

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Development of Future Leaders in the Christian Church

A Thesis Project Submitted to

Dr. Mark Plaza of Liberty University School of Divinity

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Doctor of Ministry

By

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Thesis Project Approval Sheet

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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The thesis project, *Development of Future Leaders in the Christian Church*, was developed to address the decline in youth attendance, retention, and participation in The Mountain Christian Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky. There has been a consistent decline in the number of youths who attend and participate in the church after high school graduation. After a review of literature and case study, which included a survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussions, this researcher determined that the cause of the problem was that the church lacked programs for youth that lead them to Christian maturity and an opportunity for leadership skills training. The study was divided into five themes; youth needs for religious practice and relationships, development of youth leadership skills endorsed by the church, the influence of leaders and parents on youth retention in church, leadership behavior shaping in youth, and experiences that lead youth to Christian maturity. The questions in the survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussions were divided into thematic categories, and the responses were analyzed using a qualitative research method. The study yielded information regarding why youth choose to no longer attend church after graduating from high school. Youth and adults agreed that programs that lead to spiritual maturation were foundational to address the problem. An intergenerational approach to guide youth to spiritual maturation and become active participants and leaders in the church is the cornerstone and impetus for change at The Mountain Christian Church.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This paper presents a study on the steady decline of youth attendance and participation in church services, outreach, and activities. A lack of leadership skills development in youth ages 13-17 has been and will continue to contribute to the decline in church attendance today and for the next several decades. Current research indicates that a lack of spiritual and leadership development is the leading cause of youth leaving the church after high school graduation.¹ The departure of youth from churches of all faiths has become a normative practice in American church life. The themes addressed in the paper are *youth needs for religious practice and relationships, development of youth leadership skills endorsed by the church, the influence of leaders and parents on youth retention in church, leadership behavior shaping in youth, and experiences that lead youth to Christian maturity*. The review of literature indicates that there are strategies, programs, and relationships that will transform youth into lifelong followers of Christ, contributors to the health of the church, and the Christian community.

This project's primary purpose is to delineate research-based reasons why youth are leaving the church and determine which areas of departure from the church can be addressed to have youth return to church and become mature Christian leaders for the body of Christ. Relationships play a vital role in the retention of youth in the church. An intergenerational approach has been found to be effective as long as the church embraces the idea and takes an adoptive approach for the youth in their church. Adults must not separate themselves from the youth as all are part of one body. Youth ministries have developed into a parachurch that is given little attention and is disconnected from congregational and denominational initiatives. Youth

¹ Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005), 69.

ministry matured as the understanding of adolescence matured, youth ministry was discovering its identities it was informed by other disciplines. Without degree programs or a shared curriculum, youth ministers relied upon learning networks and created the discipline of youth ministry on the go. The conversations about the practice of youth ministry became less about theology and more around best practices.² Church leaders have little understanding about youth ministry having given youth ministers autonomy and have allowed them to become detached from the aggregate church. Youth ministry has become a place to keep youth safe, teaching them a thin theology and operated by an undereducated staff.³

Youth, like adults, must be taught about how God is worthy of their passion and can deliver them from their greatest fears and mistakes. Providing entertaining, wholesome activities in youth groups is not enough to retain teenage members. The social connection available to youth group members must be paired with the sanctifying individual faith and actively seeking to fulfill God's plan for their lives. The best, most vibrant youth groups ultimately lack a connection for youth to be an integral part of the church as a whole which would provide ownership and a sense of belonging for them. Churches in every tradition are losing large numbers of youth. Youth begin leaving the church during their early high school years when they get "too busy" for church, and others continue to leave soon after they graduate from high school as the church is no longer a priority in their lives.⁴ If youth feel lost and alone in their faith

² Terri Martinson Elton, "Mergers and Possibilities: The Intersection of Missiology and Youth Ministry." 1st ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE. (2013). 67.

³ Ibid., 69.

⁴ Chap Clark, "Adoptive Youth Ministry: A New Typology for the Theological Grounding of Youth Ministry Practice," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 14, no. 2 (Spring 2016), 20.

journey, they will become dissatisfied and detach themselves from their faith group. About half of all teenagers involved in traditional youth groups that lacked opportunities to develop mature faith leave the church after high school graduation and never return.⁵

Ministry Context

This researcher has been the associate minister for two years at The Mountain Christian Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky. The senior minister planted the church nine years ago with the intention of not only ministering in a traditional church setting, but also seeking to serve those in need of physical, mental, and social assistance. Although there are fewer than one hundred active members at The Mountain Christian Church, it serves many more than its membership number. Currently, there is an addiction recovery program, an Iron Man Bible study, a music instruction program available to anyone in the community, and a close working relationship with the local homeless shelter.

Members of The Mountain Christian Church believe that Jesus Christ is the son of the living God who died on the cross and was resurrected for the forgiveness of mans' sins. The congregation practices the sacrament of communion weekly (Lk 22:19-20) and believes that all Christians should follow Jesus in baptism (Matt 3:13-17). Prayer and the study of Scripture are the cornerstones of the church. Members are actively involved in the discipleship of others as commanded by Jesus in Matthew 28:18-20.

The Mountain Christian Church operates with a relational ministry as its focus. Time is made for fellowship before and after services, where most members participate in warm fellowship with each other. Community outreach programs are instrumental for members serving

⁵ Richard Ross, "Youth Ministry in Thirds: To Accelerate the Development of Lifetime Faith," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 16, no. 2 (Spring 2017), 90.

others outside of the church. The value of relationship-building is evident not only through the action of service but also in sermons and other teachings.

The senior minister and this researcher have been in discussion for over a year regarding the importance of church growth and growing disciples. The church's goal is not to simply grow in numbers but to develop deep relationships with Christ and others. The church members' average age is 58 years old. Currently, the church does not provide youth opportunities to be involved in the church service other than during special occasions for youth ministry. The church board has discussed beginning a youth ministry that includes in-home Bible studies in which leaders can be developed and eventually brought into the church as leaders. Authentic leadership opportunities need to be made available and embraced by the church body to attract youth and use their leadership skills. Three leaders in the church have seminary educations or experience working with youth. The church desires to continue its ministry by developing young leaders who will carry it on to the future.

The senior minister, music minister, and this researcher have discussed the importance of intergenerational and adoptive youth programs. Currently, the mission of the church and youth program do not overlap. The nature of this relationship should be one in which young people are recipients and implementors of the church's mission. "Mission initiatives invite youth into Christian community to experience faith as a way of life, to offer opportunities for sharing the Gospel and experiencing God's world, and to help young people discover agency and vocation."⁶ The problem facing The Mountain Christian Church is that our current youth program is separated from the intergenerational faith community. As a result, this researcher is dedicated to ensuring that the youth ministry does not become sidelined. Youth ministry and the church's

⁶ Terri Martinson Elton, "Mergers and Possibilities," 68.

mission must include evangelism, community service, and a theological program that promotes disciple-making. The Mountain Christian Church must include the voices of youth who gain an understanding of its mission, programs, and leadership opportunities for Christ's disciples.

The church must commit to attracting youth and developing them as future leaders. The Mountain Christian Church leadership has willingly accepted this researcher's involvement with developing a youth discipleship program. The goal is to have a teenage male and female Bible study begun by April 2021. The focus would be on a theological understanding and development of faith that is relevant to their lives. It would also provide an opportunity to develop intergenerational and peer relationships. The Mountain Christian Church is ready and willing to develop future leaders for the church and community.

Current research reveals that church leadership and parental influence are significant factors for youth attendance.⁷ Adults in the church must have authentic relationships with Christ that are evident in the church and outside the church through a life lived for Christ. Teenagers desire role models who can teach them that a mature Christian life is relevant to them, their daily challenges, and the problems of this world. Leaders need behavior shaping. The Mountain Christian Church must take an assertive stance by educating its leaders and providing support for the parents who have teenagers to help them maintain spiritual and relational growth. Leaders should make efforts to assimilate youth into the church so that members of the congregation embrace intergenerational values beyond the church and influence youth's daily lives.⁸

⁷ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), 112.

⁸ Brenda Snailum, "Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry within Existing Evangelical Church Congregations: What Have We Learned?" *Christian Education Journal* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 168.

A church that provides intergenerational support, leadership training opportunities, and a deep theological focus on becoming a mature Christian will increase youth membership and retention. Youth must be given the opportunity to grow in Christian strength and maturity with their peers and adult counterparts. The Bible is explicit in its stance on youth serving as Christian leaders. Just as Paul said to Timothy, “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12).⁹ The researcher will intertwine current research themes and provide evidence and strategies that address the decline of youth attendance and involvement in The Mountain Christian Church.

Problem Presented

The problem is The Mountain Christian Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky lacks leadership skills development in youth ages 13-17. After graduation from high school, youth are leaving the church. Most adolescents remained in attendance only because their parents required them to attend. When given a choice at the age of 18, most chose to leave the church. The church does not have a program to engage the youth in leadership opportunities, and its theological teachings are basic and do not promote a mature relationship with Christ. The senior pastor, church leaders, and this researcher recognize that the development and maturation in the faith of youth are paramount to their growing into future leaders in the church. In 2001, a survey of 2,192 youth ministers reported promising findings that 84% of youth ministers perceived their youth as actively pursuing spiritual maturation.¹⁰ Youth ministers must work to effectively interconnect youth and adult programs because there is a disconnect between generations and a lack of

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *New American Standard Version*. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 1990.

¹⁰ Karen Choi, “The Relationship between Youth Ministry Participation and Faith Maturity of Adolescents: Testing for Faith-Nurturing Characteristics in Youth Ministry as a Mediator Using Multiple Regression,” *Christian Education Journal* 9, no. 2 (Fall 2012), 293.

motivation to include youth as part of the overall church program. As a result, youth membership is declining and is not projected to grow in the future.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this DMIN action research thesis is to develop leadership skills in youth ages 13-17 at The Mountain Community Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky. Programmatic changes will need to occur at all levels of the church if they are to have a youth leadership development program. The senior pastor, leadership team, and this researcher are committed to building an engaging program for youth to be connected to the larger body of the church. Youth ministry is generally considered the relationship and services between youth and the youth minister. Many church members do not consider youth ministry a “ministry” except for its connection to the greater body of the church.¹¹ Youth ministry should include the discipleship of 13-17-year-olds into spiritual maturity, utilizing their strengths in current and new church programs, and becoming vital members of the church’s operational program.

New programs will include relational education and adoptive programs to bridge the intergenerational gap in the church. The discipleship program that teaches new youth converts to reach spiritual maturity will need to replace the current topical devotional-based program. A concerted effort to include youth in planning and service opportunities for the church should be made immediately. Creating an engaging program that partners youth with adults, assists in the process of youth maturing as Christians, and allows for leadership opportunities, will create a sense of belonging and ownership for the youth. With a personal stake in the church, youth will be encouraged to remain in attendance and actively pursue their peers to do the same.

¹¹ Chap Clark, “Adoptive Youth Ministry: A New Typology,” 18.

Basic Assumptions

This project is built upon the presupposition that youth between the ages of 13 and 17 leave the church for diverse reasons. Youth choose to leave the church because of a lack of ownership and belonging in their church, insufficient programs and opportunities for spiritual growth and maturation, and a lack of leadership opportunities provided through an intergenerational and adoptive approach from the congregation's adult members. The National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) of 2005 reported that two-thirds of teenagers explained that they did not need to be involved in a congregation to be religious or spiritual.¹² This researcher has seen a correlation between the NSYR study data and youth retention in The Mountain Christian Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky.

There is not only a distinction in The Mountain Christian Church youth group and adult Bible study by name, but also a difference in the rigor of Bible study material. The adult Bible study material focuses on theological topics that lead to spiritual maturation, whereas the youth group material focuses on Christian life situations and survival tactics for teens. As a result, teens experience detachment during Sunday worship services and a lack of basic understanding to follow and apply the sermon, which is presented at a level for adults. There is little to no recognition of youth during the church service apart from graduation and summer service projects. This researcher presumes that programmatic changes in the area of youth Bible study and leadership opportunities would assist in the teens' spiritual maturation and increase the retention rate of youths in the church.

Parents and other leaders in the church could positively impact the youth by adopting an intergenerational ministry. Teenagers, like adults, grow their faith through personal relationships

¹² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 76.

with Jesus and fellow Christians. Involving youth with adults as mentors will give the youth a sense of belonging, a resource for when they have difficult questions, and a model of how to live a mature Christian life. Adult church members can involve the youth in service activities that require leadership and give the youth a sense of ownership in the ministry. This researcher assumes that a detailed adoptive ministry program would be put in place utilizing spiritually mature adults with a desire to reach youth through Christ. The program's focus would be on discipleship and spiritual growth of teens, including a plan to involve authentic leadership roles and activities for them within the church.

This researcher assumes that the church staff will work diligently to have all church members support the program. Throughout the church, there must be buy-in to give a welcoming and genuine invitation to youths into the overall church mission and programs. The Mountain Christian Church is a graying congregation and has recognized the importance of attracting and retaining youth in the church so that its ministry continues. Without immediate action, the church will continue to lose members.

It is evident that activities for youth at The Mountain Christian Church are ineffective. Movie nights, pizza parties, and other entertaining events have their place, but youth do not come to church or remain a part of the congregation for the entertainment. This researcher has had informal conversations with youth regarding their reason for coming to church. The reasons ranged from “my parents make me go” to “I come to learn how to live my life for Christ.” This researcher knows that authentic involvement and intergenerational ministry need to occur for youths to experience maturation in Christ. Providing leadership opportunities in the church for youth creates responsibility and ownership for them in the church. The researcher assumes that

increasing the retention rate and attracting new youth to the church requires significant work and programmatic change.

Definitions

Adoptive youth ministry – An integration of emerging generations into the family of faith, helping young adults become active participants in God's redemptive community.¹³

Behavior Shaping - Producing new forms of behavior by reinforcement and conditioning, also called approximation conditioning; behavior shaping.¹⁴

Youth Discipleship Program – A structured program of teaching, mentorship, and service focused on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Students are to mature to the point of living life based upon the teachings of Christ.¹⁵

Intergenerational ministry – This occurs when a congregation intentionally combines the generations in mutual serving, sharing, or learning within the church's core activities to live out being the body of Christ to each other and the greater community.¹⁶

Relational Ministry – This approach is transformational youth ministry wherein relationships are at the heart of true conversion. To bring teens to a relationship with Christ, a leader must be willing to engage in a relationship with them. It requires a healthy relationship with the teen to help them with their walk with Christ.¹⁷

¹³ Chap Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), 11.

¹⁴ Raymond J. Corsini, *The Dictionary of Psychology*, (London: Routledge, 2016), 46.

¹⁵ Malan Nel, "Imagine--Making Disciples in Youth Ministry... That Will Make Disciples," *Hervormde Teologiese Studies* 71, no. 3 (2015), 2.

¹⁶ Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*, (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012), 27.

¹⁷ Karen Choi, "The Relationship between Youth Ministry Participation," 306.

Spiritual formation – Spiritual formation in the tradition of Jesus Christ is the process of transforming the inner dimension of the human being, the heart, which is the same as the spirit or will. It is being formed and transformed in such a way that its natural expression comes to be the deeds of Christ done in the power of Christ.¹⁸

Youth leadership development – The provision of experiences, from highly structured to quite informal, that helps young people develop the competencies necessary to lead others.¹⁹

Limitations

This researcher must work with others in the church to address the limitations that are on the project. The Mountain Christian Church is a traditional congregation made up of older congregants. Part of the traditional program involves youth in the church being separated from adult Bible studies, leadership roles, and most church outreach programs. The church members need to buy into a program in which youth have authentic leadership opportunities, adult programs, including in-depth Bible studies and outreach opportunities for them to live as servants for Christ. Convincing the congregation to support the program will require planning and working with key leaders to clearly express goals and missions that will make a significant change for the church.

A limitation that requires adults and youth to lead is working to have youth buy into the program. It requires youth to be open about their spirituality with adults in the church, steps out of their comfort zone to lead in the church, and possibly participate in a program that not all

¹⁸ Dallas Willard, “Spiritual Formation in Christ: A Perspective on What It Is and How It Might Be Done,” *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 28, no. 4 (Winter 2000), 255.

¹⁹ Corey Seemiller, “A Competency-Based Model for Youth Leadership Development.” *Journal of Leadership Education: (JOLE)* 17, no. 1 (n.d.), 57.

congregants' support. Youth role models and leaders within the youth population would need to lead and pioneer the program. Having a few key youths making a serious and concerted effort to grow in Christ and lead in the church will encourage others to be involved in the program.

Another limitation of the project is having a small number of youths in the church who will be involved in the new program. The Mountain Christian Church has lost a significant number of youths and will be a need to attract new youths and facilitate the return of those who have left. The program should be completed and ready for application before encouraging those who left to return. This researcher realizes that those who left will have no desire to return to the same type of program they found unworthy of their time. Time will be of the essence to define and create a plan of application for the program that will be ready when youth come to church or return. A program that suits the needs of the youth will encourage them to continue to be a vital part of the church.

Delimitations

The most significant delimitation is the time restraint on the project. Developing a program based upon youth leadership in an intergenerational ministry, generating challenging theological studies, and attaining church buy-in requires much work. Staff and congregants would need to select material for training purposes to work with youth. Bible study programs would have to be selected and approved by staff and congregational leaders. Leadership opportunities would need to be developed and planned, and overall approval of the program would need to be supported by the staff, adult congregants, and youth. This researcher realizes that reaching the goal cannot occur within the time restraints of the project. Measuring youth retention and involvement in leadership positions at the church will take considerably longer than the time available for the project. Like an action research project, the plan will be completed and put in place for the youth

and adults to understand and mold it into a functioning program that will work for their needs to improve retention and create leadership opportunities for youth in the church.

Another delimitation is the body of individuals who will be represented through a survey and research within the project. Youth between the ages of 13 and 17 who have been involved in a church in the past or those currently involved in a church will be the subjects of study. This researcher realizes that non-church goers would be able to provide a different perspective than those who have been involved in church at some point in their lives. Also, parents could provide valuable information regarding their teens' objection or refusal to be involved in church. Providing teens with leadership training that involves spiritual maturation is a broad field that had to be narrowed to those who currently are involved or have been involved in church.

Thesis Statement

If youth ages 13-17 at The Mountain Community Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky, receive Christian leadership skills training, they will become long-term, devoted followers of Christ.

There must be an effective program for the spiritual development of youth. Church-going youths from age 13-17 years old reveal some disturbing trends. The youth show the following trends: a decrease in faith maturity, decreasing church attendance.²⁰ Overall, the positive relationship between the level of youth participation and faith maturity is agrees with a large body of literature that demonstrated a positive relationship between religious participation and positive outcomes in adolescents' lives. Youth who are more actively

²⁰ Karen Choi, "The Relationship between Youth Ministry Participation," 294.

involved in the church experience greater faith-nurturing characteristics of the congregation and higher faith maturity.²¹

Leadership skills training in the church will include a thorough and personal approach to theological study paired with practical applications of their studies that can be used in everyday life. The senior minister and this researcher are committed to reversing the trend at The Mountain Community Church. The development of a mature relationship with Christ will be partnered with youth leaders or other adults in the church to walk the path of life with them and serve as role models in the process. Youths' devotion will be evident not only by their love of Christ but their love and service of others. Opportunities will be made available for youth to serve in practical and important ways to build a foundation of service in their lives. As the youth continue to grow and mature into adulthood, they will further provide support and service for the church.

