

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

**Youth to Adult Continuance of Faith:  
How to Achieve Young Adult Retention Through Pre-Adult Instruction**

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

By  
**Michael L. Tyree Jr.**

Lynchburg, Virginia

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**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

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Mentor Name & Title

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Reader Name & Title

## THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

Michael L. Tyree Jr.

Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity, April 23, 2020

Mentor: Dr. Beauchamp, Lance

This project grows out of the late teen through the twenty-something absence of young adult believers as active Crawford Road Baptist Church (CRBC) members. This phenomenon, young adult absence, is experienced in many churches and therefore worthy of research to discover causal influences and possible mitigations. Project research included scholarly books and direct interviews with ministry experts. The project topic is youth to the young adult continuance of faith and how to achieve young adult retention through preadult instruction. Research in this effort has included discipleship, church growth, worship, culture, and relevant young adult statistical data review. This project will shed light on the issues and realities that affect young adult retention in the faith and give practical recommendations for mitigating situational problems that lead to young adults departing the church.

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## **Abbreviations**

DMIN

*Doctor of Ministry*

LUSOD

*Liberty University School of Divinity*

CRBC

*Crawford Road Baptist Church*

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Young adults are not present in the church, at least not like other age groups. Inside the church today, all along the Bible Belt (Southern states where conservative Christianity prevails), one sees many seniors, middle-agers but not many young adults. In the past, young adults have tended to return to church after significant life-changing events. Marriage, the birth of a child, or even the passing of a loved one could prompt one to return to church. The statistics support the fact that young adults are missing at church. According to Lifeway research, 66% of the young adults active as a youth in the church are not attending church now. Between the age of 18 and 22, they have chosen not to come to church.<sup>1</sup> Young adult absence is a genuine concern. What causes their exodus? What roles do culture, church teaching, church member relationships, parents, and the young adults themselves play in young adult church absence? Is postmodern culture the problem?

The culture is increasingly evil, and it does have caustic effects on the young people exposed to it. The culture of this nation has continued to become more self-absorbed, ungodly, but was predicted in the Bible.<sup>2</sup> The Apostle Paul did say that things would get worse in 2 Timothy 3:13, so no one should be surprised as the culture worsened to include things unthinkable just a few years ago. The culture has become more of a factor as exposure to the culture is nearly constant through social media and smartphones. During 2020, our world saw a global pandemic, and the fallout from long-term social distancing and mask-wearing, social and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael McGarry, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry: Teenagers in the Life of the Church* (Randall House Publications, 2019), 06.

<sup>2</sup> George Yancey, "Has Society Grown More Hostile Towards Conservative Christians? Evidence from ANES Surveys," *Review of Religious Research* 60, no. 1 (2017): 72, doi:10.1007/s13644-017-0303-8.



racial tensions flared to the point of violence in the streets, and a host of other issues have made the salt and light of the church needed perhaps more than ever. During this year of disease and social calamity, the churches were restricted for service or closed altogether, yet the cultural forces still had full access to the young people. Is the culture to blame for youths and young adult absence from the church? Indeed, it has done its share to distract and mislead young people but has the church done all to retain them?

Is the church helping or hurting its cause to keep and minister to young adults? The assumption that churches are teaching the gospel is no longer safe to make if ever it was. Many so-called “Christian” denominations deny the divinity of Christ Jesus (ex: Latter Day Saints and Jehovah’s Witnesses). How can such a church possibly share the gospel it does not know but desperately needs for itself? The church's primary purpose is to teach and preach the good news of the true Jesus Christ. The fact that verbal confession in the Lordship of the Savior, Jesus Christ, and the belief in the heart that His resurrection is true brings the Scriptural assurance of the Bible, “thou shalt be saved,” (Romans 10:9).<sup>3</sup> Suppose the church has that mission correct, teaching and preaching the gospel. In that case, there are still two other areas that require attention: church atmospherics and relationship management as it affects youth and young adults. Atmospherics refers to the condition of the church physically and how a church makes a person feel welcome. Relationship management refers to socializing the youth members with persons outside the youth group but within the church. The church and the membership have essential roles to play in retaining young people and young adults. Exploring church atmospherics and relationship management will reveal church failings detrimental to youth and young adult retention, even if the church has a good gospel message.

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<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the King James Version (Nashville:Holman,1998).

Youth and young adults are still profoundly affected by their parent's actions, attitudes, and values. Parents are still the most dominant influence on youth.<sup>4</sup> The parents have more power than they probably realize. Though limited time is a factor, parents are rooted in the young person's heart. The parents dominate the earliest memories! The hard times, good times, and all those teachable moments that appear unplanned but perhaps were divine appointments. These times are influential, and the parents cast the most significant shadow in these young lives. However, even strong parents have limitations. Influencers have their say, but the young people themselves make their decisions.

What, if anything, can be done about young adults not choosing to fellowship after aging out of the youth group? Why do young people decide not to assemble? Why do young people make ungodly life choices? These thoughts and questions have perplexed and continue to grieve ministers and parents. Some have come to see this young adult absence as a phase or normal progression. It is a problem that needs to be understood and mitigated. One hesitates to say "corrected" because even if every ministry aspect to the youth was executed perfectly, and it certainly has not been, some will still choose not to continue the fellowship. Jesus said, "How often would I have gathered my children even as a hen her chicks underwing, but ye would not," (Matt 23:37). The church loses more young adults than it must. Christ more than deserves the young adults' service and devotion; it is imperative to teach them to observe all that he has taught, (Matt 28:20). This work will demonstrate what due diligence looks like in youth ministry, emphasizing the Bible, relationships, and church atmospherics that encourage young adults to fellowship in the church past their youth group experience.

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<sup>4</sup> Holly C. Allen and Christine Lawton, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 55.

## Ministry Context

This study is conducted from a Bible-centered, God-first perspective. This researcher is of the Baptist persuasion with an appreciation for science and data and a heart toward blessing youth workers and the young people they serve. The ministry location for this research is Crawford Road Baptist Church, (CRBC). CRBC is a small, conservative, traditional church in Alabama. Southern values of love for God, family, country, and college football are core. CRBC began as a mission in 1947 of Westside Baptist Church, now Lakewood Baptist Church.<sup>5</sup> The church's first structure was a tent, but its mission has never changed. The mission of the CRBC is to reach people with the saving message of Jesus. Like many other Baptist churches, the population is older, traditional, and concerned with the young people and the church's future. The church had approximately 400 names on the rolls and 80 to 120 in attendance on Sunday morning before the Coronavirus of 2020. The youth group has 14 on the rolls, with most meetings having five to nine youths present for service; this is a small ministry.

The youth ministry at CRBC has been through many changes. Approximately 15 years ago, the youth minister was contemporary and young himself and had a group of 30 youths for most of his tenure. After the contemporary minister left the church to pursue other ministerial opportunities, one of the parents led the youth ministry. He was an easy-going, fun-loving personality. After five years, he was tired and wanted relief from the youth ministry duties. The church searched, and this researcher was called to serve.

This researcher now has served as the youth minister for the last four years. From a deep conviction that the gospel is the main message for youth ministry, this minister has fashioned a youth program that emphasizes the gospel and the Scriptures. For the last four years, the youth

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<sup>5</sup> Crawford Road Baptist Church. Last modified 2019. <https://www.crbch.com>.

group has received a steady diet of the "4-Step Gospel," which will be scripturally anchored in the following sentences. The 4-Step Gospel, , an evangelistic approach created by this researcher, is the foundation and the focus of this youth program. It stands alone as a topic of study, and it dovetails so well with many other Bible lessons. It features the person of Jesus Christ, the Savior. The 4-step presentation starts with the lost (unsaved), which is the starting point for everyone apart from Jesus and brings the good news of salvation. This approach uses some of the same Scriptures as the "Roman Road" model of evangelism. Step 1 is, "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Step 2 is, "For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 6:23). Step 3 breaks away from Romans; briefly, Jesus said unto him, "I am the way, the truth, and the life no man comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). Step 4 is, "That if one shalt confess with one's mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in the heart that God has raised Jesus from the dead, one shall be saved" (Rom 10:9). In step 1, everyone is made to understand that all people are sinners, and what do sinners deserve? Step 2 makes all realize that death is the penalty for sin. But that is not the end of step 2 because but in Romans 6:23 changes everything. But the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ, the Lord. Step 3 brings Jesus as the only way of salvation. Now to this point, everyone is revealed as a sinner and deserving of death. After that is understood, they are then introduced to Jesus, the one who has never sinned. So, where is the hope for the sinner? In step 4, Salvation is in confessing Jesus as Lord and Savior and believing in the resurrection. This gospel is the basis of the CRBC youth program.

