

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

Utilizing Relevant Bible Centric Studies as a Means of Retaining Young Adults in Active Church Membership and Ministry in an Older Puerto Rican American Baptist Church

A Thesis Project Submitted to
the Faculty 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

Utilizing Relevant Bible Centric Studies as a Means of Retaining Young Adults in Active Church Membership and Ministry in an older Puerto Rican American Baptist Church

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Liberty University - John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, 2021

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This project will explore how the integration of young adults' everyday life issues and struggles into Bible Studies content can become more attractive for this demographic. With the intention of adding relevancy as a means of retention of young adults within a local American Baptist Church in Puerto Rico. Several recent studies provide a concrete picture of the lack of local church involvement among young adults' lives, translating into attrition in many cases. In terms of church attendance, a study maintains that only 30.9% of young adults attend religious services "regularly," meaning at least twice a month, 35.4% report never attending religious services, while the rest (about 34%) only attend very sporadically (once a month)¹. Although dealing with the problem at one local American Baptist congregation, this project intends to reach out to other local Baptist congregations young adults' membership to assess how likely they would be to attend church more often if such topics are approached and develop from a more biblical-theological perspective. The project will include results from two surveys and one focus group among the congregation and young adults to obtain quantitative and qualitative data. Because the prospectus of this project was submitted pre-pandemic and its field work executed post-pandemic, readers can expect statements that required past and present clarifications throughout the work.

Abstract length: 244 words

Keywords: young adults, relevant Bible studies, contextual updated topics

¹ David Setran and Chris Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation in Emerging Adulthood: Practical Theology for College and Young Adult Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Publishing Group, 2013), 85.

Dedication

To my Savior, Lord, and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Your Word touches me, motivates me, and moves me to share it with others; You are the inspiration of this project.

To my family: Joel, Joel Antonio, and Joel Manuel. You guys are my core. You were the anonymous heroes that held me and supported me every step of the way.

To my local church, sponsor pastor, dearly young adults, and sister churches. Your prayers and words of encouragement lifted me up when I needed them the most.

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Abbreviations

ABC	<i>American Baptist Churches</i>
CBC	<i>Central Baptist Church</i>
DMIN	<i>Doctor of Ministry</i>
IRB	<i>Institutional Review Board</i>
LUSOD	<i>Liberty University School of Divinity</i>
PR	<i>Puerto Rico</i>
USVI	<i>United State Virgin Islands</i>
YA	<i>Young adults</i>

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This project intends to approach the exposed problem of young adults' attendance attrition for the local context of Central Baptist Church (CBC), located in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Central Baptist is considered a historical church with over fifty-five years of foundation and affiliated to the American Baptist Churches Christian denomination. As per its latest census, updated on December 1, 2019, active membership stands with seventy-five members. From current membership, young adults, defined as ages between eighteen to thirty-four years old, represent about twenty percent, which equals fifteen members.

The problem that has arisen within the local congregation is the considerable decrease in attendance within the young adult membership. For the past several years, attendance, in general, of Central Baptist Church has declined consistently. Unfortunately, young adults' attrition has been the most noticeable. When approaching this situation specifically within the young adult segment, the situation aggravates as there seem to be no win-back strategies for this population. Recent pre-pandemic census shows that young adults' attendance has circumscribed to Sunday worship service. Throughout the development of this thesis, research will explore how Bible-centric learning integrates relevant, up-to-date topics that can become an opportunity to capture young adults' attention, normalize attendance, and increase church involvement among them.

Ministry Context

The ministry context shared on the following pages covers Central Baptist Church's from its foundation until January 2020. CBC was founded in 1954 after several active members of the

First Baptist Church of Santurce moved to another part of Puerto Rico's capital city. With the surge of new housing in the early decade of the 1950s, many families fled the downtown area of metropolitan San Juan and moved to new residential neighborhoods away from busy city life. With this exodus to the suburban San Juan region, the expansion of many historical churches took place. About four families moved to the new residential neighborhood known as Villa Las Lomas in the early 1950s and started meeting in their houses. A year later, the group grew to over twenty people and decided to rent a commercial spot near the metro station. This is where the name "Central" comes from, as the metro station was a central point of a conglomeration of people and a meeting point for commuters.

By 1953, in less than three years, the church mission had grown to over fifty members allowing them to become an autonomous church. With such achievement, they proceeded to acquire the same commercial spot they had been renting. They were officially recognized as the Central Baptist Church by the American Baptist Churches in Puerto Rico in 1954. Because of its prime location, membership grew exponentially from people near and far, and in less than ten years later, CBC had more than six hundred members. Fast forward to present times, and after several episodes of divisions, pastoral changes, and numerous natural disaster events, CBC currently has a membership of under one hundred members.

As of January 2020, Central Baptist Church had a pastoral body composed of a senior and associate pastor. The senior pastor has been serving on the church for the last eleven years, while its associate pastor has been serving for several years. Following the American Baptist Churches' principle of congregational governance, CBC's organization consists of a board of directors, seven key ministries, and three permanent commissions. The board of directors consists of a president, secretary, treasurer, president of deacons, president of education,

president of evangelism, and one representative. The seven key ministries are deacons, education, evangelism, stewardship, worship, adults, and teens and children. Its three permanent commissions are physical property, activities, and finance.

Members are defined as baptized believers that request membership to our congregation. Baptism does not need to happen in CBC, but it does have to be by immersion; exceptions are accepted to this requirement only if they are health related. Anyone above twelve years of age who complies with baptism requirements can become a CBC member. Within the membership category, there are two sub-categories: active and inactive. An active member is any believer who actively attends services and financially supports the mission after joining our congregation. Any member who goes to study abroad temporarily relocates or cannot attend because of illness or caretaking of someone ill can keep their active membership as long as they keep contact and support to the local church from a distance. Inactive members are those who have been absent for more than six months without any communication or support to the local congregation.

When approaching the support topic of the mission, Central Baptist provides several ways members can support the local congregation's work. For the last five years, the yearly budget has remained unchanged and goes around \$85,000. Realizing current times' financial hardships, leadership has developed multiple initiatives that promote volunteer work within the church to bring savings to the financial books. Service is an enormous expectation from all active members. Leadership has bestowed a culture of using resources from within the congregation to keep the Lord's house attractive while minimizing expenses. The same approach holds for resource usage for special services.

After a general assembly back in October 2016, the congregation approved a new church program. The programming changed from meeting four days down to two days a week. Before

this change, the church met on Tuesdays for Bible Study, Thursdays for Praying Service, Fridays for ministries meetings, and Sundays for Sunday school and Worship Service. The new and current program provides for meetings on Tuesdays for Praying Service and Bible Study and Sundays for Sunday school and Worship Service. Ministries occasionally meet on pre-established dates. Attendance for a typical Tuesday praying service is around twenty-five, with minimal young adults' participation. Attendance for Sunday school is about twenty, and it increases throughout the morning with Sunday service with a typical attendance of around sixty-five. During the Sunday service, young adults' non-attendance is most noticeable, with around eight to ten of them present.

Central Baptist is what modern church lingo would identify as a missional church. Worship and praying services skew towards the traditional side, the same as the didactical material used for Bible Study and Sunday school. Tuesday Praying Service runs from 7:30 pm to 9:00 pm. On the other hand, Sunday's experience begins with Sunday school at 10:00 am, and Worship Service at 11:15 am. Both praying and worship services follow a very traditional and almost expected formatting. Although each assigned participant creates devotional content, a pre-established order must be followed; more information will be provided in the following paragraphs. The pastoral office operates Tuesday to Friday from 8:00 am to 1:00 pm. except for emergency calls, visiting the sick and the elderly, which are scheduled for Thursdays.

Tuesday service's format is standardized. It begins with thirty minutes of praying space, followed by a one-hour thematic Bible Study. A pre-established curriculum set by the Ministry of Education sets the themes that will be delivered. There are five groups during Sunday School: infants (zero to five years old), elementary (six to twelve years old), teenagers (thirteen to twenty years old), Adults 1, and Adults 2 (twenty-one years old or older). The main difference between

the adult's classes is the curriculum, where one is more theological deep, and the other is more discipleship oriented. Just as with Tuesday's Bible Study, the curriculum is selected and assigned by the Ministry of Education. Sunday's Worship Service is traditionally formal and standard, where worship occurs during the first forty-five minutes and the sermon another forty-five minutes. At present, there are about seven other Christian churches within a one-mile radius of Central Baptist.

Central Baptist is affiliated with the American Baptist Churches (ABC) in the United States and belongs to the Puerto Rico and USVI region. Because of its affiliation, Central Baptist is considered a historical church. ABC's principles are the constitution of a church of believers, the Bible as the supreme and only guidance in faith material, baptism by immersion, the supper of the Lord for all, freedom of religious choice, separation of state and church, congregational governance, and autonomy and interdependency.² Obeying these principles is central to every local congregation. Central Baptist is not the exception, the ways and forms services are carried, and congregational matters are managed exemplifies these ABC's pillars.

In a traditional, relaxed, and welcoming atmosphere Central Baptist carries out Sunday after Sunday its worship service without incidents. Its formatting was also standardized. With a membership that skews heavily towards females over fifty-five years of age, it is not strange to see both Tuesday and Sunday services with a proportion attendance of about seventy-five percent females and twenty-five percent males. The same is true for its younger membership; the majority are females. A strong trait of current active membership in Central Baptist is their roots in founding members. This majority, within the membership, has shaped much of the programming and dynamics of Central Baptist.

² Ángel L. Gutiérrez, *Herencia e identidad: Historia, principios y practicas bautistas* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2009), 4.

Development of ecclesiastical programming follows a standard order to carry out its self-proclaimed mission: “A unified church that loves, serves, and shares God’s Word to others.” This mission dictates the church's working plan and ecclesiastical calendar in periods of three years. Such an approach has provided the congregation with routines and patterns on how the church operates. The adults and elders cherished this predictable and repetitive character of the program, but not the younger generation. What adults have embraced as consistency and order, the youth have called out as dull and irrelevant.

As with many other historical churches, the younger membership of Central Baptist has long rejected the predictability of service order and theological content. This is where the problem of this research action work anchors. A hyper-conservative congregation with vital binds to their traditions has provided minimal space for innovative and creative alternatives that the young yearn for. Many young adults, especially those with independence, resent a leadership style that resists adjustments. Their response has been to stop coming to church. For the last two to three years, young adults' attendance on Tuesdays and Sunday school is almost nonexistent. Sunday worship service has decreased considerably, imposing both a problem and challenge to the current leadership and pastoral body.

Problem Presented

The problem this project will address is that the leadership of Central Baptist, specifically those belonging to the Ministry of Education, have not established a biblical teaching curriculum targeted for the young adults, specifically for those between eighteen and thirty-four years old of the church. The traditions and customs that guide the modus operandi of the Central Baptist Church ecclesiastical program have impacted all church life dimensions, including the

educational material selection. For many years, curriculum for all ages has been obtained from the same editorial house, which has provided cyclical didactical and monotonous content. Hence, every two to three years, lessons get repeated, making learning repetitive and obsolete. Young adults are also not considered a generation on their own as they are all mixed in together as adults once they turn twenty-one.

Today's Church has demonstrated that it is ill-equipped to engage this generation and leverage its leadership in the life of its congregation. Though the challenges of reaching the eighteen to thirty-four years old (college students and young adults) is not a new topic for the Church, the challenge of retaining young adults is something new.³ Like many other churches, Central Baptist Church has been experiencing a substantial churn in attendance within their younger population, specifically those between eighteen to thirty-four years old who claim their independence. Although some attend the Sunday service, their attendance for Sunday Bible School or weekly Bible studies is close to none.

After several one-to-one approaches, conversations, and informal polls among young adults of Central Baptist, the common denominator that arises is that the content is no longer relevant for their lives. They claim that traditions have made churches irrelevant and distant from their life's realities and challenges. Dogmas and doctrines have annulled Young Adults' spiritual growth and neglected the opportunity for many of them to have a voice within the congregation. It is no mystery that adolescents look to their youth culture to explore the world, understand, and experience their spiritual selves, and shape their identity. A generation that feels voided by that world now also feels that the only place that should provide that missing something has become unsupportive. Being allowed to explore and live out spiritualities in their way within their own

³ Mark DeVries and Scott Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry: Making It Work, Making It Last* (Downes Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 10.

youth culture, supported by the adults in their lives, may allow for a happy adolescent. Adults can act as guides to adolescents to make spiritual connections within the adolescents' social contexts.⁴

Furthermore, at Central Baptist Church, young adults have expressed that worship service and Bible school content are repetitive and lack context and applicability to twenty-first-century daily life circumstances. Such a statement is not exclusive to Central Baptist Church as it holds true to many historic Christian traditions. Being Central Baptist, a historical church with almost sixty years of existence, most of its congregation has gotten old and feeble. This is both a strength and a weakness. On the one hand, they hold to their roots while on the other are resistant to change. Many agree that past and current board of directors' members have been "recycled" for decades and have done close to nothing to assess new ways and forms of approaching a new generation. The status quo among leadership has stalled the opportunity to innovate and allow a younger generation to voice their needs and desires about their spiritual growth and theological depth journey. Unfortunately, as soon as many of these young adults' graduate from high school or university, many graduates from their congregations too.⁵

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry action research thesis is to explore key components that will aid in the creation of relevant biblical teaching material for young adults at Central Baptist Church which will be used in their retention. Because of similarities among many

⁴ Anastasia Apostolides, "Adolescent spirituality with the support of adults," *HTS Theologies Studies/Theological Studies* 73, no. 4 (2016): 4332. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v73i4.4332> (2016), 5.

⁵ Chap Clark, *Adoptive Church (Youth, Family, and Culture): Creating an Environment Where Emerging Generations Belong* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2018), 26.

sister churches, specifically around the problem of young adults' attrition, once this purpose statement is researched, its results are meant to be shared for replication in other local congregations. The teaching material design must emerge from a Bible-centric approach that integrates the discovered needs and wants of young adults' desire to be voiced, as unveiled by the results of this research work. This project will not propose a specific curriculum but directional content for custom-made self-serve teaching material.

The current state of ministry to twentysomethings across churches is woefully inadequate to address the spiritual needs of young adults. This population is making important life choices and determining the patterns and preferences of their spiritual reality, and churches cannot sit down and wait for them to decide for the Bible.⁶ Therefore, understanding their needs and attending to them in relevant and impactful ways through biblical-centered teachings is imperative and urgent. Central Baptist's leadership must be proactive and inquisitive on this matter to assure succession within the congregation. Enough insights should flourish from this research project to nurture multiple educational outreach strategies for this population.

Educational experiences within the local congregation's church context show the most significant attendance gap among young adults. Recognizing this reality has raised the possibility of changing or tailoring a biblical curriculum for this population. This action research thesis will focus on gathering a deeper understanding of what this generation needs and craves concerning their lives and spiritual growth. The intention is to gather insights from what macro-vision of life this generation has to ground them into the spiritual context subsequently. It is crucial to consider

⁶ Ken Ham, Britt Beemer, and Todd Hillard, *Already Gone: Why your kids will quit church and what you can do to stop it* (Green Forest, AZ: Masterbooks, 2009), 140.

their deep longing to belong, to be loved, and valued⁷ as crucial drivers of this research work. It is also essential to understand that this research thesis uses the term curriculum in a non-traditional way, as it encompasses a set of educational components and not merely canned pre-established Sunday school lessons.

As research work begins, this thesis project aims to gather as many insights as possible as to what catches this generation's attention. Research aspires to identify and present creative ways to deliberately share the responsibility for shaping the Church's future with the younger generation while also focusing on their spiritual wellbeing.⁸ The development of such a curriculum, if successful, may be shared with other Baptist congregations around the Island. A secondary benefit of this research work would be integrating young adults into church life in many of its dimensions.

Basic Assumptions

First of all, the work of this project intends to create awareness among local church leadership on young adults' sporadic attendance and the importance of retaining them. Secondly, it intends to offer initial tools and insights from which any Ministry of Education can supply and obtain enough direction to develop their own tailor-made teaching material to retain and grow young adults' attendance. This work assumes that education and application of Scripture teachings can become attractive to young adults as long as real-life topics are inserted into the content, thus portraying the Bible as the primary go-to source to live life and manage all the

⁷ Chap Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry: Integrating Emerging Generations into the Family of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2016), 7.

⁸ DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 145.

challenges that come with it. Based on the understanding that young adults no longer consider traditional learning methods relevant nor challenging, approaching their knowledge acquisition needs must come from non-standardized and non-programmatic sources.⁹ This assumption governs the essence of this work and provides direction to the development of the action research work. Furthermore, a past decade Gallup research explains that over one thousand eighteen to thirty-four years old participants indicated that they are most satisfied with church dynamics when they feel they belong, are valued, and their life experiences are considered.¹⁰

Because access to CBC historical information or data might be limited, all data, anecdotal or empirical, obtained from this research work will be considered valid. Lastly, to safeguard the purity of the research process, participants' anonymity and confidentiality will be kept. Readers can assume that every time young adults, leadership, and pastoral bodies are mentioned, the work refers to CBC congregation members unless otherwise indicated. All final recommendations based on analysis will be shared with the target population for validation before publication.

Definitions

To provide context and background to the content of this project, definition for several terms are shared to provide context to this work.

- American Baptist Churches: historical Christian denomination constituted by missional churches in the United States, Puerto Rico, and US Virgin Islands.

⁹ Clark. *Adoptive Church*, 104.

¹⁰ Richard R. Melick, Shera Melick, and Richard R. Melick, Jr., *Teaching that Transforms* (Nashville, TN. B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 697.

- Attendance: means the number of active members that attend a programmed service such as Tuesday Praying Service, Sunday school, or Sunday Worship Service.
- Baptist: refers specifically to the American Baptist Church tradition unless otherwise specified.
- Church: whenever reference with a capital c, it refers to the universal body of Christ of all believers that have accepted Jesus Christ as their one and true Savior. When referenced with a lower-case c, it refers to a church's congregation.
- Congregation: refers to the local congregation of Central Baptist Church
- Curricula or curriculum: encompasses a set of educational material, proprietary or purchased, used for Sunday school and Tuesday Bible Studies of all ages.
- Focus group: qualitative research where a guided discussion develops to obtain insights and perceptions about the thesis work subject.
- Focus group guideline: research instrument developed to guide the young adult focus group dynamics.
- Generation or population: used interchangeably to refer to young adults unless otherwise specified.
- Insights: research-driven data that provides directional guidance to act upon a set situation.
- Island: refers to Puerto Rico.
- Leadership: refers to the members of the Central Baptist Church board of directors.
- Local church: same as Central Baptist Church.
- Membership: active members of Central Baptist Church as described by its regulations.