²¹ Ibid., 302.

Chapter 2 Conceptual Framework

Literature Review

The examination of scholarly research in texts, articles, dissertations, and relevant studies yielded information that indicates the importance of leadership programs, participation, and depth of relationships for youth to become mature Christians and contributors in the church. The following information provides common ideas, the opposition of opinions, and gaps in the literature.

Youth Needs for Religious Practice and Relationships

Data from multiple research projects have indicated that sixty to seventy percent of youth leave the church after graduating from high school.²² There is a disparity between males and females in terms of the age of leaving the church. Females tend to have sporadic attendance in the church around age 14 or 15 and males between ages 13 and 14.²³

“The authors of ‘Hemorrhaging Faith’ report that among those who have been raised attending church, 15 percent have wholly rejected their childhood faith, 26 percent have wandered from their faith for a period of time, 36 percent were fence-sitters at the time of the survey, and 23 percent had continued living the Christian life, without intermission, into adulthood.”²⁴

A significant turning point for youth faith practices seems to occur after high school graduation within all denominations. The church is a safe place of belonging and acceptance

²² Chris Clements, “Experience and Christian Nurture in Youth Ministry,” *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2018), 23.

²³ Kenda Creasy Dean, “Proclaiming Passion: The Theological Challenge of Youth Ministry in the 21st Century.” *Congregations* 30, no. 4 (Fall 2004), 8.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

through interaction with peers, parents, and other adults.²⁵ The church is an important site for teenagers to make significant contact with adults and other family members. Youth feel they can turn to adults for support and advice in their life. After high school graduation, youth tend to depend more upon themselves and their peers for support. They no longer have the need for social interaction the church provides. What distinguishes this generation is their disengagement, detachment, and emotional numbness regarding their spiritual lives.²⁶

Hoge disagreed with Wagner by stating that youth have a need for religion and the relationships found in its pursuit. Youth seek religion for authentic relationships and filling their spiritual void.²⁷ By emphasizing Christ serving us through His Word, youth are more interested in seeing and feeling the presence of God through worship and serving others.²⁸ Youth curiosity needs to be addressed so that we do not make them afraid to explore their doubts and shame them into behaviors that are not like those of church members. Encouraging youth to ask hard questions will give them a depth of understanding that fulfills the need in their Christian life.²⁹ Youth are quick to express self-awareness by calling themselves Christians simply because they attend church, occasionally read their bible, and pray. Few young people have little idea

²⁵ Thomas P. O’Conner, Dean R. Hoge, and Estrelida Alexander. “The Relative Influence of Youth and Adult Experiences on Personal Spirituality and Church Involvement.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4 (December 2002), 731.

²⁶ Richard Wagner, “Problems in Training Informal Religious Educators,” *Religious Education* 71, no. 2 (March 1976), 143.

²⁷ Dean R. Hoge and Gregory H Petrillo, “Determinants of Church Participation and Attitudes among High School Youth,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 17, no. 4 (December 1978), 364.

²⁸ Vernon E Wendt, Jr. “Raising Eutychus: A Model for Youth Ministry (Acts 20:7-12),” *Lutheran Mission Matters* 27, no. 2 (November 2019), 360.

²⁹ Steven C. Argue, “Beyond ‘New and Improved’ Youth Ministry: Fueling an Entrepreneurial Vision to Support Emerging Generations Where They Need Us Most,” *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2018), 15.

why they call themselves Christians or, more accurately, what it means.³⁰

Youth who profess to be Christians are typically involved in independent youth ministries separate from the broader church community.³¹ Teens who chose only to attend youth groups become estranged from their parents and other adults in the church. The separation of youth ministry from regular church services has diminished opportunities for spiritual growth.³² The separation of adult church and youth groups has resulted in a loss of youth in church after age seventeen. The lack of connection and warm relationships with adults in the church has contributed to the decline in youths attending church.³³

Stanton discusses the idea of youth practicing vicarious religion; it is "believing without belonging, which suggests that people that have chosen to disengage from church retain a residual belief in Christianity."³⁴ Vicarious religion is a step removed from believing without belonging. It maintains belief, but only through a respect for the belief of a prior generation without practicing religion. Youth ministry should address and focus on those who believe but do not attend or those who respect religion but do not practice it. It needs to be shared as a way of life that is relevant to youths' lives. Such change from traditional youth programs requires additional training for leaders of youth within the church. Teenagers desire connection; they

³⁰ Michael D. Langford, "Spirit-Driven Discipleship: A Pneumatology of Youth Ministry," *Theology Today* 71, no. 3 (October 2014), 324.

³¹ Philippa Strong, "Effective Youth Ministry: Embracing a Family-Oriented Approach," *In Die Skriflig* 48, no. 1 (2014), 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 2.

³³ Tyler S. Greenway, Kara Eckmann Powell, and Steven C Argue, "Getting Warmer: What Growing Young Research on the Importance of Relational Warmth Reveals about Churches' Self-Assessment with Implications for Future Youth Ministry Practitioners," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2018), 93.

³⁴ Naomi Stanton, "Christian youth work: teaching faith, filling churches or response to social need?" *Journal of Beliefs & Values*. 33:3 (2012), 389.

want to receive meaningful information that is compelling and relevant to their lives. It is imperative that youth leaders work to connect and share the meaning they have found in Christ in their own lives.³⁵

Youth are drawn to religion because it provides a much-needed moral framework. It provides an inner sense of fulfillment and satisfaction of what is perceived as Christian duty. The provider of moral guidelines, Christian duty, and emotional stability is a religious practice where God is absent.³⁶ Youth sometimes are missing what they need in religion. It is a relationship with Jesus Christ, not a strategy of influence or basic moral guidelines that satisfy an inner requirement. Youth need to be conformed to the person of Jesus as incarnate, crucified, and resurrected and going to the world as dedicated Christians fulfilling His plan for their lives.³⁷ Youth need to energize themselves through the church's teaching and responsibilities of leadership provided by the congregation.

Traditional approaches to connecting, build friendships, and meaningful relationships now include the use of social media. Youth need to be given the opportunity to express their struggles and share questions about their relationship with Christ and others. The information needs to be transmitted safely and securely so that privacy can be respected. Teens want to know that they are not the only ones who have questions or struggles as they learn to walk in Christ.³⁸ Youth leaders understand that the Christian faith requires reflection, fellowship, and learning. Leaders

³⁵ Angela William Gorrell, "Hybrid Youth Ministry: Preparing Youth Ministry Practitioners to Traverse the New Media Terrain," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 16, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 68.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 325.

³⁷ Mark Dodrill, "A Call for More Critical Thinking Regarding the 'Theological Turn' in Youth Ministry," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 12, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 70.

need to take advantage of social media resources to create a space for youth to become practitioners of their faith and build relationships that will encourage their spiritual growth.³⁹ Social media can be used to inform teens about activity, but most importantly, it should be used to encourage, invite, and introduce them to Jesus.

Adults need to encourage the youth to recognize that they function as connected and committed siblings in God's household.⁴⁰ Hoge explained that research indicates that parents have a strong influence on their children's church attendance but almost no impact on their children's attitudes toward the church and authentic relationships with Christ.⁴¹ Youth desire a connection with parents who are transparent about their relationship with God. They have a need for a model found in their parents who embrace God's Word, live for God's glory, and are active in the church.⁴²

Experiences that Lead Youth to Christian Maturity

Developing into a mature Christian requires the individual to personalize his relationship with Jesus by regularly reading the Word, praying, attending to devotionals, fellowshiping with other Christians, and serving Him in daily life.⁴³ Youth who participate in age-specific groups and intergenerational services when faith nurturing characteristics serve as a powerful predictor of faith maturity than simple participation.⁴⁴ Zirsky expands Choi's thoughts on participation by

³⁹ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁰ Chap Clark, "Adoptive Youth Ministry: A New Typology," 23.

⁴¹ Hoge, *Determinants of Church Participation*, 376

⁴² Ross, *Youth Ministry in Thirds*, 92.

⁴³ Dodrill, *A Call for More Critical Thinking*, 8.

⁴⁴ Choi, *The Relationship between Youth Ministry Participation*, 305.

explaining that church involvement does little to promote genuine transformation and can ultimately do more harm than good.⁴⁵ Combining participation with a relationship that encourages discipleship and leadership leads to Christian maturity for youth. The greater degree to which the church can provide real-life experiences for our youth, the greater chances it will provide positive growth and maturity.⁴⁶ Spiritual growth begins with religious training that includes instructions on prayer and who Jesus is to Christians. Youth may not have the ability to understand or practice what is necessary to experience God, as most have only learned the vocabulary of religion as children.⁴⁷ "With intellectual maturation, religious beliefs change. Research shows that high school years are a period of incorporation of religious ideas and the beginning of confrontation with cultural relativity."⁴⁸

To address the issue of youth following cultural relativity ideas, the Christian identity must involve following Jesus into the world and not just amassing church activities. Youth must engender a movement under the sign of the cross. It is a banner of a people led by His spirit and conformed by his love to further his work.⁴⁹ Youth workers need to provide experiences that aid youth in their journey away from cultural relativity to one of finding their identity in Christ. Even though Christian leaders may be from different generations, some commonalities bridge the gap between youth and themselves.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Zirschky, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, 122.

⁴⁶ Wagner, *Problems in Training*, 149.

⁴⁷ Vallrie, *Strategies for a Healthy Youth Ministry*, 133.

⁴⁸ Hoge, *Determinants of Church Participation*, 362.

⁴⁹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 122.

⁵⁰ Wendt, *Raising Eutychus*, 357.

The church needs to have a clear vision for youth, including leadership strategies and spiritual maturation programs. Part of the vision should emphasize a long-term or lifelong approach to bridge the gap between the teen to adult years.⁵¹ Creating lifelong commitments to Christ requires more than just teaching the Bible. Youth leaders' lives need to reflect the intimate relationship they have with Jesus. The leaders also need to be open to share experiences and struggles in which Jesus has been the answer or provided support in their lives.⁵² Directly teaching and sharing personal practice allows youth leaders to participate in the teens' spiritual journey directly. Anderson expresses that "Prayer is huge as a practice of obedience by depending more on God as a consistent response to challenges."⁵³ Sharing in the prayer life of youth takes an eternal perspective of relationship with the teen and God as they become a part of Jesus' forever family.⁵⁴

Youth leaders receive confirmation from the NSYR report that programmatic change was needed. Only eight percent of the youth surveyed had no interest in religion, but it also reported that only eight percent had faith that mattered in their daily lives.⁵⁵ The data reported from the NSYR reveals that youth ministry today does not lead to youth who are spiritually mature Christians who will be dedicated to Christ throughout their lives. It indicates a disconnect between home and the congregation. Both shape teens' spiritual lives, and current youth ministry

⁵¹ Anderson and Frazier, *Leadership Strategies*, 70.

⁵² Strong, *Effective Youth Ministry*, 4.

⁵³ Anderson, *Leadership strategies*, 71.

⁵⁴ Issler, *Living into the Life of Jesus*, 105.

⁵⁵ Elton, *Mergers and Possibilities*, 69.

is not equipping them to live a mature Christian life.⁵⁶ Youth need to be involved in programs that focus on discipleship. The lasting impact of a discipleship program is developing relationships in which they can share their Christian walk with fellow Christians. The personal attention given in relationships helps the individual to understand that discipleship requires a personal investment of time, death to self, and total commitment to Christ.⁵⁷

Youth must be taught that the Christian life is not only about eternal benefits that we get from Jesus. It is about living life as a follower of Jesus.⁵⁸ As a disciple of Christ, emphasis should be placed on following Jesus in everyday life situations. Discipleship is not for super Christians; it is for all believers.⁵⁹ It is up to youth leaders to share and teach the transformational power of following Jesus to teenagers.

Youth need to have an authentic desire to follow Christ to grow in Christian maturity and become leaders within the church. Dean states, "Please show me a God that loves me passionately and who is worth loving passionately in return. Because if Jesus is not worth dying for, then He is not worth living for either."⁶⁰ Youths' response to Jesus' grace is a spiritual response. One that, in context, shapes the way they lead their lives. Having a committed life to Christ's service is the best predictor of church attendance and leadership within its community. When the church seriously facilitates the training and use of their youth in church service and activities, the youth are more likely to develop a mature relationship with Christ and continue

⁵⁶ Ibid., 70.

⁵⁷ Nel, *Imagine--Making Disciples*, 99.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 49.

⁶⁰ Dean, *Proclaiming Passion*, 7.

participating in the church after high school graduation. Vallerie explains the concept of adoptive youth ministry as leadership diligently working with youth so that their worth and value are not limited to peer or service ministry but that they are encouraged as all generations of the church to pursue service as agents of the kingdom.⁶¹

The maturation process empowers youth to have a deep sense of hope in their daily life. Their hope flows from their experience with Christ. When they begin to witness and minister to others, they have matured in discipleship.⁶² Youth leaders should provide a robust theology to accompany their ministry. Teaching youth spiritual disciplines and practices need to be personalized through a relationship found in Jesus. Youth appreciate authenticity and detest phoniness. Marchand explains that offering grace and forgiveness to ourselves, especially when we fail, speaks a great deal about using grace in front of teens when we make a mistake.⁶³ Positive experiences with adults and parents in the church will form lasting references for youth to reflect upon as they begin their spiritual maturation journey.

Leadership Behavior Shaping in Youth

For youth to become leaders within the church, they must allow Jesus to shape their way of thinking and behavior in all that they do. Ministry leaders must work under the parameters of a spirit-filled and Bible-filled approach to ministry. There is a need for daily renewal of the mind partnered with regular Bible study and service within the church.⁶⁴ There should be an emphasis

⁶¹ Vallrie, *Strategies for a Healthy Youth Ministry*, 127.

⁶² S. Selvam, "The Unnamed Companion on the Road: Spiritual Accompaniment in the Context of Youth Ministry," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 41.

⁶³ Chris Marchand, "Embodied Faith: A Peacemaking Approach to Youth Ministry," *Vision (Winnipeg, Man.)* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2016), 60.

⁶⁴ Wendt, Jr. *Raising Eutychus*, 355.

placed on nurturing faith and allowing time and space for youth to be ushered into the presence of God.⁶⁵ The relational practice of church leaders should connect youth to the story and practices of Jesus.⁶⁶ Research done by Christian Smith found that few American teens suggest that religion is centrally important to shaping their lives.⁶⁷ Behavior shaping has changed in the last few decades due to the use of technology in education and our daily lives. Behavior shaping and teaching can be shared as a skill and an art that cannot be taught.⁶⁸ Youth leaders must be led by the Holy Spirit to gain the relational commitment from teenagers to effectively help them to change behaviors that reflect a commitment to Christ. Spiritual accompaniment, combined with behavior shaping, aims to create a close and personal relationship with Jesus.⁶⁹ The faith that is built upon the relationship should be integrated into reaching out to others and actively leading in the church. Christ's view of youth is that they are participants in His mission rather than just targets for salvation. God sends the entire church to do His mission rather than separating teenagers from adults to accomplish His task.⁷⁰

Youth today are no longer captivated by the group games and activities from the '70s and '80s. There needs to be a shift to a more meaningful, life-changing, theological approach. Young people are serious about their relationships, and they do not want to be entertained. They want to be challenged intellectually and spiritually.⁷¹ To change or shape their lives, they need to hear

⁶⁵ O'Conner, Hoge, and Alexander, *The Relative Influence of Youth*, 728.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 727.

⁶⁷ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 257.

⁶⁸ Wagner, *Problems in Training*, 145.

⁶⁹ S. Selvam, "The Unnamed Companion on the Road, 53.

⁷⁰ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 97.

⁷¹ Zirschky, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, 123.

the truth of Jesus, understand His suffering that was presented for their salvation, and to guide them in the passion for seeking God and serving others. The church is a place where young and old should meet with God, and it must serve as a primary ally in their transformation into Christ's likeness.⁷² When leadership behavior and spiritual maturity are observed, it is crucial to recognize the growth that is seen and support the qualities of positive behavior shaping. Positive reinforcement of Christlike living should be shared with youth often.⁷³

Behavior shaping in youth requires inspiration, motivation, and a transformational experience. Jesus taught transformational leadership by example. He encouraged his followers to live to their fullest potential, sent them out to minister to others, and led by encouragement and taught about living with high moral standards.⁷⁴ "It is without a doubt evident from the Bible that youth ministry has a place and purpose within the Great Commission of Jesus Christ."⁷⁵ To fulfill the great responsibility of making disciples of youth, the church leaders must consider what is working in their current youth ministry, what is not working, and how to go forward, making informed decisions for change.⁷⁶ Christians' vision of life should have an influence on their actions as well as their devotional life. Youth should pursue circumstances that provide growth and a marked change in their lives.⁷⁷ Contrary to Vallrie's belief that youth should focus on discipleship first, Canales expresses, "Cultivating moral leadership in society should be taught

⁷² Marchand, *Embodied Faith*, 57.

⁷³ Vallrie, *Strategies for a Healthy Youth Ministry*, 134.

⁷⁴ Canales, *Models of Christian Leadership in Youth Ministry*, 37.

⁷⁵ Strong, *Effective Youth Ministry*, 2.

⁷⁶ Vallrie, *Strategies for a Healthy Youth Ministry*, 124.

⁷⁷ Gorrell, *Hybrid Youth Ministry*, 71.

in youth ministry, which is a place to guide young people to learn about morality and moral leadership."⁷⁸

Programmatic efforts need to focus on training youth to be disciples and makers of disciples. The church must embrace its role as a teacher to help students find their identity in Christ.⁷⁹ Programs must promote the idea that Jesus is consistent, loving, and worthy of their worship and work. More than anything else, youth have to know that it is dire to influence someone in their attitudes, beliefs, and behavior are paired with the leader's willingness to walk with them through the ups and downs of life.⁸⁰ The importance of a relational ministry is evident through the depths of challenges and suffering in youth's lives.⁸¹ A closeness between leader and youth makes a connection that enables care that may be necessary during difficult times. For youth to be shaped as leaders, congregations must include them in sharing the good news of Jesus and making decisions, leading, and being a part of the church's vital work.

Influence of Leaders and Parents on Youth Retention in the Church

It is important to emphasize that intergenerational leadership work with youth should be a goal to raise leaders within the community.⁸² Churches can provide youth with adult group role models, examples of life practices shaped by relationships with Jesus, and constructively influence youth's lives through a positive relationship that invests in preserving the church.⁸³

⁷⁸ Canales, *Models of Christian Leadership in Youth Ministry*, 32.

⁷⁹ Michael D. Langford, *Spirit-Driven Discipleship*, 337.

⁸⁰ Dodrill, *A Call for More Critical Thinking*, 15.

⁸¹ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 7.

⁸² Snailum, *Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry*, 166.

⁸³ Smith, *Soul Searching*, 242.

Parents are the closest role models that youth look up to, so youth leaders must work with parents along the way, ensuring that they are positive role models for their children.⁸⁴ Parents need to be equipped with the skills and knowledge of how to lead a Christ-centered life as well as teaching their children to do the same.

