that the relational aptitude of youth workers had been tested in the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, prompting one of the workers to say, “If I only had their numbers, I’d call them all.”

The passion of the youth workers for the ministry was compelling. However, the gap in understanding how to reach the families they serve, especially in times of crisis, was poignantly obvious. Why are youth workers not provided what is necessary to make phone or video contact if they are the church servants who directly check children into ministry every week, train youth as leaders, and take the time to connect in online student worship? However, they have no active role in the current model of ministry engagement. Further, the research study results segue into vast possibilities of youth worker’s ministry role and function. The responses revealed youth workers feel confident in teaching Christian lessons to children and teenagers. The researcher considered, could these same youth workers support parents to facilitate faith talks and discipleship? If they could, would this help parents addressing real-life issues facing families within the church?

Implications for the Staff Role

Church staff had limited input within the research study. There were several challenges to reaching staff. However, there are a few insights from the information in the staff faith

⁸ Wimberly, Anne Streaty. “Black Youth Speak Out: An Urgent Call for Hope-Bearing Response.” *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 26, no. 2 (July 2016): 102–20. doi:10.1080/10649867.2016.1244324, p. 6.

development survey. There was a consensus in how the staff and youth worker participants viewed parents' overall support as influencers in their children's faith. Again, much of the expected equipping of parents was through the teachings of sermons and weekly Bible study. The main difference between staff and youth workers was how the ministry equipped parents to influence their children's faith and provided them with the necessary tools. There were youth workers who disagreed this equipping of parents takes place.

One question gleaned from the study's perception data is, how does the church view the primary spiritual authority in young people's lives? The literature review provided in Paul Tripp's book on parenting that authority is a foundational heart issue for children, therefore modeling authority's protective beauty is a good parent practice.⁹ With this in mind, another question to consider is, what has the church done already to build spiritual leadership capacity in parents? The church may be more influential than the research revealed regarding how parents discern their preparedness to disciple their children. Based on the staff responses, the researcher considered if the leadership had a process to survey how parents felt about their spiritual authority with their children? Finally, in light of how parents view their spiritual authority with their children, is there a potential connecting trend regarding parental spiritual authority's impact on membership retention with youth transitioning into emerging adulthood?

Implications for the Youth

The youth participants provided a window into every stakeholder's impression on their spiritual journey as Christians growing in the faith. The youth explained in detail their understanding of discipleship, salvation in Christ, and the power of faith talks with their family.

⁹ Paul Tripp, *Parenting: The 14 Radical Gospel Principles that Can Radically Change Your Family* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), p. 111.

The research study revealed how compelled the youth participants were in articulating their thoughts on modeling Christian behaviors. Being Christ-like, leaning on God to help you through hardships, and being kind to others were responses to what it means to model Christian behavior. The research sample highly regarded worship and prayer as vehicles for modeling Christian behaviors. Although this is true, both a youth worker and parent participant agreed that transitioning from one worship context to another can be challenging for youth.

Jared Wilson's book on the "prodigal church" contends worship may not resonate with one or all family members as the kids get older, the parents also. As families age, the church's reality may not wholly win the family over. Yet, the menu of services offered at any particular time in the growing family's life is more of an attraction.¹⁰ An attractive menu of ministries is not necessarily why this sample of parents and youth are attracted to the fellowship. However, it is essential to note that retention in this particular church or any church for youth emerging into adulthood has declined for the last few decades. The percentage of young adult dropouts has increased from 59% to 64% from 2011 to 2019.¹¹

The youth participant responses are optimistic regarding their outlook on faith and a basic understanding of engrafting into their lives. The question to consider regarding the youth is the implications of an increase in young adult dropouts as an emergence into adulthood connected to the World Changers Church International ministry. Further, with this anticipation of national decline, what can the church do to proactively retain emerging adults within the ministry or keep them in some way connected to the body of Christ at large?

¹⁰ Wilson, Jared. *A Gentle Manifesto against the Status Quo: The Prodigal Church*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 36.