Salvation is instant and permanent, but sanctification is a process. The youth and the workers and ministers are at various stages of sanctification. Young Christians need to know they will fail to be able to keep the law or from sinning after they are saved. Salvation has spared

one the penalty of sin, but the reality of this world has not changed. Sanctification requires a daily recommitment to God. Because one still feels temptation, one must practice submission to God as described by James. “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Under submission to God, one can take thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:5). This obedience to God requires daily recommitment. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is* your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (Rom 12:1-2). Even when Christians diligently exercise James’ and Paul’s guidance, there will be the need for additional grace in asking forgiveness for moral failings. Fortunately, God is willing to forgive and to cleanse saved persons anew when they confess. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Youth ministry is parent ministry also. The Gospel and Scriptures are the basis of the youth program at CRBC, and the instruction is described as preadult preparation. Fun should always be a part of youth ministry, but the Word rightly divided is the centerpiece. When the parents choose to attend, they are blessed in the youth services as well. This church history, current church status, and the manner of this youth ministry make up the context of CRBC youth ministry and the backdrop of this youth and young adult retention study.

### **Problem Presented**

The youth at Crawford Road Baptist Church (CRBC) appear to lack full devotion to the faith in the form of remaining active in the church after graduating from the youth group. Young

people come to the church, join the volleyball team or basketball team, and have a good time. Every activity is couched in prayer, and time is always set aside for Scripture reading and worship. But something happens when the youth age out of the youth group because; they are not continuing with the church in the young adult class.

The data on the retention of transitioning young adults at CRBC will reflect that less than 10% have been retained. Shallow young adult retention is distressing in that love, time, and treasure have been invested in young people, and they choose not to stay. Many partings are understandable; some move, take jobs, go to college, possibly attend a different church, but that is not the whole picture.

The Lord deserves better for His love and sacrifice, and the church wants better for the Lord and the young adults. CRBC believes in the Scriptures and embraces the gospel, but something is missing in ministry execution. Young people are choosing not to fellowship with CRBC after adulthood.

They simply are choosing not to worship with the church. Young people should be mentored as youths to serve as young adults. It is disappointing that after working to bless the young people, they choose not to be a blessing as young adults but are breaking fellowship after aging out of the youth group, and maybe that is the problem. For some young adults, their only connection in the church was the youth group. The youth group is for adolescence, but the church is for eternity.<sup>6</sup> The problem is the young adults were not socialized adequately as youths. Socializing with the church is more important than it appears. If a youth member only knows a few youth workers and a few other youth members, they are not socialized. Why would a brand-new young adult want to go to a young adult class where they don't know anyone? Chris Barnett,

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<sup>6</sup> McGarry, *A Biblical Theology*, 04.

author, and preacher, was enlightened to this socialization issue when serving as an associate pastor for a large church. Barnett talked with a teenager who commented that he has spent very little time in “big church.” It occurred to Chris that perhaps the young adults abandoned church because it was never theirs.<sup>7</sup> There should be a conscious effort to introduce youth members to young adults long before they age out of the youth group. First, outreach must be conducted to invite a young visitor to the church, then getting the youth to return to the youth group after a first visit is enhanced when church atmospherics are sound. Now taking this a step further, for youth to have an opportunity to move up one day to the young adult class, socialization with others outside the youth group must be a priority.

For the chain of events just described to have a chance to succeed, the church must be an inviting place. The people’s friendliness, the tone of the meeting, and the ministry’s energy (atmospherics) must comfort the visitors. Meaningful relationships (socialization) outside the youth group but within the larger church are of great importance. But most important to good ministry is the unfiltered gospel and the teachings of Jesus. It would not matter how many youths were invited and encouraged through atmospherics and socialization if the gospel were not taught as a matter of first importance. The youth are generally invited through outreach and possibly swayed by their first visit’s atmospherics to return. Even if they have passed these first two hurdles, they are not being adequately socialized and therefore have no connection in the church other than the youth group. They will age out of the youth group very quickly and have no connection to the rest of the church. These conditions and realities may be unintended, but they contribute to the primary problem: young adults are not staying with the church.

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<sup>7</sup> Holly C. Allen, *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches Through Intergenerational Ministry* (2018), 15.

## **Purpose Statement**

This DMIN thesis highlights the importance of providing the proper teaching of scripture as more important than church atmospherics and building meaningful relationships. If the scriptures were not taught, it would not matter if one had the atmospherics and a relational program perfected. A complete ministry brings all three of the elements previously listed to inspire lifelong devotion in the faith and continuance of fellowship. It is fulfilling to see a follower serve in the church that was first blessed by another believer's faithfulness. Faithfulness that made the person feel welcome, loved, and receptive to the Word of truth. It is even more special to see that the blessed person continues in fellowship and grows in the faith to the point that they assist the church's outreach. A well-disciplined believer helps make visitors feel welcomed and even loved and is capable of a gospel presentation that leads one to life everlasting. King Solomon advised to train them in the way they should go (Prov 22:6); that is what ministers strive to do. Jesus said, "Love one another just as I have loved you" (John 15:12); ultimate love is to share the gospel of Jesus. Jesus said, "Teach them all I commanded you" (Matt 28:20). This thesis demonstrates that providing the proper atmosphere, building loving relationships, and teaching the Holy Writ will retain more youth and young adults in Christian fellowship. "God's Word has power and goes forth, and it does not come back void" (Isa 55:11).

Most believers probably understand how important the Bible is to ministry. Rarely does one place importance on the church's atmospherics, the ministry, or even the perceived atmosphere that affects the visitor. Drew Dyck shares this insight he first learned from his grandfather, a lifelong pastor, "People don't learn through argument but embrace spiritual truth



through atmosphere.”<sup>8</sup> Building the right atmosphere is only one step but an important step.<sup>9</sup> A welcoming, safe, and engaging environment is the fitting backdrop for building relationships. All ministry is expressed in a relationship. Being a part of a loving atmosphere and making loving connections prepares the way to preach the Word. In this way, the gospel is caught as it is taught.

The purpose of this DMIN thesis is to spotlight the importance of providing the proper church atmospherics, building meaningful relationships, and teaching scriptures, including the gospel of Jesus Christ. It appears that the church at large is not stewarding its atmospherics to the degree needed or seeing the critical importance of establishing relationships that lead to youth and young adults choosing to continue their church fellowship. Even with that, the most vital ministry tool is a powerful presentation of the gospel based on the Word. The purpose of this writing is to impress the importance of these stated imperatives on the church’s commission. To understand this commission and ignore it is a sin. James said, “He that knows to do good and does it not, to him it is a sin” (James 4:17). When the church provides the proper atmospherics and offers meaningful relationships, those visiting may be more likely to stay and receive Bible teaching. Therefore, when atmospherics and relationships are fostered, more youth and young adults will choose to continue in church fellowship, and the opportunities for Bible instruction to bring blessings will increase.

### **Basic Assumptions**

This researcher assumes that ministers, church members, and parents want to know how to serve the youth better so that fewer will decide to break fellowship with the church as young

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<sup>8</sup> Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith. . . and How to Bring Them Back* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 175.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

adults. Those mentioned above are not fully conscious of many of the possible disconnections, that is, failings of church ministry, that this study will bring to light. Disconnections with the youth eventually lead to young adults choosing not to continue fellowship with the church.