To effectively prepare parents to teach their children about becoming leaders for Christ, youth leaders must make an effort to work with parents to guide them in the process instead of blaming them for a decrease in youth involvement.⁸⁵ Stanton expressed that working with parents of emerging adults may include more than having a youth minister work with parents to understand and minister to their teenagers. In opposition, he stated that "cultural relativism and fear of criticizing others' beliefs have led young adults to view morals and beliefs as subjectively defined."⁸⁶ Youth who are wavering in their Christianity need role models, especially their parents, to teach them that morals and beliefs are not subjective by example. Parents must initiate discussions with their teens regarding beliefs before teaching them the details of discipleship. Parents or church leaders who can teach youth about moral values are a positive step toward teenagers understanding the link between Christianity and their everyday lives.

There is a direct correlation between the decreasing attendance for adolescents from 7th to 12th grade and a lack of maturing faith in Christ.⁸⁷ Some youth leaders' efforts were considered detrimental to adolescents' Christian formation due to shallow approaches to teach theology and the importance of a relational journey with Christ.⁸⁸ Blame on the departure of youth from

⁸⁴ Vallrie, *Strategies for a Healthy Youth Ministry*, 122.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸⁶ Stanton, *Christian youth work*, 392.

⁸⁷ Choi, *The Relationship Between Youth Ministry*, 294.

⁸⁸ Zirschky, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, 120.

churches is placed on everything from budget cuts to inadequate training of leaders. However, the most significant cause of concern and contributor to their departure is based on theological credibility.⁸⁹ A theology that authenticates the relationship between Christ and youth motivates them to love as He loved and serve as He served. That is the most critical factor in improving youth retention in churches. Nel states, "I have to learn to walk in rhythm with God and the rhythm of an adolescent's life. In doing so, I recognize that I am both subject and object in the incredible mystery of God's redemptive work in those to whom I provide spiritual care."⁹⁰

There should be clearly defined job descriptions for each youth group team leader, and each should be taught to model what a healthy relationship with youth and other leaders is in a church setting. Having trained and better-prepared leaders provide room for accountability. Personality inventories and spiritual gift assessments should be used to determine which area of ministry a youth leader should work. One of the most important aspects of youth leaders' influence on teenagers' retention in the church is an understanding of theology and a Christian life worth modeling.⁹¹ Difficult questions are asked by the youth who often are placed in difficult situations in their lives. Leaders must be prepared not only to answer questions but provide support and guidance to the youth. Youth groups need fewer religious pundits and more spiritual leaders. Being there for the youth is a ministry of presence and relational growth with Jesus.⁹²

The Biblical basis for growing disciples is through relationships. Youth, or disciples, must receive personal attention to impact their personal growth needs. Convincing a young person that

⁸⁹ Dean, *Proclaiming Passion*, 8.

⁹⁰ Marchand, *Embodied Faith*, 58.

⁹¹ Vallrie, *Strategies for a Healthy Youth Ministry*, 121.

⁹² Zirschky, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, 121.

he must die to self to live fully in Christ can only be made through an individual and personal investment in that young person.⁹³ The most successful youth leaders are those who are approachable.⁹⁴ It is essential that their lives serve as proof of their religious sincerity and not just their words. Youth emulate the Christian practice of their peers and leaders. The role models in their community provide a base of experience that is reflected in their Christian conviction.⁹⁵

Development of Youth Leadership Skills Endorsed by the Church Community

Studies have shown that youths' spiritual maturation is similar to the characteristics of the church they attend.⁹⁶ If a church promotes faith maturity of youth by offering theological teachings imbued with developing a depth of relationship with Christ, youth are inspired to participate in intergenerational activities and are empowered as leaders. Youth pastors and other church leaders who have a desire to build relationships with youth need to involve them in their spiritual walk as well.⁹⁷ Young people are cognizant of their parents' leadership roles in the church and have a stronger desire to remain in the church, having grown with parents who are committed to serving Christ.⁹⁸ Having an intergenerational leadership program does not mean that separate groups and meetings are dissolved. There needs to be a balance of programs so that youth may be youth, and each generation can also have opportunities to work together as leaders in the church.⁹⁹

⁹³ Nel, *Imagine--Making Disciples in Youth Ministry*, 2.

⁹⁴ Hoge and Petrillo, *Determinants of Church Participation*, 371.

⁹⁵ Clements, *Experience and Christian Nurture*, 27.

⁹⁶ Choi, *The Relationship between Youth Ministry*, 305.

⁹⁷ Snailum, *Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry*, 165.

⁹⁸ Ross, *Youth Ministry in Thirds*, 95.

⁹⁹ Snailum, *Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry*, 169.

Parents should make an effort to involve their children in service opportunities within and outside of the church. Christian leadership is an integral part of Christian discipleship.¹⁰⁰ Since service projects are relational teaching opportunities, the entire church community can experience the presence of youth as an integral part of the church. Jesus' ministry was built around serving the poor, sick, and outcast. His final act of teaching the disciples to serve was before the Last Supper when he washed his disciples' feet. The act would be remembered by the disciples for many years and serve as a behavior shaping memory.¹⁰¹ Serving others is transformational and builds a solid moral foundation, faith in Christ and others, and makes disciples within the youth community.¹⁰²

The church leaders and congregation need to understand who their youth are as church members, what they have to offer, and what their needs are as members of the congregation. The church should develop a clear plan for youth leadership that includes a mission statement, clear vision, and accountability for the leadership team. The church needs to be selective of its leaders, understand youth demographics, and partner with parents.¹⁰³ Youth should not be considered future leaders but leaders who have something to offer today. Christians are called to lead regardless of their age or level of spiritual maturity. There are leadership opportunities for all Christians. Since youth are leaders, the church's mission statement should clearly communicate that, and it should serve as a blueprint of the church's youth ministry. "The youth ministry

¹⁰⁰ Canales, *Models of Christian Leadership*, 28.

¹⁰¹ Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming Like Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2009), 179.

¹⁰² Nel, *Imagine--Making Disciples*, 97.

¹⁰³ Vallrie, *Strategies for a Healthy Youth Ministry*, 118.

should reflect God’s direction and should specify measurable results that are regularly discussed throughout the year.”¹⁰⁴

Leadership opportunities in the church include ushers, scripture readers, prayer, testimonials, and various service projects.¹⁰⁵ While planning the involvement of youth in church programs, there must be tangible support for them, including financial resources and time allotment for their services.¹⁰⁶ The commitment of time and resources is well worth the outcome of building the kingdom of God and continuing the growth of the church. Churches face significant challenges as they work to develop meaningful and healthy youth ministries. God's vision for the youths' lives is an impetus to be a dedicated kingdom builder.¹⁰⁷ Church members can make an impact on the lives of youth by serving as adoptive mentors. Their work of teaching and guiding youth in their spiritual journey can be tremendously rewarding.¹⁰⁸

Adoptive youth ministry consists of a group of committed, nurturing congregants who offer young people guidance and support within the church community.¹⁰⁹ The relationship between the older generation and youth is one of mutual respect and learning. Each group needs to grow and develop at its own pace, but it is important not to lower the bar for youth if they are expected to be lifelong dedicated Christians and leaders for Christ. Transitioning from age-categorized ministry to an intergenerational approach requires program shifts and a vision of all

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 118.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 127.

¹⁰⁶ Greenway, Powell, and Argue, *Getting Warmer*, 90.

¹⁰⁷ Fred P. Edie, “A Liturgical Re-Imaging of Rural Church Youth Ministry,” *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 10, no. 2 (Spring 2012), 76.

¹⁰⁸ Canales, *Models of Christian Leadership*, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, 22.

congregants as fellow disciples of Christ. It must become part of the church's vision, mission, and purpose.¹¹⁰

Youth ministry should never be about ministry with youth alone. It is about ministry and the role that youth is called to play in the church today and throughout their lives. There are dynamic calls for changing the job duties of pastors, youth pastors, and other church workers. It changes a system in order to value young people's spiritual growth and leadership over mere attendance.¹¹¹ A relational and adoptive program requires training for all parties involved. The investment of time and money is inconsequential compared to the outcome of youth becoming spiritually mature and lifelong contributors to the church's ministry. The connection made with youth must be sincere. Youth remain connected to those with whom they have built personal connections and have a high level of respect.¹¹²

The rite of passage from high school graduation should be a seamless move for youth as they should have continued participation in the church community. It is crucial to allow youth to be immersed in the community of faith by being involved in its ministry's facilitation. Teenagers should be able to publicly express their love for God while showcasing their talents in leadership areas such as singing, public speaking, playing instruments, or praying. It is also a positive way to introduce the church to its youth.¹¹³ Successful youth ministry works to develop a mature faith and adolescence as one of its primary goals and views them as participants in the life and ministry of the church.

¹¹⁰ Snailum, *Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry*, 168.

¹¹¹ Argue, *Beyond 'New and Improved' Youth Ministry*, 18.

¹¹² Dodrill, *A Call for More Critical Thinking*, 10.

¹¹³ Vallrie, *Strategies for a Healthy Youth Ministry*, 125.

There is a missing component in the research and practice involving the impact of specific leadership activities in the church and their relative impact on youth retention. The deficiency also exists in the use of unconventional leadership activities that would be attractive to youth.¹¹⁴ Church congregants need to have a view of young people that is positive and hopeful. Congregants must understand the importance and role that youths have in the church. This can be accomplished by inviting various adults to volunteer in youth ministry projects to ensure that they understand they are members of one body.¹¹⁵ Developing a church that includes youth as part of the community requires relationships that promote the growth of youth into lifelong believers and leaders. A theological and personal commitment to relationships should be shared in connection with a relationship in Christ that is in presence and service.

Theological Foundations

The decline in youth involvement in churches must be addressed immediately to maintain overall congregation numbers and ideally increase the overall attendance and involvement of all church members. Youth have experienced a detachment from the church due to a lack of involvement, authentic leadership opportunities, and participation activities. Today's generation of youth desires to belong, engage, and develop relationships with adults in the church. The Bible and commentaries on Scripture support the need for spiritual maturation and leadership training for youth to be actively involved in church. Without a moral compass and meaningful pursuit in life, youth have no desire to be involved in the church. The apostle Paul encouraged youth to abandon evil desires and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace (2 Tim 2:22).

Sin entered the world through Adam and continues today, but through Jesus Christ,

¹¹⁴ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 87.

¹¹⁵ Langford, *Spirit-Driven Discipleship*, 336.

people have the gift of salvation in which there is no condemnation for mans' transgressions. Youth are entrenched in the sin of this world and need the Savior. Teens have a desire to build deep relationships with their parents and other adults who have a responsibility to teach them Christian lifestyles, imbue them with God's word so that they might have a solid foundation (Prov. 22:6). Parents and youth leaders should encourage teens to be often part of Christian instruction and their daily walk in life. One of the most critical aspects of an adult's life is to edify one another.¹¹⁶ Parents and youth leaders are to encourage youth to attend and be involved in church leadership roles and encourage them in the process of growing spiritually (Heb.10:25).

Providing direction is a vital component that encourages youth to deepen their relationships with God and other adults. We know that God has a plan for each of their lives that gives them hope for the future (Jer. 29:11). Youth must hold onto the hope offered through Christ and adults in their lives. Just as God's Word said, "Seek me, and you will find me" (Jer. 29:12), so must parents be available and respond to youth in their times of need. Jesus commanded that his followers should have a child-like faith to enter His kingdom (Lk. 18:15-17). Teaching youth to do away with their selfish desires, sin, and connect to Christ, assures them entrance into His kingdom. God sought out those without power or position: the poor, children, widows, and the infirmed.¹¹⁷ Jesus warned against those who would hinder youth from having a relationship with Christ (Mk. 9:42). Even if a parent or youth leader is responsible for the tiniest stumbling block, it is a sin that will bring judgment. Jesus was referring to youth and

¹¹⁶ Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle to the Hebrew: An Exposition*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1934), 87.

¹¹⁷ Trent C. Butler, *Luke* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 138.

humble believers who needed encouraging relationships rather than discouragement and negative behavior.¹¹⁸

As youth grow spiritually, they must have practices and relationships that help to shape their behavior into the image of Christ. It begins with the commandment to honor one's father and mother (Ex.20:12). The commandment serves as a universal principle for youth that begins with respect for parents and other leaders.¹¹⁹ Likewise, parents and adult leaders in the church should commend and encourage the godly works of youths (1Thes. 5:11). Respecting parents, youth leaders, and God begins with accepting the fact that all of God's Word is inspired, good for reproof, and training to grow to maturity as a Christian (2 Tim. 3:16). Youth must adhere to the teachings of God's word in a sober manner. In doing so, they will endure difficulties and be able to share an authentic testimony as part of their ministry.¹²⁰

An aspect of behavior shaping that is difficult for youth is denying the life and attitudes that they have held for some time. Denying oneself and fully accepting God requires that a person give Him his due and fulfill the duties that He has given them to perform. Teens are to do justice within the life that God has planned for them.¹²¹ Youth can only remain pure and on the path of righteousness by keeping God's word and commandments. Sin can be vanquished by treasuring God's word in their hearts (Ps.119:9-11). Parents and adults should recognize that one

¹¹⁸ Rodney Cooper, *Mark* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 75.

¹¹⁹ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on Old Testament Wisdom & Psalms*, Accordance Bible Software. (Altamonte Springs, FL: Oaktree Software, Inc, 2015), 142.

¹²⁰ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament: First American edition* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), 160.

¹²¹ Clarke, Adam. *Clarke's Commentary on the Old Testament*. Nashville, TN: WORDsearch Corp. 2004.

of the most critical parts of their jobs in bringing up youth is edifying and producing confidence for God.¹²²

David had a stumbling block placed before him by Eliab, his oldest brother. When David had come to the battlefield and saw Goliath and heard the curses, he asked Eliab why no one had the courage to fight Goliath. Eliab was furious and condemned David for leaving the sheep, called him prideful and haughty, and said that he was only here out of curiosity to see the battle. Eliab's response to David is what some face when taking strides to grow in their Christianity.¹²³ Barnes explains that as Christians, we are called to face hardships and that we should be prepared for such hardships as we share the Gospel and live according to Christ's plan for our lives.¹²⁴ Teens should be taught to be strong in Christ's grace and endure hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 2:1-3). As a soldier trains for battle, youth should train themselves by following Christ's example and studying His word.

Youth should be considered valuable members of the church. Parents' influence on youth often makes the difference between them continuing in the church or choosing to no longer be involved. Youth who have had a negative experience or fall out with church members or their parents might never return to the church. Although the youths may have been honoring their father and mother, they may still be influenced negatively by an adult's behavior.¹²⁵ Paul takes the commandment of honoring thy father and mother a step further by expressing that parents

¹²² Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle to the Hebrew: An Exposition*. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1934), 89.

¹²³ John Goldingay, *Baker Commentary on Old Testament Wisdom & Psalms*, Accordance Bible Software. (Altamonte Springs, FL: Oaktree Software, Inc, 2015), 278.

¹²⁴ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament: First American edition* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), 97.

¹²⁵ Stuart Weber, *Matthew* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 137.

should not provoke their children to anger but to bring them up in the instruction of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). Jesus has made parents and youth leaders overseers of His flock. They should have a shepherd's concern for their flock.¹²⁶

One of the most important aspects of encouraging youth to attend and be involved in the church is to love them. Parents and youth leaders must emulate Christ and His nature to be kind, loving, and forgiving. If parents do not share the image of God, there is no saving knowledge of Him.¹²⁷ "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love" (1 Jn. 4:8). Youths who come to know God are strong, and His word abides in them so that they can overcome evil. (1 Jn. 2:14). Youth should receive encouragement and the knowledge that doing good without limit through Christ's strength will lead them to spiritual maturity and prepare them for life to come. Reap the reward and not grow weary (Gal. 6:9). When good is sown, the ingratitude of men will not stop youth from doing good.¹²⁸ As youth prepare to serve as leaders in the church, they must be willing to take the time and make an effort to make a difference. In preparation for serving in the church, they should strive to be approved workers for God, full of the truth in His word (2 Tim. 2:15). God commands that his people be holy vessels. Everyone in the church, including youth, must be approved by God and devoted to His service.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000), 122.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 2013, 45.

¹²⁸ C. S. Keener, *Galatians: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2019), 77.

¹²⁹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary on the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2000), 321.

Youth serve a vital role in the mission of the church. In Ephesians, Paul described the church as one body. Christ is the head, and all members of the church from all generations serve according to the gifts God has given them. Some youths are organizers while others are musicians. The body has one hope, one Lord, and one God who is over all its members.¹³⁰ The diversity of gifts distributed by Christ are used to build up the church through service, involvement, and leadership roles. The body working together brings a unity of faith and stability to promote spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:16).

Youth and adult members of the body have their place and gift to serve. There is a clear distinction between each member of the body and how the gift is to be beneficial to the church (1 Cor. 12:12-26). The intergenerational exchange between youth and adults should reflect cooperation and usefulness to fellow members of the body. All the members should be united through Christ and his love being dependent upon one another, burden receiving help in their time of need, and sharing their knowledge and experiences for the good of their fellow Christians.¹³¹

For youth to feel welcome as equal members and participants in the church, adults must put forth a concerted effort family to understand and include them in the mission of the church. Adults must operate with the same concern for youth that they have for one another. They must model a selfless approach to their ministry and use of gifts. Pride, contentious behavior, and quarrels within the church are to be condemned.¹³² The distribution of gifts to the members of the body is not equal as some gifts are greater than others. Each member should be content with

¹³⁰ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Ephesians*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian Classics Ethereal Library 2004. 168.

¹³¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Concise Commentary*, 214.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 215.

the gift they have received. The Holy Spirit appoints each as an instrument of God (1 Cor. 12:29-30). Adult members of the body need to perform their duties according to the appointments given them by The Holy Spirit, diligence, and dedication should be evident through everything adults do as role models for youth. Church members must exemplify faithfulness to God for the trust they have placed in them as they diligently perform the work of Christ and, by doing so, teach the youth to fulfill their duties according to their gifts.¹³³

As youth develop in the area of leadership, they take ownership of their service for the church. Their involvement as an integral part of the church encourages them to remain a part of the congregation and invite others to experience the goodness of the Lord. As youth are growing in Jesus Christ, they receive the ability and desire to work for others' spiritual good. An increased measure of grace provides a sincere love, charity, and desire to serve others in their heart.¹³⁴ The more often youth are engaged in helping others, the more they are encouraged to follow Matthew's advice to do unto others as you would have them do unto you (Matt. 7:12).

Youth should be given the opportunity to develop leadership skills in a manner that reflects Jesus' expression of those who wish to become great shall be a servant (Matt. 20:26). Whether parents or youth leaders are working with teens, the same message should be shared. Leadership training is about letting go of oneself and putting others' needs first. Serving through teaching, performance, or mission-based opportunities is centered around loving and serving others for Christ's sake. Jesus provided excellent examples of service throughout His ministry. One, in particular, was the washing of the disciples' feet (Jn. 12:12-17). He came to Earth to

¹³³ Ibid., 216.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 264.

serve with humility and not to be served. His greatest act of service was expressed through His death on the cross for man's sins so that they may have salvation.

Jesus said, "But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest and the leader like the servant" (Lk. 22:26). Spiritually mature adults must work with youth humbly and expect no honor or recognition as Jesus did in His ministry. Adults are not to seek recognition, only His will in developing youth as future leaders. Adults and youth leaders should share the fact that they, like the youth, need to humble themselves on their knees before God in repentance and understand that God's grace is truly unmerited favor. Leadership in the church is the opposite of leadership in the world in which an individual seeks selfish gain. Youth leadership opportunities should allow for the expression of a humble and loving effort from God's young servants.