- Online questionnaire: research instrument developed for young adults to answer voluntarily, through a secure online survey development cloud-based software.
- Online survey: research methodology used to administer research instruments for the congregation and young adults to answer voluntarily.
- Participants: all Central Baptist Church members who choose to participate from any of the three research instruments.
- Pastoral body: refers to senior and associate pastor of Central Baptist Church.
- Relevancy: subjects and areas that seem essential to the population being studied and thus create a connection and attention.
- Sister churches: other American Baptist Churches in Puerto Rico in the metropolitan area, adjacent to CBC.
- Sponsor pastor: lead pastor that approves the intervention plan within the local congregation.
- Survey Monkey: a secured online research platform that allows survey administration through digital mediums.
- WhatsApp: a text, voice, and video messaging platform that allow users to share messages, photos, videos, and voice clips bilaterally to individuals, broadcasted lists, or pre-established groups.
- Young adults: male and females between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four, single or married with or without kids.
- Zoom: online video conference platform with recording capabilities that provides end-to-end secure means to execute multiple people meetings and dynamics.

Limitations

Original Set of Limitations

The limits of this action research work are the sampling of participants, methodology, timing, and access to historical data for the local church. Sampling for this work will be convenient and participation by invitation and voluntary. Considering the congregation size of Central Baptist Church, trying to achieve at least ten young adults' constant participation might not be accomplished. Therefore, any young adult and congregation member available and voluntarily willing to participate when administering the research tools will be considered the sample. Due to the last point and the intention to complete research work within a three to four months window, time extensions on tool administration will not be allowed.

In addition to this, because of the idiosyncrasy of small church circles around keeping information private, there might be limited to no access to necessary past attendance information. Therefore, for this research action work, young adults and total attendance information will be limited to the last four years. Also, because leadership chairs have been recycled among members, getting transparency from perpetuating leaders might become challenging.

Lastly, but not less important, the potential lack of information shared by young adults can impose a limitation. The millennial generation is distinctive for several reasons, especially for the fast-growing group of millennials, “nones”; these are the ones not willing to participate in those activities that seem unattractive or unbeneficial.¹¹ This lack of interest can represent a challenge in obtaining transparent and substantial insights into young adults' life issues and challenges. Their age gained autonomy can represent a false sense of no longer belonging to

¹¹ Reed, Randall. “A Book for None? Teaching Biblical Studies to Millennial Nones.” *Wiley Publisher: Teaching, Theology & Religion*, Volume 19, Issue 2: 156.

prior groups. This reality could become a limitation of participation from this action research work. In line with this, limitations on the data analysis process can happen, some by analysis error, others by data omission.

Additional Post-Covid Limitations

Post-pandemic realities added additional burdens to this thesis research project. With such burdens, an additional set of limitations arose, as well. For this thesis project, many of them reach out, meetings, and encounters were originally intended to be physical in nature. Because of the pandemic restrictions, all communications, meetings, and reach-out initiatives had to be changed to electronic means. A heavy dependency on remote work and virtual technology became imperative for realizing most of the work of this thesis project. That dependency brought limitations around connectivity bandwidth, availability of others having a proper connection, and data signal inconsistency at specific points in time. Virtuality brought the necessity to explore secured yet financially feasible platforms to undergo communication and research efforts. The identification of such platforms also brought limitations, as many free online suites limit the number of participants, reach, and periods. Lastly, because of the social distancing imposed by pandemic protocols, when physical reach was imperative, COVID-19 protocols had to be followed, limiting the number of interactions. Timeframes had to be adjusted, limiting the amount of time for the research field work.

Delimitations

Original Delimitations

For the sake of setting boundaries and delimiting this research, action work, topic, population, research instruments, and location are the main self-imposed delimitations of this thesis project endeavor. This work aims to research the reasons for the ongoing decrease in church attendance by young adults, members of the Central Baptist Church congregation. The action research focuses on the young adults of Central Baptist Church, a small Baptist congregation in the San Juan suburban area on the Island. The topic that will be developed goes around the importance of incorporating relevant Bible-centric educational material for this population. Three research instruments will be executed: an online congregational survey, a face-to-face and one-on-one questionnaire for young adults, and a guideline for a focus group to be performed among young adults in person. The intention is to analyze the research results and unveil this population's necessities that have not been attended to from a spiritual growth perspective. The outcome from these three research instruments should provide enough direction, up-to-date data, and insights to enable any local ABCs congregations to develop educational materials as a strategy to retain the young adult population.

Additional Post-Covid Delimitations

As with the limitations section, additional delimitations had to be taken into consideration after pandemic restrictions. New research population delimitations now extend to other sister churches, specifically for those research instruments targeted to young adults. In addition, the face-to-face and one-on-one questionnaire for young adults was transformed into an online

survey. Furthermore, the execution of the focus group experience among young adults was reviewed to be performed virtually through a secured online video conference platform.

Thesis Statement

If Central Baptist Church establishes relevant biblical teaching material for their young adults, defined as those eighteen to thirty-four, they may be inclined to attend church more often. This thesis statement stems from the understanding that relevant, pertinent, and contextual Bible education can bring practical life tools for a younger adult population. The objective of the intended didactical biblical approach is to bridge the gap between spiritual needs and irrelevant teaching material among young adults. Cookie cut curricula no longer adapt to a generation's everchanging needs in a rapidly changing world. Integrating relevancy through contextual subjects to biblical curricula will provide adaptability to targeted educational material. Contextualization of this degree will allow local congregations to segregate young adults from the current general adult group, specifically those that are older than twenty-one.

In a world of zero censorship and pluralism where individuals are free to have a variety of ideas, behaviors, and philosophies, the Church must be intentional and persistent in making the Word of God the first and only go-to resource in all matters of faith. While life struggles indeed represent challenges for every generation, current times are both a singular opportunity and a unique threat for the spiritual formation of tomorrow's church leaders. Many young adults are living out the tension of “in-but-not-of” in ways that ought to be corrected or applauded, yet instead are often criticized or rejected.¹² An appropriate and relevant Bible-centric curriculum

¹² David Kinnaman. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 9.

can provide the means to engage this population back to the way of God. The Church must realize that the time is precious and the opportunity unique to assure we retain and provide for this ongoing decreasing church attendance population.

As faithful Baptists, we must not forget that we believe that the Bible is the utmost authoritative guide to knowing and serving the triune God and only reference material of faith.¹³ It is imperative, then, to make the current state of ministry and supporting tools relevant and Bible-centric enough to address the young adults' generation. Young adults are making important life choices and determining the patterns and preferences of their spiritual reality. Churches cannot wait for them to come proactively.¹⁴ Understanding their cluttered lifestyles must be considered and inserted in all creation of future curricula.

Unfortunately, faith communities have not done an excellent job creating environments and experiences for all. Within an ABC local congregation, all people are intertwined and united by a mutual relationship with Jesus Christ.¹⁵ That link with each other must move its members in love to allow for a healthy community of believers where all are considered. Therefore, strong leadership must provide the means and facilitate such endeavors to allow each member's right level of importance. Throughout this thesis, this challenge will be addressed with the intention to achieve the main objective of this project: life pertinent biblical teaching material for young adults. Echoing and modeling God's mandate on Psalm 32: 8-9: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you. Do not be like the

¹³ Gutiérrez, *Herencia e identidad*, 6.

¹⁴ Kem Ham, Britt Beemer, and Todd Hillard, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, AZ: Masterbooks, 2009), 37.

¹⁵ Gutiérrez, *Herencia e identidad*, 30.

horse or the mule, which have no understanding but must be controlled by bit and bridle or they will not come to you”, becomes a relevant invitation to instruct and teach the ways of the Lord.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

One core value for American Baptist Churches is that the Bible is the divinely inspired Word of God that serves as the final written authority for living out the Christian faith.¹⁶ This principle, among other things, should guide the way preaching and teaching materials are selected and integrated into local Baptist congregations. Regrettably, this same guiding principle has generated a lack of actualization in many curriculums and ecclesiastical preaching programs. The extreme desire to safeguard this principle in many churches has resulted in obsolete and monotonous educational material and curriculums. This reality has brought several challenges to current leadership across the Church, as they face a rapid loss in attendance from their pews. For some, Church dynamics have become irrelevant, distant, and outdated. Enthusiasm and goodwill have been missing from church life resulting in boredom for many and creating panic among leaders of all denominations.¹⁷ For the development of the remainder of this chapter, the author will consult multiple literary works and secondary research that will be directly and indirectly used further to build the purpose, problem, and thesis statements.

Recent statistics reflect that local churches' general boards and pastoral bodies, of all historical denominations -including the Catholic Church-, are confronted with an ongoing declining membership of church groups. This attrition problem seems to worsen for the younger and male population. On the one hand, a study from Randall Reed establishes attrition that has reached numbers up to eleven percent¹⁸, while a second report from David Setran and Kris

¹⁶ Gutiérrez, *Herencia e identidad*, 6.

¹⁷ DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 49.

Kiesling talks about an ongoing seventeen percent decline within Protestant churches¹⁹. The truth is that such statistics reach double digits marks. Kara Powell supports similar statistics by establishing that up to 2015, no major Christian tradition was growing in the United States and, although some have managed to hold steady, that is as good as it gets.²⁰

Furthermore, several studies agree that the most significant group participating in this exodus is, in fact, millennial Christians.²¹ Setran and Kiesling admit that these numbers are alarming as the loss of young adults from Christian congregations does indeed create a "black hole."²² This black hole can eventually translate into an interrupted legacy in key leadership positions and ministries' activities. According to Mark DeVries, youth ministry across America had struggled in recent times,²³ mainly for lack of relevancy. In other words, the subjects and areas that seem essential to a specific population for creating the connection and attention have been missing. This literature review intends to explore and expose general challenges that both Church leaders and young adults face around spiritual fulfillment within an ecclesiastical learning scenario. Lastly, the intention is to develop and present possible solutions around topics that could nurture the development of tailored curriculums and the integration of activities within the context of a local American Baptist Church in the greater metropolitan area of Puerto Rico.

¹⁸ Reed, *A Book for None?* 156.

¹⁹ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 13.

²⁰ Powell, Kara, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young: 6 essential strategies to help young people discover and love their church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 15.

²¹ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 156.

²² *Ibid*, 83.

²³ DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 43.

General Challenges

Throughout literature research on the subject matter, a constant common denominator seems to point towards what Stanley calls disconnection.²⁴ Disconnection seems to intertwine a broader group of reasons young adults have stopped going to Church. Andy Stanley describes it as an ongoing disconnection of the church from the world.²⁵ That disconnection transforms into irrelevancy which eventually results in many of them not attending church. One of the most common disconnects in the church world is the discrepancy between purpose and approach. Stanley states that although pastors and church leaders claim that they want to bring back those who left, once they sit at the table, they go back to creating services and programs that assume a one size fits all mentality.²⁶ Such actions have led many young adults to reach a degree of indifference towards church life and what the Church represents. This has created a distance that grows exponentially with the pass of time between this generation and the Church with the passing of time.

One research performed by David Setran and Chris Kiesling, and published in 2013; they shared that:

- thirty-one percent of young Christians described the Church as dull,
- twenty-four percent states that church is not relevant to their career or interests,
- twenty-three percent feel that church does not prepare them for real-life nor help them find their purpose, and lastly,

²⁴ Andy Stanley, *Deep & Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People like to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zordevan, 2012), ch10.

²⁵ Ibid, ch10.

²⁶ Ibid, ch10.

- twenty-three percent express that Bible teaching does not reveal precise application to their hectic lives.²⁷

Ironically, many of these findings are not unknown to the Church, yet concrete plans have still not been strategically established to counteract them proactively.

If perceptions, like those listed above, from young adults towards the Church were not challenging enough, DeVries and Pointer affirm that today's average church has clearly demonstrated that it is ill-equipped to engage this younger generation in church life and to its leadership body.²⁸ This revelation, amidst the contextualization of an American Baptist Church's local congregation, can be alarming when considering its principles and beliefs. According to Kinnaman, one of the biggest problems with churches lies precisely in the practice of their creeds and principles.²⁹ He states that, unfortunately, faith communities have not done an excellent job creating environments and experiences that genuinely include all, in particular, the younger population.³⁰ DeVries and Pointer agree to this statement by adding that many churches lack processes and ideas to assure the youth integrates early on to church life and place them in a “holding tank” until they have paid their dues in the pews, neglecting them for decades from leadership roles and relevant active participation.³¹ Finding creative and innovative ways to integrate the younger generation into the Church’s unique dynamics has become imperative for

²⁷ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 84.

²⁸ DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 10.

²⁹ Kinnaman. *You Lost Me*, 137.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 137.

³¹ DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 17.

pastors and their leadership. Church leaders must seek to understand today's young people, the absence of the prior; Powell, Mulder, and Griffin consider it a lack of empathy.³²

Chap Clark shares a clue about dealing with such challenges churches face today with young adults leaving our congregations. He establishes that leadership must deconstruct their "adult-centered" agendas and negotiate with the younger population.³³ David Ford argues that finding the equilibrium between relevancy and Christian "non-negotiable" values is critical for twenty-first-century young adults to regain their religious identity and decide to re-engage with the church again.³⁴ As identity is an essential part of spirituality,³⁵ DeVries and Pontier accept that it is time for leaders to stop holding on to the wheel of traditions and status quo to make room for emerging adults to have a place in leadership roles and grow deep roots within their congregations.³⁶ Peter Scazzero bluntly summarizes that unhealthy leadership, which is unwilling to make changes, is set to fail its church and our Lord.³⁷ Powell, Mulder, and Griffin recommend a "keychain" leadership approach, in where senior leaders prepare and include the young generation in critical roles within the Church, allowing for friction-free "key passing" on crucial roles in crucial roles in the church as a congregation.³⁸

³² Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 83.

³³ Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, 35.

³⁴ David Ford, Joshua Mann, and Peter Phillips, *The Bible and Digital Millennials* (Oxon, OX: Taylor and Francis Group, 2019), 33.

³⁵ Apostolides, "Adolescent spirituality with the support of adults", 2.

³⁶ DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 68.

³⁷ Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader: How Transforming Your Inner Life will Deeply Transform Your Church, Team, and the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 26.

³⁸ Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 66.

Spiritual Fulfillment and Young Adults

According to Randall Reed, many millennials are willing to engage in certain religious beliefs and practices, such as believing in God and having a sense of spirituality in them.³⁹

Within a Christian environment, this statement on its own without contextualization in Christ can be risky, as people are far more interested in what works for them rather than what is right.⁴⁰

Willingness is not enough; transforming such intentions into a conviction is vital. The ongoing stream of other spiritual movements presents the danger for many that have left our Christian communities to fulfill their spiritual needs elsewhere. According to Setran and Kiesling, emerging adults are now behind what they call “Starbucks Spirituality,” where they can switch between faith options and choose their personalized blend.⁴¹ Clark establishes that churches can counteract the youth's ambiguity by intentionally building bridges for them to grow into the body of Christ and connecting with them early on, procuring understanding of their needs, and providing ownership within the church.⁴² Leadership must translate purpose into an actionable approach. Clark suggests that any youth ministry's goal should be to invite young people to make individual decisions about their individual spiritual lives in Jesus Christ and no other.⁴³ Responsible leadership makes an effort to emphasize this by intentionally creating ways to insert young people in local congregation characteristics, worship gatherings, staffing, and even budget.⁴⁴

³⁹ Reed, *A Book for None?* 156.

⁴⁰ Stanley, *Deep & Wide*, ch.6 part 7.

⁴¹ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 90.

⁴² Clark, *Adoptive Church*, 72.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 79.

⁴⁴ Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 101.

However, approaching spirituality cannot become unilateral as it is much too deep to be described in just one way. According to Paul Pettit, spiritual formation is many-sided and complex; it is a “multi-faceted gem” that must be approached with humility and the right amount of intentionality.⁴⁵ One of the biggest challenges is that there is no one size fits all approach for spiritual formation. Spiritual formation must be defined with well-intentioned goals to focus on developing and actualizing peoples’ spirituality.⁴⁶ Therefore, spiritual formation is not a single act but an ongoing contextual initiative within ecclesiastical programming. That is why initiatives of that matter must consider what millennials value and consider necessary in their lives.

Young Adults’ Needs and Wants

Spirituality cannot be consumed in silos; recognizing what attracts young adults must be considered when reaching out to them. Setran and Kiesling establish that many emerging adults choose to cobble their personalized faith in isolation as there is no longer relevancy in traditions and ecclesiastical structures.⁴⁷ Kinnaman adds that it is heartbreaking to find how churches lack clarity on how young people connect to faith nowadays as they connect to information, ideas, and people worldwide.⁴⁸ Churches must amplify their vision and allow room for emerging adults’ life approaches before it is too late, and they lose them to the world.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Paul Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to becoming like Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2008), 143.

⁴⁶ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 38.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 90.

⁴⁸ Kinnaman. *You Lost Me*, 146.

⁴⁹ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 85.

Canned Sunday Schools are no longer meeting the needs of many, specifically young adults. Thompson explains that 20th century Sunday schools are heavily institutionalized and way too rigid.⁵⁰ This sets yet another challenge considering what Reed establishes, that young adults do not care for structures.⁵¹ The intention to reach out to millennials through biblical teaching requires connection and a genuine willingness to identify with their struggles and vision of the world.⁵² Research shared by Kinnaman exposed that five to nine percent of young people with a Christian background will “drop out” from the church if their congregation is unwilling to respond to their generation's problems.⁵³ DeVries and Pontier agree that young adults can sense the church as an institution tied to its traditions and routines. This no longer offers deep theological conversations nor fulfills their spiritual needs when they go out in the real world.⁵⁴

Possible Solutions

According to Mac, Martin, and Ewing, a successful strategy to attract and retain young adults must be multidimensional.⁵⁵ Richard Melick stands out that biblical teaching must be presented as a means of companionship for young adults.⁵⁶ He emphasizes that Bible teachers must re-invent themselves and discover new forms of Christian teaching to provide the relevancy

⁵⁰ Naomi Thompson, *Young People and the Church Since 1900. Engagement and Exclusion* (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group. 2018), 43.

⁵¹ Reed. *A Book for None?* 157.

⁵² *Ibid*, 161.

⁵³ Kinnaman. *You Lost Me*, 17.

⁵⁴ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual*, 161.

⁵⁵ Mac Instosh, Andrew, Eric Martin, and Martha E. Ewing, “Youth definitions of success, obstacles to success, and how significant others can help: Providing the youth a voice in their own environment.” Routledge, Co: Taylor & Francis. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, Volume 25, Issue 1 (2019), 495.