Another assumption is that the ministers are interested in increasing the number of attendees. It is further assumed ministers are eager to share the gospel's truth, enhance ministry atmospherics, and develop meaningful relationships when shown how important these are to building the church. Finally, all gospel ministers want to see a consequential acceptance of Christ and a continuance of fellowship as the youth transition to adulthood.

If informed, church members are interested in preventing disconnections and making their church a more inviting place for visitors. It is also reasonable to assume that church members would try harder to build relationships if shown how vital relationships are to spreading the gospel. Certainly, church members would build relationships with young people if they saw the correlation to young adult retention.

Even as church members may underestimate the value of their companionship with young people, parents are not fully aware of the critical role and the power they wield in forming a youth's values. The parents' long-term impact on future choices made by their children has been undervalued. This influence extends to their children's whole life. Another truth is not widely taught: kids become who and what their parents are, not the who or what their parents instruct. A parent's example is more potent than their counsel.

Ministers, church members, and parents with a heart for youth will be dismayed by the Barna Group provided statistical data that shows the alarming rate at which young people leave the church. This researcher assumes that the statistics used in this study are representative of the whole of the people group 18 to 29-year-olds, with sampling errors expressed as a percentage of

2.7%.<sup>10</sup> And lastly, this researcher expects to learn more and feel more deeply about the issues surrounding the young adult exodus of Christian fellowship after this study than ever before.

### **Definitions**

Atmospherics: concerning the church, these are controllable elements of a visitor's experience, i.e., the friendliness of the church members and the cleanliness and décor of the building.

Catechesis: is a written religious doctrine for parents to learn from and teach their children.<sup>11</sup> These written religious instructions were a big part of the reformation and were accepted practice to pass the faith basics to new believers and the youth.

Disconnections: broad reasons offered by young adults for breaking from the church.<sup>12</sup> These are breakdowns of human interactions in the church that lead to hurt feelings and or breaking of fellowship with the church.

Drifters: the largest group of leavers, slow motion often so gradual, is their departure; they do not realize it themselves. They pass on attendance once, and it becomes easier next time. Their leaving is not based on skepticism. They degrade to cultural Christian with no passion for Christ.<sup>13</sup>

Dropouts: any who leave the church even temporarily after attending regularly.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church." *BioLogos*. Last modified June 5, 2017. <https://biologos.org/articles/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>.

<sup>11</sup> McGarry, *A Biblical Theology*, 62.

<sup>12</sup> David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Ada: Baker Books, 2011), 92.

<sup>13</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 159,170.

<sup>29</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 21.

Exiles: have a deep commitment to Christ but do not see eye to eye with the church and feel stuck between culture and the church.<sup>15</sup> This type of leaver does not leave their Faith, but many will leave their church and often find mission work outside their church's authority.

Generation Boomers: were born between 1946 – 1964<sup>16</sup> The generational data is referenced because people of the different generations have different values and, therefore, different spiritual needs.

Generation X: AKA Busters born between the 1965 – early 1983<sup>17</sup>

Generation Y: AKA Mosaics or Millennials born between 1984 – 2002<sup>18</sup>

Generation Z: AKA Post Millennials born between 1997 and onward. Cutoff points are not an exact science.<sup>19</sup>

Greatest Generation: was born before 1946<sup>20</sup>

Mishna: a collection of oral traditions captured and written now taught by Rabbis.<sup>21</sup>  
These traditions are likely the earliest form of a catechism but not under a Christian faith.

Modern Leavers: for the modernist, truth is science, and there is no such thing as soul or Spirit.<sup>22</sup> Science has all the answers, while Faith is making believe or wishful thinking.

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<sup>15</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 25.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 246.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Michael Dimock, "Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins," Pew Research Center, last modified July 28, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/where-millennials-end-and-generation-z-begins/>.

<sup>20</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 246.

<sup>21</sup> McGarry, *A Biblical Theology*, 39.

<sup>22</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 86.

Modernism: a worldview that thinks science has all the answers. Modernists believe they are enlightened, and Spirit is not real, just this physical world. Faith has no place and no meaningful use as this life's existence is all anyone ever gets.

Neo-Pagans: earth-based religion that believes in magic, not God or Satan, reacts emotionally against Christianity, aligned closely with Wicca, a ritual religion, and affiliated with environmentalists causes and feminism.<sup>23</sup>

Postmodern Leavers: do not trust metanarratives, but someone's personal perspective is honored, not reason driven, and no one truth is absolute.<sup>24</sup>

Postmodernism is a worldview with no metanarrative to guide, so the reality is determined by individual experience. What is suitable for one may not be what is valid for another. This group is experiential rather than rational.<sup>25</sup>

Recoilers: The head follows the heart; offense and anger manifest as disbelief toward God, usually after a bad experience.<sup>26</sup> This leaver category may be angry or offended by a perceived slight, a self-righteous church member or minister, or just an unfortunate circumstance, so they express their outrage as disbelief in God.

Rebels: a moral rebel forsakes to indulge in sin, and a spiritual rebel leaves to protest God's rule.<sup>27</sup> A moral rebel is one who seeks worldly desires no matter who is hurt to include themselves. A spiritual rebel does not want God to make life rules for them.

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<sup>23</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 110-111,121.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 35.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 139, 141.

Relationships: for this study, building relationships is connecting the youth to members outside the youth group but within the church in meaningful, emotional ways, if possible.

Silo effect: age-separated ministries that, while designed to assist an age group in instruction, have the effect of isolating members from the other parts of the church, leading to silo members leaving the church when they no longer have a hook in a siloed group.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, they have no other relationships in the church and no compelling reason to stay with the church.

### **Limitations**

When engaging in a study, there are limitations to discover why young adults choose to act as they do. These limitations include but may not be limited to time, money, and COVID-19 interference with church services and outreach. Therefore, there is liberal use of open-source libraries, online sites, phone interviews, and leveraging statistical data gathered by the Barna Group, a powerful marketing and research organization that has conducted multiple surveys. Rainer Research and other sources are also cited to help assess the young adult Christian faith's status. It is impossible to talk to or survey every young person in America, but the Barna Group has survey studies from which assumption of the whole 18 to 29-year-old age group may be inferred. Samples of data are used to guess the status of the whole. Truly only God knows how many young adults are not fellowshiping in the church; a statistically based answer will be the best evidence humanly possible. A statistical assurance will have to do.

The data sets used for Crawford Road Baptist Church (CRBC) in this study are Sunday school attendance records. Attendance is tracked by name and number. The names can be checked against class rosters from year to year to see if they have progressed to the next class

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<sup>28</sup> Allen and Lawton, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 308.

level and, of course, their attendance. The CRBC data system does not track the Sunday evening youth services and Wednesday evening youth services. That could have been telling data as most youth activity takes place Sunday evening and Wednesday evening.

### **Delimitations**

This study focused on discovering why young adults are breaking fellowship with the church that served them as a youth and to finding ways to improve young adult retention. The delimitations that this researcher placed on this project are practical. Surveys were taken from the membership of Crawford Road Baptist Church. A working group of a cross-section of the church membership acted as a committee of stakeholders advising the researcher. The recommendations that came from the working group to improve young adult retention were vetted through the church council for approval and presentation to the church at a monthly business meeting before being applied. The design is fashioned this way because the church has a vested interest in their young adults' status, and the church membership will carry out any meaningful changes that were implemented. Any recommended changes to the management of atmospherics, socialization, and Bible instruction were born of an effort to prevent or mitigate disconnections that affect fellowship and church dropouts.

### **Thesis Statement**

Suppose the youth of Crawford Road Baptist Church CRBC are nurtured in the proper atmosphere, socialized in meaningful relationships, and taught Christ Jesus's words. In that case, they can become productive continuous worshipers in young adulthood. This thesis statement sounds like discipleship. A church conducting a fully functioning program of atmospherics,

fostering loving relationships, and a thorough presentation of the Word makes a biblical discipleship program.