Theoretical Foundations

There have been countless articles, dissertations, and projects related to the decline of youth attendance and church activity. A recurring theme associated with the improvement of youth attendance in church is an intergenerational approach to building a community of youth ministry. The ministry involves and effects the whole church as an impactful component of its work. Transforming an age-stratified ministry to an intergenerational ministry requires a new mission, core values, and church vision.¹³⁵ There has been little done in most churches to change the age-graded Sunday School models, focusing on individualism rather than dependence upon each other within the entire church body.¹³⁶ The separation of generations within a church has no

¹³⁵ Snailum, *Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry*, 168.

¹³⁶ Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship*, (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012), 8.

biblical foundation, nor does it correspond with proven sociological theories of youth development and growth.

Youth can learn from the uniqueness of each generation. With strategic and incremental changes, a church can build a support and teaching program that will prepare youth for leadership-building opportunities.¹³⁷ The idea of creating leadership opportunities and developing youth to utilize their skills as leaders within the church will give them a sense of ownership and belonging to the church. The leadership roles should be meaningful and relevant to the church's mission. Traditional leadership areas include communion and offering teams, pre-service preparation teams, event organizations, and outreach teams. Each is acceptable for youth involvement, but it is essential to connect youths to leadership roles related to their strengths and interests.

A growing area of need in churches is the effective use of technology, social media, and technology-related tasks. Youth today do not know a time without the internet, and some older church members are less adept at using technology.¹³⁸ The youth's strengths, paired with the adult members, creates an intergenerational opportunity to learn and bond while providing a service for the church. There are multiple opportunities utilizing technology within the church ranging from the music ministry, social networking, and sound and video presentation work. An important area for the church to focus on is promoting faith publicly and personally. Social media gives many entry points to offer the Gospel to those who are seeking faith.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Snailum, *Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry*, 174.

¹³⁸ R. P. Reimman, "Uncharted Territories": The Challenges of Digitalization and Social Media for Church and Society, *The Ecumenical Review*, [s. l.], v. 69, no. 1, 2017, 73.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

Many programs, practices, and theories have proven ineffective for increasing youth attendance in church. An example would be a youth exclusive program, which is a small age-specific group of youth without the natural hierarchy of blended ages. When there is a natural age hierarchy blended, there tends to be nurturing and teaching from all. Allen explains that Christian institutions have emulated the culture around them, which has become more generationally fragmented.¹⁴⁰ The failed practices of generational segregation have harmed youth sociologically, theologically, and relationally. Each generation has lessons to be taught and lessons to be learned.

There should be a healthy balance allowing youth to actively pursue age-appropriate events as there are times when older generations need to focus on age-appropriate events.¹⁴¹ Youth between the ages of 13-17 years old should be actively involved in the services and lessons with adults to experience and grow from a robust theological study. Without meaningful teaching, youths will discard the church and determine it as irrelevant to them.¹⁴² The daily life of youth today involves technology during the morning, afternoon, and evening. It has become the environment in which their lives are played out consistently. For youth, online services, prayer, and devotions through social networking and texting one another allows them to freely reveal themselves and share their hearts.¹⁴³

Intergenerational work within a church is in contrast to current and, indeed, older theories of learning. Jean Piaget worked in cognitive development, focusing on preschool and elementary

¹⁴⁰ Allen, *Intergenerational Church Performance*, 9.

¹⁴¹ Snailum, *Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry*, 169.

¹⁴² Zirschky, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, 124.

¹⁴³ Reimman, *Uncharted Territory*, 74.

education segregated into grades in the 1960s and 1970s. Churches followed in his steps that were age-appropriate for children.¹⁴⁴ Jesus taught to audiences that included children and adults. Youth between the ages of 13 and 17 are mature enough and desire to learn in-depth, meaningful theology as their counterparts did in Jesus' day. Some churches have even changed their educational model to the point of completely separating youth and adults during the worship service. Others have begun providing a more contemporary service and a traditional service that are more appealing to specific generations.

Many churches believe that for adults to grow and mature in Christ, they need to be separated from the youth. Likewise, for youth to develop appropriately, they need to experience only age-appropriate activities.¹⁴⁵ Transitioning to intergenerational programs within a church can only be successful if there is buy-in from the leadership team and all generational groups. Utilizing small groups is a positive way to recruit older leaders to teach and train youth. The investment in time is beneficial to both groups. The use of a four-week activity, such as working with the homeless outreach program or other outreach programs, helps to build trust and appreciation between the groups.¹⁴⁶

The book of Acts addresses the idea of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and how a Christian is part of a community. Jesus' teaching expressed that He was a personal Savior and that we were part of His kingdom and family. A person is saved to a community. The evangelical conception of a personal relationship with Christ only is a distortion of radical American

¹⁴⁴ Allen, *Intergenerational Church Performance*, 10.

¹⁴⁵ Snailum, *Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry*, 176.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

individualism.¹⁴⁷ Jesus brought His disciples and followers together to teach, eat, and fellowship. Jesus' practice of living with a wholeness of community served as an example of who we should be as a church and how generations should interact.¹⁴⁸

The organization, Young Life, focuses on teenagers and young adults in specialized ministries aimed at their specific age groups. The organization found success, but it did not lend the same success to churches that tried similar approaches.¹⁴⁹ Youth perceived Young Life as an activity that supported the work of the church. The church was the home base for them to develop and mature spiritually. For many youths, that does not occur. The main hindrance is understanding that intergenerational relationships are crucial to spiritual growth and maturation.¹⁵⁰ The church's community must work together to engage youth in the church's meaningful activities and mission. Parents alone cannot successfully integrate their children into the whole of the church body. Most research agrees that family tensions will interfere with parents working on expanding their children's involvement in the church.¹⁵¹

Relationships with older church members and leaders determine the involvement youth will have in a church. It is important to be liked and respected by the youth by living according to what is said and teaching out of concern and interest. This will determine youth participation in leadership roles.¹⁵² Youth today have a seriousness about theology and its effect on their lives

¹⁴⁷ Allen, *Intergenerational Church Performance*, 12.

¹⁴⁸ Matt Brain, "Offering Faith to Youth in a Digital World," *St Mark's Review* 233 (October 2015), 113.

¹⁴⁹ Allen, *Intergenerational Church Performance*, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Snailum, *Implementing Intergenerational Youth Ministry*, 171.

¹⁵¹ Hoge and Petrillo, *Determinants of Church Participation*, 360.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 376.

and the world around them. They are more socially conscious and have a desire for deep relationships. Youth do not want to be entertained in the church; they want to be challenged.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ Zirschky, *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, 123.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Intervention Design

The decline in youth attendance and church participation is due to a lack of depth of relationship with Christ, a sense of belonging in the church, and ownership in the church's operations and outreach through leadership and participation programs. This intervention plan will be centered around an intergenerational approach that will require buy-in from all age groups willing to commit themselves to developing youth into future leaders in the church. The core of youth's belief and commitment comes from the depth of study and their maturation as Christians. Adult church members will serve as mentors during the process.

The intervention plan and its facilitation will be based upon leadership needs within programs and support within each program category. All youth can be involved in current or new programs that will depend upon their strengths, interests, and desire to participate. The goal of leadership training is to prepare youth to grow into leadership positions as they learn their area of service. Youth will be trained in their area of leadership by adult congregants and church leaders who have undergone youth training modules. They will work in their area of expertise and commit to being mentors who hold their youth members accountable and support them along their path of development.

The most crucial area of change needed for youth is spiritual maturation. Defining the concept of spiritual maturation is difficult, and it is important to include youth to define spiritual maturation as it applies to their lives.¹⁵⁴ Within the intervention plan, the depth of study and

¹⁵⁴ Paul McQuillan. "Youth Ministry in a Changing World: The International Research Project on Youth Spirituality," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 7, no. 2 (Spring 2009), 77.

programmatic development as mature disciples will prepare the youth for commitment to one another, the church, and its program ministries. The intergenerational approach will give youth a sense of belonging. They will have peers who have similar experiences to share and adults whose experiences vary and can project the result of spiritual growth.

The evaluation of the church's current programs by youth and leaders will give a sense of ownership to the youth as stakeholders in the process of improving the church's outreach and daily programs. The use of a qualitative approach in developing the evaluation instrument will function as a test that ensures the questionnaire's validity and reliability. Qualitative research is capable of providing reliable ideas regarding youth leadership development.¹⁵⁵ Youth today are bored easily. So, by keeping them involved, responsible for a church program, and leadership development, the responsibility will give them a higher level of interest and involvement in the church. Rather than focusing on an individualistic approach to involvement, it is crucial for youth to see themselves as valued members of the community.¹⁵⁶

Before a new program begins, there will be a requirement for training in the area of ministry. Youth involvement in assessing the program's needs, developing a plan, and procuring needed materials will give youth a sense of ownership within the church's work. The collection of data to build the programs includes interviews with potential youth volunteers. An analysis of the information will assist in the placement of the volunteers.¹⁵⁷ As youth begin to work and

¹⁵⁵ Terence D. Linhart, "Grounded Theory as a Scientific Methodology for Youth Ministry Research," *The Journal of Youth Ministry*, 1, no. 2 (Spring 2003), 27.

¹⁵⁶ Mark Chater, "Child and Youth Spirituality: Current Research and Practice Issues, and Some Strategic Pointers," *Studies in Spirituality* 15 (2005), 256.

¹⁵⁷ Linhart, *Grounded Theory*, 28.

mature as Christians, they will understand that pragmatic way what it means to serve others and become kingdom builders.

Communication is essential to the success of any project. There must be project introduction, progress, and completion information communicated to all stakeholders. The leaders and youth will be spoken to directly during initial meetings, planning meetings, and progress checks. A general announcement will be made to the congregation, and a question/answer time will be held after the service for those who have an interest in the program. Emails will be sent to all stakeholders on a regular basis to keep them updated on the program's progress.

Approval will need to be received from the senior pastor and parents of youth involved in the program. The senior pastor and other church members will have a roundtable discussion regarding questions about the program. This researcher will have an informational meeting for the youth and their parents. At that time, parents will sign and return the written consent form if they choose to participate. Youth must have a consent form signed by their parents to participate in any aspect of the program. A guidebook on youth and leadership development will be needed in the training phase, which the church staff and adult volunteers will use.

The researcher's approach to explaining the project to participants, youth, and adult representatives will be threefold. A discussion will be held regarding the program's need for improved participation necessary for success and provide a data-driven approach for building the project. The researcher will utilize PowerPoint, written outlines of the presentation, and offer sample books on spiritual formation to reach visual, tactile, and auditory modalities that match each participant's learning style. It will be essential to address the data based upon youth attendance in the church and their participation and leadership. Disengagement from church

among youth would be examined at this level. Addressing the problem measures success as reflected in more young people attending church services and participating in available programs.¹⁵⁸ After identifying the reasons for decline, the floor will be open to discuss why the participants feel there is a decrease in youth attendance and participation.

Next, the researcher will discuss the need for change and that it is essential that the church provides a program for youth leadership training, which includes spiritual maturation in terms of an intergenerational approach, emphasizing the participants' areas of strength, interest, and experience of our adult members searching for a way to be more involved in the church. The researcher will then explain the benefits of a mentorship program, a blended leadership program, and new church programs. It would be essential to include a discussion regarding participant recruitment. The leadership will work together to identify programs that need improvement within the church and new program possibilities in which youth could take leadership.

This researcher will give a cursory explanation of the program leaders' efforts after the sermon and invite interested congregants to an informational meeting. Committee members would be asked to participate in the informational congregation meeting. During the meeting, the researcher will explain what the committee had discovered and developed during the process. An interest inventory will be provided for participants, and a time will be given to discuss what areas of interest they have identified. Next, the group would talk about what is required in the particular areas of program leadership and spiritual development. Lastly, the researcher will set a time for a second meeting, which would involve the program's training aspects. Throughout the process, the researcher will email each participant and the congregation about the program's

¹⁵⁸ McQuillan, *Youth Ministry in a Changing World*, 63.

progress. The information would inform each person of what is needed from youth and adult congregants.

In case a youth member is not interested or wants to drop out of the program, this researcher will try to meet with him to discuss what concerns or unfavorable aspects he identified in the project. The youth's concerns would be addressed by emphasizing the area of concern and asking if there was further information or explanations that needed to be addressed. The most crucial aspect would be to discuss how vital the project is for the church, youth, and spiritual maturation. If the youth is still not interested in the project, the researcher would ask if there were any peripheral duties that would be of interest to assist or participate in and thank the youth for providing input on the project.

There is a generational disconnect and a lack of motivation to include youth as part of the overall church program. As a result, membership is declining and is not expected to grow in the future. For the intervention to be successful, several criteria would first have to be met. The criteria would include, was the process reliable and valid, were the sources credible, and was the process outcome achievable. The intervention will be based on qualitative research in the form of a questionnaire built upon current research and practices within the area of youth leadership and retention efforts within the church. Qualitative research methods in youth ministry have developed into the dominant method of inquiry within its educational research.¹⁵⁹ The intervention will address the problem statement to identify critical measures to understand the problem and its possible solutions. McQuilan explained, "Like an iceberg. The problem is at the

¹⁵⁹ Linhart, *Grounded Theory*, 27.

top, but 80% of the issues are below the waterline. Issues at the problem level are usually observable realities.”¹⁶⁰

The intervention will be deemed reliable if the data results can be reproduced or found to be consistent with similar studies. The intervention will be valid if what the researcher measures truly represents the problem stated within the project. Resources and processes will be measured through source study and cross-referencing. Data research will be used only from peer-referenced scholarly work. The intervention process will be based on a suitable number of participants and an accurate measurement of the findings.

The intervention will achieve a depth of understanding of the identified problem. The questionnaire will evoke responses that are personal, truthful, and detailed. A critical evaluation of the responses will provide both positives and negatives that will contribute to the problem's solution. Written responses to the open-ended religious preference items avoided questions with individuals answering "very" or "moderately". Short answers will provide more insight and ideas for the program. The intervention will also spotlight any areas that require alteration, addition, or subtraction from the project.¹⁶¹ The researcher must receive a sufficient number of responses to effectively measure, compare, and contrast the data research to the questionnaire.

Since the 1970s, churches have separated age groups in Sunday Schools and church services. Efforts were made to involve young people in youth groups to keep them involved in church and connected to Jesus. The thought was that youth responded best to their peers;

¹⁶⁰ McQuillan, *Youth Ministry in a Changing World*, 63.

¹⁶¹ S. K. Harris et al., "Reliability and validity of the brief multidimensional measure of religiousness/spirituality among adolescents," *Journal of Religion and Health*. v. 47, no. 4, 2008, 443.

therefore, any further ideas or life experiences varied little because of age separation's sequestered nature. This researcher's work will be different from the older approach to retaining youth involvement in church and helping them move to spiritual maturation.

Youth have developed a detachment to the church, and when given the opportunity, they leave and typically do not return to the church later in life. The researcher's approach focuses on opening programs that would provide ownership and a sense of belonging for youth in the church. Youth would be involved in leadership training and serve vital roles either as leaders or contributing members to existing and new church programs. Outreach programs that currently exist in the church would continue but involve youth members on the committees who could share new ideas about approaches that work best with their generation. Further opportunities exist in media-related programs. If a number of youths are interested in social media, video presentations, and web design. They could help develop new programs that are much needed in a twenty-first-century church.

An additional new approach would be to emphasize an intergenerational effort to develop the programs and share responsibility for success. The underlying strength behind any generation's desire to remain involved in a church is a profoundly mature relationship with Christ. Youth would be involved in in-depth theological studies partnered with adults who have varied experiences and new ideas to share with the youth. An intergenerational approach gives youth the desired authentic relationship that they want with Christ and adults the satisfaction of sharing their life experience and spiritual insight with the next generation. The church is one family and should work together to promote the kingdom of God, utilizing their strengths through its varied experiences.

Implementation of the Intervention Design

The implementation procedures for the intervention design were based upon three components for the data collection process. It included a survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussions. The goal of the implementation was to provide accurate information through the use of the triangulation of data collection. Data collection included both written responses by participants and data from observation by the researcher and an additional observer. The method used to create the study's three components began with a conceptual framework and empirical framework, which formed the study's foundation. This researcher utilized protocols throughout the study to ensure ethical considerations and privacy for all participants.

The study's conceptual framework was built upon the theological framework and theoretical framework found in chapter two of this paper. The theological foundation was the anchor to addressing the problem statement of the study. The focus was on spiritual formation and maturation, leading in the church, intergenerational influence, and growing in relationships with Christ and fellow Christians. Theoretical foundation considerations included cooperation and participation between intergenerational groups, opportunities for participation and leadership in the church, opportunities of joint outreach in the community, including youth and adults, and an increased depth of study of theology for youth. The conceptual framework utilized the different foundational approaches in the study to create the basis for creating the study's components and serve to assist in the area of data analysis. The conceptual framework consisting of the thoughts presented by this researcher and the data from the study will help to guide this researcher make conclusions and recommendations.

The study's empirical framework is based upon several factors that contribute to the decline in youth attendance to church. Youth perception of church, lack of spiritual growth opportunities, lack of meaningful participation and leadership opportunities inside and outside of the church, the influence of technology, and a lack of cooperation and distance between generations in the church have each contributed to the decline in youth participation in attendance to church. The information provides a direct connection between what the church offers and what youth need to grow spiritually and become actively engaged church members. The conceptual and empirical frameworks are considered in the study's design to best address the problem statement.

During the implementation of the intervention design, there was an emphasis on the ethical treatment of participants, adjustments made during pilot testing, pre-study research, triangulation of results to check consistency, data collection, and analysis. Prior to beginning the study, this researcher requested permission from the Mountain Christian Church's senior pastor. After permission was granted to begin, this researcher met with church leaders to describe the study's intent, implementation, and proposed impact. The group indicated that all of their questions regarding the study were answered to their satisfaction. They expressed that they were looking forward to assisting in any way and hearing of the results.

Next, this researcher sent letters of invitation to youth between ages 13 and 21 who had attended The Mountain Christian Church in the past two years. Approximately two weeks later, this researcher sent a reminder letter to those invited to join this study. 84% of youth between ages 13 to 21 agreed to take part in the study. Those who answered in the affirmative were then sent a consent form that was to be returned within two weeks of receipt. Youth between the ages of 13 and 17 had a consent form sent to their parents (see appendix A). Parents had to agree to

allow their child to participate in the study due to the fact that the child was a minor. Youth between the ages of 18 and 21 were sent consent forms directly to them to be signed and returned (see appendix B). 95% returned consent forms agreeing to complete the survey and questionnaire.

This study was formulated in a way that data could be tested for validity and reliability. This researcher performed an in-depth study of literature and prior research to address the problem statement and construct the study's components. Relevant literature for assistance in gathering and analyzing data was studied as well in the construction of the research design. The design's accuracy must include an appropriate sample and collect new data to process into a usable form. The interpretation of the data will then be used to address the problem.¹⁶² This researcher chose to use a qualitative approach to analyze data and triangulation of data to assure reliability and validity.

It is necessary to understand that quantitative research and qualitative research are scientific approaches that rely on empirical data and can provide the basis for a hypothesis. Also, there is a distinguishing component between quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research translates human experiences into numbers, whereas qualitative research translates human experiences into words.¹⁶³ Both quantitative and qualitative research requires the analysis of numbers and the interpretation of language. "While qualitative researchers in "human science" have been criticized for failing to live up to the noun "science", quantitative researchers have been criticized for failing to live up to the adjective "human". Do we best understand the

¹⁶² Terry L. Brink, "Quantitative and/or Qualitative Methods in the Scientific Study of Religion," *Zygon* 30, no. 3 (September 1995): 461.