⁵⁶ Melick, Melick, and Melick, *Teaching that Transforms*, 6.

young adults so much desire.⁵⁷ Regular programming is not enough; Ham, Beemer, and Hillard defend this point by sharing statistics from this decade, showing that sixty percent of young adults left the church because it “failed them” with their program. Faith-based teaching needs to adjust to the ethnographic needs of each local congregation and have a long-term plan.⁵⁸

Biblical teaching must address subjects that extend beyond the doors of the local church. As per Clark, leaders must equip themselves with enough theological foundation to find ways to apply them to everyday situations.⁵⁹ He proposes that Bible teaching should transform from a didactical approach to a practical one. New curriculums must be identified or designed. Ham, Beemer, and Hillard agree that Bible-based curriculums must mix theological teaching and real-life application.⁶⁰ Considerations such as political and social views from young adults are to be taken, as they shape and constrain how they make decisions.⁶¹

Parallel to creating a transformative and adaptive Bible-based curriculum, leaders are to take the youth seriously, assist them, and enable the path for them to integrate into the church life actively. Schaefer agrees that young adults must play leadership roles in the worship, teaching, evangelical and administrative areas of the Church as a means to equip and engage them for other ministries.⁶² Gary Thomas suggests that leaders of all churches must reevaluate their approach towards those left behind, pray for God’s direction as any adoption and integration

⁵⁷ Melick, Melick, and Melick, *Teaching that Transforms*, 6.

⁵⁸ Clark, *Adoptive Church*, 25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 200.

⁶⁰ Ham, Beemer, and Hillard. *Already Gone*, 41.

⁶¹ Elise K. Leal, “All Our Children May be Taught of God”: Sunday Schools and the Roles of Childhood and Youth in Creating Evangelical Benevolence” *Crossmark: Church History Journal*, Volume 87:4 (December 2018), 1060.

⁶² Naomi Schaefer Riley, *Got Religion? How Churches, Mosques, and Synagogues Can Bring Young People Back* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton Press, 2014), 109.

process will not be easy for the local congregation and can bring lots of stress.⁶³ Melick, Melick, and Melick recommend that believers in leadership positions let go of their agendas and turn back to God in prayer and obedience, asking for His direction and allowing Him to reveal it for the benefit of all.⁶⁴ Therefore both teaching and integration efforts for the young must be delivered in tandem for better success.

Conclusion

The fact that young adults are leaving our congregations is evident in the literature reviewed. According to Kinnaman, this must create pain in the heart of local church leadership and move them to adopt new models of engaging with the young population.⁶⁵ Leadership must think macro and train the congregation into the importance of retaining the young.⁶⁶ Ben Gutiérrez also suggests that Christian leaderships must switch leadership paradigms from one that fills a position to one that impacts lives, in the same way, they too were once impacted by God's grace.⁶⁷ Scazzero refers to this type of approach as team building and emphasizes the importance of diversity and inclusion; he even suggests the co-creation of a shared vision and common goals to assure the congregation's engagement and commitment.⁶⁸

⁶³ Gary Thomas, *Everybody Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 27.

⁶⁴ Melick, Melick, and Melick, *Teaching that Transforms*, 3.

⁶⁵ Kinnaman. *You Lost Me*, 146.

⁶⁶ Clark, *Adoptive Church*, 24.

⁶⁷ Ben Gutiérrez, *The Call: Know Personally. Live Passionately* (Virginia Beach, VA: Academy Publishing Services, 2011), 94.

⁶⁸ Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 213.

After identifying the needs and wants of this generation within a local congregation, quick action is imperative. According to Setran and Kiesling, congregations that have reasonably substantial involvement with the youth can retain up to thirty-one percent of this generation within their religious services with certain “regularity” (at least twice a month) and about thirty-four percent of them sporadically (once a month).⁶⁹ Such statistics should push Church’s leadership into making 1 Timothy 4:6-16 “ If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the truths of the faith and of the good teaching that you have followed. Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly,” a reality among the young. The truth is that the young adults’ generation has expressed a need for spiritual fulfillment, but congregations have not done much to counteract the root cause of the problem.⁷⁰ Leadership needs self-discipline and the genuine intention to grow spiritually along with the local congregation closer to God.⁷¹ New teaching material can stop the erosion of young adults’ attendance and bringer them closer to God.

Theological Foundations

This theological foundation section uses commentaries, biblical dictionaries, biblical scholarly books, and direct Bible references to establish a theological foundation for the development of this project related to the theological significance of teaching the young, creating relationships, and grooming them for leadership. The importance of teaching and learning is

⁶⁹ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual*, 86.

⁷⁰ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 17.

⁷¹ Gutiérrez, *The Call*, 94.

present in the Scriptures throughout its metanarrative. It began, initially, through oral tradition, then through the Law, later through the prophetic Word of the Lord, into the New Testament through parables with Jesus, and then through discipleship and exhortations with the apostles. From beginning to end, the importance for the people of God to know and follow His Word has been at the core of the Scriptures. The mandate is clear; believers are to meditate on the Lord's Word, day, and night to know and practice carefully everything written in it.⁷² Hence, God's Word is to direct every single aspect of our lives.

For the American Baptist Churches' tradition, Bible-centric teaching is essential, as previously mentioned. One of the American Baptist Church's core principles states that the Bible is the exclusive and final written authority for living out the Christian faith. This premise sets the perfect foundation for the Bible to become the anchor from which all faith-based ecclesiastical activities, including didactics, must proceed. Moving from the Old Testament, with its multiple didactic narratives, to the New Testament with the ongoing teachings of Jesus to His follower and then Paul as he taught the Gospel to others, the Bible can be considered, among many things, the principal educational book for life. From the Hebrew concept of *mathetes*, the practical dimension of learning through experience was a fundamental part of the way of life for God's people during the early times exemplified throughout the Old Testament.⁷³ Initially, such knowledge transfer was performed through oral tradition until later on; it was captured on scrolls through scribes.

⁷² Joshua 1:8, New International Version Bible.

⁷³ Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New Testament Theological Dictionary Vol. II* (Salamanca, Sp: Sígueme Editions, 1990), 79.

As a general example from the Old Testament, there is the book of Proverbs on how knowledge was delivered. Proverbs offer life wisdom, especially for young people.⁷⁴ The Proverbs are filled with words like wisdom, discipline, insight, discernment, understanding, knowledge, and caution, like a rainbow, each with its color, but the boundaries of their meaning are difficult to identify, the reader can find continuous learning advice from its content.⁷⁵ A concrete example of such teachings is found in Proverbs 16:16, where it says that having wisdom and understanding is better than having silver or gold. Proverbs provide a complete set of wisdom, advice, and valuable tips for all readers. These core intentions are well defined in the first three verses of the book: to provide knowledge, wisdom, and instructions to the people of Israel.

Additionally, from the book of Proverbs, lifelong questions can be answered like how children should be taught, how money must be managed, how to preserve a happy marriage, among many others.⁷⁶ Such responses, indeed, provide multiple practical instructions for life, thus providing teaching for the believer. This becomes practical when considering what its early verses clearly states; they are meant to give knowledge and discretion to the young.⁷⁷ Even Solomon himself can become a practical model for young adults from his early years. When Solomon was still young, he had prayed to Yahweh for this: “Give your servant, therefore, an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil.”⁷⁸ The

⁷⁴ Frans van Deursen, *Proverbs* (Amsterdam, NE: FELIRE, 1979), 111.

⁷⁵ *Idem*, 31.

⁷⁶ *Idem*, 15.

⁷⁷ Proverbs 1:4, New International Version Bible.

⁷⁸ 1 Kgs. 3:9, *Ibid.*

same type of questions young adults these days must be encouraged to answer through the lens of the Scriptures.

Browsing through the Scriptures, multiple stories of leadership and education towards the young can be found. Contained within the Old Testament, readers can see Joseph's story and how his faith in God placed him in the palace. Later on, David's example demonstrates that although he was dismissed by many for his young age, physical appearance, and apparent weaknesses, he eventually became Israel's most important king. Then there was King Josiah, one of the few righteous kings of Israel who reign from an early age for thirty-one years, reigning while being a young adult.⁷⁹ Josiah did what was right in the eyes of the Lord and followed the ways of his father David, not turning aside to the right or the left.⁸⁰ Giving a hermeneutical leap into the New Testament, the Gospels also share multiple examples of Jesus Christ, who Himself was a young adult throughout the active years of His ministry. He can be explicitly seen alluding to the young in several instances; like when He asked for the children to be allowed to come to Him, when He invited the rich young ruler to sell all he had and followed Him, or the occasion when a nameless youngster was used by Jesus to bring upon Him the bread and fish, He later multiplied to feed the multitude.

Moses and Joshua Leadership Transition

Nothing can be more powerful than finding parallels in the Bible that believers can integrate into their lives as examples and guidance. Going back to the Old Testament, there is precisely a specific illustration of the importance of teaching and mentoring the young in the

⁷⁹ 2 Kings 22:2, New International Version Bible.

⁸⁰ 2 Chronicles 34:2, Ibid.

example of Moses and Joshua. This story of commissioning and leadership transition offers insight into a model of leadership, trust, and relationship building that still proves relevant today. Joshua is first seen in the book of Exodus as a young warrior who overcame the Amalekite army with the sword.⁸¹ From this point forward, it is evident that Moses groomed Joshua to become his successor. Toward chapter thirty-one of Deuteronomy's book, readers can recognize signs that the era of Moses' leadership is ending and that of Joshua, his successor, is beginning. An exegetical analysis of the entirety of Deuteronomy 31 reveals that Moses' advanced years were debilitating the impact of his leadership capacity.⁸² The narrative serves multiple purposes as it prepares the people for Moses' death while revealing Joshua's commissioning. Moses had a passion that became evident earlier in his life, helping the disadvantaged, a passion that kept him energized throughout his leadership path. Moses was not just any leader; he has been Israel's leader, teacher, intercessor, and suffering Servant.⁸³ Therefore, Deuteronomy thirty-first portrays Joshua not as just another leader but as a book and a song chosen by God.⁸⁴

The close and personal relationship created between Moses and Joshua is evident throughout this chapter. Relationships are nurtured by trust and mutual respect—another example of why relationship building is essential among local congregation leadership and the young. Moses' leadership style was an enormous influence on this. McNeal emphasizes that Moses practices shepherding leadership learned at the dessert that built accountability and urges

⁸¹ Exodus 17:13, New International Version Bible.

⁸² Eugene H. Merrill, *The New American Commentary - Deuteronomy: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (ProQuest E-book: Central B&H Publishing Group, 1994), 354.

⁸³ Deanna A. Thompson, *Deuteronomy: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (ProQuest Ebook Central: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 155.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 155.

for succession.⁸⁵ The exercise of grooming the young needs to come from a genuine intention to create strong ties that eventually will bear fruit. Shaping the young cannot come across as an automatic uninterested event. They will be able to tell it is not engagement the Church is looking for. It cannot become an automatic natural aging event, as it can be perceived as distant and impersonal. Instead, just as Moses did with Joshua, personal bonds must be intentionally cultivated. Moses knew he would not be entering the Promised Land with Israel; he must commission Joshua, his successor, just as God commanded him to do.⁸⁶ There must be interest, intention, and personalization as critical characteristics when working with the young to avoid sterile or one-size-fits-all interactions. As with Moses, one-on-one touch is often necessary and mandatory for others to understand the importance of passing along the baton to the younger generation.

Verse seven of chapter thirty-one of Deuteronomy provides a model on how a personalized approach is vital and achievable in building a relationship between mentors and youngsters. The narrative shows how Moses turned to Joshua to offer him personal encouragement publicly. The New American Commentary highlights that Joshua and the whole community needed to hear this endorsement and how the Lord had made provision for them and that his provision was a matter of public record.⁸⁷ Our youths cannot be left behind the scenes nor hidden in the dark; Church support must be public and evident. This generation longs to feel loved, valued, and taken into consideration by all. The same way God commanded Moses and

⁸⁵ Reggie McNeal, *A Work of Heart: Understanding How God Shapes Spiritual Leaders* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 11.

⁸⁶ Thompson, *Deuteronomy*, 156.

⁸⁷ Merrill, *The New American Commentary - Deuteronomy*, 355.

Joshua thousands of years ago, He wants to command His twenty-first century Church to be strong and courageous⁸⁸ and dare to work intentionally with the young.

Modeling the Master

Moving away from the Old Testament and making a hermeneutical move to the New Testament, readers are presented with the most excellent teacher of all times, Jesus Christ. Christ exemplifies the most crucial role any leader shall aspire to achieve, one of service. Christ is not only our Lord and Savior but also our Teacher.⁸⁹ From the narratives of His early years, believers can understand the importance of learning when a twelve-year-old Jesus is found at the synagogue sitting among the teachers, listening to them, and questioning them.⁹⁰ Jesus teaches the Reign of God by how He lives His ministry. Through Jesus, both disciples and followers were introduced to the *Didache*, meaning transferring learnings in Greek.⁹¹ From a Scriptural approach, the *Didache* is considered Jesus' teachings to the world through His disciples. Time and time again, throughout the Gospels, readers can see Jesus' teaching and transferring knowledge to those who followed Him. His teaching focuses on breaking down the boundaries that separate humans from each other.⁹²

Besides healing, preaching, and serving while on earth, Jesus was often found teaching. Throughout the Gospel, He is referred to as Teacher or Master highlighting His knowledge and

⁸⁸ Deuteronomy 31:23, New International Version Bible.

⁸⁹ John 13:13, Ibid.

⁹⁰ Luke 2:46, Ibid.

⁹¹ Coenen, Beyreuther, and Bietenhard, *New Testament Theological Dictionary*, 79.

⁹² Brian K. Blount, "Jesus as Teacher: Boundary Breaking in Mark's Gospel and Today's Church," *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 70, no. 2 (2016), 184.

wisdom. His teachings were not traditional nor adapted to the known law. On the contrary, His teachings broke paradigms and challenge the status quo. Jesus dared to talk about subjects that religious leaders have labeled anathema. Many times, Jesus made many around Him uncomfortable by His teachings, saying things as He saw them.⁹³ Even when many began questioning His unconventional ways, He did not stop teaching.

His teaching methods can be considered non-traditional for the time, as it was not a curricular teaching style but more a participative one. Jesus' actions and words are intended more than conveying information; He anticipates that His hearers and readers will do something considering the teaching received.⁹⁴ Jesus was practical in His ways. Many times, He taught by example others by illustrating something. As a teacher, Jesus confronts, engages, and challenges becoming relevant to His audience.⁹⁵ Jesus' teachings encourage His audience, then and now, to move from where they are to where His Word pushes them to be.

Jesus engaged with people and taught based on His character. Jesus, the Master, the Teacher, understood the learner.⁹⁶ Jesus connected with those around Him. Skeldon and Waller talked about this connection between Jesus and the Church, emphasizing the importance of churches understanding how Christ's constant involvement with His followers produced a long-lasting impact that is seen until this day.⁹⁷ His teaching style crossed not only boundaries but also social stigmas. Jesus thought both the old and the young, the Jew and the gentile, men, and

⁹³ Mathew 23:13, New International Version Bible.

⁹⁴ Blount, *Jesus as Teacher*, 185.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, 185.

⁹⁶ La Verne Tolbert, *Teaching Like Jesus: A Practical Guide to Christian Education in Your* (Zondervan, 1999), 20.

⁹⁷ Grant Skeldon and Ryan Casey Waller, *The Passion Generation: The Seemingly Reckless, Definitely Disruptive, but Far from Hopeless Millennials* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 92.

women, equally, making the teaching of His Word accessible to all. By reading the Gospel, readers can appreciate how Jesus' ministry was in constant action; it was dynamic, agile, and reachable. Jesus' teaching was transformational and intentional, so the Reign of God would be heard.⁹⁸ All characteristics of an instructive model must be mimicked in 21st century Christian teaching. In the same way, Jesus was purposeful in what, who, and when He taught, contemporary teachers shall feel compelled to do the same.⁹⁹

It is essential to highlight that Jesus' teaching model was constantly in touch with His audience. Being in touch with the audience means considering factors such as moments, environments, society, culture, needs, and emotions, among others. Jesus spoke their language and adapted His teachings to the type of vocabulary the audience was most familiar with. Because they were agrarian people, Jesus used similes and metaphors that involved farming, harvesting, and shepherding.¹⁰⁰ Jesus contextualized His teachings, making Him a relevant teacher. Modern-day Bible School teachers must be the same and tailor the teaching to the needs and experiences of each target audience. There must be a willingness for change, adjustment, and continuous improvement.

Jesus' teaching model transcends the Gospel and can be identified all over the continuation of the New Testament through His disciples and the persona of Paul. In the same way that Moses and Joshua's example is provided in the Old Testament, Paul and Timothy's example is found on the other side of the cross. Paul's mentorship toward Timothy provides yet another model on how leaders should carry on the importance of grooming and teaching the

⁹⁸ Blount, *Jesus as Teacher*, 191.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 191.

¹⁰⁰ Tolbert, *Teaching Like Jesus*, 25.

young and prepare them to exercise relevant roles within the Body of Christ. Paul's teaching has always been closely related to life experiences and practices. His teachings were not left at mere interpretation but were often shared as practical instructions to the early members of the Church of Christ. Practicality brings context, context provides relevancy, relevancy creates pertinence, and pertinence makes it personal.

Paul Nurtures Timothy's Path

Personal is an appropriate descriptor of Paul and Timothy's relationship. The Scripture first introduces the reader to Timothy, Paul's future student in ministry¹⁰¹, in chapter sixteen of the book of Acts. The narrative shows how their connection was almost instant as Paul took Timothy under his mentorship immediately after they met. The goal was clear: they were going to work together on the extension of the Church.¹⁰² This goal is still valid and necessary in present days, and the Church should strive to bring under their wings men and women of all ages to be collaborators of God's Kingdom here on earth. Scripture evidence that Paul went on to commission others throughout his ministry, but it is evident there was a special bond shared with Timothy. Timothy was with Paul when he wrote eight of his thirteen letters for about twenty years.¹⁰³ Paul went as far as to regard Timothy as a son.¹⁰⁴

Throughout Timothy's two epistles, readers can perceive how Paul's mentorship upon Timothy produced fruits. The strong relationship, teachings, grooming, and care bestowed upon

¹⁰¹ Tolbert, *Teaching Like Jesus*, 185.

¹⁰² Acts 16: 2-5, New International Version Bible.

¹⁰³ Aida Besancon Spencer, *1 Timothy: A New Covenant Commentary*, (Lutterworth Press: ProQuest E-book Central, 2014), 23.

¹⁰⁴ 1 Timothy 1:2, New International Version Bible.

Timothy have resulted in his ministry. There is no doubt that Paul's ability to teach, lead, preach, and pursued others came from God, yet he did not think twice when it was time to pass it on to Timothy.¹⁰⁵ If the modern Church cannot apply this kind of mentorship, relationship, and leadership models, it will end up with no succession plan as there will not be a younger generation to pass it along to. Postmodernism is a worldview ailment that rejects the ability of collaboration, integration, and community as it has become mainly about the individual and not the Reign.¹⁰⁶ The time has come for local congregations to turn back to the Scriptural models, redefined their goals, and align them to the models provided throughout the Bible. Paul appeals to the highest authority to give us new motivation. If the Church wants to develop silver soul believers and leaders while becoming more valuable to God and better prepared to do any good work, there must be the willingness to embrace what He has planned for the Church. These words must be taken into the heart: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were brought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies" (1 Cor. 6:19-20).¹⁰⁷

Conclusion

Returning to Jesus and His ministry through this theological foundation, it is evident how important and necessary it is for all believers to be taught the Scriptures continuously. In addition to becoming the go-to tool for educating the young, the Scriptures' content can become transformational for YA and those around them. Church leaders, pastors, and teachers need to

¹⁰⁵ Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Acts*, (Tyndale House Publishers: ProQuest E-book Central, 2016), 18.