If this thesis statement is correct, something has gone wrong in the churches today as so few youths who grow into young adulthood continue as active members of a local church. They are not moving up to the young adult class. Some attrition is expected as the young transition to adulthood. They tend to start missing church meetings when they begin their first job, move away from their parents, and attend college.<sup>29</sup> But that does not account for all the missing young adults. The church is failing to disciple the young people, and the world is trying to draw them away.

The culture imparts values into the young people's hearts and minds contrary to biblical Christianity. In *Christianity Today's* follow-up survey after the election of 2016, partisan issues were hot; the latest generation has been dramatically impacted by the world's values concerning LGBT rights and other social justice and race concerns. These sentiments are rarely mainstream in the church, so why would a worldly-minded young adult stick around?<sup>30</sup> They would not unless maybe they sense love in the church. Love is the reason others have continued the fellowship of the faithful. Then it is possible to build relationships with stronger believers and grow a more mature faith in the younger believers.<sup>31</sup> When people perceive love as the central atmospheric, a church culture of loving relationships is established, then high regard for the

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<sup>29</sup> "The Top Reasons Young People Drop Out of Church," *Christianity Today*, last modified January 15, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/january/church-drop-out-college-young-adults-hiatus-lifeway-survey.html>.

<sup>30</sup> "The Top Reasons Young People Drop Out of Church," *Christianity Today*.

<sup>31</sup> Allen and Lawton, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 38.



Scripture can be taught. A devoted minister prepares one to take one's values from the Word instead of the world.

Productive continuous worshipers and disciples are the results of Ministry conducted through good atmospherics, meaningful relationships, and Bible instruction. Welcoming persons to an organization flowing with the atmospherics of love, fostering loving relationships, and total dependence on the Word is service to the person of Jesus Christ. These services are typically Spirit-filled in that Jesus said, "I will send the Comforter from the Father, the Spirit of truth and he will testify of me" (John 15:26). These are genuine connections, real fellowships, for the purpose of making a real difference. Genuine connections are a ministry, not the fake, false, and phony connections available with online media, for which many have settled. During COVID 19 virus concerns, the church has often had to make do with virtual cyber applications. The internet and social media connections can be a blessing, but not when overindulged or when preferred to face-to-face fellowships. Social development of younger Christians is improved and negative stereotyping of older Christians is reduced when in person intergenerational worship is prioritized.<sup>32</sup>

When one cannot be there, social media can assist connectedness until genuine fellowship can be rejoined. Making productive continuous worshipers is a personal process in a real place, with real people acting under the Holy Spirit's direction. If relationships encourage more young adults to fellowship and worship at church, where is the church going wrong in this process? Maybe the process is broken in the way youth ministry is carried out. Voddie Baucham, author and former pastor, says, "There is no biblical mandate for the current approach to youth ministry. I have never heard an argument presented from the Bible as to why the youth are

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<sup>32</sup> Allen and Lawton, *Intergenerational Christian Formation*, 95.

separated from the rest of the church for worship."<sup>33</sup> That is a compelling argument. If the youths have been kept separate from the rest of the church and then age out of the youth group, what is their incentive to keep attending? They are no longer part of the group they know. There was no relationship building with elements outside the youth group. The newly minted young adult does not know the members of the young adult class or have a relationship with anyone at the main sanctuary. The failure to build relationships outside the youth group results in unintended dropouts. Baucham's point about separation seems to account for the lack of relationship building between the youth and the rest of the church; therefore, the second-order effect of young adults leaving the church is a logical but painful outcome. The integration of the youth into the larger church's ministries is the proper response going forward. Relationship building would improve young adult retention, and therefore time must be spent in bringing the youth and the church membership together again. Although the youth and the church members may seem to have little in common, they need the same Jesus, suffer common sin issues, and need each other. There is merit in teaching young people in a youth group but it is incomplete in that a young person needs interaction with other believers outside the youth group. It is not that traditional youth ministry needs to end it is that greater socialization with the rest of the church needs to be incorporated.

Another component is in this mix: the parents. The parents are or should be the primary disciplers of their children; the youth minister and youth workers come alongside the parents to assist.<sup>34</sup> Parents are supposed to be the primary connection for the youth into the larger church. If

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<sup>33</sup> "Voddie Baucham Talks Youth Ministry - Bing Video." Bing. Accessed September 27, 2021. <https://www.bing.com/videos/search>.

<sup>34</sup> McGarry, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, x.

that is not possible, more is required of the ministers and the church membership, starting with parent visitation and socializing the young churchgoer with elements outside the youth group but within the church.

The youth of CRBC can become productive continuous worshipers when nurtured in the proper atmosphere, socialized in meaningful relationships, and taught Christ Jesus's words. This work will open the best available resources that speak to atmospherics, relationship building, and teaching. Those who read this and the ones working on this project may become better stewards of the young people and further build the Kingdom of God.



## Chapter 2

### Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this project, “Youth to Adult Continuance of Faith: How to Achieve Young Adult Retention Through Pre-Adult Instruction,” follows that the problem must be that the young adults are not continuing in fellowship with the church and that the solution lies at least in part in their preadult Bible instruction. That point will be explored, but two other issues are core to the retention of youth and young adults. These issues have not been credited with the importance that they carry. Two other issues that impact youth retention into young adulthood are church and ministry atmospherics and relationship management. These may seem like common sense add-ons at first, but atmospherics and relationship failures may prevent or upset one’s opportunity to share the Word in the first place. Everything that follows supports the three aspects of the presented thesis. Issues with atmospherics, relationship management, and Bible instruction will be opened for deeper understanding so that readers may derive their best practices for future ministry.

In the past, many young adults who left the church returned after a life change event like a marriage making the problem, young adults lacking full devotion to the faith in continuance, seem like a phase most young adults would go through.<sup>1</sup> Young adulthood is a particular time in a young person’s life with new temptations and liberties; however, that does not fully account for the significant departure of fellowship noted in the statistical data cited in this study. The first part of this framework will cover the magnitude of this issue nationally and then lay the groundwork for understanding and communicating the factors of this issue.

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<sup>1</sup> "Why Young People Leave the Church," *BreakPoint*, last modified January 7, 2020, <https://breakpoint.org/why-young-people-leave-the-church>.

After the statistical picture is understood, the study looks at the effects of culture on young people's lives. The effects of culture are not cliché talking points; social media and the Smartphone have brought the culture to young people's eyes as never before. The study then explores the disconnections churches experience, failings that prompt folks to leave a church. The research will uncover six categories of church leavers, each having its unique needs. These factors will be used to help the reader fully understand that young people need to experience good atmospherics at church, be adequately socialized with the other members of the church, and receive high-quality Bible instruction in the hope that when the youths become young adults, they will choose to continue fellowship at the church.

### **Literature Review**

The literature review begins with the statistical magnitude of young adult nonattendance at church. The study then describes the cultural pressures, displays church disconnections, explains the church leaver categories, and brings teaching into focus and harmony to make the point that young adults need a proper atmosphere and to be socialized in meaningful relationships and taught the words of Christ Jesus. The productive application of these factors, atmospherics, relationships, and Word instruction makes it possible for youths to see value in church fellowship and choose to engage in church fellowship as young adults. The factor that is most deficient for most churches is socialization, building relationships across generations. The problem is an institutional one based on the organization of most protestant churches. Most churches use an age-based age-segregated system similar to schools. According to Holly Allen, author and researcher, many churches have been made aware of the silo effect of age-segregated ministries.<sup>2</sup> Allen's research opens how intergenerational ministry can be transformative, making

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<sup>2</sup> Holly C. Allen, *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches Through Intergenerational Ministry* (2018), 17.

socialization effective in the church, bringing a sense of belonging to young adults that can never be achieved in an age-segregated ministry.<sup>3</sup>

Core to the basic understanding of the study of young adult church absence is the works done by Drew Dyck, David Kinnaman, and Michael McGarry. Dyck explains what is going on with the leaver of the church. He opens and organizes categories of church leavers. David Kinnaman tracks church disconnections, breakdowns, and ministry failures that prompt church exodus and points to church function failures. McGarry contributes by relating the issue to Scripture and provides theological arguments for proactive youth ministry. These three authors make a strong case for proper atmospherics, building relationships, and putting the most importance on Bible instruction. After all, all is for naught if one had superior atmospherics and relationship management but poor Bible instruction.