¹⁶³ Maureen Duffy and Ronald J Chenail, "Values in Qualitative and Quantitative Research," *Counseling and Values* 53, no.1 (2008): 26.

American people by looking at the census reports or by observing a narrative of their actions, values, and beliefs?"¹⁶⁴ Both forms of research were critically considered before arriving at the choice for the study. The qualitative approach provided a more precise and more definitive response opportunity for a limited number of subjects and more detailed responses when working with youth in a multi-faceted study of the problem.¹⁶⁵

In preparation for creating the survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussion questions, the researcher developed a set of pilot exercises to determine the age appropriateness and clarity of questions. Youth between the ages of 13 and 17 completed the consent form, survey, and questionnaire. Their reaction to each of the components was positive and required no changes or adaptation of the material. Their responses were appropriate for what was asked of them in the survey questionnaire. The two youth who participated in the pilot exercise were not used as part of the formal study. The adopted, pilot-tested exercises were adopted by the researcher and sent for approval to the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The consent form and roundtable discussion questions were pilot tested by two adults, and their responses were favorable as well. Their discussion as related to the questions was focused and detailed enough for this researcher to adopt the exercise. The two adults who participated in the pilot exercise were not used as part of the formal study. Again, the pilot-tested exercise was sent to the Liberty University IRB for approval.

The use of a survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussions provided opened ended, detailed responses for the study. Each participant received detailed instructions that explained the

¹⁶⁴ Terry L. Brink, *Quantitative and/or Qualitative Methods*, 466.

¹⁶⁵ Maureen Duffy and Ronald J Chenail, *Values in Qualitative and Quantitative Research*, 32.

purpose how the study, the requirements to be a part of the study, the step-by-step procedures required to complete the assignment, an explanation of the privacy requirement, and the participant's use of an ID code for anonymity (see Appendix C). The survey required participants to respond to 10 questions by marking their responses on a Likert Scale model on which there were 5 response levels of agreement. The levels were strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree (see Appendix D). Participants were instructed to take their time to give the most thoughtful and accurate responses. Participants were then asked to complete a 10-item questionnaire and instructed to answer each question in two to five sentences (see Appendix E). Again, they were asked to take their time to ensure that they were giving their most thoughtful and accurate responses. Upon completing the survey and questionnaire, the participants were asked to return the question and survey anonymously through the mail as explained in the directions.

There was an 83% return rate of the survey and questionnaires based upon the number of consent forms returned to the researcher. Although all questionnaires were completed and returned to the researcher, there was a great deal of disparity between the length of response. The quality of responses to the questions varied in depth and detail. Qualitative research includes approaches in which the emphasis is on describing the subject's experience in terms of subjective phenomena or natural meaning.¹⁶⁶ The analysis of the questionnaire's responses will require a close examination of what was written and an objective classification of each response. The classifications will be labeled as sub-categories to the question's theme.

The third component of the study was two roundtable discussions with adult members

¹⁶⁶ Terry L. Brink, *Quantitative and/or Qualitative Methods*, 464.

and leaders of the church. Each week for a period of two weeks, an announcement was made regarding an invitation to participate in the round table discussion portion of the study. An explanation of the study, requirements for participation, and expectations from participants were shared. After the announcement, letters of invitation were made available to those who were interested in participating. Upon returning the consent forms, the first roundtable discussion consisted of eight adult participants, this researcher, and an independent observer who took notes for the meeting.

The church members who expressed interest in participating in the study were given a consent form to read and return prior to their participation (see Appendix F). There was a total of twelve participants in the study's roundtable discussion. The first discussion consisted of eight participants, the researcher, and an outside observer who was a non-participant. The second discussion consisted of four participants, the researcher and the outside observer who was a non-participant in the discussion. The roundtable discussion questions were opened-ended in design to have participants express their responses in writing and verbally based upon experiences and knowledge of the problem (see Appendix G). The discussion remained focused and provided many diverse responses related to the subject. Each participant and the non-participant observer returned their written responses and notes at the end of the roundtable discussion.

Upon the return of the surveys and questionnaires and the completion of the roundtable discussions, this researcher began the analysis of the data and categorization of responses. The researcher's goal was to focus on the validity and reliability of the data and its sources through triangulation. Linking data from the various sources assisted in providing triangulation for the study. The validity and reliability of the data proved to be accurate and consistent. There was internal consistency throughout the study in each of the components. The self-administered

questionnaire and roundtable discussion proved to be excellent for the study. Both categories within the study included standardized responses and open-ended questions that favor a favored message in quantitative research.¹⁶⁷ The analysis of data from the study will be used to determine its impact on the problem. Both positive and negative effects will be derived from the information gleaned from the data. It is essential to be critical and objective in the study of the data given by the researcher. The analysis method should give due consideration of the objectivity and ways to map the need for religious change and make sense of religion today.¹⁶⁸

Ethical considerations and privacy were a priority throughout the creation, implementation, and presentation of the study. From the moment of contact with the senior pastor and potential participants to the exercise of completing all components of the study, openness and transparency was evident throughout all aspects of the study. It is essential that all critical decision points in a research project and the process of analyzing data be revealed and discussed with stakeholders along the way.¹⁶⁹ The researcher's goal is to address the problem statement and contribute to the body of knowledge and research in a relevant manner. Considerations were made to ensure that all aspects of the study were appropriate for youth, the church, and the scholarly community. Confidentiality was stressed and implemented with high importance to provide comfortable and authentic representation in the participants' answers and address the legal concerns working with youth. An outside observer was involved in all in-

¹⁶⁷ Samuel Z. Klausner, "Methods of Data Collection in Studies of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1964): 195.

¹⁶⁸ Andrew Singleton, "Making Sense of the World of Faith: Recent Trends in Data, Methods, and Explanations of Religious Change," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 29, no. 1 (2016): 95.

¹⁶⁹Maureen Duffy and Ronald J Chenail, *Values in Qualitative and Quantitative Research*, 34.

person activities of the study to record all events. Providing concise, data-driven information to inform and address the problem should contribute to improving the lives of youth and the life of the church.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter will present the results of the project's surveys, questionnaires, and roundtable discussions. The chapter will include the outcome of each component based upon participant responses and an analysis of the data. The project explores the problem of a decline in youth attendance and participation faced by The Mountain Christian Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky. Their youth program lacks leadership skills development in youth ages 13-17. As a result, youth attendance, retention, and participation have dropped drastically. Youth do not feel a sense of ownership of the church or a compelling reason to attend church. Information derived from the surveys, questionnaires, and roundtable discussions will delineate youth's needs and the areas in which the church can contribute to their growth as disciples of Christ and involvement in the church.

Five themes were used as an organizational tool for the study to determine youth's needs and the areas of change needed in the church. The project themes are *youth needs for religious practice and relationships, development of youth leadership skills endorsed by the church, the influence of leaders and parents on youth retention in church, leadership behavior shaping in youth, and experiences that lead youth to Christian maturity*. The themes framed the survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussion questions. An evaluation and comparison of responses was then made possible to determine the validity and reliability of the data.

The first component of the project was a survey. The data within the questions' themes and sub-themes were then presented visually through a data table. A Likert scale-based survey was used that combined participant responses into a composite score. The scores were analyzed

using median data in the ordinal level of measurement.¹⁷⁰ There are a total of ten questions on the survey having two per project theme. The participants responded favorably to the researcher regarding the interest in addressing the problems that youth face at the Mountain Christian Church in Nicholasville, Kentucky.

The second component of the project was a questionnaire. A thematic analysis of the questionnaire responses was used as an organizational tool. The questions were broad and open-ended, which allowed participants to use their experiences and opinions freely. The responses were analyzed by adding the data into a template based upon the five categories as a qualitative approach. Then, the individual responses were recorded in sub-themes which were reflective of the highest percentage of responses. The data within the question theme and sub-themes were then presented visually through a data pie chart.

Two roundtable discussions were held with six open-ended questions presented to the participants as the third component of the project. Similar to the questionnaire, the roundtable discussions allowed participants to express their opinions freely and base their answers upon their experiences within the church. Each member was asked to respond in writing and verbally as part of the discussion. An observer took notes from the discussion. All participant notes and the observer's notes were gathered and analyzed using a thematic approach. The questions were based upon the five themes used throughout the project. Sub-themes were formed as responses were placed or added to the template. The data within the question theme and sub-themes were then presented visually through a data bar chart.

¹⁷⁰ Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers), 1973. 32.

Since the three components of the project were built around the five themes, a triangulation of data was made readily available and presented clear and definitive results. This researcher used methodological triangulation, which includes multiple ways to gather data such as interviews, observations, questionnaires, and documents.¹⁷¹ Data was gathered from two groups, youth and adults. Triangulation of data using a cross-verification approach indicates the validity of the data.¹⁷² The validation is found through the consistency obtained through the three instruments used in the project. Triangulation of data helped the researcher build a conceptual framework that will explain the results probably project and diversity and complexity found between youth and adult participants responses.

The conceptual framework was strengthened by using different instruments that added value to each other by explaining different aspects of the issue. Each set then confirmed the information provided by the other instrument. One set of findings in an instrument could explain or provide more detail to an unexpected finding in another instrument. Using multiple instruments in the study decreased the possibility of measurement bias. Measurement bias is caused by how data is collected. The use of triangulation to combine helps reduce measurement bias such as peer pressure on participants.¹⁷³ Invitations to participate in the study were sent to eighty-two potential participants. Eighty-three percent responded, participated, and completed the survey, questionnaire, or roundtable discussion. A total of sixty-eight individuals participated in the three components of the study.

¹⁷² Martin J. Packer, *The Science of Qualitative Research* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2017. 76.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 83.

Survey Results

The survey component yielded results that were inserted into the five themes from the study. The first survey theme was *youth needs for religious practice in relationships*. The theme is related to youths’ personal need for spiritual development and the development of relationships with other Christians within the church. The survey’s first theme included two questions as noted (see Table 1). The participants’ responses indicated a high percentage of youth who attend church regularly in question one and those who do not wish to continue attending church in question two.

The lack of desire to attend church was evident by the decreased attendance and retention youth have in the church. The higher percent indicating that youth attend church regularly was found to be based on parents encouraging or requiring that their children attend church. The dissatisfaction that affects their willingness to continue attending church was based on various and diverse reasons, as found in the remainder of the study.

Table 1.

Youth Needs for Religious Practice and Relationships

| Survey Questions | Question Response Levels | | | | |
|---|--------------------------|----------|---------|--------|----------------|
| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| I attend church at least three times per month. | 18.18% | 0% | 27.27% | 18.18% | 36.36% |
| I want to continue or start attending church. | 36.36% | 18.18% | 0% | 27.27% | 18.18% |

The following two questions were from the theme, *development of youth leadership skills endorsed by the church*. The theme pertains to youth involvement in opportunities to develop leadership skills through participation in church operations or outreach groups. Participant

responses indicated little participation in both church outreach programs and youth involvement in general church operations (See Table 2). The Mountain Christian Church does not provide many opportunities for youth to be involved with adults in most outreach programs, and adults have generally performed church operations for many years. Youth have expressed an interest in adding programs and having youth-specific outreach programs to increase their involvement.

Table 2.

Development of Youth Leadership Skills Endorsed by the Church

| Survey Questions | Question Response Levels | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|----------|---------|--------|----------------|
| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| I participate in church outreach projects. | 18.18% | 36.36% | 18.18% | 18.18% | 9.09% |
| I am involved in church operations. | 18.18% | 36.36% | 27.27% | 18.18% | 0% |

Youth responses from the questionnaire indicated that a small percentage felt welcomed at the church, and as a result, few interacted with adults at the church. The *theme influence of leaders and parents on youth retention in the church* was an important indicator of an immediate need for change. There are few opportunities other than a meet and greet time and departure time for intergenerational interaction. Intentional efforts to join youth and adults together in meaningful interactions are not present in the church. The most unexpected fact revealed in this theme was that few youths felt welcome at church (see Table 3). Youth interaction with older generations was low as well.

Table 3.

Influence of Leaders and Parents on Youth Retention in the Church

| Survey Questions | Question Response Levels | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|----------|---------|--------|----------------|
| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| I feel welcome at church. | 27.27% | 27.27% | 18.18% | 18.18% | 9.09% |
| I interact with older generations at church. | 36.36% | 18.18% | 27.27% | 18.18% | 0% |

Leadership behavior shaping is the foundation of youth involvement, attendance, and retention in the church. The theme leadership behavior shaping in youth was a personal reflection from youth to their parents and church leaders that emphasized their need to develop into mature Christians. This theme's responses indicate that youth at The Mountain Christian Church have ideas to improve the church, youth ministry and increase their involvement. There is a need to value their current contributions and ideas for improvement. Many youths responded that they feel their ideas, participation, and contributions are not valued (see Table 4). There is a need to have adult leadership meet with youth to brainstorm ideas for involvement opportunities in the church.

Table 4.

Leadership Behavior Shaping in Youth

| Survey Questions | Question Response Levels | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|----------|---------|--------|----------------|
| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| I have ideas about how to improve youth ministry in my church. | 0% | 18.18% | 27.27% | 36.36% | 18.18% |
| My ideas and contributions are valued. | 0% | 27.27% | 45.45% | 18.18% | 9.09% |

Spiritual maturity is an essential factor in all categories of the project. Without spiritual maturity as the goal, then youth participation and leadership would not follow. The theme *Experiences that Lead Youth to Christian Maturity* addresses the need for the youths' spiritual gifts and talents to be discovered and nurtured in the church (see Table 5). Youth must be growing spiritually, and the church must make concerted efforts to utilize their spiritual gifts and natural talents to serve the Lord and those in the community. Responses indicate a need to make a deliberate and well-planned effort to build a program that focuses on the youth's spiritual maturation.

Table 5.

Experiences that Lead Youth to Christian Maturity

| Survey Questions | Question Response Levels | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|----------|---------|--------|----------------|
| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| I am growing spiritually. | 0% | 27.27% | 36.36% | 36.36% | 0% |
| My talents and spiritual gifts are utilized at church. | 27.27% | 36.36% | 0% | 27.27% | 9.09% |

Questionnaire Results

The study's questionnaire component consisted of ten open-ended items that allowed for diverse and varying length responses. Two questions were grouped into each of the five primary themes of this study. The responses to the two questions in the primary themes were grouped into five of the most predominant response categories. The first, *youth needs for religious practices and relationships*, was divided into two sections because the two questions address divergent ideas.

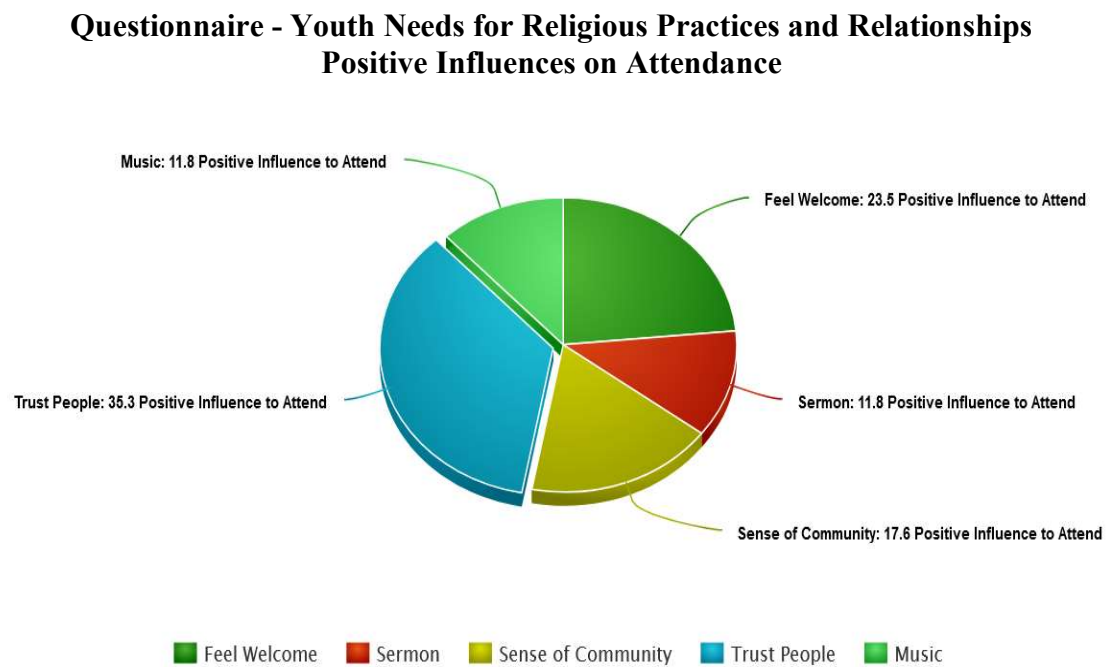
The first section was *positive influences to attend church* (see Figure 1). The questions used in part one of the theme were as follows:

What aspects of church influence my desire to attend or not attend regularly?

How can the church provide spiritual and personal relationships that would encourage youth to increase involvement?

The level of trust that youth have for adults is the most significant influence for youth to attend church. The youths' parents and other adults in the church are generally respected and considered favorably. To a lesser degree, the music, sense of community, and sermon are positive influences for attendance.

Figure 1.

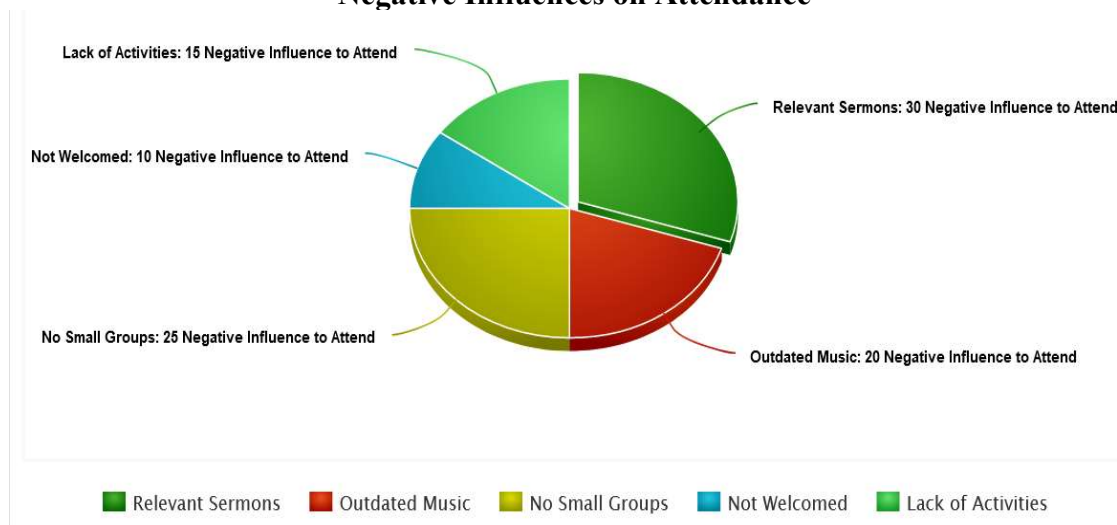


The second section of the theme, *youth needs for religious practices in relationships*, focused on *negative influences on church attendance* (see Figure 2). The responses that indicated the most negative influence on youth attending church were sermons not being relative to youth. It

would seem that sermons relative to youth are subjective, based upon spiritual maturity. Topical ideas related to youth's lives would be deemed more relative to their interests, but the level of understanding and current application to immature Christians would be equally as important. A lack of activities, not feeling welcome, and outdated music also had a negative impact on youth attending church. There is a dire need to begin youth Bible studies that take an intergenerational approach in their leadership.