¹⁰⁶ Swindoll, *Insights on Acts*, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Thomas, *Everybody Matters*, 46.

look into different ways in which Christ-centric curricula can be designed to attract and retain the younger generation in our congregations. The same way Jesus' teachings were delivered through parables, others through preaching, others by exemplifying, and others only by one-on-one conversations, educational ministries must aspire to seek various alternatives to innovate their educational methodologies and material content. This multidisciplinary model of Jesus as a teacher is essential for this project. The imperative of teaching is even confirmed through the Great Commission, as disciples are sent to be baptized and teach others to obey what Jesus has commanded.¹⁰⁸

Consequently, it can be concluded that the Scriptures provide multiple instances where relationship building, mentoring, and teaching the young were essential for the continuation of God's work. Jesus' model is enough to impart Scripture-based knowledge as a biblical principle for all Christians. Rather than simply throw people into a one-size-fits-all education approach, educators are encouraged to find out what young people are looking for in a church and attempt to provide Bible-centric curricula that suit their spiritual needs.¹⁰⁹ Leadership's heart must be moved to this Scriptural truth with urgency. Considering what the Bible says about the characteristics by which believers should be identified, looking at God's character is necessary.

The invitation is clear, and the timing is even more so. Sunday school teachers, leadership, and pastoral bodies are to make their teaching to the young a priority and a holistic endeavor. The young adult curriculum must integrate teaching and relationship building. Following Jesus' model, the Christian educator must aspire to impart knowledge while bestowing trust. Such endeavor must be genuine and intentional. For such leaders and teachers

¹⁰⁸ Matthew 28:19-20, New International Version Bible.

¹⁰⁹ Schaefer Riley, *Got Religion*, 133.

are to insert themselves into young adults' lives. Getting to know their out-of-church dynamics is essential to add the context and relevancy of young adults' so much need and require.

Current times require that Bible-centric teaching become engaging and relevant to the lives of those who come to Church looking for Jesus' healing and guidance.¹¹⁰ The same way Jesus spoke with authority and authenticity, Christian educators are to do the same to achieve that desired and needed empathy to engage the young back to our congregations. Acting as faithful believers and active, passionate leaders who seek to grow the Kingdom of God here on Earth, today. Leaders are to question themselves how they can connect their passion, calling, and worship into sharing the gospel with others.¹¹¹ This way, they can grow and mature their religious' lives and their spiritual beings.

Theoretical Foundations

Today's average church has demonstrated that it is ill-equipped to engage the young adult generation and leverage their leadership skills and talents in everyday life of the Church. Even though the challenges of reaching 18 to 34 years old (college students and young adults) is not a new topic for the church, the challenge of reaching them is something new.¹¹² The portion of this generation from the prior statement must be enhanced, as it represents a significant part of the current problem. As the sense of belonging added to the lack of empathy towards institutional bodies grows among young adults, the need for a new way of thinking and approaching this

¹¹⁰ Duncan S. Ferguson, *The Radical Teaching of Jesus: A Teacher Full of Grace and Truth: An Inquiry for Thoughtful Seekers*. ProQuest E-book Central, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=4652312>. (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016), 91.

¹¹¹ Peter Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Church: A Strategy for Discipleship that Actually Changes Lives*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 13.

¹¹² DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 10.

challenge is necessary. A generation that chooses how they want to learn, whom they want to listen to, how they consumed information, and where to do so is no longer satisfied with solutions from the past.

The thesis of this project states that if Central Baptist Church develops tailored made biblical teaching materials that tackle young adults' life situations, then they can be retained, and their attendance may increase. Such educational material creates pertinence and sets the appropriate environment for conversational dynamics among leaders and young adults, enabling trust and relationship building. In addition, an endeavor to bring context into Bible-centric studies will set the stage to help bring down generational walls that have been built with time. Providing the means to access such topics or themes must be facilitating. Labeling these topics as anathema must be tackled head-on and embraced with proactivity.

A general challenge is that many churches have adopted a mass-production approach to faith development. Taking cues from public education, among other sectors of society, churches have created a conveyor belt of Christian development that industrializes the soul formation of young people, who eventually become adults with inch-deep, mile-wide faith.¹¹³ However, faith-based speaking, their growing disinterest is towards religious institutions, not necessary to the Bible. This is an advantage to anchor a new curriculum with Bible-centric models, narratives, and examples that can appeal to this generation. Several surveys from the current decade demonstrate that emerging adults struggle to continually question their identity and values expecting relevant and appealing answers.¹¹⁴ This reality can represent a potential opportunity for churches that decide to approach it proactively and creatively. Nearly thirty-one percent of

¹¹³ Kinnaman. *You Lost Me*, 83.

¹¹⁴ Reed, *A Book for None?* 154.

young Christians described church today as boring.¹¹⁵ Also, a 2015 Group Publishing publication revealed that this generation of young adults decides to stay in places where their needs are considered, their voice is heard, they can make friends, and they feel like they are valued.¹¹⁶

Traditional Sunday school methodology, curriculums, and systems are no longer attractive to twenty-first century young adults. It is not only considered obsolete but unilateral. Recent publications coincide with the need for new approaches to disciple emerging adults back to their congregations. A lack of discipleship vision is an essential element that has led young adults to flee their local church.¹¹⁷ Several publications emphasize that the attachment to traditions and lack of leadership seem to be part of the biggest challenges modern church faces.¹¹⁸ Sunday Schools have been heavily institutionalized and fostered on nineteenth and twentieth-century methods. Managing multi-generational populations has become a real struggle for many churches. Some churches that have begun some sort of transformation to their Sunday school format have mainly targeted children, leaving a void for emerging adults.¹¹⁹ A well-designed curriculum that balances Scriptures and secularity is what more modern and relationship-building publications suggest. Educational ministries are to find creative ways to deliberately share the responsibility for shaping the church's future and the young adults' spirituality by focusing on the generation they would like to see lead it in the next fifteen to twenty years.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 84.

¹¹⁶ Melick, Melick, and Melick, *Teaching that Transforms*, 697.

¹¹⁷ Skeldon and Waller, *The Passion Generation*, 61.

¹¹⁸ Ham, Beemer, and Hillard, *Already Gone*, 35.

¹¹⁹ Leal, *All Our Children May be Taught of God*, 1058.

¹²⁰ DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 145.

A multidimensional approach to church dynamics, along with meaningful connections, can provide the spiritual growth emerging adults' desire.¹²¹ Young adults are hungry for literacy, belonging, and empowerment. These necessities factored into relevant and practical Scriptural teachings can become a potential solution to young adults' attendance decline. A Gartner study reveals that the Bible among Christian young adults still represent authority in their lives, yet it lacks contextual application.¹²² These insights provide direction and foundation to this research work to discover appropriate retention, integration, and engagement strategies through Bible-centered teaching.

It is also clear that those working as Christian teachers with children and young people today face tensions between being adaptive to the needs of the young and responding to their ecclesiastical authorities' concerns.¹²³ Young people can choose to attend Christian activities, which is a marginal choice among more popular options; this is where contextualization becomes key. Church leaders are to explore which social currencies they could utilize and allow the young to feel attracted to what the church has to offer. The Sunday school teacher's role must consider a shift towards apprenticeship to provide knowledge and trust base engagement. A 2005 research from Jeffs and Smith shows that the characteristics distinguishing informal education from formal education, including its focus on the learner's needs, its lack of pre-defined curriculum, and the importance of relationship for voluntary engagement, are part of a change.¹²⁴ Being able to listen to what is meaningful and essential for this generation is critical.

¹²¹ Clark, *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, 41.

¹²² Reed, *A Book for None?*, 162.

¹²³ Schaefer Riley, *Got Religion?*, 114.

¹²⁴ *Ibid*, 115.

Churches that become intentional and strategic in their approach towards the young, enabling their capacities and spirituality, are setting themselves to thrive.¹²⁵ New times require new ways of doing things. The current pandemic situation has led many to rely on technology, social media, and virtual platforms, setting the perfect stage for innovation, and the Church is not the exception. The willingness and openness for a new state should propel church leadership into new paths of dynamics and venture. Bible-anchored principles, knowledge, and understanding can bridge this new season's gap for local congregations to bring about innovative curriculum and teaching methodologies.

Staying static is no longer an option. Deciding not to change is deciding to set a congregation for failure. The same way Moses saw in Joshua, a great leader, and Paul saw in Timothy, a great pastor, there are endless opportunities within our youngsters among each local congregation. Sunday school teachers and young ministry leaders are to blend their diverse skills, commit to a shared vision and common goals to strive to gain and retain the young adults.¹²⁶ The Bible must be the standard for Christian educators. Perfection is not required, but the character is. New times require new ways to do things. Trusting that, although times will change and change is embraced, the Lord's Word prevails the same.

Conclusion

In conclusion, young adults' curriculums and educational material must highlight current life events to add relevancy and catch their attention. These materials must be designed with a comprehensive approach where Bible-centric teaching engages with an entire leadership

¹²⁵ Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, *Growing Young*, 222.

¹²⁶ Scazzero, *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*, 213.

development model that intuitively contrasts with a traditional classroom banking education style. Church leaders must assume the role of influencers to the young, the same way Moses, Jesus, and Paul were influencers themselves. People are most likely to support leaders who help them discover whom they are created to be and empower them to employ their talents, energies, and passions to honor and glorify God.¹²⁷ Bible-centric teaching is a supreme break to create Christ's followers. In a society where following others seems to be the right thing to do, young adult leaders must present the imperative necessity to follow Jesus through the Scripture. Church leaders have in their hands the priceless opportunity to present something more significant, a better alternative, the only choice Jesus Christ.

Multiple studies show that the sooner congregations engage the young into ministry environments, the better.¹²⁸ Even if teachers are not fully trained, planning for such a vision is imperative. A leap of faith is required, along with lots of praying and fasting, a task the entirety of the congregation must engage in. Adopting this vision will allow for several things to happen. First, leadership is confronted with what they do not know but need to know, thus becoming extraordinarily teachable. The second thing that happens is that they usually recognize immediately if they have chosen an appropriate place to serve. Third, a sense of community and belonging is created. All these things build identity, and what better identity than the one influenced by Jesus Christ.

¹²⁷ McNeal, *A Work of Heart*, 83.

¹²⁸ Stanley, *Deep & Wide*, ch 7.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Having explained the research project and developing an extensive literature revision with proper theological and theoretical foundations, this chapter will focus on describing the research methodology. The type of data to be collected is both quantitative and qualitative in nature. The execution of three research instruments, two surveys, and one focus group will provide for triangulation. The objective of this research project and its intervention plan is to explore how current didactical experiences are perceived among the general congregation and the necessary topics of relevancy that can be integrated into targeted curriculums to attract and retain young adults helping them grow their spirituality.

Contextual Consideration for Intervention Design

As with Central Baptist Church's, current young adult attendance has been declining, attrition rates from this demographic have become a common topic in recent years for many traditional Christian denominations. Their absence is mainly noticeable during Sunday school and Bible studies. Specific to CBC, this trend became more evident after the last programming change approved by the church about four years ago. When several approaches were made to several sister churches, anecdotally speaking, the trend seems to repeat itself. Young adults' attendance seems to be lacking, especially on non-worship experiences.

The fact that the church's congregational pre-pandemic activities narrowed down to only Tuesdays and Sundays has taken its toll. While looking for efficiencies on one side, the programming limitation also has limited availability of attendance options. This second

limitation is particularly true for young adults. Because of the small size of the total current membership, the lack of participation from young adults seems to magnify. Their life circumstances, current academic and work responsibilities limit their weekday availability. Such reality adds to the fact that through several informal conversations, young adults have shared that the theological and education material used in traditional and historical churches is obsolete, which makes Bible studies, in their opinion, irrelevant. When inquired about defining irrelevancy, young adults referred to it as the disconnection between their own life's realities with the topics developed from a theological perspective at the local church. Using such a statement as a means for validation, it was indeed confirmed that CBC has been using the same educational editorial material for the past decade. This material has been being used in cycles of two to three years, becoming repetitive and irrelevant to them after a couple of years.

Post Pandemic Methodology Adjustments

After COVID-19 restrictions, some methodology aspects and research instruments had to be review. In order to enforce social distancing, a local executive order produced by the Puerto Rico government imposed a mandatory lockdown. This new reality brought about the original methodology a set of limitations and, therefore, adjustments. As churches were closed and any type of physical contact was utterly discouraged, the author of this thesis research project had to transition the methodology, the intervention plan, and the execution of research instruments into an online environment. Thankfully, the adjustments were made months before the design of the intervention plan and IRB submission, having a minimum impact on its execution, and essentially simplifying it considerably.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the author of this thesis project is to lead all research-related tasks. These tasks include but are not limited to maintaining communication with the sponsoring pastor, promoting research windows with potential participants, designing, and executing the research instruments, and analyzing the results from those instruments. All researchers' responsibilities were dependent on obtaining IRB approval. All three research instruments' content were developed, considering the problem, purpose, and thesis statement. It was imperative that cohesiveness among these three priorities was maintained to assure the appropriate and unbiased direction of their results. The researcher was responsible for guaranteeing the intervention plan was executed as presented and agreed with the sponsoring pastor. Objectivity and impartiality are essential throughout the intervention period. Following the process established by Liberty University's School of Divinity Program and Thesis Project Handbook, once IRB approval was received, the researcher facilitated research work, online polling platforms, data collection, and analysis results, which shared in chapter four of this work.

Approval from the Institutional Review Board

Before beginning the research fieldwork, the permit letter, promotional flyer, and all three research instruments designed by the researcher and approved by the thesis mentor were submitted to the IRB. The submission was accompanied by a formal application executed on November 25th, 2020. The prior was submitted through the Cayuse Research Suite provided by Liberty University and accessed with Liberty University Online assigned username and password. The original submission was accompanied by all supporting documents and research instruments in PDF format. After submission, two rounds of revisions took place: one in

December 2020 and the other in January 2021. The first round of revision was strictly related to the electronic format the documentation was submitted. Original documentation attached to the submission was sent in PDF format, and they were requested to be resent in Word format. The second round of revision was specifically a terminology change request which was executed and resubmitted immediately. Upon completion of required revisions, final approval by the IRB was received on January 11th, 2021, giving the intervention plan the green light to proceed. A copy of IRB's approval can be found in Appendix G within this thesis project's appendix section for readers' reference.

Immediately after obtaining IRB's approval, a formal permission request letter (Appendix D) was delivered to the sponsoring pastor on January 26th, 2021, asking for the necessary permission to conduct fieldwork research through the administration of approved instruments within the local church. This permission request allowed the author of this thesis to contact members of the local congregation and sister churches. It also contained a brief delimitation for the reach of the research work and the online methodology to be used. The approval from the sponsoring pastor was received via email (Appendix E) on January 29th, 2021, the date upon which research work finally began in earnest.

Intervention Design

Intending to obtain data and insights that will either support or contradict this project's thesis statement, an intervention plan was designed. Because the local church knew the problem being addressed, executing the proposed intervention plan was uneventful. Due to its membership size and post-pandemic limitations, the intervention plan was executed informally and casually. All means for objectivity, were followed. As previously mentioned, all research

instruments were reviewed and adapted to be administered through a secure online platform instead of face-to-face encounters as initially intended because of the current pandemic reality. In addition, recognizing that many sister churches encounter similar experiences among their young adults, part of the fieldwork was expanded to other American Baptist churches of the metropolitan area in Puerto Rico. The results of this intervention plan will not only be shared locally but are also intended to be socialized with the Education and Formation Office of Puerto Rico's ABC offices so they can be used as a contribution for many other local congregations on the Island.

The intervention plan provided for a communication plan, a promotional focus group flyer, and three research instruments further explained under the intervention plan section. All three research instruments were designed with objectivity and seeking to safeguard the anonymity of participants. The items administered were a general congregational survey and a young adults survey to all those between the ages of eighteen to thirty-four. Also held was one focus group among the same young adults' demographics. Both surveys, the one targeted for the entire congregation and the one targeted for young adults, were available for completion voluntarily. An open invitation for participation was sent across electronic communication mediums. These two instruments were made accessible through the online survey platform *SurveyMonkey*.

The author of this thesis project signed up for the free online suite from the named online survey platform suite alternatives in January 2021. This choice was mainly due to a lack of user experience with more advanced functionality and limited financial resources for paid suites. Sign-up and registration to SurveyMonkey were easy and intuitive; all requested are email addresses and general personal contact information. The free online survey solution fulfilled the

general needs of the researcher to perform the fieldwork appropriately. It allowed administering an unlimited number of surveys while capturing data, opinions, and open-ended answers for up to forty participants. In addition, this online survey platform stores all capture data and stores it for up to twelve months after the research instrument is closed under password-protected access requests.

Since all research instruments were already made and approved by the IRB, when the appropriate time came to upload them into the platform, it only required a data entry task carried on by the author of this research work. Both surveys were made available to participants on a research window from January 30th, 2021, until February 14th, 2021. A direct link for each survey was shared on several occasions with their correspondence audiences, encouraging participation. Participants were able to provide their answers and feedback at their convenience between the set windows. Also, surveys were completed by participants without the presence of the researcher. Carrying out the research work online simplified the workflow process considerably. The detailed timeline of this research window carried on as follow during the year 2021:

- Mid-January: created a new account on the chosen online survey platform, SurveyMonkey.
- January 28th & 29th: created the surveys on the chosen online platform.
- January 30th: sent a message with a link to the congregational survey via WhatsApp to the general local church group.
- January 30th: a message linked to the young adult survey was sent individually to all aged qualified.

- February 4th: sent a reminder note with survey links to both the general congregation and young adults via WhatsApp.
- February 10th: the focus group meeting was set up through Zoom to obtain the proper Zoom ID and passcode.
- February 11th: a promotional flyer that included the Zoom ID and passcode (Appendix F) of the focus group to be performed was sent to young adults individually via WhatsApp.
- February 13th: a third and last reminder was sent to both the general congregation and young adults via WhatsApp, advising that the survey window was soon to close.
- February 14th: both online surveys closed.
- February 15th: data and insights from both online surveys were access and downloaded for proper analysis.
- February 19th: sent focus group promotional flyer to all young adults as a reminder for participation.
- February 20th: focus group guided discussion took place via Zoom.

As shown by the above timeline, once surveys were made available through the online platform, the only remaining task was to follow up with participants through periodic communications as part of the intervention plan until the survey research window closed.