Many churches do atmospherics and Bible instruction well, but the same cannot be said for relationship management. Holly Allen, author, and intergenerational studies expert puts forward that the church's age-based organization hinders relationship management. Her work reflects possible ways to modify or even reorganize the church to improve the socialization and retention of young adults. Allen hopes that churches will embed intergenerational ministry into their faith culture and foster benefit and collaborative blessings for children, teens, middle-agers, seniors, and young adults.<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Nesbit Sbanotto, author and professor, looks at each generation as a unique culture with its values and world views. She adds that generational norms will not accurately describe everyone in a cohort. The generalized values ascribed to each

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<sup>3</sup> Allen, *InterGenerate Transforming Churches*, 22.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

generation are meant to be informative over-prescriptive.<sup>5</sup> Humans are wired to need caring connections no matter the age, and bringing the generations together makes it possible even promotes affectionate encounters.<sup>6</sup>

### Trends of Young Adults Leaving the Church

Drew Dyck, the managing editor for *Christianity Today International*, acknowledges the historical truth that young adults have a high dropout rate. Rodney Stark, Sociologist of Religion said, “Young adults have always been the group with the highest dropout rate.”<sup>7</sup> According to the Rainer Research Group, by the time the youth reach twenty-two years of age, 70% will have left the church. The Barna Group estimated 80% would be “disengaged” and tend not to seek alternative opportunities to convene.<sup>8</sup>

The statistics are not good news, and future trends are not good either. Young adults are not the only group underrepresented in the church because there is a forty-year low in Protestants’ attendance across the board. Pew Research has revealed that 40% of American citizens between the ages of 23 to 38 are unaffiliated with any religion.<sup>9</sup> When dealing with statistics and surveys, there will be variability in findings. The precise number of young adults and their status of having left or returning or serving faithfully is ultimately beyond human

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<sup>5</sup> Craig L. Blomberg and Elisabeth A. Sbanotto, *Effective Generational Ministry: Biblical and Practical Insights for Transforming Church Communities* (Ada: Baker Academic, 2016), xiv.

<sup>6</sup> Holly C. Allen, *InterGenerate Transforming Churches*, 29.

<sup>7</sup> Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion* (2008), 196.

<sup>8</sup> Thom S. Rainer and Sam S. Rainer, *Essential Church?: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 11.

<sup>9</sup> “Why Young People Leave the Church,” *BreakPoint*.



knowing.<sup>10</sup> The best that can be humanly done is studying the statistical data, taking note of the revealed trends, and adjusting ministry efforts to serve better.

What happens between the youth group and the young adult class? Where are the young adults now? There are several reasons for young adults' absence from church. The top five reasons for not attending church as determined by *Christianity Today's* research for adults 23 to 30 years old are as follows: 1) Moved to college (34%), 2) Church members seemed judgmental (32%), 3) No connection to other church members (29%), 4) Political or social disagreement with the church or members (25%), 5) Working now and those duties interfere with the church (24%).<sup>11</sup>

The Barna Group offers the following six top reasons for young adult church absences. 1) Christianity feels stifling, fear-based, and risk-averse. Nearly one-quarter of 18 to 29-year-olds said, "Christians demonize everything outside of the church" (23%) indicated this was part of or, in total, their experience. 2) This group also reports that the church ignored the fundamental problems of the world (22%) and was too worried that movies, music, and video games are harmful (18%). 3) the tension between science and Christianity, nonbelievers think that the Christians are too confident they know the answers, (35%). Others say the church is out of step with science (29%), many say the church is anti-science (25%), young people are tired of the creation and evolution issue (23%). 4) the church is repressive, simplistic, and judgmental about sex. The surveyed said they have made mistakes and feel judged by the church (17%), and others allege that the church's teachings on sex and birth control are outdated (40%). 5) young people

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<sup>10</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> "The Top Reasons Young People Drop Out of Church," *Christianity Today News & Reporting*, last modified January 15, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2019/january/church-drop-out-college-young-adults-hiatus-lifeway-survey.html>.

struggle with the exclusive claim of Christianity and think that the church fears the faith claims of other faiths (29%). The same population see the church as a club for Christian insiders (22%).

6) The Barna Group's last reason for young adult dropouts is that the church is an unfriendly place for those with doubts and felt they could not ask pressing life questions (36%), they felt they could not express doubt in church (23%), and felt marginalized (18%).<sup>12</sup>

*Christianity Today* and the Barna Group point out the obvious. Young adults choose not to be a part of the church fellowship. The firms asked relevant questions in their surveys and recorded startling data. These were reasonably good faith efforts to gain insight into the issue of falling young adult Christian retention in church. A survey can only lead to informed projections of the whole. The results are sufficient to demonstrate that young adults are trending away from church membership. Something must be done to bring them to the gospel and fellowship with true Christian believers.

### Cultural Pressures

What has changed to make church fellowship a smaller voice in the lives of young adults? One problem is that the world's values are being impressed in the youth's hearts and minds despite efforts to teach that friendship with the world is enmity with God (James 4:4). The entertainment industry, for example, is courting young people. Entertainment is more than a diversion, for assumptions are implied in the products of this industry, and errant conclusions are reached by youth who consume the various entertainment programs. These entertainment programs are designed to prescribe the ethics and values of their authors. Much of what young

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<sup>12</sup> "Six Reasons Young Christians Leave Church," Barna Group, accessed March 23, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/six-reasons-young-christians-leave-church/>.

people watch is accepted without critical thought and sometimes unconsciously incorporated into their belief systems.

The culture has more sway and works more deeply than ever before in America's youth. America's lifestyle is more hedonistic and temporally indulgent than ever before. Change comes much faster as constant electronic connectedness makes fads run their course much more quickly. Therefore, ever more vile emanations are acceptable through the culture that impacts the conscience and directs young people's sensibilities. The tension of living in the world but not of the world has always been challenging. Separate living for the faithful is even more difficult now because of instant cultural access electronically.<sup>13</sup>

Kinnaman (President of the Barna Group) and Aly Hawkins, co-authors of *You Lost Me*, wrote that no generation, meaning the millennials of Christians, has dealt with so many cultural changes in so short a time. The changes are so short-lived as they saturate the culture through social media and other electronic media. The pace shows no sign that it will slow down. Because of overt connectedness, more of the world's values get exposed to young people's minds at more impressionable ages. Kinnaman said, "I doubt many previous generations have lived through as compounded and complicated a set of cultural changes as have today's Christians in the West."<sup>14</sup> Kinnaman saw the Millennials as having it the worst; at one time, that was true, but Generation Z is the latest generation as of this writing. The challenge is the constant exposure to this ungodly culture through smartphones, media platforms, and the old standby TV. American culture

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<sup>13</sup> David Kinnaman and Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Ada: Baker Books, 2011), 76.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

approves and calls Generation Z the most tolerant.<sup>15</sup> Ministers would call Generation Z overexposed to the influence of the culture and therefore the worldliest generation; of course, the culture approves.