Figure 2.

**Questionnaire - Youth Needs for Religious Practices and Relationships
Negative Influences on Attendance**



The second theme of the questionnaire was the *development of youth leadership skills endorsed by the church*. Two questions made up the category, and there were five general areas of responses that the participants discussed. The questions are as follows:

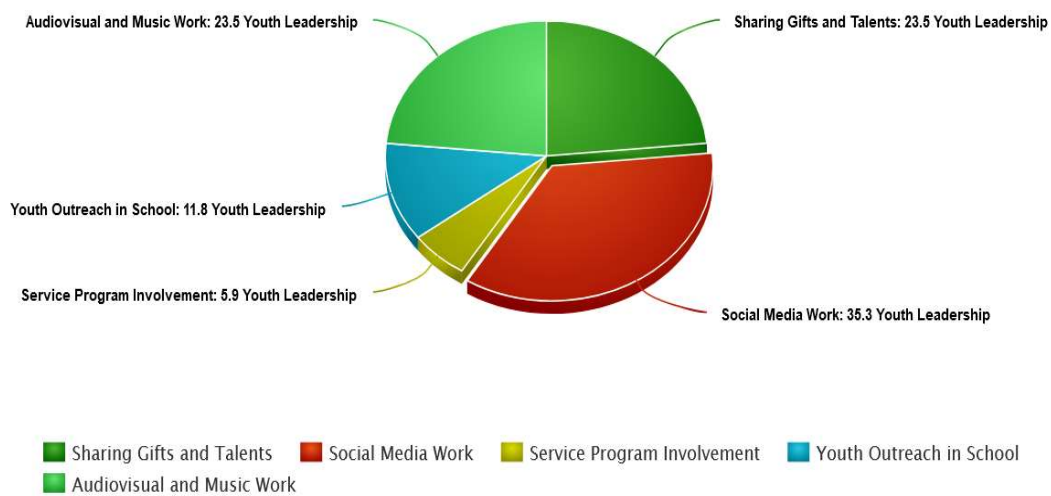
How can youth lead or be involved in areas of operation (ex. social media, music, outreach) in the church?

What community outreach programs would you like to see offered for youth and adult participation?

There were three notable areas in the participant responses that indicated the youths' desire to participate and become leaders in the church. Social media or technology work, audiovisual and music work, and the desire to use their spiritual gifts and talents in leadership positions were each a focus in their responses. Fortunately, there is a need to improve in each of the areas. (see figure 3). Youth outreach in school and service programs was also discussed in this particular area. There is a great deal of room for growth and a need for youth talent in the areas listed in this category.

Figure 3.

Questionnaire - Development of Youth Leadership Skills Endorsed by the Church



The third theme in the questionnaire, *influence of leaders and parents on youth retention in church*, opens the conversation of energy and irrational reactions in the church. The questions in this theme are as follows:

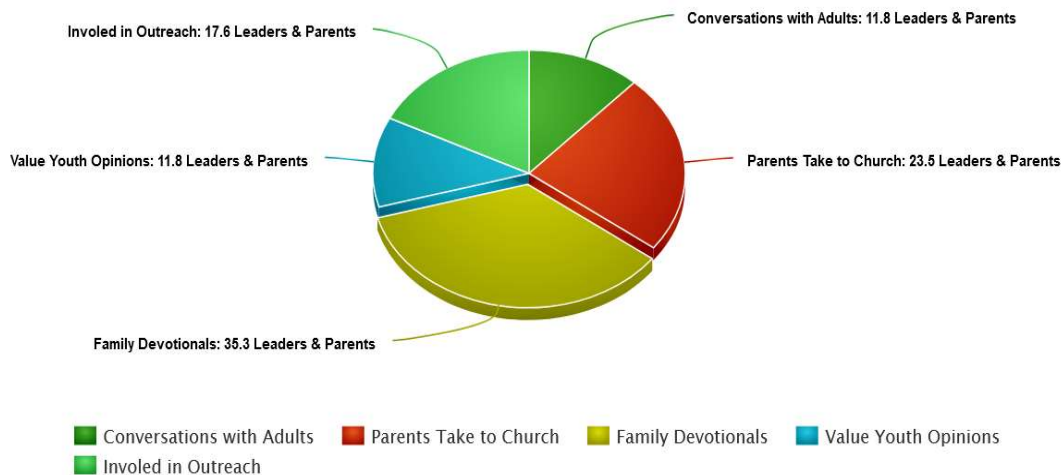
In what ways could the adults in the congregation make youth feel welcome as equal members of the church?

How do my parents encourage my spiritual growth and involvement in the church?

The most critical and encouraging activity discussed by youth was a family devotional time. It expresses the need for small group Bible studies and intergenerational leadership in Bible studies. Many of the youth do not have the benefit of parents who share devotional time with them, while others may be from non-Christian homes or from a home that is not adequately prepared to teach the Bible to their children. Respondents discussed the importance of their parents taking them to church as an encouraging influence. The simple act of transporting a child to church can make a difference in their lives and should not be underrated. Conversations with adults, involvement in outreach, and the desire to have their opinions valued were also discussed and the responses.

Figure 4.

Questionnaire - Influence of Leaders and Parents on Youth Retention in the Church



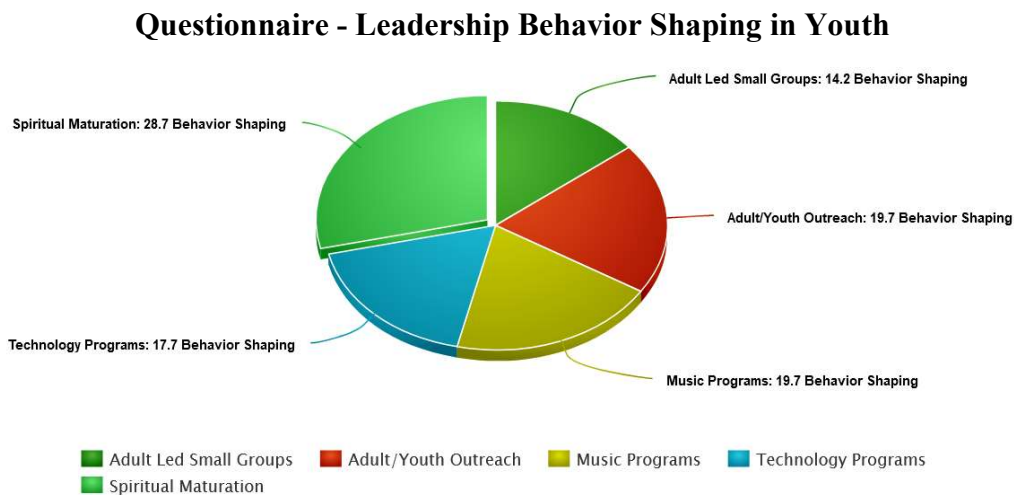
Leadership behavior shaping in youth was the fourth theme in the questionnaire. The two questions in this theme are as follows:

In what way can intergenerational (youth and adult) program participation increase involvement and spiritual growth?

What church operation or outreach programs would you like to lead or participate in regularly? (Be creative - bring new program ideas to your church.)

The questions yielded an encouraging response to the most important factor to leadership behavior shaping, spiritual maturation. There is a strong desire within the youth to grow spiritually, serve the church, and serve the community (see Figure 5). Currently, there are no adult and youth combined outreach programs. The youths' desire to mature spiritually must be met with effective programs by the adults because it is a vital step to become leaders in the church.

Figure 5.



The last and most impactful theme of the project is *experiences that lead youth to Christian maturity*. The questions for the theme are as follows:

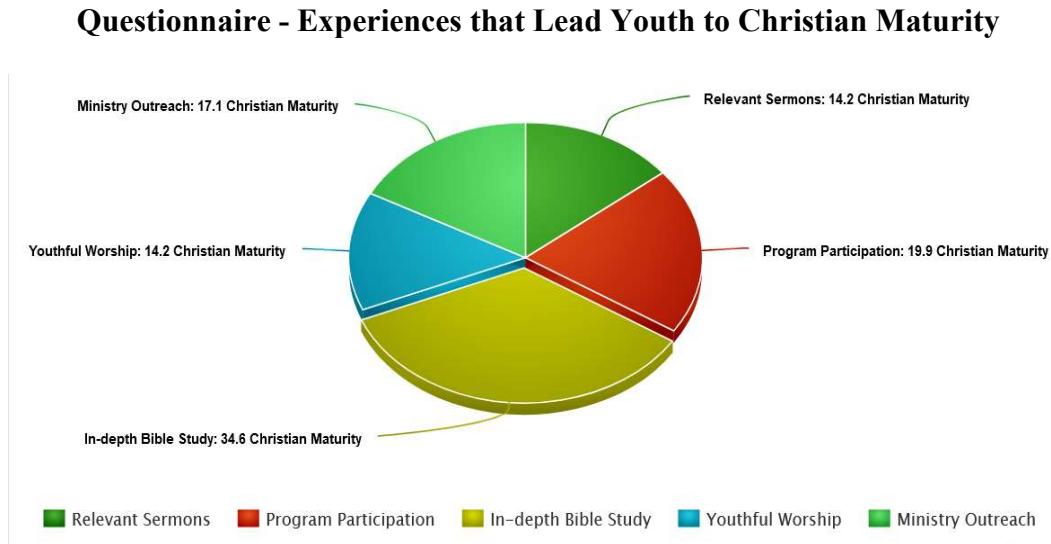
What aspects of the church, programs, and congregation would you change to help you experience serious, continuous spiritual growth?

In what way can the group lessons and sermons improve to involve youth and help them to apply what is being taught?

Participants expressed a desire for in-depth study of the Bible that would lead to Christian maturity (see Figure 6). Applying what is learned through community outreach and church

program work would help lead youth to spiritual maturation and give them a sense of belonging in the church. Relevant sermons, program participation, and youthful worship were also discussed as important factors discussed that would lead to Christian maturity.

Figure 6.



Roundtable Discussions Results

The third component of the study was the roundtable discussions. The discussion participants consisted of church leaders and other adults who attend The Mountain Christian Church. The adults' perspective provided a validation of the youth responses to the program's strengths and weaknesses within the church. There were six questions based upon the five themes of this study. The participants' responses were then analyzed and graphed according to their prevalence in the open-ended-based discussion. The first theme, *youth needs for religious practices and relationships*, was divided into two sections, as in the questionnaire. The questions are related to positive and negative influences on youth for participation and attendance to church.

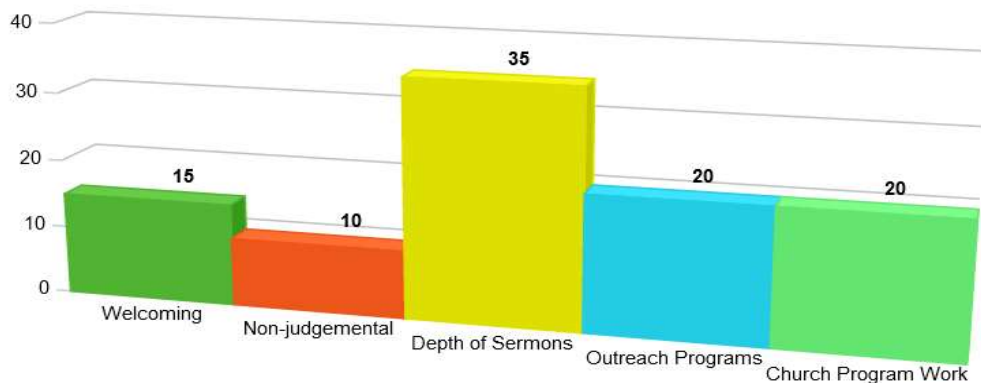
The first, *positive influences on church attendance*, indicated that the sermon’s depth is the most significant influence for youth to attend church. The question for the first part of the theme is as follows:

What aspects and programs in our church contribute to youth participation and retention?

The desire to grow spiritually and learn to study the bible is crucial and promising to youth. A youth bible study program would give the youth a solid foundation and background to better understand the depth of the sermons. Outreach programs and church program work had a positive influence on youth as they sought to apply their faith by serving others (see Figure 7). The welcoming and non-judgmental atmosphere were also considered contributors to youth attendance.

Figure 7.

**Roundtable - Youth Needs for Religious Practices and Relationships
Positive Influences on Attend**

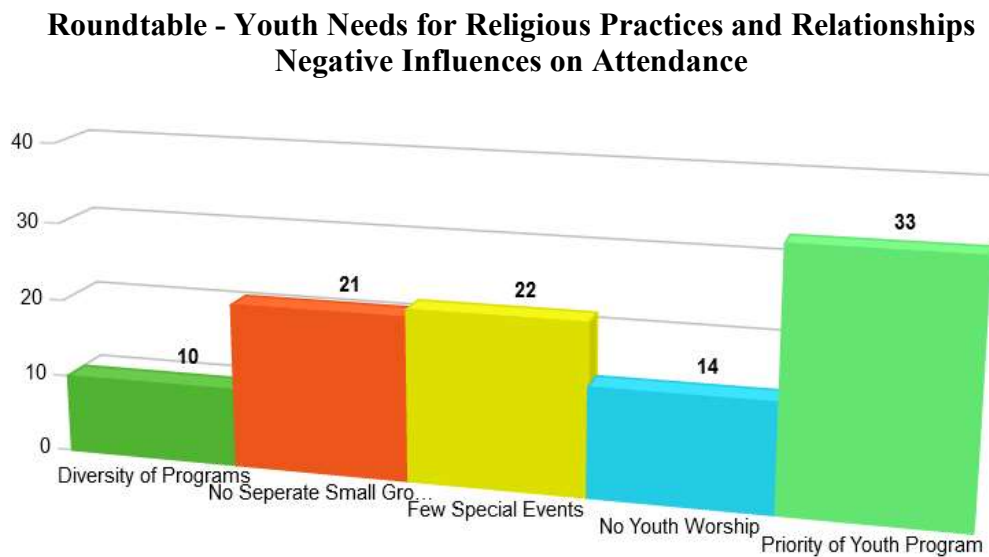


The second section of the *youth needs for religious practices and relationships* focused on *negative influences on youth attendance to church*. The question for the second part of the theme is as follows:

What aspects and programs in our church detract from youth participation and retention?

Many of the leaders and adults in the roundtable discussion stated that the church's youth are not a priority or mission for the church has had the most significant negative impact. Youth not attending or being involved in the church could be a result of not having special events for youth. Events are planned sparingly and are typically aimed at regular attendees. The lack of youth-specific small groups or Bible studies had a detrimental impact as well (see Figure 8). No youth worship team and lack of diversity in programs were also contributors to youth not attending or participating in church.

Figure 8.



The second theme addressed in the roundtable discussions was *developing youth leadership skills endorsed by the church*. The question for the theme was as follows:

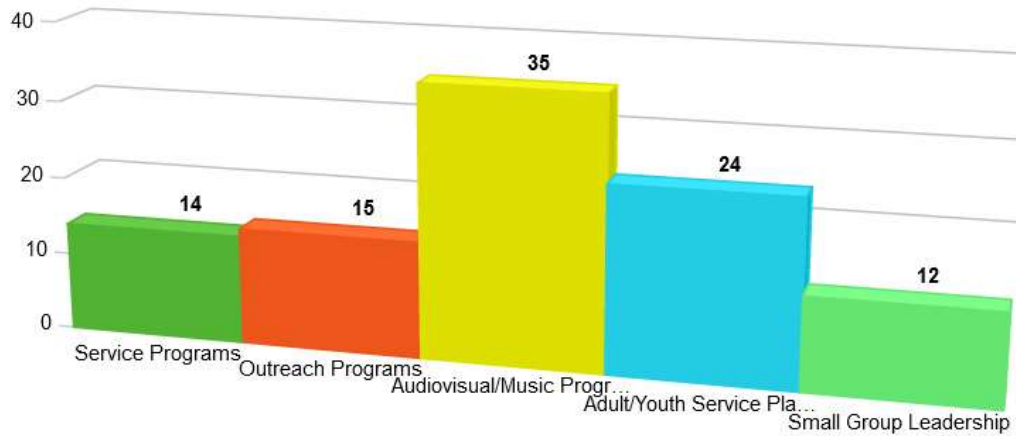
What current and new outreach and operational programs promote youth leadership and participation opportunities?

Many of the participants agreed that the audiovisual - music program allowed for the utilization of youths' talents and provided opportunities for them to develop as leaders in the program area. The responses indicated that having a team of youth and adults work on planning sermons and church program units. Outreach programs, service programs, and small group leadership in the

church were also discussed as future opportunities for youth to be involved as participants and future leaders.

Figure 9.

Roundtable - Development of Youth Leadership Skills Endorsed by the Church



The third theme, *influence of leaders and parents on youth retention in the church*, was an essential and personal section in the discussion. The question for the theme was as follows:

How can we create/encourage intergenerational involvement in our church programs?

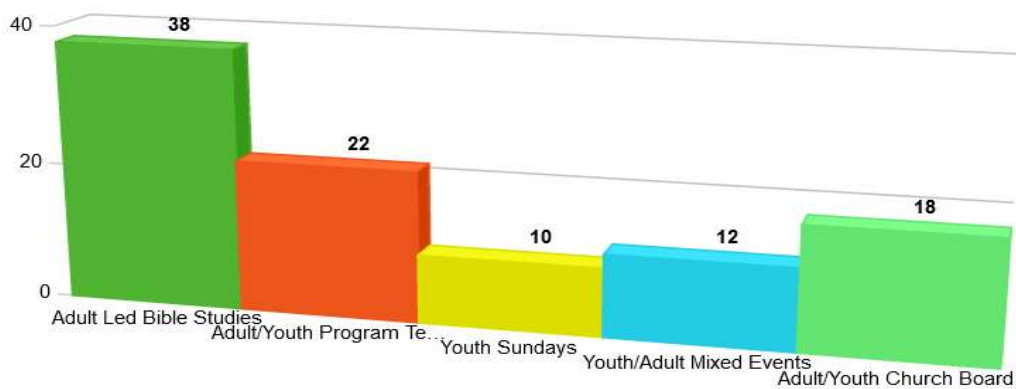
Responsibility and accountability were discussed as a basis for improvement around much of the discussion. The adults took ownership in the decline of youth attendance and participation in the church. Many participants felt that creating adult-led Bible studies for youth would help develop the youth into the program and spiritual leaders.

An immediate need was expressed about the importance of an adult-youth church program team to help facilitate services. The participants agreed that an adult and youth church board would be beneficial. To include youth on a planning board would not only ensure that the youth are informed, but their innovative ideas on improving the church's services could be

implemented (see Figure 10). Youth and adult mixed events and the return of youth Sundays in which youth leave the services were also discussed. There has been a decrease in attendance, and youth involvement would undoubtedly give them ownership in the church and improve attendance.

Figure 10.