On the other hand, the focus group was designed to be performed with the presence of the researcher and sponsor pastor. As previously mentioned, a promotional flyer was created to communicate this experience. The intention was to direct an open conversation among young adults from the local congregation and several sister churches that choose to participate. The guide produced for this open-ended conversational experience can be found in the Appendix

section, specifically Appendix C. The instrument for this session was designed to explore young adults' needs, wants, and current understanding of what a relevant Bible study should consist of or look like. The execution of this focus group was performed through Zoom, an online secured virtual system with a live video recording platform.

The Intervention Plan

The intervention project plan will have four main parts: communication, design, research, and insights. The detail of each central part will be explained in the following paragraphs.

Communication

After IRB's approval, a formal permission request was submitted to the sponsoring pastor to approve the designed intervention plan. Upon approval and common understanding of the work and scope, an intervention period and timeline were agreed on. It was also agreed by the researcher and the sponsoring pastor that the latter became the liaison between the congregation and the author of this project. The intervention period was communicated to the congregation in advance through various electronic mediums, and progress was shared periodically. Continuous progress reports were intended as a means to maintain transparency of the process and its progress. At the same time, weekly accountability meetings with the sponsoring pastor were intended to inform the progress of milestones and intervention plan goals.

Design

A series of communication materials, supporting scripts, and research instruments were designed to pursue data gathering to support the thesis statement. As previously mentioned, all

designed documents were to be submitted to the IRB for revision and approval. Following are the designed documents:

1. A promotional flyer was be designed and distributed through electronic mediums to provide information on the work and recruit volunteer participants.
 - a. This promotional flyer was later redesigned to promote the focus group.
 - b. All specific progress communication was performed by internal communication scripts shared on several occasions with the congregation through WhatsApp.
2. A release opt-in option verbiage was designed to be inserted in all online research instruments to obtain approval from all participants before their participation.
3. A quantitative tool in the form of a survey was designed for the congregation to fill out. This survey contained only close-ended questions, all polling questions with yes or no answers. Also, a voluntary demographic section was included at the end.
4. A second quantitative tool in the form of a survey was designed to be executed among all young adults that wished to participate. This survey contained both close-ended and open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were free text, and the close-ended questions had one polling (yes or no) with additional space for explanation and the Likert scale to measure the level of satisfaction and level of participation among church activities.
5. A focus group script was designed to guide a future conversational experience to obtain intuitive and qualitative insights to enrich the quantitative data obtained through both surveys.

Overall Timeframes

The Original Timeframe

IRB submission was expected to happen during October 2020. Once the action research project was approved, the original intention was to begin around November 2020 to have all analyzed data by early February 2021. Such a commencement date was intended to be integrated into the ecclesiastical program for 2021 of the local church. Taking the proper steps as part of the church calendar and plan would facilitate the process and resources. These steps would also facilitate the communication process with the congregation, participants, and leaders of the project's progress and development.

Considering the plan was to insert the action research project into the church calendar, the intention is that the intervention period would last between three to six months to be finished early during the first quarter of 2021. Although one-on-one interviews were to be coordinated upon availability, other interventions such as focus groups and congregation surveys would be part of the calendar. Working within the church calendar should have facilitated completion by the end of February 2021.

Oct. 2020	Nov. 2020	Dec. 2020	Jan. 2021	Feb. 2021
Submit an application to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for research project approval	Obtain IRB's approval. Communication to the congregation of a timeline for the intervention period.	Kick-off intervention period. Publish and make accessible: Congregation survey. Young adults' survey.	Perform focus group with young adults. Begin gathering all data and insights.	Analysis of results, categorization, and coding. Finish intervention

The Final Timeframe

The original timeframe presented as part of the initial prospectus did not consider the pre-established curriculum and course order provided by the DMin 840 course, which is where researchers are to submit their application to the Institutional Review Board. Submission to the IRB under the DMin 840 course happens during week six, around the end of November, for the Fall Semester D term. In addition, it did not take into consideration that the approval period would be delayed by the Holidays’ break and two rounds of revisions. These situations caused the original timeframe to be bumped down a month from the initially designed intervention plan. The research field work part of the intervention plan had to be adjusted to comply with the proposed submission date of April 28th, 2021, where the final thesis project must be submitted to request a reader. The latter caused all field work to be performed in one month versus an original two-month period. The following updated timeframe highlights specific dates of certain action items to portray the agility with what the intervention plan had to be executed, including initial implementation steps.

Nov. 2020	Dec. 2020	Jan. 2021	Feb. 2021
Submit an application to Liberty University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for research project approval – 25 th	<p>First round of revisions with IRB.</p> <p>Met with sponsor pastor to explain intervention plan.</p>	<p>Second round of revision with IRB.</p> <p>Received IRB’s approval – 11th</p> <p>Received field work permit from sponsor pastor – 29th</p> <p>Communicate and invite to participate from intervention tools.</p> <p>Kick-off intervention period. – Jan. 30th</p>	<p>Congregation survey. Young adults’ survey – closed 14th</p> <p>Focus group with young adults – 20th</p> <p>Gather all data and insights – 27th</p>

March 2021	April 2021	May 2021	June 2021
Analysis of results, categorization, and coding. – 5 th Began initial implementation phase Virtual Worship Service – 10 th Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea: Sexuality – 24 th Genesis 1 and 2	Virtual Worship service – 7 th Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea: Time Management – 21 st Ecclesiastes 3 : 1-11	Virtual Worship service – 5 th Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea: Finances – 19 th 1 Peter 4:10 Worship Afternoon experience – 29 th (first presentational activity since the pandemic)	Tuesday’s Praying Service – 1 st (directed by youth ministry) Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea – Life Balance – 2 nd Proverbs 23: 4-5 Celebrating our graduates Worship service – 6 th (an experience by the young for the young) End of intervention - 7th

Research

Based on the previously exposed timeline and designed instruments, all three research tools were produced online to facilitate for a non-physical research field work. To summarize those instruments, they are:

1. A congregational survey was administered via SurveyMonkey with voluntary participation.
2. A second survey for local congregation young adults was performed online via SurveyMonkey with voluntary participation.
3. A focus group was the last research tool to be executed. It was programmed with enough time to insert within the church schedule and distributed with anticipation to all attendees.

The intervention plan provided that both surveys run simultaneously while the focus group was to be performed on a later date to produce supporting qualitative insights.

Insights and Implementation

Once all data is gathered, an analysis process must occur with all the data collected from the surveys and the focus group. The surveys were tallied, and their results were included along with the interviews and focus groups. All results will be inserted into the thesis project's writing process, and eventually, the findings and solutions were shared for implementation. Because of the online survey platform used, all surveys were automatically tallied, making data analysis easier.

How Data was Collected Throughout the Project

Triangulation was performed by using three different ways of gathering data. As already mentioned, the three instruments were a congregational survey, young adults' questionnaire, and a focus group. This allowed for a more straightforward method of evaluation and analysis as it delimited each audience, and it even allowed for external representation. All instruments were constructed per IRB's approval and uploaded into the SurveyMonkey platform for proper and secured administration by the end of January 2021. Both surveys were available for participants from January 30th until February 14th, 2021. Most of the answers were obtained during the first four days of its publication.

Congregational and Young Adults' Surveys

The congregational survey contained only close-ended questions, all polar questions with yes or no answers, ten to be exact. For the young adults' survey, there are ten questions, of which three were demographic related. After the survey's closing, the SurveyMonkey platform provided a detailed result page with proper tallying of all close-ended questions and display of all open-

ended answers. Results were reported for forty participants for the Congregational survey and fourteen participants for the young adults' survey. Close-ended questions displayed results with graphics, some of which will be shared in chapter four. Open-ended questions were displayed with a detailed list of all provided answers. No names nor pseudonyms were collected, assuring anonymity of all participants.

Young Adults' Focus Group

A third research instrument consisted of a guided focus group conversation with young adults from the local congregation and sister churches. The details of the scripted discussion can be found in Appendix C. The focus group was conducted via the Zoom platform with secured passcode access. It was adequately recorded for insight gathering and reference purposes. The focus group was conducted on Saturday, February 20th, 2021, at 8:00 p.m. The experience lasted around one and a half hours. All participants provided voluntary consent to be recorded. This third intervention intends to obtain intuitive and qualitative insights to enrich the quantitative data obtained from both surveys. As results are qualitative and anecdotal, the presentation of results on Chapter 4 will complement the two surveys.

Implementation

As part of the intervention plan timeline, as previously shared, some initial steps and several experiences around the insights found were implemented for project documentation purposes. Implementation started with a month-by-month planning approach. This tactic was decided to provide a slow yet steady pace of integration with the young adults. Initial experiences began with virtual worship services and an untraditional Bible study. The first Bible

study was developed around the sexuality topic. As time went by and attendance response was there, additional encounters were scheduled and offered. Attendance grew to the point that initial experiences began with around seven participants and currently goes around a steady eleven to thirteen. Their interest in further studying other subjects that were provided by them continues. They have expressed, they feel heard. The response has been positive enough that it was decided to work a calendar of meetings quarterly. There are three important outcomes that can be highlighted from this intervention period: attendance, interest, and involvement. Further details will be share in chapter five of this thesis work.

Conclusion

Although the research work of this project followed the proposed timeline and design, COVID-19 limitations presented additional unforeseen and unplanned limitations to this work. Some of these limitations included time constraints, internet access intermittency for some participants, and, therefore, limited online survey access. Even though the sampling from each research instrument does represent each predefined population, the sample size obtained from each does not provide any statistically significant representation. Because of this, compiled data was used and referred to only as directional and not prescriptive. Also, although the focus group's results were thoroughly analyzed, because of its qualitative nature, in some instances, the researcher had the inability to generalize the research findings.

Lastly, virtuality brought some advances to the research work and initial implementation process. Because all research instruments were performed through online electronic platforms, the researcher's data collection and analysis process were considerably expedited and simplified. The fact that no manual tabulation was required shortens the analysis period significantly. In

addition, it is important to mention that performing a complete virtual methodology streamline process made the research work substantially straightforward. From the experience of the actual execution of the intervention plan, one fundamental lesson was important, ongoing communication and follow-up with potential participants to create a desire for participation is key to achieved intervention plan engagement. As the intervention plan happened, the author of this thesis project went back to the previous chapter to assure that the post-Covid impact was captured to contextualize the work.

Chapter 4

Results

This chapter outlines the results gleaned from the data and insights that the three research instruments from this project's intervention plan unveiled. The data collected was used to understand and explore relevant results and insights around the research topic: if Bible-centric studies with the integration of relevant subjects would be effective strategies to retain young adults. As previously mentioned, participants' identities were kept confidential; no names, direct or indirect references, nor pseudonyms were used. All results are presented by the researcher with directional intentions. Percentages are used to portray proportions, not necessarily statistical correlations unless otherwise stated.

As approved by the IRB, the three research instruments were administered within a timeframe of three weeks. As previously indicated in chapter three, the first two instruments executed were the congregational survey and the survey specifically tailored for young adults. After an open invitation was sent to the congregation and the young adult ministry, participation of both instruments began simultaneously. The execution of a focus group followed, and its results, although qualitative, added practical value to the development of this chapter. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, a detailed narrative will expose data and insights from each instrument for readers' information. With the intention to develop a narrative that links a common thread that resulted from each research survey tell, data and findings will be presented from the macro to the micro, in the following order: congregational survey, young adults' survey, and young adults' focus group.

What Can Readers Expect?

After analyzing the data and insights gathered, the researcher concluded that the results support the established thesis statement. Therefore, readers will be informed of such findings and understand through a narrative that describes how integrating topics that young adults consider relevant into Bible studies is indeed attractive to them. Findings from the two research instruments targeted for young adults -the survey and the focus group- sustained the thesis statement. This should provide local church leadership at CBC and other Baptist churches in Puerto Rico enough material for each to develop and tailor an appropriate and relevant curriculum for this demographic.

The congregational survey results validated the importance of young adults' attendance growth that churches need to assure successional leadership. Hence, converging current life issues and topics along with Bible Centric references are undeniably necessary to add relevancy and transform the Bible Study curriculum for young adults. The nature of the field work results and gained insights will be outlined as directional and not a prescriptive of a curriculum. Consequently, as presented, the results should be intuitive enough to provide proper guidance and necessary flexibility for any American Baptist Church in Puerto Rico to create its own Bible Study curriculum for young adults.

The Importance of Language

To finalize the introduction of this chapter, it is essential to highlight that in consideration of the geographics of the research field and the natural language of its habitants, all research work and instruments administration were executed in Spanish. The researcher decided on this, intending to guarantee complete understanding from participants. Each instrument was carefully

translated by the author of this thesis project pursuing to maintain the integrity for the instruments approved by the IRB. Having established that, the graphics presented throughout this chapter will be in Spanish to present data analytics as provided by the system and minimize the possibility of human error upon data entry transcription. When deemed necessary, graphics will be accompanied by English captions to exemplify the captured raw data. The intention of deciding to present data this way is to safeguard the purity of findings and insight sharing.

Congregational Survey

The first research instrument from which results and findings are presented is the congregational survey. A copy of this survey is found in Appendix A under the appendix session. The survey contained a total of ten closed-ended questions; out of the ten questions, five were around the thesis subject of Bible studies, attendance, and their level of satisfaction. Another two questions were related to youth ministries, and the other three were demographic in nature. Forty-seven answers were received, yet results shared by the used online platform belong only to the first forty participants because of package limitations. As explained before, this was an expected limitation from the package chosen by the author of this thesis work. The number of participants embodied a statistically reasonable representation of total membership. The survey was opened to all church members, including youth and young adults.

Interestingly enough, only three young adults answered this survey. This is because the demographic questions were voluntary. However, from those who answered related questions on this first survey, this is how participation looks:

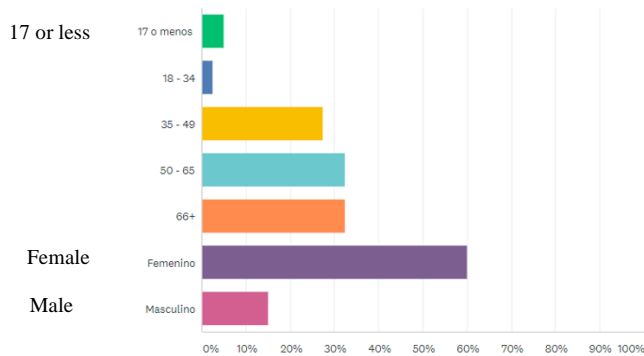


Figure 1: Demographics of the Congregational Survey Participants

This first graphic confirms a reality known by many congregations: church membership is aging rapidly. In the specific case of this field work, results show that over sixty percent of participants are older than fifty. An elderly church needs to act fast to assure leadership succession, the same way Moses and Paul did. Waiting to do so is no longer the answer. DeVries and Pointer established that many congregations give a lot of lip service to the need for developing emerging leaders, but frankly, most churches have absolutely no process or ideas for integrating young adults into the church's fabric, let alone into its leadership.¹²⁹ Another reality confirmed by the data on this first figure is that women fill our pews while men's attendance has been missing at our congregations for a long time now. The good news, and sort of a spoiler alert, is that this gender gap among young adults seems to close considerably when the demographic representation is compared from the data in the young adults' survey. Further details on this will be shared when these survey results are presented later on, yet this insight is undoubtedly a positive and hopeful note for the Church in general and provides a vast area of opportunity if retention and growth strategies such as the one suggested by the thesis statement of this project are implemented.

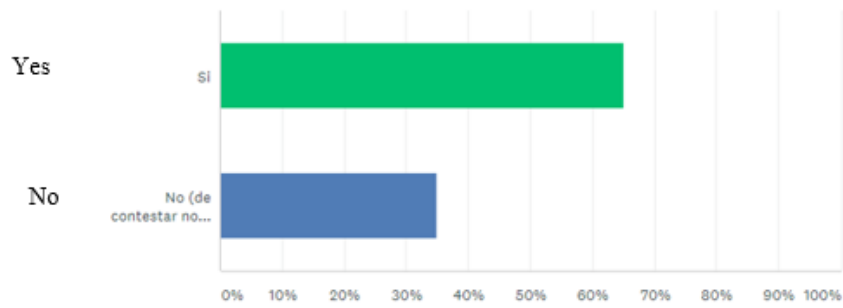
¹²⁹ DeVries and Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 17.

Another implicit insight from this demographic graphic is that once both surveys were made available and the invitation to answer them was open, most young adults' skew towards the young adults' survey. Initially, this could be expected behavior, yet, considering that participation was stressed for both instruments, specifically to young adults, the fact that the majority still only answered the survey directed to them might be intriguing. This insight sheds some light on how this population considers having different needs and realities from the rest of the congregation. In other words, although feeling identified with what the church represents, young adults do not necessarily feel part of the membership of the congregation. Naomi Thompson states that young people will not stand to meet institutional demands and would rather debate between what their spirituality needs and what churches have to offer.¹³⁰ Correlating this insight with Thompson's statement supports yet another finding that will be further explained during the young adults' survey section, yet another spoiler alert: young adults identify with the church as a community of faith seekers but not with the institution the church represents.

Moving on with results from the Congregational survey, more exciting insights are exposed around the reality of Bible study and Sunday School attendance among the congregation. For example, six out of ten members attended Sunday School before the pandemic, while seven out of ten members attended Tuesday's Bible study.

¹³⁰ Thompson, *Young People*, 13.

Answered: 40 Skipped: 0



ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES
Si	65.00% 26
No (de contestar no continua con la pregunta #7)	35.00% 14
TOTAL	40

Figure 2: Before the pandemic, did you attend Bible Sunday School?

These results correlate with the 2019 study titled *The Bible, and the Digital Millennials* shows that only seventy percent of adult membership engage with any related educational activity at church.¹³¹ Furthermore, even though the survey did not provide a section to explain the reason for their answer, several participants shared under the general comments area that the main reason some preferred attending Bible studies rather than Sunday school had to do mainly with time and content.

The fact that time and content are key drivers to choosing to attend Sunday school confirmed and provided another set of opportunities for leadership to consider. Early morning programming appears to be harder to fit in a family's morning agenda, while after-hours seems to provide more flexibility and accessibility. This result challenges traditional church programming scheduling and opens an enormous window of opportunity to revitalize, enhance,

¹³¹ Ford, Mann, and Phillips, *The Bible*, 13.

and modernized Sunday school formatting to increase attendance. Increasing attendance can be obtained by revising or adding after church service schedules while adding the virtual modality that this post-pandemic new normal has brought to most congregations. What might have been rejected pre-pandemic is now the reality of most congregations; thus, the learning curve has been achieved, and the adoption rates are already there.

Undeniably there is some sort of apprehension, even among adults, to the traditional expository curriculum teaching modality. Again, through general comments, some shared that they instead study the Bible from the Bible itself and develop different topics according to life experiences and social situations, rather than from content that does not hold relevancy to current events. This insight also supports the central thesis of this project that undeniably relevancy has become essential to attract the attention of churchgoers, especially after the aftermath the pandemic has caused among society.