God deserves better; young Christians being overexposed to an errant culture and choosing to be absent from fellowship in the church is counter service to God. Older Christians owe it to the Savior to disciple the younger Christians. The youth themselves deserve loving mentorships that encourage finding true fulfillment in God's will because "blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly" (Ps 1:1). Unfortunately, there is so much wicked counsel available in television shows, movies, and internet sources. The connection to this culture is intensified by the proliferation of the smartphone, a constant potential source of evil counsel. "The great challenge of every generation is living faithfully to GOD in the culture. Jesus said, "be in the world but not of the world" (John 17:16). That was difficult enough before the total social/cultural saturation that is before the eyes of the people all day in the form of a smartphone, internet, and social platforms," reports David Kinnaman, author and President of the Barna Group.<sup>16</sup>

Generation Z's problems have surpassed the challenges Kinnaman noted of the millennials. Technology is better now, and connections are faster; more of the population has constant access to the increasingly depraved culture. The images put before the eyes by the ever-present smartphone have made culture's power over the viewers' hearts and minds even greater. Unfortunately, it appears the church is losing the attention of the young people to the culture.

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<sup>15</sup> Christel J. Manning, "Gen Z Is the Least Religious Generation. Here's Why That Could Be a Good Thing," *Pacific Standard*, last modified May 6, 2019, <https://psmag.com/ideas/gen-z-is-the-least-religious-generation-heres-why-that-could-be-a-good-thing>.

<sup>16</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 11-12.

This condition is intensified by the economic shutdown and COVID 19 mitigations of 2020. The pandemic prevents people from congregating at church, but it does not affect the smartphone's ability to bring the caustic elements of the culture before the eyes of the young people.

Driven mainly by cultural exposure, teenagers in the church do not understand the basics of the Faith. Instead, they have this misguided sense of spirituality. American Sociologists Christian Smith and Melina Denton coined the acronym MTD which stands for "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."<sup>17</sup> There are five parts to MTD: 1. God created the world and watched over it and the people. 2. God wants people to be nice like the Bible says, and most religions have that as part of their beliefs. 3. The main goal in life is happiness and personal well-being. 4. God is not involved in one's life unless there is a problem. 5. People go to heaven when they die if they are good.<sup>18</sup>

No wonder they fall away from the faith; they do not know the Faith. Moral Therapeutic Deism is not the gospel, but MTD is the shallow religion many young people practice. People go to heaven who have confessed and believed that Jesus is Lord and that God has raised Him from the dead. Not good works but a good Savior is why people go to heaven. Shallow MTD faith could explain why so many are easily converted to nonbelief, pulled to false religion, or just drift from the Faith and break fellowship.

#### Dyck's Leaver Categories

Dyck and Kinnaman think differently about those 18 to 29-year-old adults choosing not to fellowship. Dyck studies the persons leaving the church and has made six categories outlined

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<sup>17</sup> Christian Smith and Melina L. Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 162-163.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

in the "Definitions" section. Dyck's focus is to understand the leavers to witness the gospel most effectively and best meet the needs of the individual leaver.<sup>19</sup> Kinnaman's organization is different; he focuses on the disconnections (church failings) that lead to young people leaving the church.<sup>20</sup>

Dyck's categories are not scientific so much as they are instructive and utilitarian.<sup>21</sup> Dyck categorizes those who leave the faith into six leaver categories: recoilers, modernists, post-modernists, pagans, rebels, and drifters. Each type has its motivations and issues explained in the definitions and leaver categories sections of this study.

Dyck is all about looking at what is motivating the leaver. For example, is the leaver angry and hiding a great hurt? In that case, Dyck would say this leaver may be a recoiler and needs to be listened to and, when appropriate, reveal that Christ was a suffering Savior, a high priest "touched by our afflictions," who never leaves.<sup>22</sup> Possibly the recoiler will identify with the Savior through pain and be drawn by the dedication of the Savior in that He never leaves.

Or is the leaver a genuine modernist believing his argument against there being a sovereign God? Dyck would call this person a modern leaver, and this leaver loves to debate. Avoid getting caught up by side issue arguments; no one has been argued to God but drawn by love. Instead, ask the modernist a few questions, like "Do you consider yourself spiritual?" "How do you determine the truth?" "Who do you admire?" will make the modernist feel like they are being heard and allow one to bring the right spiritual medicine.<sup>23</sup> Arguing apologetic points are

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<sup>19</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 92,93.

<sup>21</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 139.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-96.

not heard as the modernist leaver is simply preparing their counter-arguments. Fighting is counterproductive, even if a Christian prevails in the arguments that never wins the leaver to Christ. Try to connect to the modernist's heart; do not engage their brain in a debate.

Continuing with Dyck, if the leaver is all about experiencing things for themselves and easing by saying what is true, one may not work for another. That mantra is straight out of the postmodern mindset. Dyck would recommend reaching the postmodernist by trying the personal testimony approach. Bring your experience with the Savior and how the Word has enriched your life. Do not invoke the metanarrative (the understanding that God from the beginning intended that Christ would redeem the world and the Old and New Testaments testify to that) fact-driven method shuts a postmodern down.<sup>24</sup>

Neo-Paganism and Wiccans are earth-based religions, and there are hundreds of varieties of them. Wicca is growing fast as a religion that benefitted from the culture of consumerism. Witchcraft has found its way into mainstream media in movies, and TV and members of this movement are vehement environmentalists. This group has the strongest angst against Christianity because Christians call them devil worshipers. Many Wiccan groups do not believe in God or the devil; the movement is about ritualism, not theology. Again, as is often the case, asking them questions and letting them talk is Dyck's recommended start of an engagement. When engaging, be appreciative of God's creation, women's opportunities in the Faith, and Jesus. Catherine Sanders, the author of *Wicca's Charm*, reports Neo-Pagans and Wiccans never had anything bad to say about Jesus during her research.<sup>25</sup> So, be polite but point to Jesus as the source of your peace and salvation as the conversation continues.

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<sup>24</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 34.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 112,121-123.

Moral rebels characterized by moral compromise hide under their rebellious nature a need for adventure and purpose. Dyck cautions that repeatedly calling the moral rebel out for their horrible choices will cause them to tune out and push on in their sinful path, but not addressing it is just as bad. Instead, be polite and direct (address the rebellion once) and move on. Moral rebels need a cause or purpose. Jim Rayburn, Presbyterian minister, said, "It is a sin to bore a kid with the Gospel." Dyck wonders why anyone would care about a gospel that has no adventure and risks nothing.<sup>26</sup>

Spiritual rebels simply defy God's authority. These end up serving something less than the true living God because, as John Calvin said, "The human heart is an idol factory." People like any rebel will eventually reach out to God when they hit rock bottom, an unfortunate part of human nature that one must be broken before one will be willing to accept Jesus.<sup>27</sup>

The most prominent category of leavers is the drifters. The drifters leave the faith a little at a time. They show up occasionally and will not volunteer for any projects. Also referred to as cultural Christians, they may admit as much if asked. They put their confidence in an uttered prayer made years ago because the other kids were doing it. Apathy and lack of intellectual objections to the tenets of the faith are also elements of their profile. Dyck notes that Israel's greatest threat was not a powerful enemy nation but a failure to be faithful to God. Dyck continues, "We should all be humble, but for the grace of God, all would be backslidden. The drifter is not unlike us; it is a matter of degree of disobedience rather than kind of

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<sup>26</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 146-149.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-152.



disobedience."<sup>28</sup> So invite them back, let them witness the church loving Jesus just for Jesus' sake, care about them, and give them the gospel in small doses and allow the Spirit to work.

### Kinnaman's Disconnections

There are breakdown failings in church services and ministry that Kinnaman calls disconnections, and he has identified six disconnections. The six disconnections, broad reasons leavers, offer for breaking fellowship, as Kinnaman describes, are overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive, and doubtless.<sup>29</sup> These disconnections must be understood and avoided outright or at least mitigated to lessen their impact on ministry. Investigation of these disconnections may bring light to the nature of church failures. These disconnections ultimately interfere with the delivery of the Word. The church must be made familiar with the disconnections so that they may be prevented or avoided. The Word is the most critical part of the proposed thesis, but the Word cannot be shared with members or visitors that have disconnected.