Roundtable - Influence of Leaders and Parents on Youth Retention in the Church

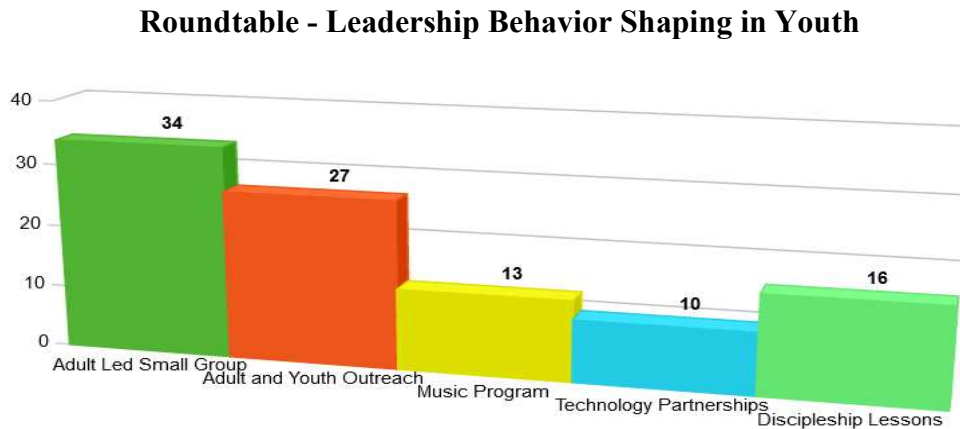


The fourth theme in the roundtable discussion pertains to *leadership behavior shaping in youth*. The question for the theme is as follows:

How can we integrate our current peer mentor devotional program with one that uses an intergenerational approach?

The discussion centered around what current programs or new programs could be implemented in an effort to increase participation and develop future leaders in the church. There was much discussion about having an adult-led small group for youth. The Bible study and relationships in the group would help lead youth to the spiritual maturity necessary to become an effective leader in the church. An adult and youth paired outreach program for the community was discussed by the participants. Discipleship lessons, technology partnerships, and music program work were also discussed as potential areas for participation and growth in youth (see Figure 11).

Figure 11.

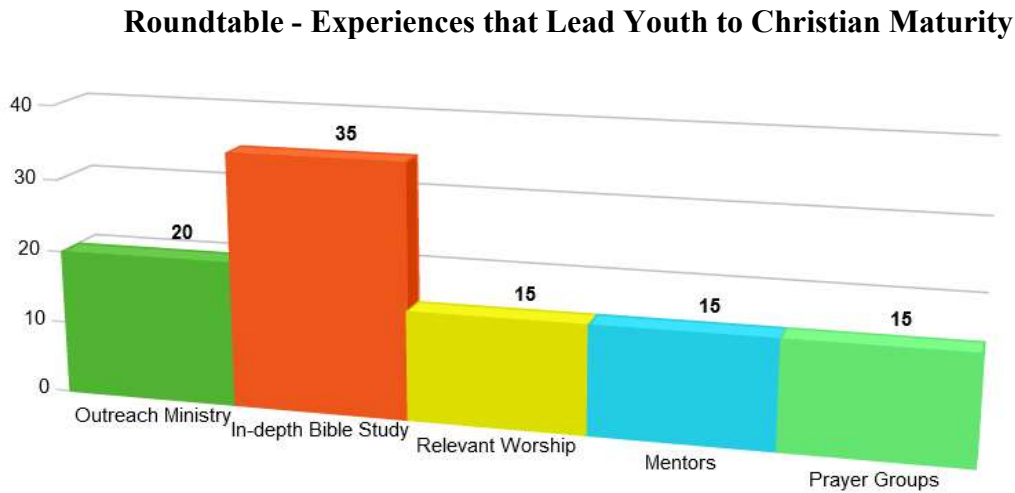


The last and most important theme in the roundtable discussion was *experiences that lead youth to Christian maturity*. The question for the theme was as follows:

How effective are our theological programs in promoting spiritual maturity in our youth?

Participants discussed the importance of discipleship and youth maturing as Christians. Youth who attend church and youth seeking God are drawn to the church if growth and spiritual maturation opportunities are available and a priority. The majority of the participants discussed the importance of in-depth Bible study in the sermons and small group Bible studies for youth. There was interest in increasing community outreach ministry to include youth to learn by living as Christ has commanded them (see Figure 12). Relevant worship, prayer groups, and mentors were also discussed as ways to become an Invitational church and one that actively pursues Christian maturity for the youth.

Figure 12.



Triangulation of Data

The triangulation of data exceeded this researcher's expectations for the validity and reliability of responses in the project. The surveys, questionnaires, and roundtable discussions provided consistent and clear indications of the areas in which The Mountain Christian Church meets youth's needs to develop into Christian leaders and the areas in which change and additional programs are needed. This researcher's decision to add an adult component by way of the roundtable discussions provided a more detailed look into current programs and the reasoning behind them. Adults and leaders in the church immediately recognized a need for change and examined plausible opportunities to increase youth attendance and retention in the church.

The results of the surveys, questionnaires, and roundtable discussions will be combined into a single report of the church's programs and a recommendation of programs that will encourage the spiritual maturation of youth, their participation in church programs, and their development into leaders of current and new programs. Doing so will utilize the spiritual gifts

that have been granted to the youth by the Holy Spirit. Their gifts, along with natural abilities, will be used to better our church's programs, outreach ministry and teach the adults new and interesting approaches to ministry.

The report will be produced by analyzing data and emphasizing change or ideas for new programs. It will be derived and supported from the triangulation of data from the five themes of the study. The first theme, *youth needs for religious practice and relationships*, indicated in the survey that youth who attend church do so at least three times per month. That same group responded that many did not want to continue attending or start attending church. The questionnaire yielded support that youth did not have a strong desire to attend church due to sermons that were not relevant to them, outdated music, and the fact that there were no youth-related small groups.

The roundtable discussion continued to support youth desire or detractors to attend church based on a lack of priority for youth programs, no youth-specific small groups, and few special events for youth. On the other hand, the adults in the roundtable discussion felt that the depth of sermons was a positive influence. However, they did not consider that youth may not have the background to fully understand or appreciate the sermons typically targeted at mature Christians. Youth expressed in the questionnaire that they trusted the church's adults and felt welcomed in the church.

Each of the study's components supported the idea that youth programs were lacking or not available. They supported the idea that due to the lack of opportunity to serve as leaders and grow as Christians, the desire to continue attending church was small. The following four themes had very distinct correlations to each other. The triangulation of data exceeded this researcher's expectations and confirmed the need for change and the route in which change should be taken.

The second theme, *development of youth leadership skills endorsed by the church*, indicated in the survey that youth participated in very few outreach projects or church operations. The youth responses expressed that they did not participate in outreach or church service programs because there were too few available. The youth indicated a desire to use their social media or technology work skills, audiovisual, and music work, and had a general desire to share gifts and talents. Adults participating in the roundtable discussions concurred that there was a need for increased youth programs and specifically expressed a desire to utilize youth talents in audiovisual or music programs and small group leadership outreach programs.

The respondents also expressed a desire to develop an adult-youth service planning committee. Each of the components expresses the same sentiment that a change needs to occur if youth attendance and retention are to improve, and programs need to be added to develop youth leaders. The data expressed that spiritual maturation was a foundational need in any program change or addition. A positive correlation found throughout the study was that youth had a high level of trust and respect for the leaders and the adults had an appreciation of a desire to improve youth programs. The third theme is foundational to an intergenerational approach to address the problem. It is the *influence of leaders and parents on youth or retention in church*.

There was a disparity between the survey responses and the questionnaire completed by the youth. The questionnaire indicated that the majority of youth did not feel welcome at church, nor did they interact with older generations at church. The youth responded that they did not feel welcome at church or why they did not interact had little interaction with adults at church. The most evident is that youth felt that the leaders and parents did not value their opinions, were not given opportunities to be involved in ministry outreach and that conversations with adults were rarely given the opportunity to have conversations with adults. The questionnaire did express the

desire and importance of family devotions to youth and that parents consistently take their children to church. Participants in the roundtable discussions expressed the importance of starting adult-led Bible studies, parental involvement, devotionals, and Christian instruction at home. There was a correlation between the youth and adult responses in that adults expressed a desire to have youth and adult mixed events and discuss the possibility have an adult youth church board.

Data triangulation from the fourth theme, *leadership behavior shaping in youth*, showed strong correlations between the survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussions. A majority of youth expressed that they have ideas about improving youth ministry in the church on the survey. Youth also did not feel that their ideas and contributions were valued. A continuation of the survey response was found in the questionnaire as many respondents felt that an in-depth spiritual maturation should be the basis for change within the church. They readily expressed ideas on involvement and improvement of technology programs, music programs, and adult youth outreach. The roundtable discussion yielded very similar responses as adult and youth outreach, music program, and technology partnerships or discussed. A prevailing theme was spiritual maturity through adult lead small group Bible studies.

The fifth theme, *experiences that lead to Christian maturity*, indicated that youth felt they were growing spiritually, but their talents and gifts were not utilized at church. In the questionnaire, youth expressed again – a need for in-depth Bible study to grow spiritually and expressed the need for opportunities to use their gifts and talents in the areas of outreach ministry worship.

Summary

The use of a qualitative approach to research requires the interpretation of human responses. This researcher found the best way to interpret the responses was to gather the data and distribute it into the study's five themes. When comparing the data between the survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussions presented by youth and adults, there was a distinct correlation between the data. The youth questionnaire served as a tool to give details and ideas for improvements and additions to programs and express their specific needs. The roundtable discussion provided valuable information about current programs and served as an opportunity to discuss program changes and the need for new youth-oriented services.

The qualitative approach and instruments used for the study represented participants' responses well through the triangulation of data. Although the interpretation of some responses was complex, using a thematic approach helped to categorize and compare results from each of the study's instruments. The confirmation given from the literature review and other research in chapter two and the study's information was encouraging. It will serve as an instrument and impetus for change at the Mountain Christian Church. This researcher has seen the value of the data collected in the project and will effectively apply its results to address the lack of youth leadership skills training an opportunity.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This aim of this thesis is to address the problem of the decline in youth attendance and participation at The Mountain Christian Church. The lack of leadership skills training and spiritual maturation programs for youth ages 13-17 that develop young leaders must be utilized to address the problem effectively. This researcher will discuss the thesis's cumulative findings and provide a comparative analysis between the project findings, review of literature, and current practices in The Mountain Christian Church. The conclusions drawn from the study will help determine the best direction and practices to address the problem presented in this paper. The findings from the participant input and review of literature will assist this researcher in forming recommendations for church leaders to address the decline in participation of youth in the church.

The recommendations include an implementation plan to reengage the youth in the church. Lastly, the summary of this paper will address the next steps for the youth and church as a whole. It is evident from the project that there is a great deal of concern about the church's current state. There is also excitement and an impetus for change in our youth programs that cross generations, and this researcher is confident that positive impacts will occur due to these changes. This researcher feels confident that there will be an increase in youth attendance and a renewed interest in adults as they partner with youth in outreach and church service programs. There is much prayer for many to come to Christ, renew their faith, and be rejuvenated to serve the church and community.

The three components of this study included a survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussions. The diversity of research components was important as this researcher worked to

establish the reliability and validity of the study's results. The survey provided a general snapshot of youth perception of the church, its programs, and their spiritual maturity. The questionnaire and roundtable discussion allowed a more open-ended opportunity for respondents, youth, and adults to share their answers in more depth and more poignantly. The use of youth and adults in the study provided information about youth's perception in the church, opportunities for youth in the church, and the current state of youth opportunity to participate and lead in the church.

The review of literature, survey, questionnaire, and roundtable discussions contributed to the development of the five themes, youth needs for religious practice and relationships, development of youth leadership skills endorsed by the church, the influence of leaders and parents on youth retention in church, leadership behavior shaping in youth, and experiences that lead youth to Christian maturity. The five themes were used for organizational purposes as this researcher compares the study results and the review of literature. The recommendations to the church leaders on how to address the problem presented by this paper will be organized under the five themes of the study as well. The next steps will be presenting the findings to the church leadership with suggestions to change or add to the program organized by the five themes.

Comparison: Review of Literature and Project Results

The project's survey gave insight into the youth's general perceptions and feelings about the church programs, outreach, their desire to attend church, and the need for spiritual growth. The questionnaire and roundtable discussion allowed for a more in-depth look at the church youth programs' current state and opportunities for service. It generated ideas to improve program involvement and spiritual growth. The review of literature revealed that research

projects have indicated that sixty to seventy percent of youth leave the church after graduating from high school.¹⁷⁴ The project's study specified that most youths at The Mountain Christian Church agreed or strongly agreed that they would not continue attending church if given the opportunity.

It is alarming to know that most youths do not have a desire to attend church or return to church after they have left for some time. The church should be a welcoming, gathering place for young people to share ideas, work through problems, and learn how to live a life through Christ that is fulfilling and content. The questionnaire explains how trust, sense of community, and positive influences to attend church. Although contrary to students' desire to return to church or continue attending, they feel comfortable and welcome at church is a positive foundation for building new programs for youth. The sermons and music program should be a starting point to examine the need for change. In the questionnaire and roundtable discussions, both youth and adults expressed that adults at The Mountain Christian Church were not positive influences to promote youth attendance and retention. A significant turning point for youth faith practices seems to occur after high school graduation within all denominations. The church is a safe place of belonging and acceptance through interaction with peers, parents, and other adults.¹⁷⁵

This study revealed that youth are seekers who are in need of truth and a moral foundation upon which they can build their lives. Although not enticing enough to increase or retain youth attendance, the church programs have planted seeds of a spiritual foundation of hope, peace, and love. A survey of church leaders reported that the majority of youth ministers perceived their

¹⁷⁴ Chris Clements, *Experience and Christian Nurture in Youth Ministry*, 23.

¹⁷⁵ Thomas P. O'Conner, *The Relative Influence of Youth and Adult Experiences*, 731.

youth as actively pursuing spiritual maturation.¹⁷⁶ The opportunity to pursue spiritual maturation in The Mountain Christian Church is lacking, which negatively influences youth attendance and retention. What distinguishes this generation is their disengagement, detachment, and emotional numbness regarding their spiritual lives.¹⁷⁷

The roundtable discussion offered many ideas on how to include more youth-oriented events and the need for youth-specific small groups that focus on the most crucial aspects of leadership building skills which include a desire to attend church, growing to spiritual maturity, and living the life as effective Christians.

The Mountain Christian Church needs to expand its outreach programs and improve its service programs by updating its technology usage, music programs, and youth programs. Leadership skills are developed over time and practice. If youth are given the opportunity to become leaders and active participants in the church and its outreach programs, they will feel needed, and their services will become a critical part of the church. Having a sense of belonging and being needed by the church will encourage youth to be involved in outreach and service programs and spiritual growth and development through Bible studies, sermons, and interaction with adults in the church. An intergenerational approach to developing the new programs will benefit the youth and adults who may not have the technical skill or experience in social media and promotion of the programs.

If a church promotes its youth's spiritual maturity by offering theological teachings and service projects that include relational teaching opportunities, the entire church community can

¹⁷⁶ Karen Choi, *The Relationship between Youth Ministry Participation*, 293.

¹⁷⁷ Richard Wagner, *Problems in Training Informal Religious Educators*, 143.

experience the presence of youth as an integral part of the church. Jesus' ministry was built around serving the poor, sick, and outcast. His final act of teaching the disciples to serve occurred just before the Last Supper when he washed his disciples' feet. The act would be remembered by the disciples for many years and serve as behavior shaping memory.¹⁷⁸

Parents can and should be the best mentors and examples of effective Christians who teach leadership skills through service. Youth look to their parents as examples for the level of involvement that should be shared to meet the church's needs. Young people are cognizant of their parents' leadership roles in the church and have a stronger desire to remain in the church if they had grown up with the benefit of having parents committed to serving Christ.¹⁷⁹ It is critical that parents understand that and live their lives accordingly. Serving others is transformational and builds a solid moral foundation, faith in Christ and others, and makes disciples within the youth community.¹⁸⁰

The youth in the questionnaire and adults in the roundtable discussion were emphatic about youth being equal members of the church involved in daily operations and outreach positions that are considered essential and not just a side thought to get them involved. New areas of outreach and daily program operations should be supported by adults and eventually led by youth. Youth ministry should never be about ministry with youth alone. It is about ministry and the role that youth is called to play in the church today and throughout their lives. There are dynamic calls for changing the job duties of pastors, youth pastors, and other church workers. It changes a system in order to value young people's spiritual growth and leadership over mere

¹⁷⁸ Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation*, 179.

¹⁷⁹ Ross, *Youth Ministry in Thirds*, 95.

¹⁸⁰ Nel, *Imagine--Making Disciples*, 97.

attendance.¹⁸¹ Roundtable discussions revealed that adults value, respect, and need youth opinions on the church's operations. The questionnaire gave several examples of youth activities and leadership opportunities to partner with adults in an intergenerational approach two leading. The benefit is not only for the youth and their leadership development, but it is also valued by adults who learn from the youth and gain valuable experience themselves. Church members can make an impact on the lives of youth by serving as adoptive mentors. Their work of teaching and guiding youth in their spiritual journey can be tremendously rewarding.¹⁸² Mentors for the youth help develop them into mature Christians and leaders and equip them positively impact their peers.

Parents and leaders of the church should be then live a Christian life that youth respect. An essential aspect of that is for the parents and leaders to have a solid understanding and application of the church's theology and personal devotion. If parents are able to teach their children through daily devotionals and example in the way they live their lives, the impact will be invaluable. It is essential that their lives serve as proof of their religious sincerity and not just their words. Youth emulate the Christian practice of their peers and leaders. The study's questionnaire and roundtable discussions indicated a strong desire to have leaders and parents who shared devotional and prayer time with him as a developed as Christians. The role models in their community provide a base of experience that is reflected in their Christian conviction.¹⁸³ Adults expressed the value of directly influencing the spiritual life and practice of youth. One of

¹⁸¹ Argue, *Beyond 'New and Improved' Youth Ministry*, 18.

¹⁸² Canales, *Models of Christian Leadership*, 36.

¹⁸³ Clements, *Experience and Christian Nurture*, 27.

the most important aspects of youth leaders' influence on teenagers' retention in the church is understanding theology and a Christian life worth modeling.¹⁸⁴

Youth indicated in the questionnaire that their parents' most positive impact on them for attending church was merely taking them to church. The simple act of committing to taking a child to church helps develop the routine and habits independently and indicates how much the parent values what the church offers and what they offer to the church. Once the youth steps into the church's doors, the decision is his in terms of making a concerted effort to learn, grow, and serve Christ. The church is a place of preparation to serve a world in need. Adults must make a concerted effort to welcome, use, and involve them as valued members of the church. The most successful leaders in a church are approachable and genuinely interested in the lives of the youth. Convincing a young person that he must die to self to live fully in Christ can only be made through an individual and personal investment in that young person.¹⁸⁵

For youth to develop as leaders, they and the adults in the church must realize it is a process that requires skills training period the Holy Spirit has given the youth gifts. They have natural abilities and skills that are beneficial for the church. The leadership skills training occurs when a youth is involved, participates in a church program, or works under the guidance have an adult mentor who is the program leader. The skills learned from leading a church program will benefit the church and community for many years. Serving others is transformational and builds a solid moral foundation, faith in Christ and others, and makes disciples within the youth community.¹⁸⁶ Youths and adults agreed in the questionnaire and roundtable discussions that

¹⁸⁴ Vallrie, *Strategies for a Healthy Youth Ministry*, 121.

¹⁸⁵ Nel, *Imagine--Making Disciples in Youth Ministry*, 2.