These results can somehow be confirmed by the following two graphs. The first graph shows the level of satisfaction for Sunday School’s content, while the second graph relates to Tuesday’s Bible studies.

Sunday School Content Satisfaction

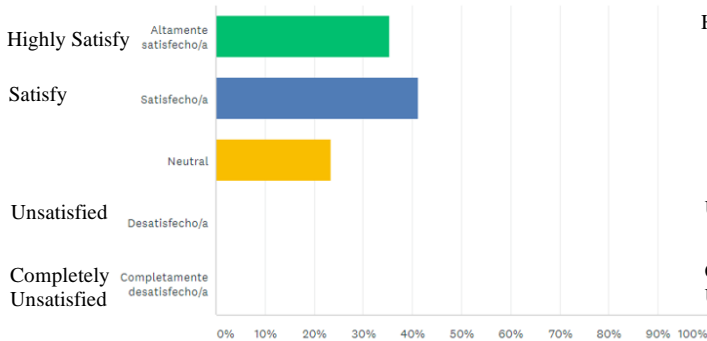


Figure 3.1

Tuesday’s Bible Study Satisfaction

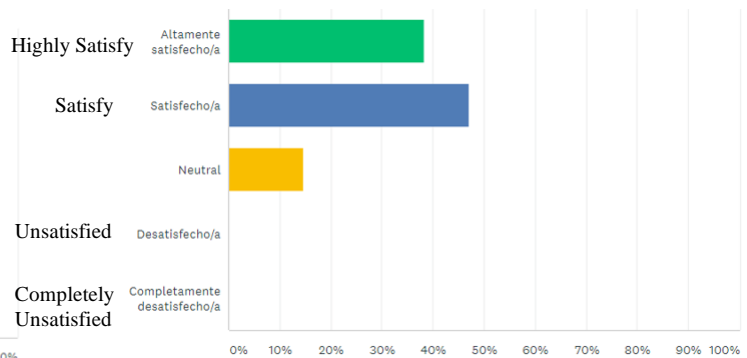


Figure 3.2

A higher percentage of participants answered to be highly satisfied with Bible study's content rather than with Sunday school content. Tuesday's studies are assigned on a more need-based approach, and that might contribute to this finding. Although none of the participants expressed dissatisfaction with either content, a higher percentage ratio communicated to have a neutral satisfaction level towards Sunday schools. Specifically, eight participants answer neutral satisfaction to Sunday school content, while only five participants chose neutral satisfaction to Bible Study.

Finally, it imperative to note that although ninety-nine percent of participants answered that they would like to see youth ministry growth, only thirty-five percent of them assented to have participated at least once with any youth ministry activity. Ford, Mann, and Phillips share some more alarming statistics around this irony where churches want more youth yet will not integrate with them. They state that only around eleven percent of adult church-goers engage with youth ministry programming.¹³² The fact that the findings from the local research work close the gap from what Ford, Mann, and Phillips share is good news. However, it confirmed that a dichotomy between the desire and the actions of the surveyed congregations still exists. The heart of every member wishes that more youth join the church, yet once they do, only a few are willing or eager to participate with their programming or necessities. This insight should be almost an epiphany for local leadership of any Baptist church in Puerto Rico as it shows that generational integration is essential to create bonding and trust that, eventually, will translate into role modeling and relationships.

¹³² Ford, Mann, and Phillips, *The Bible*, 5.

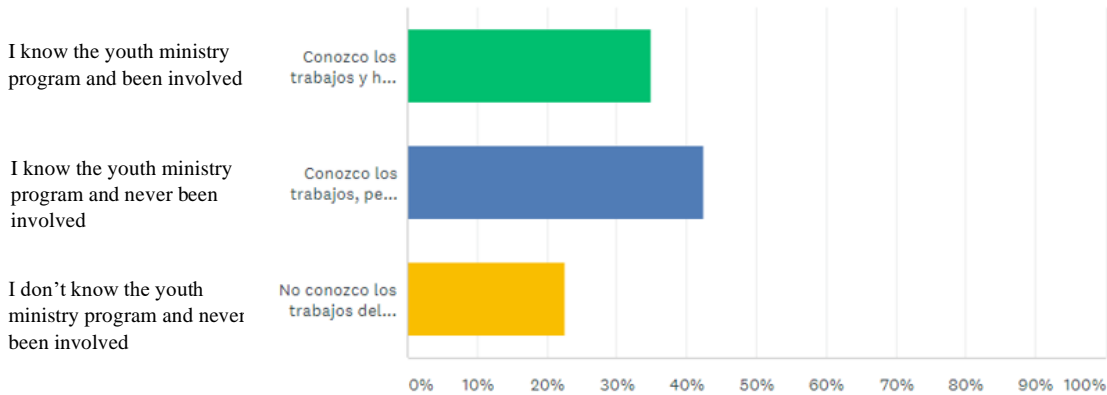


Figure 4: Integration from adults on Youth Ministry Activities

Young Adults' Survey

Moving on to the second research instrument, the young adults' survey, this online survey had thirteen participants. A copy of this survey can be found in Appendix B under the appendix session. Out of the thirteen participants, nine were between the age of eighteen to twenty-three; two, between twenty-four and twenty-nine; and two, between thirty and thirty-four. Seven were female, and six were male. Although it cannot be confirmed if this result is statically sustainable, a smaller gender gap between females and males can be highlighted. The gap is bridged by seven percent when compared to the general congregational survey, where the gap opens up close to forty percent.

It is interesting to emphasize that most participants, seventy percent to be specific, are college students or recent college graduates. This fact also unveils an untold story: full-time working young adults are less likely to feel part of a traditional so-called youth ministry. There were three participants that filled this profile at the focus group, and one of the things they manifested was that they feel caught in a sort of undefined zone inside the Church. They are too old for youth ministry, too young for adult ministry, and too different from being part of a one-

size-fits-all young adult ministry. When asked to amplify that statement, they highlighted that their lives become too heterogenous once they join a formal career workforce. Some become professionals but stay at home with their parents, others pursued their careers and move out from home yet remain single, while others become parents, some within a formal relationship while others do not. This reality is an opportunity and a challenge because it calls almost for one-on-one tailored made programing, which can become unsustainable for small and medium churches. Nevertheless, identifying common topics and finding multiple contexts to the same topic can become a way to tackle this multidisciplinary group. This insight poses a new set of challenges that might deviate from the presentation of the results of this work, but the researcher understands it is important enough to share with readers as another window of opportunities and certainly further exploration.

Analyzing the young adults' survey took longer than expected since, contrary to the congregation survey, where all questions were close-ended, this survey contained several open-ended questions from which every single answer was as diverse as the previous one. The first open-ended question asked participants to share at least three characteristics they would like to put at service of the Lord. Following are the verbatim of their answers:

Participant 1: committed, persistent, [*sic*] detail-oriented.

Participant 2: committed, humble, and wise.

Participant 3. honesty, visionary, and modern.

Participant 4: sociable, caring, and determine.

Participant 5: friendly, extrovert, and organize.

Participant 6: honest, vertical, and free.

Participant 7: responsible, calm, and service oriented.

Participant 8: communicator, active, and hunger of God's word.

Participant 9: service-oriented, responsible, and dedicated.

Participant 10: analytical, cool, and introverted.

Participant 11: intelligent, firm, and loyal.

Participant 12: reserved, persistent, and modern.

Participant 13: honest, sincere, and sociable.

Characteristics such as commitment, dedication, social skills, honesty, and loyalty seem to follow a common theme among participants. An opportunity to thread these characteristics and capitalize them to the benefit of the Church, ministry and themselves can become a powerful co-creation and integration strategy for leadership to follow through. Such qualities can be combined by creating support systems that will bridge the gaps between those who are more active than others within the church life dynamics.

Contrary to the previous question, when asked about their spirituality, it was difficult to identify a common thread between open-ended answers, except that all thirteen agreed that they would like the church to play a central role in nurturing their spirituality. This position goes in the opposite direction of the "Starbucks spirituality," where they can switch between faith options. Setran and Kiesling highlight this as a postmodernism virus that is affecting traditional churches.¹³³ This realization is gold for CBC and local ABC congregations. Curriculums can be fully developed to be fully dedicated to spiritual growth among real-life experiences. Here are the answers verbatim provided by eleven of the thirteen participants when asked how they define spirituality:

Participant 1: ...the way I translate my faith into my everyday life.

¹³³ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 90.

Participant 2: ...my relationship with God, intimate, honest, and loyal.

Participant 3: ...is connected with a triune God, with something bigger than me, that goes beyond this physical world. That my eyes cannot see, but my heart can feel.

Participant 4: ...a direct connection with God.

Participant 5: ...my intimate relation with the creator, just me and Him, no religions, no protocols, no rituals, nor traditions.

Participant 6: ...how important or big I decide to make my relationship with God, the stronger the relationship the larger my spirituality.

Participant 7: ...communicating with God, the way I perceived Him, and I express Him to others.

Participant 8: ...a connection with God that goes beyond religion.

Participant 9: ...conviction, purpose, and commitment with God.

Participant 10: ...I do not know.

Participant 11: ...the way God wants me to reach out to Him.

In the next chapter, as part of the project conclusion, several recommendations will be provided around this result.

When asked the daily challenges and topics that occupied their minds, the researcher encountered that the answers varied in nature and intensity. An array that goes from academic weight to time management to managing temptations, emotional health, and more was provided.

To completely share the answers from this question, a verbatim of all answers follow:

Participant 1: university work, trying to accomplish all responsibilities.

Participant 2: managing temptation daily and what the world has to offer.

Participant 3: social life, love life, finances, emotional stability.

Participant 4: staying organized, studying.

Participant 5: no one prepared me for the real world, knowing if Jesus loves me or not and how will I have to be accountable for my actions.

Participant 6: virtual classes and virtual university.

Participant 7: my language, daily adversities, and how to make sure they do not change my focus on God.

Participant 8: managing stress and anxiety.

Participant 9: school, auto esteem issues, managing criticism.

Participant 10: pandemic uncertainty.

Participant 11: how daily life struggles can distance us from God's will.

Participant 12: the pandemic, university, and not being able to go out.

Participant 13: virtual university.

Interestingly enough, only four out of the thirteen participants, when asked this question, included something related to their spiritual life: managing temptation, seeking Jesus' love, maintaining a relationship with God, and following God's will. When posing these answers against their unanimous desire to grow their spirituality, the researcher can think of two things. First, they cannot tie their daily lives and concerns around their spiritual growth, as if they were two separate entities. Second, they do not consider their spiritual needs as something they can manage at this point in life. For the purposes of insights and conclusions in the next chapter, both possibilities will be further developed.

Another fascinating insight that caught the researcher's attention is that although one hundred percent of participants answered they are committed to their spiritual growth, only seven out of the thirteen attests to be actively involved with church-related activities or programing.

When defining active, regular, and non-active attendance, virtual or physical modalities were considered to guide the answer. Active was defined as those who attend or participate in at least three to four church programming activities a month; regular meant two to one attendance per month, and no participation define as currently zero attendance to any church programming. These results are similar to what Setran and Kiesling share that, in terms of church attendance, a study maintains that only 30.9% of young adults attend religious services "regularly," meaning at least twice a month, 35.4% report never attending religious services, while the rest (about 34%) only attend very sporadically (once a month)¹³⁴. Even considering that COVID restrictions have provided for multiple technology-driven ways of interacting with church programming, the following graphic shows that not even the ease that such mediums bring has necessarily increased participation or support for some.

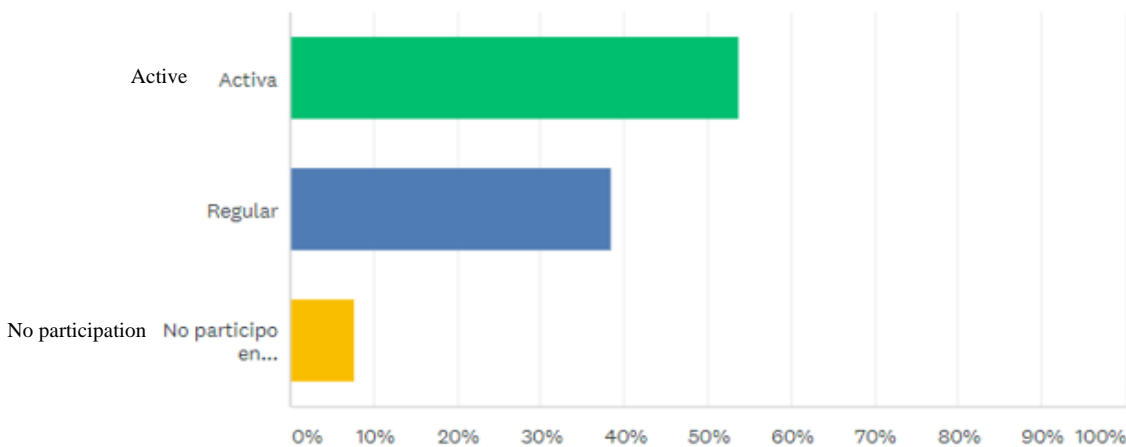


Figure 5: Young Adults' level of integration into church events

The above correlates to another question asked around their level of satisfaction with church programming. Only five out of the thirteen participants said they were highly satisfied

¹³⁴ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 85.

with current church programming. From the rest, five answered to be satisfied, two were neither satisfied nor unsatisfied, and surprisingly, only one answered to be unsatisfied with current church programming. Readers are invited to interpret this result cautiously, recognizing that the definition of satisfaction can be highly subjective. What satisfies one person might be the same thing that does not satisfy another. Furthermore, Mac, Martin, and Ewing suggest that millennials have been shaped by a different set of modern values where the definition of success and satisfaction are mostly placed on material things.¹³⁵

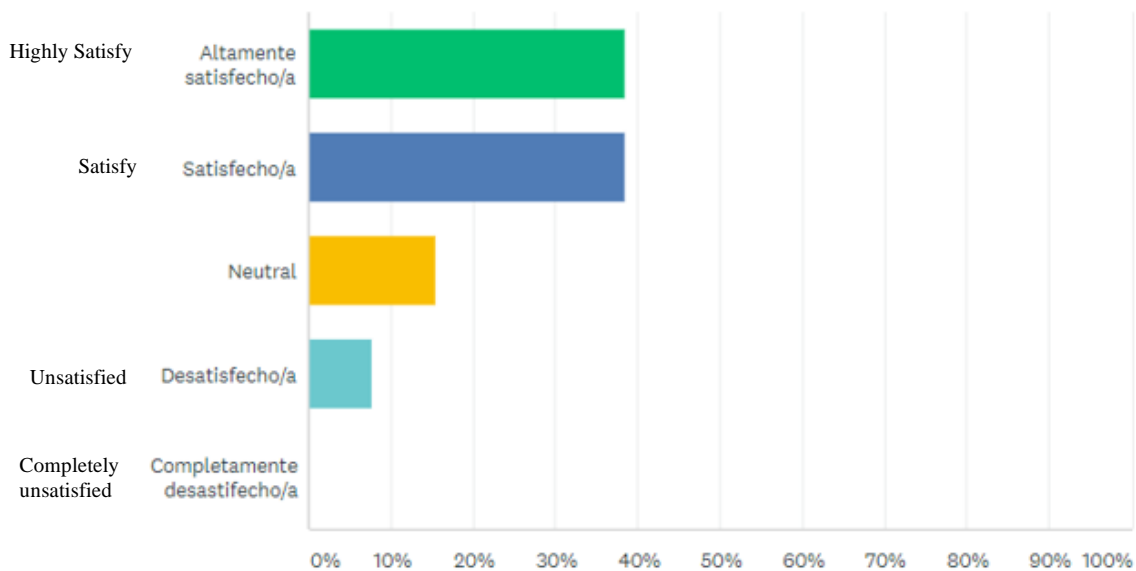


Figure 6: Level of satisfaction with current church programming

Although it can be alarming for some, this finding shows that the young adult segment seeks to appease “what is in it for me.”¹³⁶ However, this is another opportunity to combine what some may call secular topics with spiritual ones. Maybe this is another shout to stop studying

¹³⁵ Mac Instosh, Martin, and Ewing, *Youth definitions of success*, 493.

¹³⁶ Ham, Beemer, and Hillard, *Already Gone*, 27.

how God divided the sea for His people to cross and instead focus on how even when facing an imminent failure, we can follow God's leading. One insight that correlates to this finding from the focus group comes from a twenty-nine-year-old female who expressed that she would like to know if her financial decisions align with God's plan for her life. What if biblical stewardship can take a leap to the twenty-first-century economic system and teach young adults to properly manage their finances in ways that not only fulfill God's plans for their lives but also God's will for them to become active supporters of His kingdom here and now. It might be just a hypothesis for some at this point, but suggestions like this support the thesis statement that associating theological fundamentals, biblical truths, and everyday life issues will add relevancy and attract more young adults to attend and integrate back to their churches.

Another fascinating insight supporting the above statement comes from one of the participants' general comments, who manifested that deciding to be a Christian is about having a relationship with God. That relationship must expand to those who constitute the church community. Congregations do have the tools for cultivating such relationships and teaching young adults to cultivate their own relationship with God. Practices like translation, testimony, and detachment figure significantly in missionary church tradition.¹³⁷ Such practices help them build their identity in Christ. The participant added that watching a worship service through a social media platform can be self-consumed on demand and even by affinity or likes; however, setting roots within a church requires trust-based relationships and are built with time. This reveals another opportunity as they wish for a church that moves with them at their own speed.

Together with the deep-rooted traditions a historical church holds, if appropriately integrated, the opportunity of agility can systematically provide one-on-one conversations, reach

¹³⁷ Kenda Creasy Dean. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenager is Telling the American Church* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 106.

out with interactions, and personalize them. Young adults want to be known by their name, they want to be missed, they want to receive a call letting them know they are being missed, yet at the same time, they want their personal space to be respected. Again, something that cannot be scalable for some churches, but if systematically implemented, could be managed efficiently. This insight calls for agility and frequent adaptability. Organization, planning, and continuous monitoring for revision are vital to sustaining such a flexible structure without becoming a fixed rule.

As previously mentioned, to finalize this section, open-ended answers from this same survey provided plenty of raw material to develop several contextual plans to serve the young adult demographic and build a more relevant Bible study curriculum. When asked about what type of skillsets or personal attributes they would be willing to bring to the church community, words such as commitment, hard work, determination, socialization, technology, responsibility, service, communication, analytics, dedication, and loyalty—another window of opportunity of Education Ministries, local congregations, and pastoral leadership in general. In conclusion, this young adults’ survey leaves no doubts on how many local congregations need to integrate into their lives to help them build and sustain their spirituality. By the open-ended answers provided, it is evident that they are seeking a church that goes beyond the institutional to care for and groom them as an individual.