¹¹ Barna Group, *Church Dropouts Have Risen to 64%—But What About Those Who Stay?* (Barna.com, September 2019), <https://www.barna.com/research/resilient-disciples/>

What the Researcher Learned

The researcher has learned a great deal about the incredible impression the ministry has on families. There is an enormous amount of honor for the church ministries and the leadership of the pastors. The devotion staff, youth workers, parents, youth, and children have for the ministry makes the researcher value how precious the faith development is of the membership. The vulnerability, trust, and dedication shown through the participants' responses propel the researcher's desire for future studies highlighting discipleship's delicate nature in local churches. The willingness of members across the lifespan to commit to the church's mission and vision should propel leadership aspirations to actively equip parents as primary disciplers of children. The researcher discovered others within the ministry were inclined to desire more for parents as leaders in the faith.

Further, it was a surprise that the methodology was hollow in studying other essential aspects of how parents become equipped by the church and outside resources to influence their children spiritually. Also, there is a great deal of literature on parents as primary influencers of faith, but very little of it provides research on the African American Christian experience specifically. Much of the literature the researcher found on the topic was not culturally relevant to African American worship. Many books by pastors and authors of journal articles on the subject did not grapple with the Black church's various nuances.

Results as Implications for Other Church Settings

Other church settings could use the implications of this study by asking the following questions gleaned from each participant sample and the overall garnered ideas from the research:

- When it comes to Christian influence, modeling, and behaviors, is exposure to Christian experience in the church enough to impact the child's faith in God, understanding of

purpose, and awareness of how to share and take ownership of spiritual growth in adulthood?

- Do parents believe the church is the primary resource of Christian education for their children?

- If there is ever errant teaching, questionable discipleship, or biblical precepts not rightly divided by youth leaders, at what point would the parent know?

- Further, when parents prepare to correct something taught to their children by youth workers they disagree with, how challenging might it be to rewire teaching hardwired by their primary spiritual developer: the church?

- When learning is consistently and repetitively wrong, it is the equivalent of reading sheet music incorrectly while playing the piano.

- Trusting youth pastors, workers, leaders, and volunteers to steer children and youth correctly in the tenets of the Christian faith is an obvious expectation when families come to church, but how far does this trust go for individual families growing in the faith?

- As forerunners of their children's spiritual development, how will parents know when spiritual correction is necessary if they are not primary teachers?

- Why are youth workers not provided with what is necessary to make phone or video contact if they are the church servants who directly check children into ministry every week, train youth as leaders, and take the time to connect in online student worship?

- Further, the research study results segue into the ministry's vast possibilities of youth workers' role and function.

- How can these workers utilize the same Christian studies in supporting parents to facilitate faith talks, discipleship, and addressing real-life issues families facing families within the church?

- How does the church view the primary spiritual authority in the lives of young people?
- What has the church done already to build spiritual leadership capacity in parents?
- Does the church leadership have a process to survey how parents feel about their spiritual authority with their children?
- In light of how parents view their spiritual authority with their children, is there a potential connecting trend regarding parental spiritual authority's impact on membership retention with youth transitioning into emerging adulthood?
- What are the implications of increasing young adult dropouts on the youth emerging into adulthood connected to the church?
- With this anticipation of a national decline in church attendance by emerging adults, what can the church do to proactively retain emerging adults within the ministry or keep them in some way connected to the body of Christ at large?

Ideas Emerged for Implementing Change

The researcher offers two emerging ideas for implementing change within the church. These include the intentional path toward a shift in mentality and development of a parent network, funneling ongoing education for each leader in the lives of children served at WCCI. Further, these recommendations are considered interventions World Changers Church International can implement into the already established ministry design.

Mental Shifts

The first emerging idea for implementing change is empowering leadership to understand their authority to help parents influence and model Christian life before their children. No real

change can occur in assisting parents to if there is no compelling shift in the mentality that the church is the primary source for parental guidance. The church now has data that implicates parents want to support, and youth leaders who are passionate about children and their spiritual growth have the tools necessary to provide this support.