Kinnaman's first disconnection is overprotectiveness, calling everything that is not specifically Christian bad. Many of the overprotective rules that follow may appear to be self-righteous, which is never a good look—no TV, no movies, no music, and so on. Have no contact with those people; they are evil. Discernment requires that one recognizes those bad people as the mission field. Wisdom would say check out what the world is up to and apply the Word to it. Do this so one may speak credibly about what the world is doing and keep your witness fresh. Don't isolate or try to isolate the youths from the world. The youths likely know more about

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<sup>28</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 167.

<sup>29</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 92,93.

what is happening in the world than they are willing to admit. Let them see how ugly the world can be and the falseness of its promises.<sup>30</sup> Could it get messy? Yes, but ministry has always been a messy affair.

Shallow and boring is how many young people see the church. Shallow is Kinnaman's second disconnection. A place full of platitudes and Christians speak (though familiar) the youth don't understand. Slogans and proof-texting (that is, dropping a Bible verse to impress and make a self-righteous point) that come off formulaic repeated over and over like a bad mantra. Shallow is countered by discipling, building relationships, and teaching sound doctrine. Young people need mentors and to make connections with people who care. The youth need to be included in the practice of church sacraments and included in outreach.<sup>31</sup> Personal interactions with other church members, camps, and meaningful labor are never shallow.

Then there is the disconnection of anti-science where the church is perceived as out of touch, but the so-called science is enlightened. An errant dilemma is presented; one can be faithful to the church or become real as a science advocate.<sup>32</sup> Nothing is more genuine than the Word. It is the Word that is profitable for instruction (2 Tim 3:16). Science is a mixed bag. Science is a blessing when a medical breakthrough saves a life, mechanical advancements make safer cars, and electronic improvements allow for improved cell phones and cheaper large screen televisions. Science is not a blessing when theory is put forward as fact. Science is not a blessing when comingled with political correctness, and no one is permitted to question the claims of "settled science." The Bible has stood the test of time and is equal to any critical review. The

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<sup>30</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 92,104.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 92,120.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 92,135.

assumption that science is the only source of true knowledge is grossly overstated. Paul advised Timothy to beware of false science (1 Tim 6:20).

The disconnection of repression, sexual mores is Kinnaman's fourth point. The church is often seen as particularly old-fashioned when sex is the object of discussion. Now, sexuality itself has become a significant challenge for youth ministry. Young people are more tolerant of sexual deviants than older populations. The culture and society call for a carve-out where homosexuality is concerned.<sup>33</sup> The world wants everyone to accept homosexuality as an alternate and valid form of love. However, God has called homosexuality abominable (Lev 18:22). and God has not changed (Mal 3:6). God states explicitly that the sin of homosexuality will cause one to miss heaven (1 Cor 6:9-11). Love demands that those afflicted by this sexual deviancy be forewarned. Those tempted to engage in hetero sex need to know that the marriage bed is undefiled and holy (Heb 13:4). Sexual immorality (as with all sins) leads to regret and shame (Rom 6:21). But, God has said I would forgive confessed sin and cleanse from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). God is the God of second chances.

The disconnection of exclusivity is Kinnaman's most challenging sale. This culture has molded young people to overvalue open-mindedness even at the expense of the truth. There is not much by way of false beliefs, sexual matters, and climate alarmism this culture has not already accepted. Kinnaman recommends embracing scripture over culture and reports that salvation is exclusively through Jesus. Jesus is the way the truth and the life and specifically the only way to heaven (John 14:6). One must break it down; there is only one championship major league baseball team every year. There is only one fastest car, one tallest building, one biggest ship, and only one Savior, and His name is Christ Jesus. He is the object of the gospel, and the

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<sup>33</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 93,163,166.

gospel is the saving message. Because God so loved, Jesus gave Himself for the sins of the world. Because God so loved, confession in Jesus as Lord and belief that Jesus was raised from the dead makes a sinner a saint. Be kind, gentle, understanding, and loving, but never compromise or change the gospel message.<sup>34</sup> The gospel message is the power of God to save the sinner, (Rom 1:16).

Doubtless is Kinnaman's last disconnection. Young people say that church was not a place where they felt comfortable expressing any doubts. Even asking a tricky question is uneasy. Why does God allow suffering and evil? That is a tough one. The complete answer is lengthy, but the short version is God is glorified, and believers are blessed. Doubts are part of the Christian experience. Thomas famously doubted (John 20:24-29). Jesus told the father of the afflicted child that all things are possible if you believe, and the man cried out for help with his unbelief (Mark 9:23-24). On the other side of the doubt is a higher plain of victory. The man's child was healed, and Thomas made a profession greater than his peers; Thomas declared Jesus was his God. Doubts are challenges that should be confessed in the presence of other believers, and as God gives victory, all involved are made more victorious in their spiritual lives.<sup>35</sup>

### Proper Youth Teaching and Discipling

The church's contribution to the future absence of young people is by not pressing the true gospel. When a watered-down safe unoffensive Gospel is presented, do not be hurt or surprised when young people who need meaning in their life reject it. It is a sin to torture kids with a boring gospel, said Jim Rayburn, the founder of Young Life. Pizza and games are no

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<sup>34</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 93,181.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 93,187.

substitute for the gospel; radical love (sharing the gospel) is illegal in 55 countries; they need something worth dying to start to live. Now one is getting through to young hearts and minds.<sup>36</sup> God's business has got to be the most prominent business on this earth to the church members. Every Christian should serve as though God's business is more significant than everything else and desire to serve their generation by sharing the good news of God's Salvation.<sup>37</sup> Brad Griffith (long-time youth minister and musician) agrees, "You got to keep an eye on the culture. Keep up as best as possible with what the kids like now and how the language is changing."

Griffith believes in, "Be an expert on your kids. Get to know them. There is no handbook for that."<sup>38</sup> Connecting with the youth leads to a young adult that sees value in fellowship from church members. Pastor Marvin Minton of Crawford Road Baptist Church agrees, "I think that young adults do not see any relevance or value for their lives in attending church. If they saw value, I think they would be more likely to attend."<sup>39</sup> The church contributes to young adults' absence in not making multiple loving connections to each church's youth. These connections are even more critical when the teen has no family tie vested in the church.

Another way the church fails the youth is over-dependence on programs or ministers. H.L. Mencken, a noted journalist, and satirist said, "For every problem, there is a simple, neat and wrong solution."<sup>40</sup> The best strategy is to teach the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation. The latest program or newest idea that will grow the Ministry is often empty. A.P

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<sup>36</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 149.

<sup>37</sup> Alfred P. Gibbs, *The Preacher and His Preaching* (1960), 29.

<sup>38</sup> Brad Griffith, Phone Interview, Phenix City, Alabama 36870 April 15, 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Marvin Minton, Phone Interview, Phenix City, Alabama 36870 April 14, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why Most Youth Ministry Doesn't Last and What Your Church Can Do About It* (Large Print 16pt) (Sydney: ReadHowYouWant.com, 2010), 22.

Gibbs, preacher, and author said of the early scattered believers of Acts, “They witnessed, and the church grew and was blessed.” Gibbs made the point that there was no record that these scattered believers were licensed or ordained. Every available believer needs to be a “Gospel Gossiper.” Witness, absent of formality, is the best witness. The young people need the witness of regular church members, not just that of the ministers.<sup>41</sup> Programs do not disciple young people. The latest great idea to bring them in does not mentor young people. John Ortberg, an evangelical Christian author, said, “Disciples are handmade, one relationship at a time.”<sup>42</sup>

### Youth Themselves

Many are quick to blame the culture for youth absence from church. Others blame a failed program or the youth ministry's isolation from the rest of the church for eventual young adult absence. These issues have an impact on the youth status, but the youth bear some responsibility also. Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am (Matthew 16)?" Everyone must answer that question themselves. Then, the youth and the young adult will give an account for their actions.

McConnell, a LifeWay researcher, says, "Shifting personal priorities drive newly emancipated adults to drop out of the church." Studies at LifeWay showed (29%) planned on taking a break after High School, and (34%) of young adults stayed, which attended two Sundays a month.<sup>43</sup> Taking a break and exploring the limits of one's newly gained independence does not necessarily equal abandoning the Faith, but these are options exercised by less committed

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<sup>41</sup> Gibbs, *The Preacher, and His Preaching* (1960), 88.