Young Adults’ Focus Group

Moving on to the third and last research instrument, there was the Focus Group for Young Adults. This experience happened on Saturday, February 20th, 2021, via Zoom, a secured online video platform. The open and guided conversation lasted about one and a half hours with

eleven young adults' attendance. Four were from sister churches, for a total of five ABC's congregations represented from the total attendance. The demographical representation was as follow:

- Eight females between the ages of eighteen to thirty-three
- Three males ages twenty, twenty-two, and twenty-four

The experience opened with the researcher of this thesis project presenting her problem, purpose, and thesis statements. Explaining the intention of the experience, assuring them that anonymity will always be kept. Along with the researcher, the sponsoring pastor was present to supervise the process. After salutations, his participation was strictly of an observer. Once the introduction was completed, all participants were asked to agree to participation and recording using the chat section, to which all agreed.

The conversation began by requesting each participant to say their name, age, and church. As an ice breaker question, the researcher asked each participant the reason they go to church. When asked why they go to church, many answered that it is a tradition and part of their lives' routines. Nevertheless, a few highlighted the importance of cultivating their relationship with God, a common thread with results obtained from the survey. Others stated that most of them started going to church very early in their formation and upbringing and now forms part of their personal needs. Interestingly enough, words such as gratefulness, faithfulness, and seeking of His presence also came up.

The second question was how identified they feel with the church they belong to and how that could change. As with the survey, see figure 7, the totality of participants answered that they feel identified with their local church.

Answered: 13 Skipped: 0

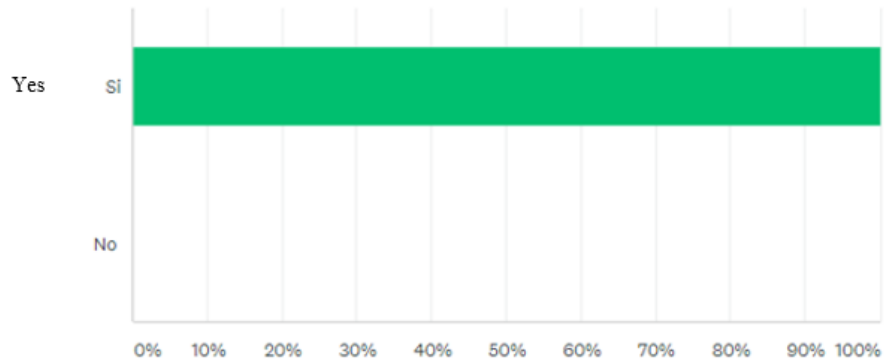


Figure 7: How identified do you feel with the church you belong to?

When answering the second part of the question, much time was consumed among them. Some mentioned that the opportunity to participate in other areas of church life has been vital to staying in church. This active participation has developed in some of them a great sense of identity and belonging with the church as a community. They want to belong, want to lead, want to learn, want to integrate, and have their safe spaces where they can dialogue about topics that might be considered controversial. This insight coincides with Melick, Melick, and Melick shared that the most satisfied church members in America worship at places where they feel like they belong, valued, and appreciated, and flourish.¹³⁸ While others agree to this last point, others suggested that church is their go-to place for spiritual fulfillment. Indeed, integration and education must go hand in hand. For this, Stanley suggests moving away from the traditional classroom format and developing coaching or mentoring programs.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Melick, Melick, and Melick, *Teaching that Transforms*, 696.

¹³⁹ Stanley, *Deep & Wide*, ch 10.

Halfway through the conversation, they were asked how often they read the Bible. The majority answer not often, followed by a rather long and awkward silence. Subsequently, when asked to describe an ideal Bible study setting, they became very vocal and opinionated. Virtual mediums were instant responses, but as the answers developed, other ideas such as outdoor settings and encounters at local coffee shops also became constant. Recognizing that the pandemic has kept everyone so distant from each other, they claim that having a Bible study at the church's parking lot can be attractive. Also, a few suggested capitalizing on virtual mediums and bringing young adults from other churches. As the discussion from the focus group provided ideas, it was an excellent opportunity to learn from others who share similar values but might live in different life contexts. This was yet another instance during the focus group where more time than expected was taken, as they started asking each other how x or y thing was being done at their church. This latter event recalled the events narrated in Acts chapter two, where those following Jesus share what they had among them and together grew the Church.

Lastly, about an hour and fifteen minutes into the experience, they were allowed to share any last thoughts. Many expressed their gratitude for the invitation to the experience. They mentioned how they were able to speak freely without being judged nor questioned for their answers. Some even suggested repeating the dynamics to continue nurturing their need further to understand the church's role in their lives. They also emphasized the importance of empathic leaders role, who are willing to listen more and judge less. On this last point, Melick, Melick, and Melick also comment that many studies demonstrate that caring spiritual leaders who share their knowledge lead to spiritual growth.¹⁴⁰ As a famous infant character is quoted: sharing is caring.

¹⁴⁰ Melick, Melick, and Melick *Teaching that Transforms*, 696.

Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, it is evident that young adults desire to grow their spirituality. They see in the church an undelegated responsibility for their spiritual growth. Undeniably, this is a generation overwhelmed with school, work, and life in general. They yearn for personal attention and are open to depositing their trust in places they feel cared for. They want to learn; they just want to learn things that matter for them and can be applied to their daily struggles. Institutionalized religious' topics do not represent relevancy. Personalization, applicability, and agility are crucial to adapt, review, and continuously delivered what young adults will consider relevant Bible studies.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Embracing New Paradigms

The results from this research project strongly validate the thesis statement established for this work. Contextualizing and modernizing young adults' Bible study content with topics of interest will add relevancy to their everyday lives and consequently generate attraction among them. A shift in paradigms is necessary to focus on the imperative reality that the twentieth-century church is losing traction and connectivity rapidly with young adults. They need the old-style sage's wisdom with innovative ways of delivery. The invitation is not to throw out the old but to transform it and integrate it with the new. Mid-twentieth century methods of how the church approaches theological education are no longer effective. Young adults respond to a different and fast-changing reality, time, and context. They have no patience for long-windedness.

Varnishing the old and portraying it as new is no longer an answer; transformation is imperative. Pre-defined curriculums and canned educational materials are part of an old paradigm. Trying to fit people into a series of standardized measures of spiritual growth is no longer an effective strategy.¹⁴¹ It is time to move away from the cookie-cutter approach. Young adults' greater respect for and attention to diversity must influence the way churches embrace change and the methods used to develop their curriculums and unique services. Leadership and local congregation together must team up and proactively embrace this transformational path.

¹⁴¹ Clark, *Adoptive Church*, 114.

Indeed, the route for this transformation is not a straight-line, and stating a single methodology to approach new requirements to transform young adults' curriculum will be irresponsible. However, a starting point must be created; a plan must be designed. As Reggie McNeal establishes, spiritual growth occurs in baby steps that cannot be measured but must be taken.¹⁴² A practical first step can be transforming the educational model and materials used within CBC and other local Baptist congregations. Utilizing the insights presented from the results of this thesis project can be capitalized in multiple directions. Making available the results and insights of the previous chapter, may trigger creativity, and the compilation of themes may make it easier to develop new and up-to-date Bible study material. These materials could not only be tailor-made to take care of current circumstances but can be flexible enough to adapt fast and effortlessly. Appendixes H, I, and J are examples of the first three Bible studies created as part of the implementation part of this intervention plan. They portray the simplicity of their development process, as they are meant to ignite a participative study rather than a unilateral education.

Creative methods must be deliberately conceived to introduce the new paradigms this emerging generation yearns for. A mix of formal with informal didactical mechanisms is to be cultivated. Here, the experience of the members of the Educational Ministry of each local congregation plays a central role. This is an opportunity for leadership to embrace boldness and make a leap of faith, knowing that God will unveil the way after every given step. The same way the psalmist asked God to show him the way and teach him His path¹⁴³, the local church is to ask for God's guidance and purpose towards this important generation currently running away from

¹⁴² McNeal, *A Work of Heart*, 30.

¹⁴³ Psalms 25:5a, New International Version Bible.

their pews. A first step must be taken, and that is precisely what these recommendations provide, a series of first steps that can accommodate to a local church context.

Similarly, as the Lord did for Moses and Paul when they decided to take the first step, He will do the same for the local church and beyond. The leadership models from these men portray how they were willing to break from certain paradigms of their own times to achieve bigger and greater things. If they were able of such accomplishments, then the twenty-first-century church leadership is called to do the same. They were pioneers, intrepid, and, most importantly, obedient to God's will for His people. Many folks probably thought that both Moses and Paul were mad to take under their wings someone as young and inexperienced as Joshua and Timothy, respectively, were.

God is looking for leaders, like Moses, Paul, and many others, who are willing to take risks to expand His kingdom amidst their contexts. Nevertheless, let us be reminded that the Scripture is clear when it affirms that age is not a qualifier for spirituality.¹⁴⁴ This convocation from God shall be extra special for Baptists congregations as they acknowledge that all people are intertwined and united by a mutual relationship with Jesus Christ. That link among each other most moves its membership in love to allow for a healthy community of believers.¹⁴⁵ This affirmation should ignite the passion, empathy, and creativity, characteristics that will be partially explored in the following section.

¹⁴⁴ 1 Timothy 4:12, New International Version Bible.

¹⁴⁵ Gutiérrez, *Herencia e identidad*, 30.

Additional Literature Interaction

Following research work and discovered results, new and additional literature was consulted to identify converging points to align better and improve the recommendations from research findings that will follow in this chapter. As previously mentioned, three main qualities appear to be critical requirements for church leadership to be able to go ahead and embrace the shared recommendations: passion, empathy, and creativity. Therefore, adopting new paradigms is a requirement. Approaching the recommendations from this work requires a leap of faith, courage, and an open mind. Assuming risks and moving outside the comfort zone is also imperative. Thompson establishes that church leadership must recognize that there will be tensions between adapting to the needs of young adults while trying to preserve traditions but recognizing such tensions will help any congregation bridge the current gaps among both sides.¹⁴⁶

Considering the size of the CBC congregation plays a crucial role in how small and medium-sized churches should approach any transformation path. Holly Catterton Allen suggests five best practices to assure the adoption and acceptance of new paradigms among members as frictionless as possible. She talks about¹⁴⁷:

1. Providing meaningful participation within an intergenerational worship experience.
2. Consider new models of biblical education.
3. Support and encourage the family nucleus to own their own spiritual formation.
4. Share the stories of change with others.
5. Involve all and act together.

¹⁴⁶ Thompson, *Young People*, 145.

¹⁴⁷ Allen, Holly Catterton and Jason Brian Santos, *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches through Intergenerational Ministry* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2018), 97.

When analyzing this new literature, it validates the findings shared and the thesis statement this work states. Following these best practices can aid any congregation similar in size and conditions like CBC begin a groundbreaking transformation around their educational ministry.

About groundbreaking curriculum, McNeal suggests that it must include experience, observation, and participation.¹⁴⁸ A multifaceted curriculum will provide hands-on interactions that move away from the old fashion textbooks and present the Bible and real-life circumstances as the new instruments for biblical education in a comprehensive but nimble approach. With all the alternative settings that post-Covid reality offers, the dynamics of group settings are now easier and faster to coordinate. Clark suggests that providing ownership to the targeted population in the ideation and co-creation of such curriculum encourages participation and creates an environment that allows frictionless encounters among participants.¹⁴⁹ Integrating young adults to develop their own educational process will also serve as a strategy to increase their involvement level with ministry and church activities.

Integration is crucial, and, as per Kenda C. Dean, it comes from participation. The statistics shared by Dean on Christian young adults' church participation across different theological traditions in the continental United States are as follow:

- Seven percent actively attend and support their local congregation activities,
- Forty-three percent regularly attend and support their local congregation activities,
- Twelve percent never attend and support their local congregation activities.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ McNeal, *A Work of Heart*, 188.

¹⁴⁹ Clark, *Adoptive Church*, 72.

¹⁵⁰ Dean, *Almost Christian*, 41.

There is encouragement when comparing these statistics with the results of the Young Adults Survey performed under this project. This question shows an active participation rate of fifty-three percent, regular participation of thirty-nine percent, and inactiveness of eight percent. Although there is not enough statical representation to correlate results, directionally speaking, somehow, it seems that both spectrums of the statistics are presented towards CBC favor. This latter literature interaction can be summarized in one simple yet powerful statement: Central Baptist Church and many of our sister congregations must pick and choose from a pot filled with an array of opportunities and act on them. Opportunities that can be implemented based on their own realities, sizes, capacities, and context.

Nothing but Opportunities

The sum of all presented results and insights add to one extraordinary outcome: opportunities. To provide a structure to the presentation of such opportunities, the researcher will follow McNeal's innovative approach to curriculum development. First, McNeal establishes that any educational experience must contain space for experience, observation, and participation.¹⁵¹ As expressed in chapter one, the project's purpose statement of this Doctor of Ministry action research thesis was to explore key element components that will aid in creating a biblical teaching curriculum for the young adults, defined as between eighteen to thirty-four years old at Central Baptist. Gathered results provide plenty of such components and enough raw material for multiple curriculum tailor-made constructions. The recommendations that will follow have been identified as crucial element components that focus on three main aspects: a constant from captured insights: spirituality growth, incorporation of relevant topics, and faith nurturing.

¹⁵¹ McNeal, *A Work of Heart*, 188.

Spirituality Growth

All human beings have spiritual needs. Cultivating that common need through learning can provide powerful spiritual and personal renewal.¹⁵² Spirituality must be experienced. How Christian churches choose to take advantage of that opportunity is critical. McNeal establishes that solid spiritual leadership is a work of heart, and it needs to be competent, timely, and contextual.¹⁵³ Spirituality building must be at the core of the church. This thesis research work unveiled the fact that young adults expect the church to play an active role in shaping their spirituality experience. This represents an unnegotiable responsibility for the local congregation to search for innovative ways to claim the spiritual cultivation of our emerging leaders from the world. How? Creatively, intentionally, and continuously! Insights from this research work suggest that young adults perceive spirituality as a personal experience in which a relationship with God can grow with time and intimacy. Several indications stand out from this statement that can direct local church leadership ideas: spirituality is personal, spirituality is experienced, spirituality is relational, and should have room for growth and be nurtured.

On a personal level, young adults need practical Christ-centered tools to help them nurture their spirituality. An extension of the new curriculum to be created can include “at-home devotionals” that provide a continuation of the topic being studied and contextualize in the reality of their spirituality. A peer-to-peer accountability system can be implemented among them, where they can reach to each other and share their own experiences. Not only do they support each other, but they begin to create a community. This way, they start participating,

¹⁵² McNeal, *A Work of Heart*, 183.

¹⁵³ *Ibid*, 217.

nurturing, training, and empowering each other's spiritual growth. A role, Young Adults Ministry in the 21st century must welcome.

Flourishing their spirituality will allow young adults to experience how something intangible can become tangible, authentic, and genuine in their lives. Hence, enabling young adults to develop their relationship with Christ and others further. They can be encouraged to build relationships with others through communication, follow up with trust and need. An opportunity for cross-generational mentorship can be explored. Small groups with no more than five adults mix with young adults can be created and embark on spiritual journeys together. Such dynamics can allow each generational member to experience their spirituality through each other's eyes. Spirituality viewed through the lens of accompaniment encourages its members to crisscross and connect the borders of age and stage that often separate them.¹⁵⁴

Incorporating Relevant Topics

Undeniably, college and post-college years are critical periods in anyone's life.¹⁵⁵ Topics like the ones that emerge from research become more evident and ever so present in young adults' lives. The Church cannot run away from managing these topics nor delegate them to what the modern world has to say about them. The same way the Church must embrace the spiritual growth of their congregation, they must approach, face front, these uncomfortable but necessary topics. The opportunity lies in how the local church can close the gap between biblical teachings and challenging topics such as the ones exposed from the research:

- sexuality,

¹⁵⁴ Allen and Santos, *InterGenerate: Transforming*, 173.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 113.

- self-esteem,
- depression,
- anxiety,
- morals and values,
- addiction,
- finances,
- thoughts of self-harm,
- time management,
- peer pressure,
- self-love,
- love life,
- homosexuality,
- suicide,
- conflict management,
- out wed children bearing,
- emotional health,
- family life, and
- temptations.

Interestingly enough, the compilation of verbatim topics captured from the results provides enough raw material to develop a twelve to twenty-four months curriculum, depending on the depth and width provided to each topic. Furthermore, if the pacing and unstructured timeframes were to be the approach, there can be enough working material for up to thirty-six months’

worth. With this in mind, several ideas come to mind as alternatives to develop such necessary topics with relevancy and reverence.

Idea #1: Self spiritual formation academy

A local spiritual formation academy can be carried out with face-to-face and virtual meetings. These experiences are meant to be delivered by young adults to young adults. On this untraditional spiritual formation academy, a series of topics can be chosen within the cyclicity that each congregation decides. The topics are assigned along with biblical passages to teams and are develop and carry out by each one. Pastoral guidance is present but only for theological direction and clarification. At each meeting, a team would have developed the assigned topic and guide a conversation with the other participants to share their inputs. Such dynamics will allow, on a rotation basis, for young adults to become teachers and students. They will need to prepare for each assigned meeting, parting from the topic and the assigned biblical passage. Again, the pastoral role will be one of companionship only. At the end of each cycle, those young adults that have shown more interest or superior teaching skills can “graduate” to another role within the local church.

Idea #2: Seasonal retreats

Intertwined with the spiritual formation academy cycles, seasonal retreats can be inserted into the calendar. The retreats will be on site. The selection of topics will come from previously identified topics. This selection will allow the church leadership to explore each topic further and design dynamics around them. This type of experience can further work if presented by professionals with experience in the most popular topics. Each retreat can have a topic, for

example, Summer Retreat of Emotional Health, Sexuality, Addiction, among others.

Professionals such as counselors, therapists, psychologists, financial planners can be invited to develop the chosen topics from a non-theological perspective. This non-theological perspective can later be connected to future spiritual formation academy cycles creating an everlasting loop of ongoing material to address. This interconnection of faith and practicality can bring discipline and a sense of seriousness to the approach. The right balance between informality with formality can help a program or initiative gain traction among young adults.

Faith Nurturing

In the same way, humans are not born in a vacuum; church dynamics cannot be executed in a vacuum. Christianity is not just privately true; requiring our attention for only two hours on a Sunday service or a Bible Study; it is a public affirmation that affects the totality of life.¹⁵⁶ A quest for the truth and not self-service must be directed. It requires leadership from discipline. Awareness for the Cross needs to be rescued among many Christians, young adults not being the exception. As revealed by this research results, the fact that young adults are not even considering their spiritual needs as something they can manage at this point in their lives is alarming. Facilitating platforms and contexts where young adults can nurture and practice their faith and connect it to their daily life's issues and concerns around their spiritual growth is pivotal. Combining both adds practicality to faith; below two additional ideas that might provide some direction on how something like this could be implemented.

¹⁵⁶ Pettit, *Foundations of Spiritual Formation*, 49.