¹⁸⁶ Nel, *Imagine--Making Disciples*, 97.

spiritual maturation was an essential requirement for leadership behavior shaping. Each discussed the importance of a small group Bible study and sharing in an intergenerational approach to learn the theology and practices of living the Christian faith. Ministry leaders must work under the parameters of a spirit-filled and Bible-filled approach to ministry. There is a need for daily renewal of the mind partnered with regular Bible study and service within the church.¹⁸⁷

The participants in the roundtable discussions indicated an immediate need to make necessary adjustments and additions to youth-related activities and programs in the church. The adults emphasized the importance of use being considered equal members of the church as we all are equal members of the body of Christ. The youth contributions are just as valuable and impactful as those of the adults. Christ called the church to be disciple-makers. Christian youth should be encouraged and taught to disciple their peers and those around them. The maturation process empowers youth to have a deep sense of hope in their daily life. Their hope flows from their experience with Christ. When they begin to witness and minister to others, they have matured in discipleship.¹⁸⁸

Through the questionnaire and roundtable discussions responses, it is evident that there are youth members of The Mountain Christian Church who have developed their skills and gifts that exceed those of the adult members in specific program areas. Youth should not be considered future leaders but leaders who have something to offer today. Christians are called to lead regardless of their age or level of spiritual maturity. There are leadership opportunities for all Christians. Since youth are leaders, the church's mission statement should clearly communicate

¹⁸⁷ Wendt, Jr. *Raising Eutychus*, 355.

¹⁸⁸ S. Selvam, "The Unnamed Companion on the Road: Spiritual Accompaniment in the Context of Youth Ministry," *The Journal of Youth Ministry* 11, no. 2 (Spring 2013), 41.

that, and it should serve as a blueprint of the church's youth ministry. "The youth ministry should reflect God's direction and should specify measurable results that are regularly discussed throughout the year."¹⁸⁹ Although there is currently no rubric to measure progress and goal setting for youth in the church, it will be addressed as part of the youth-adult advisement committee's mission.

The successful development of utilizing youth as leaders works to develop a mature faith as one of its primary goals and views them as participants in the church's life and ministry. Part of the spiritual maturation process includes overcoming problems, trials, and difficulties faced in everyday life. Adults who have experienced similar situations can serve as guides to help youth through the difficulties of living a Christian life in a lost world. A relational ministry's importance is evident through the depths of challenges and suffering in youth's lives.¹⁹⁰ A closeness between leaders and youth makes a connection that enables care that may be necessary during difficult times. For youth to be shaped as leaders, congregations must include them in sharing the good news of Jesus and making decisions, leading, and being a part of the church's vital work.

There are many facets to building a youth program that develops them into effective church program leaders. The most important critical aspect of developing a church leader is promoting the experiences that lead to Christian maturity. Suppose the youth are not given the opportunity to study the Bible in-depth and practice its tenets by utilizing their skills and learning new skills to serve. In that case, they will not grow to a spiritual maturity that is fulfilling and impacting their lives and the lives of others. Developing into a mature Christian requires the

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 118.

¹⁹⁰ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 7.

individual to personalize his relationship with Jesus by regularly reading the Word, praying, attending to devotionals, fellowshiping with other Christians, and serving Him in daily life.¹⁹¹ The survey indicated that a large percentage of youth are not growing spiritually. The questionnaire and roundtable discussion revealed that a more diverse set of service and spiritual growth opportunities were needed. In particular, in-depth Bible studies, prayer groups, involvement in music and technology programs, and general outreach opportunities are needed for youth to be involved and live as Christ lived, serving others. The maturation process empowers youth to have a deep sense of hope in their daily life. Their hope flows from their experience with Christ. When they begin to witness and minister to others, they have matured in discipleship.¹⁹²

Through the use of mentoring, relationships can be developed that are mutually beneficial to use and adults. The questionnaire and roundtable discussions express that Christian maturity was based on developing a strong relationship with Christ and developing as a Christian family in the church. Youth who participate in age-specific groups and intergenerational services that include faith nurturing characteristics serve as a more powerful predictor of faith maturity than simple participation.¹⁹³ Currently, The Mountain Christian Church needs relationship-building programs and practices between adults and youth. There is already the common goal of developing our relationship with Christ for youth and adult programs but combining the two groups is the singularly most important goal is the next step.

¹⁹¹ Dodrill, *A Call for More Critical Thinking*, 8.

¹⁹² S. Selvam, *The Unnamed Companion on the Road*, 41.

¹⁹³ Choi, *The Relationship between Youth Ministry Participation*, 305.

Participants in the roundtable discussion expressed a need to increase youth attendance and participation in the church and grow spiritually together with youth and relationships the model the life of Christ in his ministry. This goal could be attained through sermons, small group Bible studies, and outreach in the community. Combining participation with a relationship that encourages discipleship and leadership leads to Christian maturity for youth. The greater degree to which the church can provide real-life experiences for youth, the greater chances it will provide positive growth and maturity.¹⁹⁴ An intergenerational approach to spiritual maturation helps youth and adults develop leaders with the skills for discipleship and continued growth in the church.

Conclusions of the Study

Through the review of literature, discussions with colleagues and professors, and three research components with participants in this study, this researcher has concluded that the lack of leadership development in youth ages 13 through 17 at the Mountain Christian Church is valid. It can be addressed through prayerful consideration, careful planning, and the involvement of an intergenerational approach. There is interest and excitement of all participants and many in the congregation to be a part of an effort to grow spiritually, serve selflessly, and become leaders in an effort to increase God's Kingdom. Professional studies, including articles, textbooks, research studies, and dissertations, were considered as the study was developed, implemented, and provided opportunities to develop future leaders and the church.

The review of the literature confirmed this researcher's initial hypothesis. It helped to form the study into five themes that contribute to youth participation and development as leaders in the church. Each theme led to subcategories that came from participant responses that confirmed

¹⁹⁴ Wagner, *Problems in Training*, 149.

prior researchers' findings and literature dedicated to youth leadership development in the church. This researcher and adult participants became motivated to make changes as the current state of youth-specific programs was revealed. Adults in the church strongly believe that youth should be given the same considerations, respect, and leadership opportunities they received as they are valued members of the church.

Youth are leaving the church in significant numbers after high school graduation. Their leaving is discouraging and could be detrimental for the future existence of many churches. The problem lies in the lack of hope to overcome the decreasing numbers of youth in the church. Without youth, the future of existing serve churches is in question, but the desire to be a part of a thriving, meaningful church in which youth can mature spiritually is viable. The Mountain Christian Church has decided to operate in a hopeful manner for its continuation and growth by putting its hope in Jesus Christ. Much work is to be done for any church to change the trajectory of growth or lack thereof. All parties in the study agree that an intergenerational approach in which adults respect use opinions and contributions will be the most successful and rewarding.

The church's most meaningful activity and goal is to focus on the spiritual maturation of its youth and adults. Without spiritual maturation, there is no focus or meaningful goal for youth participating in the church and leading programs in the community. Outreach and service our contributors to spiritual growth, but a solid biblical foundation and meaningful relationships that are supportive and positive are necessary for leaders. Scholarly research, literature, and leaders in the church agree that the church's mission should include youth as contributors who can attain the same level of spiritual maturity as adults. Youth must be afforded the opportunity to have in-depth Bible studies the challenge them and prepare them for the challenges in their world.

Through this study, it became evident that parents and leaders in the church played a vital role in youth's decision to either be active members of the church or choose to no longer attend. Youth will determine their level of involvement based upon those who are most meaningful and influential in their lives. If their parents do not value knowing, growing, and serving in the Lord, typically, they will do the same. The Mountain Christian Church members are dedicated to serving as role models and mentors to youth. The church must make this known to all stakeholders because youth must have role models and mentors to help them on their Christian journey. Parents should take the lead to do what is necessary to make sure their house serves the Lord. Devotionals and family prayer are needed to give youth the support and growth they need from home.

The importance of outreach was emphasized in the study. The review of literature and desire of youth and adults indicated that participating in outreach for the church is a crucial component to move spiritual maturation the traditional programs for outreach include serving at a homeless shelter, helping with after-school programs, and providing service projects for the elderly. All of the components are certainly important and worthy of the church's time. However, youth need to be involved in the brainstorming and decision-making of outreach opportunities needed in their community. Adults have much to learn from youth as they begin to understand and provide a different perspective to the needs and most effective approaches to serving the community. An intergenerational approach provides guidance for youth in the programs, and it also allows youth to grow into leadership positions. At times, the best leader for a program is the one who generates the idea behind the program period.

Although there were many different approaches to considering the development of youth as leaders in the church, one point was consistent; youth must be involved in the decision-

making process to buy into and desire to participate in the program. Involving youth from the initial stages of program development or program change gives some sense of ownership and belonging to the church. God gives each individual gifts and talents that should be utilized regardless of age or position. Youth who are actively involved in decision making will become contributors and recruiters for their service. Ultimately, this researcher has discovered that the development of youth as leaders is essential not only for the success and continuation of the church but also for the Kingdom of God.

Recommendations for Church Leaders

This researcher's recommendation to church leaders is to move forward to make immediate changes and additions to youth-related programs. The first step would be to develop a youth-adult advisory board. It would generate ideas and make plans that create new programs and opportunities for youth involvement that will contribute to their spiritual maturity, outreach opportunities, church service programs, and future leaders' development. The first program change should be the creation of a youth-specific Bible study. An adult leader and mentor should work with a youth teacher to develop a curriculum that is theologically sound and challenging for the youth. The youth Bible study should also be a safe place for youth to share their struggles, concerns with their Christian lives and develop positive relationships with their peers.

The next step would be to create an intergenerational mentorship program for accountability and support purposes. Each youth member in the church should be assigned an adult mentor as a contact that will be available to pray for them and be there for them during difficult times. Mentors must complete an approved mentorship program prior to being assigned a mentor. Each mentor will meet with church leaders to discuss the program and receive updates on effective practices and ideas for working with their mentees. Each mentor should encourage

his mentee to be involved in their area of interest, gifts, and talents of church programs and outreach. The mentor should be conversing with the child's parents about the youth's involvement, progress, and concerns to keep the parent engaged in their child's life.

After the youth-adult planning committee meets, this researcher recommends that leadership moves forward by assigning an adult to each program. Youth volunteers will be expected to attend the mentor training as well. The first component program is the social networking aspect in which youth have a great deal of experience and desire to make a change. Next, youth who have an interest or present skill in audiovisual and music areas will begin developing and updating worship service that includes youth-adult performers.

The last recommendation would be to develop an outreach team that includes youth and adults. The team should brainstorm have an initial event to kick off the program in which they introduce the outreach activities and share the specific needs of those they will be serving. The team will also be responsible for creating lessons related to the specific outreach that will serve as an impetus to serve and guide spiritual growth and maturation. A timeline and materials will be provided for the church leaders as soon as this researcher and the senior pastor can work through the details.

Summary and Next Steps

This researcher is determined to develop a well-defined program for youth that will ensure they have the opportunity for spiritual growth, serving the church and community, and developing into leaders for the church. A church leader and this researcher will develop a curriculum, recruit a youth member of the church to lead, and plan the youth Bible study format. This researcher will invite youth to become members of the Bible study and inform that congregation of its progress.

Next, this researcher and a senior pastor will meet with youth for a kickoff party in which the Bible study, mentorship program, and new program development ideas will be shared. Information about involvement and leaders in each program will be introduced. As the programs begin, the senior pastor and this researcher will develop a rubric and timeline for each program to determine its success, needs for change, and general progress. It will include surveys that determine the youth's perception and ideas on how to improve the programs. The congregation will be kept and formed of the projects and their successes.

The project and thesis work experience has been difficult at times for this researcher, but the benefits heavily outweigh the challenges. With the support of others and the confirmation of God's Word, The Mountain Christian Church will move forward to implement the study's findings which will help develop youth as disciple-makers, mature Christians, and future leaders in the church.

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

December 22, 2020

Albert Crout

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY20-21-368 Development of Future Leaders in the Christian Church

Dear Albert Crout and Mark Plaza,

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(I).

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

Sincerely,

Research Ethics Office

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Appendix A

Parental Consent

Title of the Project: Development of Future Leaders in the Christian Church

Principal Investigator: Albert Crout, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

- Your child is invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate he/she must be between the ages 13 and 17 years old.
- All participants must have attended a church for at least one year from when they were 13 and 17 years old. Taking part in this research study is voluntary.
- Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to allow your son/daughter to take part in this research study.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

- The purpose of the project is to evaluate attendance and involvement in church when you were 13-17 years old. Nationwide, attendance and involvement of youth has been in decline.
- Information about the positives or negatives that influenced your attendance or lack of attendance during that time.

What will participants be asked to do in this study?

If you allow your child to be in this study, I will ask him/her to do the following:

1. Respond to the 10 questions on the survey and questionnaire. The survey and questionnaire will take approximately 10-15 minutes.
2. Return the completed questionnaire to me by placing it in the provided envelope and mailing it within 10 days of receipt.

How could participants or others benefit from this study?

- Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.
- Benefits to society include the improvement of church outreach and retention of youth as leaders and participants in the congregation.

What risks might participants experience from being in this study?

- The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

- Responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations.

Appendix B

Consent

Title of the Project: Development of Future Leaders in the Christian Church

Principal Investigator: Albert Crout, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

- You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be between the ages 18 and 21. All participants must have attended a church for at least one year from when he/she was 13 and 17 years old. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.
- Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

- The purpose of the study is to evaluate attendance and involvement in church when you were 13-17 years old. Nationwide, attendance and involvement of youth has been in decline. Information about the positives or negatives that influenced your attendance or lack of attendance during that time.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

3. Respond to the 10 questions on the survey and questionnaire. The survey and questionnaire will take approximately 10-15 minutes.
4. Return the completed survey and questionnaire to me by placing it in the provided envelope and mailing it within 10 days of receipt.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

- Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.
- Benefits to society include the improvement of church outreach and retention of youth as leaders and participants in the congregation.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

- The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

- Responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations.

Is study participation voluntary?

- Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with The Mountain Christian Church. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

- If you choose to withdraw from the study, please discontinue the survey, inform the researcher that you wish to terminate your participation, and do not submit your study materials. Your responses will not be recorded or included in the study.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

- The researcher conducting this study is Albert Crout. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

- If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board.

Your Consent

- Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.
- By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix C

Project Survey and Questionnaire Instructions

Project Title:

Development of Future Leaders in the Christian Church

Principal Investigator:

Albert Crout
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Project Information:

The purpose of the project is to evaluate attendance and involvement in church when you were 13-17 years old. Nationwide, attendance and involvement of youth has been in decline. Information provided about the positives or negatives that influence your attendance or lack of attendance in church will be gathered as part of the project.

Information gathered from the study will be used to address the problem of youth attendance and participation decline in the church.

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey/questionnaire. The consent document contains additional information about my project. Please sign the consent document or parental consent document (if under 18 years old) and return it to me.

Responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of identification access codes. Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations.

1. Respond to the 10 questions on the survey. The survey will take approximately 5 minutes.
2. Respond to the 10 questions on the open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire will take approximately 5-10 minutes.
3. Return the completed questionnaire to me by placing it in the provided envelope and mailing it within 10 days of receipt.

In order to participate, each person will complete the attached survey and questionnaire then return it to me by placing it in the provided envelope and mailing it within 10 days of receipt. Feel free to contact me for more information.

Thank you for taking time to take part in the study. Your participation is a meaningful, important, and valuable component of my research.

Appendix D

Project Survey

Please respond to the following questions by marking the level of your answer under the corresponding descriptor. Take your time to give your most thoughtful and accurate responses.

| Survey Questions | Question Response Levels | | | | |
|--|--------------------------|----------|---------|-------|----------------|
| | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly Agree |
| I attend church at least three times per month. | | | | | |
| I want to continue or start attending church. | | | | | |
| I am growing spiritually. | | | | | |
| I feel welcome at church. | | | | | |
| I interact with older generations at church. | | | | | |
| I am involved in church operations. | | | | | |
| I participate in church outreach projects. | | | | | |
| My talents and spiritual gifts are utilized at church. | | | | | |
| I have ideas about how to improve youth ministry in my church. | | | | | |
| My ideas and contributions are valued. | | | | | |

Plases sign below with a self-generated ID access code. Please save your code if you choose to access your survey at a later date as I will not have a record of it due to confidentiality purposes.

Access Code

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
| | | | |
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Appendix E

Project Questionnaire

Please respond to the following open-ended questions in 2-5 complete sentences. Discuss how the question topic relates to your experiences and relationships in church. Take your time to give your most thoughtful and accurate responses.

1. What aspects of church influence my desire to attend or not attend regularly?

2. What community outreach programs would you like to see offered for youth and adult participation?

3. In what ways could the adults in congregation make youth feel welcome as equal members of the church?

4. How can youth lead or be involved in areas of operation (ex. social media, music, outreach) in the church?

5. In what way can intergenerational (youth and adult) program participation increase involvement and spiritual growth?

6. What church operation or outreach programs would you like to lead or participate in regularly? (Be creative - bring new program ideas to your church.)

7. What aspects of the church, programs, and congregation would you change to help you experience serious, continuous spiritual growth?

8. How do my parents encourage my spiritual growth and involvement in the church?

9. In what way can the group lessons and sermons improve to involve youth and help them to apply what is being taught.

10. How can the church promote spiritual and personal relationships that would encourage youth to increase involvement?

Plases sign below with your self-generated ID access code from the survey. Please save your code if you choose to access your questionnaire at a later date as I will not have a record of it due to confidentiality purposes.

Thank you.

Access Code

| | | | |
|--|--|--|--|
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Appendix F

Consent - Roundtable Discussion

Title of the Project: Development of Future Leaders in the Christian Church

Principal Investigator: Albert Crout, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

- You are invited to participate in a research study roundtable discussion.
- Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

- The purpose of the study is to evaluate attendance and involvement in church of 13-17-year-old congregants. Nationwide, attendance and involvement of youth has been in decline.
- Information about the positive or negative aspects of the church that influence youth attendance or lack of attendance during that time will be discussed.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

- Participants will be expected to take part in the discussion and take notes on the discussion.
- All notes will be given to the researcher at the end of the discussion.
- Participants are expected to maintain confidentiality regarding the content of the discussion.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

- Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.
- Benefits to society include the improvement of church outreach and retention of youth as leaders and participants in the congregation.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

- The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks one would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

- Responses will be anonymous. Participant responses will be kept confidential throughout the study process.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations.

Is study participation voluntary?

- Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with The Mountain Christian Church.
- If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

- If you choose to withdraw from the roundtable discussion, inform the researcher that you wish to terminate your participation.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

- The researcher conducting this study is Albert Crout. You may ask any questions you have now.
- If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him.
- You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

- If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board.

Your Consent

- Before agreeing to be part of the project, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.
- By signing this document, you are agreeing to be a participant in the roundtable discussion. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix G

Roundtable Discussion

Facilitator: Albert Crout

Date:

Meeting Length: 60 Minutes

Topics

What aspects and programs in our church contribute to youth participation and retention?

What aspects and programs in our church detract from youth participation and retention?

How can we create/encourage intergenerational involvement in our church programs?

How effective are our theological programs in promoting spiritual maturity in our youth?

What current and new outreach and operational programs promote youth leadership and participation opportunities?

How can we integrate our current peer mentor devotional program with one that uses an intergenerational approach?