World Changers Church International has incredible resources, complete with a virtual and physical bookstore of materials. These are special tools considering the present unpredictable timeframe for meeting in person as a fellowship again. Families are still experiencing triumphs and trials during COVID-19, and parents more than ever need connection with all stakeholders, especially those spiritually invested in their children.

The workers who participated in the study are first-fruits to the outreach through phone calls, text reminders, augmented media use, and in exceptional cases, video or in-person consultation. The mentality of youth leader's worth to parents will shift when church administration embraces the value of the life-changing mentorship these workers offer the youth ministry and church at large. These workers are poised to work, asking the hard questions regarding the constituency they passionately and dedicatedly served: where are you, how are you, and how can I help you? These are the questions shepherds should be asking about their sheep. Matthew 18:12-14 states. "What do you think? If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he is happier about that one sheep than about the ninety-nine that did not wander off. In the same way, your Father in heaven is not willing that any of these little ones should perish."

Parent Network Development

Like in public and private education, there are many ways parents network with each

other, teachers, and their children. Remind, class dojo, and the Band provides communication applications to stay connected, receive updates, and complete projects. Developing a parent network with World Changers Church International, with church leadership oversight, is an immediate spiritual and Christian engagement opportunity. WCCI, unlike many churches before COVID-19, was technologically prepared to meet the specific spiritual needs of the congregation immediately. This extension of technology can be readily assessable to each part of the sample, including the children and youth. Strategy on implementing this network includes:

- Brainstorming ideas with youth workers, parents, and children on network possibilities.
- Tailoring classes for staff, youth leaders, and workers to provide instruction to guide parents as “disciples who make disciples.”
- Making ethical considerations concerning technology.
- Outlook on sustaining the network beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Determining the financial and institutional requirements necessary to establish a network aligns with the church fellowship's mission, vision, beliefs, and goals.

This kind of connectivity is a corporate initiative toward fulfilling a biblical mandate to impress upon children the heritage of faith for their generation and the next. Deuteronomy 6:6-9 “These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”

Future Research Considerations

Future research considerations may include the impact of intergenerational influence on

faith in African American families. There is also a need to discuss how gender and racial movements such as Me Too and Black Lives Matter cultivate the next generation's views on the Christian faith. As an extension to the impact of cultural shifts on faith development, research considerations may include the intergenerational gaps parents, children, and extended families experience. A further augmentation of this research would be how generations continue to substantiate core beliefs of the Christian faith and meaning in church fellowship.

There are other research areas on parents as primary faith influencers that could cross-reference to bring texture to the subject's theological and theoretical discourse. For instance, how do stages of development impact faith influence? Also, comparative studies on the parental effect on children's spiritual development when parents become Christians at different lifespan stages. An extension to this current study may be to provide a pre-and post-assessment, implementing interventions that provide resources and curriculum to youth ministry pastors, workers, and volunteers directly geared toward parents in African American churches.

Pastoral and church administrations may consider this research valuable in engaging parents as faith leaders in their families. Urban church administrations may find this research helpful, as church ministries for decades in African American communities focused on connecting children through Sunday school, vacation Bible school, holiday programs, and various community gathering activities. These missionary initiatives within the church have often negated the parent, using the church bus to gather children and youth without parents' help and serving the needs parents typically provide, such as recreation, food, and fellowship. Therefore, more studies on connecting with the total family in urban areas may provide insight into church growth and multigenerational membership retention.

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 8, 2020

Caarne White
R. Peter Mason

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY20-21-426 Faith Development Study on Parents as Primary Faith Influencers

Dear Caarne White and R. Peter Mason,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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 does not classify as human subjects research. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your study is not considered human subjects research for the following reason:

(2) Your project will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46.102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects research status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so. If you choose to use our documents, please replace the word *research* with the word *project* throughout both documents.

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

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