Idea #3: Virtual spiritual gatherings

Integrating the new normal that post-pandemic reality has brought to everyday lives must be capitalized on. A year ago, exclusively online worship service would have been seen as irreverent, blasphemous, or nonsense. Today, although some in-person activity has been regained, the virtual experience is part of the ecclesiastical program of many church traditions. Virtual congregating has come to stay for good. This new normal also represents another opportunity when considering how busy young adults' calendars are. Sparing them the driving time and saving them that space in their agendas can create pathways to new experiences physically distanced but spiritually connected. Parallel virtual programming can mirror those who cannot or would instead not physically visit a sanctuary. Making church a virtual alternative by design can facilitate experiences that help young adults congregate and actively participate from not only worship but learning experiences that will support them to cultivate their faith.

Idea #4: Biblical Site locations virtual tours

Once again, capitalizing on the new normal of virtuality and following some secular trends that the pandemic has brought, leaders and teachers can calendarize a complete cycle of virtual tours of places, sites, and locations referred to in the Bible. Visual aids as a didactical tool have been proven to support and enhanced the learning experience. Mixing the quench for traveling that the pandemic has prohibited with the satisfaction of meeting new places can become a winning combination. At the same time, placing a shape, form, and locations to many places that many only know through their childhood Bible School illustrations can help transform their own paradigms of what the scenarios of Jesus' footprint looked like. This idea can be tied to ideas one and three and interconnect to support the topics being developed.

Capitalizing on the Opportunities

As previously mentioned in chapter three, several steps have been taken towards the initial phased to implement some of the recommendations. Following is a brief explanation of the context and content of each experience implemented during the intervention period.

Virtual Worship Services

Although post-pandemic Sunday service has been held virtually for more than a year, nothing had been done for the younger population of the church. Capitalizing on the acquired technology and the willingness to this new normal way of congregating, virtual worship services began in February for young adults. These worship services are exclusively for young adults, and their format allows them to direct and facilitate the experience among themselves. Pastoral body members serve as facilitators, providing guidance and resources, yet the experience allows full integration and participation from young adults.

Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea

One of the most constant findings from this thesis project was the apprehensiveness that young adults have to traditional ways. Young adults are not interested in one-size-fits-all experiences nor traditional Sunday school methodology or topics. Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea was created as an untraditional Bible study. It is indeed a Bible study without the name. Topics from the findings are developed from a Bible-centric approach and are offered virtually (appendixes H, I, and J). There are no books, no formal order of items. A Bible base is established, a few trigger questions are shared, and an open conversation develops from there. The introspective questions are meant to ignite dialogue and participation.

Three Bible studies were given with an upward tendency in attendance during the intervention period, including young adults from sister churches. Attendance was as follows: March – 7 participants, April – 11 participants, and May – 13 participants. Next quarter provides for one Bible study of this kind every month.

Worship Afternoon

This experience took place on May 29th and was the first presential activity since the pandemic, Young Adults have had. After two months of positive response to all virtual encounters, a face-to-face experience was decided, and the end of the academic year was the best motive to meet. A worship afternoon was celebrated in the parking lot of the church. Young adults from other sister churches were invited. A total attendance of around forty young adults was expected; a total of sixty-one arrived. Of those sixty-one, twenty-three were from the local church, which means perfect attendance, plus companions. In addition, about twenty adults, leaders, and non-leaders, from the general congregation joined the young adults in this experience as a gesture of companionship and validation.

The primary problem this ministry project was designed to address was that of a lack of consistent Young Adult attendance and involvement in church activities. While results were not dramatic, the consistently rising attendance at the three Bible Studies and the larger-than-expected attendance at the afternoon of worship were encouraging. They give an initial indication of what could happen if these types of ministries are further developed and implemented in the church.

Therefore, a calendar for the next quarter has been tentatively set. As shown on the calendar, besides continuing with Bible-centric studies and virtual worship services, additional

items recommended from findings are included, such as the virtual site tour and a virtual retreat which will happen in August. For record and references purposes, this is how the following quarter calendar is starting to look like:

June 2021	July 2021	August 2021	September 2021
<p>Post-intervention period calendarization</p> <p>Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea: Values – 16th</p> <p>Virtual biblical site tour – 25th</p>	<p>Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea: Homosexuality – 21st</p>	<p>Virtual Retreat – 14th</p> <p>Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea: Managing Peer Pressure – 18th</p>	<p>Virtual Worship service: presenting a new academic year to the Lord – 8th</p> <p>Virtual Bible, Coffee or Tea: TBD – 22th</p>

Future Research Merits

As mentioned in chapter four, a possible area of future research might be to explore further how young adults can integrate into overall church dynamics. This thesis research focuses on retaining young adults through relevant Bible studies and, although it provides some hints around the integration subject, but not enough. Nevertheless, it can be worth exploring essential means of integration to deepen their roots and identity with Christ through the Church. One meaningful insight from the current research work highlights the fact that many young adults feel caught in a sort of undefined zone inside the church; where they are too old for youth ministry, too young for adult ministry, and get this; too different to be part of a one size fits all young adult ministry. This gap hinders them from actively getting involved in their local church dynamics.

Those are the same young adults that have manifested they refuse to accept the new responsibilities of adulthood, much less to assume additional responsibilities.¹⁵⁷ This certainly shows a tension that needs to be resolved to ensure church succession and growth at the local level. Perhaps the developing of spiritual maturity as outlined in this project will aid in developing that greater sense of responsibility. Within this research project, when they were asked to expand on such a statement, they highlighted that once they join a formal career workforce, their lives become incredibly hectic.

In addition, life context varies among them as some become professionals but stay at home with parents, others pursued their careers and move out from home yet remain single, while others become parents, some within a formal relationship while others do not. This diverse reality is both an opportunity and a challenge for several local congregations as it almost calls for a one-on-one tailored program that in small and medium churches can become unsustainable. Future exploration around these possibilities and challenges might be merited by these types of churches, with a genuine intention to reach their young adults' populations.

Where Do We Go from Here?

Forward! Let us embrace the Apostle Paul's word when he stated *I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining forward to what is ahead, I press on toward the goal.*¹⁵⁸ The results and insights from this project offer readily available opportunities for application. It might be unknown territory for some, but passion and purpose can lead the way. McNeal stresses the importance of leadership in

¹⁵⁷ Setran and Kiesling, *Spiritual Formation*, 225.

¹⁵⁸ Philippians 3: 13-14a, New International Bible.

identifying personal interests and tying them to a life purpose.¹⁵⁹ Authentic leadership is humble enough to admit the areas where there is space for improvement. The moment church leadership decides to be honest with themselves, they will start being honest with their congregations, including young adults.

Besides the initial steps taken as part of this thesis project, the use of the provided information is intended to also ignite newer ideas and proactive changes to the way American Baptist churches develop and identify educational materials for all generations, particularly for young adults. Fostering and adopting new didactical strategies along with shared insights will lead to new pathways. Accommodating unorthodox learning is what this untraditional generation wants and needs. Furthermore, through unorthodox mechanisms is where young adults find relevancy nowadays. In a hyperactive society, the Church must not stay stalled. Anchoring on the Scriptures' liveliness opens an easy door to Bible-centric studies. In the same way, the Lord's Word is alive and compelling, so different teaching methodologies must be also.

The world as we have known it for the last several centuries is giving way to constant change.¹⁶⁰ Timing is crucial. Adapting to the dynamics of local ecclesiastical communities serve as a powerful strength to those willing to transform and be transformed by God's divine will.¹⁶¹ This research project suggests changing the forms of learning using the whole Word of God. It is asking the local churches to take a leap of faith. It is time to trust that The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father has sent in Jesus' name, to teach us everything we need as we move

¹⁵⁹ McNeal, *A Work of Heart*, 36.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 78.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, 187.

forward.¹⁶² Leadership must organize, delegate, and decide to set milestones on what and how they can consume from supplied recommendations and give that first step.

Why Now?

Why now? Truth be told, the conversation around reaching and attracting the younger generation is not new to churches. There has been plenty of conversations and many good intentions, but somehow no concrete and steady actions. Allen affirms in her research that churches have been accustomed to working only with band-aids short-term solutions, which make results only temporary.¹⁶³ Enough with temporary resolutions; young adults need permanency. They need the appropriate guidance to discern between good and evil, constructive, and destructive, from what truly edifies from what misguides, misinforms, and misleads. It is time to realize that the same way COVID-19 shook the ground of many congregations and forced them to change, the other virus called losing young adults, must also force congregations the same way to act immediately. This hemorrhage must be stopped at once.

Concluding Statements

Contrary to the traditional one size fits all old paradigm of teaching, this thesis research project provides an ample buffet of alternatives that CBC and any local American Baptist Church congregation can choose from to tailor-made a young adults' curriculum or educational material suffice their specific needs. It provides an array of relevant topics that can be developed in multiples ways, but it also recommends several strategies for implementation and integration into

¹⁶² John 14:26, New International Version Bible.

¹⁶³ Allen and Santos, *InterGenerate: Transforming*, 32.

the church planning process. Precisely, planning is critical. There is no room for improvisation or chance. There is not much time to waste. In the same way, this current pandemic reality has brought about many changes to human behaviors, habits, and way of living; it has also posed a more significant challenge for many congregations to retain and grow their membership quickly. Young adult membership is not exempt from this reality.

Three months of experience from the intervention plan of this thesis work proves that intentional planning towards young adults works. It also confirms that developing topics young adults consider relevant from a Bible-centric approach calls their attention and improves their attendance, increases their involvement, and promotes church life integration. Immediately after the research fieldwork finished, even before completing data analysis, a virtual co-creation conversation took place with about five young adults. This action showed them proactiveness and agility from leadership and pastoral body. The fact that the research part had significant participation and left many curious for more, especially the target audience of young adults, was the ideal beginning point. The timing was pivotal.

Churches can decide to dwell on the past and settle to what COVID-19 has force congregations to change, or they can decide to transform and transcend to new ways of doing things. Many of these changes have been favorable to many. Adoption ratios to new forms of things have sky-rocketed among humans and society overall. These post-COVID realities open a window of endless opportunities to guide the old and the young to a new era of doing Church. In the same way, CBC was once founded to serve its adjacent community and now has a geographically diverse membership, now is the time to inquire how can COVID-19 help expand its frontiers. The virtuality of this pandemic enables the local congregation to grow its

geographics and demographics. Combining physical and remote experience can become the new commonplace for young adults to grow and be groomed in the Scripture.

Finding that commonplace where young adults feel welcome can set the ideal stage of relevancy. Capitalizing on the virtual spaces they are currently familiar with through work, university, and even social experiences, with a twist of spiritual growth. This same space at church can provide familiarity and proximity to their current reality. Such moves toward the young can make them feel wanted, cared for, and nurture, all vital to guarantee the future of our congregations. More so if the Church wants to play a vital role in their spiritual growth. Owning that spiritual realm is non-negotiable. The nurturing of the spiritual domain of any human being should be a collaborative endeavor between the individual and the Church. Being able to bridge the didactical gap between church curriculum and young adults' necessity through hybrid virtual and physical spaces can indeed be that commonplace.

The author of this thesis project can testify that the initial implementation of several recommendations resulting from findings has confirmed the proposed thesis statement: if Central Baptist Church established relevant biblical teaching material for their young adults, they might be inclined to attend church more often. The implementation of relevant Bible-centric studies through untraditional channels and means has demonstrated an increase in attendance and participation of local young adults and other sister churches. The challenge of sustaining initial results now becomes part of the mission for the author of this project. Mid- and long-term planning and continuous development of additional material will be essential. Also, factors such as seasonality and delivery methods must continue to be assessed and reviewed to assure attendance and participation remains and grows.

Because of the similarities and peculiarities of Puerto Rico's geography and demographics throughout the Island, the results shared through this work are easily adaptable in many American Baptist Church congregations locally. Furthermore, if any sister church deems it necessary to replicate the field research work, the methodology and research instruments shares in this work should simplify the process. Any reader from a sister church with access to this thesis work may utilize all three research instruments following a similar methodology and captured their own results specific to their congregation. Access to online platforms used to execute this research project is publicly available, and research instruments can be found in the appendix section. All is set; only action, will, and passion are needed.

In the end, we must seek to move these young adults to understand how they must become part of Jesus's kingdom. The stage has been set; the means have been given, the ideas are clearly written and exemplify. Several teaching strategies have been provided to make the biblical learning process both relevant and pertinent. Every day the local church lets pass by is a lost opportunity to gain them back. Anchoring young adults on Christ's Word is long past due. A culture of continuous Christian learning and formation in nontraditional ways can lead the Church to form long-term young adult Christians who will contribute to their churches and society.

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All sources were used in the writing, but not all were quoted.

Appendices

Appendix B
Young Adults Questionnaire

Instructions: Please answer every question to your best knowledge. Before starting, be sure you have read and sign a general or short consent form. Your submission of this questionnaire will be understood that you complied with consent submission.

1. Define yourself in five to ten words.

2. How long have you been involved in church life?

3. How do you define spirituality?

4. What are the biggest struggles you face on everyday life?

5. What kind of topics would you like to hear at church from the pulpit or thru Bible Study?

6. Are you satisfied with church programming?

7. How do you consider your level of participation at ministry activities?

Demographics:

8. Please select the age group that better represents you.

18 – 23 24-29 30 - 34 35+

9. Gender:

Female Male Prefers not to identify

10. What is your current relationship within our congregation?

Member Visit Friend

Appendix C

Young Adults Focus Group Guide

Welcome and explanation of the research.

General instructions:

This is a participative dynamic, where all are expected to contribute. There are no right or wrong answers, as they all be analyzed and taken into consideration. It is essential to respect all contributions; we are not here to judge anyone but to listen to everyone.

Therefore, answer every question to your best knowledge.

Before starting, be sure you have read and sign a general or short consent form. Through such consent, you have given the research permission to audio-record/video-record/photograph yourself as part of the participation in this study.

Let us begin!

Introductions

Going around the room:

1. Why do you come to church?

2. How old were you when you started coming to church?

3. From the current church program, which one fulfills you the most? Why?

4. Do you believe that church life relates to your everyday life? Why?

5. Do you consider yourself a spiritual believer? Why?

6. What do you think about the Bible? What does it mean to you?

7. How often do you read the Bible?

8. Any additional contributions you would like to share?

Hand out a piece of paper and pencil:

Without writing out writing your name, answer the following questions:

1. What are the biggest struggles you face in everyday life?
2. How did the Scriptures have to help you with those everyday life situations?
3. How can the church become more relevant to your life?

Demographics:

1. Please select the age group that better represents you.

18 – 23 24-29 30 - 34 35+

2. Gender:

Female Male Prefers not to identify

3. What is your current relationship within our congregation?

Member Visit Friend

4. If you are a member, how long have you been a member of our church?

Less than 5 years 6 – 10 years 11 – 19 years 20+ years

Appendix D
Permission Request Letter

January 26, 2021

Rev. Dr. Roberto Dieppa
Sponsor Password

Dear Rev. Dr. Dieppa:

As a graduate student in the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting a field work project as part of the requirements for a Doctorate in Ministry degree. The title of my research project is Relevant Bible Centric Studies as a means to retain Young Adults, and the purpose of my research is to understand what topics, life issues, and spiritual needs the young adults' population would like to see integrated into a Bible centric curriculum.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research at the local congregation you pastor and contact your church members to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to go to a SurveyMonkey.com and click on the link provided. The data collected will be used to understand and explore relevant insights around the matter of research. The focus group will be handled through the Zoom platform on a later scheduled day.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, respond by email to jlugo8@liberty.edu. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Rev. Jessica Lugo-Meléndez
Candidate for the Doctor of Ministry Degree
Liberty University, School of Divinity

Appendix E
Formal Approval from Sponsor Pastor



[External] Re: Application Permission for Field Work Doctoral Project

From: Roberto Dieppa

Fri 1/29/2021 8:06 PM

To: Lugo, Jessica

[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content.]

"You are authorized to proceed."

Sent from my iPhone

Jan. 27, 2021, at 4:49 p.m., Lugo, Jessica wrote:

Hello Pastor;

God bless you. Following our conversation and for records of doctoral work, I include the formal permit letter (as approved by the university) requesting your permission to be able to carry out the necessary research work to complete my thesis project.

I also include for reference purposes the 3 instruments that I will be using for this work.

1. General survey to the Congregation
2. Survey Questionnaire to young people
3. Group interview with young people

They will be executed online and in our Spanish language.

Thank you; Jessica

Rev. Jessica Lugo
DMin. Expository Preaching and Teaching Program

**Appendix F
Focus Group Promotional Flyer**

H A B L E M O S
LA BIBLIA, SU RELEVANCIA & YO

¿ASISTIRIAS A UN ESTUDIO BIBLICO QUE SEA RELEVANTE PARA TU VIDA?*

● MUY PROBABLE
● PROBABLE
● POCO PROBABLE

87% 13%

8pm

SÁBADO, 20 FEB. 2021
ZOOM ID: 839 5517 4878
PASSCODE: 807875

¿PIENSAS QUE LOS ESTUDIOS BÍBLICOS CONECTAN A LA REALIDAD EN TU VIDA?*

87% 13%

¿DESEARIAS CONECTAR MAS CON TU IGLESIA?*

87% 13%

*CREANDO UNA CULTURA DE CONECCION EN LA IGLESIA: GALLUP, 2014.

Let's Talk
Bible, its relevancy, and I

Would you attend a Bible study that you consider relevant?

Red – most probably

Yellow – probably

Blue – not probably

Do you think most Bible studies connect to the reality of your life?

Would you like to connect more with your church?

Time

Date

Zoom ID and Passcode

Source of questions.

Appendix G
IRB Approval Letter

January 11, 2021

Jessica Lugo
Kenneth Hood

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY20-21-390 Relevant Bible Centric Studies as a mean to retain Young Adults

Dear Jessica Lugo and Kenneth Hood,

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:

Your project will consist of quality improvement activities, which are not "designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge" according to 45 CFR 46. 102(l).

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

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

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

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

Appendix H

Lesson #1: Sexuality

Welcome

Suggested Biblical Narrative:

Genesis 1 and 2

Guiding Questions:

1. What is the diving order provided from this narrative
2. Genesis 1:26 - 27 declares that human beings are created by God. What do you think of such a statement? How can you reflect the image of God in all your decisions, including sexuality?

Prayer

Appendix I

Lesson #2: Time Management

Welcome

Suggested Biblical Narrative:

Ecclesiastes 3:1-11

Guiding Questions:

1. What are the areas of your life you understand you need to dedicate more time?
2. What are the things you do where you waste your time vs. invest your time?
3. How good stewardship calls us to better manage our time?

Prayer

Appendix J

Lesson #3: Finances

Welcome

Suggested Biblical Narrative:

1 Peter 4:10

Guiding Questions:

1. Quick personal finance assessment?
2. Guide conversation from results.
3. How good stewardship calls us to manage our finances better?

Prayer