<sup>42</sup> Kinnaman and Hawkins, *You Lost Me*, 13.

<sup>43</sup> "Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church As Young Adults," *LifeWay Research*, last modified January 15, 2019, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>.

Christians. Teens with real devotional life, who read their Bibles and pray, are more likely to stay in the Faith.<sup>44</sup> Personal devotion is one factor at play, but many factors are influencing young adults. The parents and family, peers and friends, youth minister and youth workers, and the church may be factors applying to influence the decision to worship in church or not, but the decision to continue or not belongs to the young adult.

Parental and family ties in the church are important to retention. "I think much of the retention failings of the church concerning young adults would be mitigated, if not greatly improved if we were able to get the parents to come to church while their kids were still in the youth program," said Brad Griffith (Youth Minister) partially mourning.<sup>45</sup> Dyck writes that the kids with the most dedicated parents are more likely to stay with the church as young adults.<sup>46</sup>

Peers and friends have influence to apply. Often young people will visit a church because a friend asks them to. They may then decide to come again based on the first visit with their friend and the welcome they received from their peers. Whether it is said or not, everyone needs to be loved and feel welcomed, leading to feelings of belonging. Those that feel they belong return.<sup>47</sup> The decision to return to a church or not belongs to the visitors.

Youth ministers and youth workers set the atmosphere and the tone for the youth class. When the church has visitors, Dr. Rainer, author and CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources, recommends that visitors be encouraged to feel like guests. Do not hide out in holy huddles;

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<sup>44</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 189.

<sup>45</sup> Griffith, Phone Interview, Phenix City, Alabama 36870 April 15, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 189.

<sup>47</sup> Megan G. Brown, "Relationships Matter: The Impact of Relationships upon Emerging Adult Retention," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 13, no. 1 (2016): xx, DOI:10.1177/073989131601300102.

greet folks genuinely and smile. See that the youth engage with the new kid and make sure the guest is informed about important information and events. The minister must also keep the ministry space neat and clean. These are acceptable practical practices when welcoming youth and their parents to the youth group.<sup>48</sup> The minister's work is one of presence. Griffith goes on to say, "I get the most opportunities by spending time with the youth no agenda. In this way, I build relationships, and the youth realize I love them; opportunities to share the gospel come naturally."<sup>49</sup>

Yes, the church has influence as well. The church members, the pastor, the deacons, the hospitality committee, for that matter, can welcome folks to help them feel like guests. Help them want to belong to the congregation. Invite them to participate in church events, outings, and services. The sense that one belongs is enhanced by involvement. When one works alongside others, they build bonds of love. They make friends and feel the empowerment of being a part of a more significant community.<sup>50</sup> When the parent is being served, they want to return and bring their children.

Sometimes young adults will break fellowship no matter what a minister or church does for them. Prayer is treated as a last resort, but in truth, prayer should be the church's primary and most powerful tool. Pray for the youth, be diligent in Ministry, and trust God for the outcome.

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<sup>48</sup> Thom S. Rainer, *Scrappy Church: God's Not Done Yet* (B&H Books, 2019), 66.

<sup>49</sup> Griffith, Phone Interview, Phenix City, Alabama 36870 April 15, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> Brown, "*Relationships Matter*, xx, DOI:10.1177/073989131601300102.



## Theological Foundations

For any structure to stand and endure, the foundation must be substantial. The foundation must be strong, whether speaking of the buildings of brick or systems of ideas. As a building of physical materials may collapse due to a weak foundation, a movement based on ideas may collapse because the movement's base is not strong enough. The theological foundation of youth ministry or any ministry that will honor God must be based on the Word of God, the Bible. The Bible is a foundation that is strong for the saving of souls and the discipling of believers. The ministry's "why" is doctrinally correct theology taught from the Bible to honor Jesus in the commission outlined in Matthew making disciples and teaching all Jesus commanded (Matt 28:18-20). MacArthur (Pastor of Grace Community Church, Sun Valley, California) wrote that believers are sent to make disciples based on Christ's authority, which means their responsibility does not stop at the point of conversion.<sup>51</sup> They are instructed to teach the whole doctrine a "broad gospel." Mc Garry's broad gospel is concerned with saving souls but later mentors a new believer to maturity. For now, the Bible itself says there is no other foundation fit to build on, and no one can lay a foundation as powerful as Jesus Christ (1 Cor 3:10-11). According to MacArthur, one may lay this foundation only by preaching Christ Jesus.<sup>52</sup>

### The Why of Ministry

The Bible's primary narrative is the foundational blessing of grace unto salvation only through Jesus Christ. The main push in this thesis is proper instruction from the Bible. In a preadult setting that leads primarily to professions of faith unto salvation followed by discipleship leading to enduring faith. The follow-on effect is greater retention of young adults in

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<sup>51</sup> John F. MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005), 1186.

<sup>52</sup> MacArthur, *MacArthur Commentary*, 1568.

the church. In the past, young adults had a greater tendency to return to the church after a season away. Statistical trends reveal this is no longer the case. There are many influencers affecting that unfortunate dynamic, but the influencer that ministers have the most control over and may bring to bear is biblical instruction and discipleship.

Cultural detractors working against righteous living are worse than before. A majority of Christians argue that America has entered a post-Christian era and that it is more socially acceptable to direct hatred and hostility toward those who practice their Christian faith.<sup>53</sup> Paul says in 2 Timothy that the times will become more perilous, but the Christians still act shocked when things worsen. As medical doctors may work more earnestly as their patients' conditions worsen, Christians must encourage one another so much more, as Paul said in Hebrews 10:25. Christians must communicate the gospel and be prepared to give a testimony or a gospel presentation as a seamless extension of any activity. Sports and activities are often used to draw in young people, but the meaning of the gospel is presented. Youth ministry could only entertain the youth for 45 minutes or make an eternal difference through the application of the Word. In the youth group, the primary point of volleyball is Jesus. In the youth group, the primary point of basketball is Jesus. In the youth group, the primary purpose of any fun activity that has drawn in young people is Jesus. Bible instruction brings Jesus to the hearts and minds of young people and changes the eternity of many.

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<sup>53</sup> George Yancey, "Has Society Grown More Hostile Towards Conservative Christians? Evidence from ANES Surveys," *Review of Religious Research* 60, no. 1 (2017): 72, doi:10.1007/s13644-017-0303-8.

## The Powerful Truth

God is the only one who has ever so loved or given so much (John 3:16) and continues to give even now; that is a powerful and foundational truth. It is only by God's grace that any person is saved. God's grace is seen in superabundance in that God's grace is filled with saving power and has appeared to all humans.<sup>54</sup> Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's saving love, and Christians have a duty to tell others about this love. The church is made up of a priesthood of believers (1 Pet 2:5) and, as such, are expected to give the reasons for their hope (1 Pet 3:15). The church is made of those who are saved in Jesus Christ and partake of the Word. Theological heavy hitters like Martin Luther contended that the true church exists where the Word is proclaimed and the faithful are fed. The church is centered around the Word of God.<sup>55</sup> The church members have confessed the death and resurrection of Jesus and are commissioned to witness to others the love of God in their lives, the Lordship of Jesus, the way of salvation, and teach all that Jesus has commanded (Matt 28:19). Christians are to teach the way of salvation: through one Savior, Jesus Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life. Salvation through Jesus is God's ultimate display of love, and that is the powerful truth (John 14:6).

## Salvation Education

What is salvation? Salvation is moving from condemnation to justification. The condemnation is the rightly deserved punishment, which all have merited through their sins. MacArthur notes that it is impossible to follow God's law perfectly.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, all have failed,

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<sup>54</sup> Gustaf W. Henriksson, "Grace in Action: Exploring the Intersection of Soteriology and Ethics in the Letter to Titus," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 73, no. 4 (2020): 335.

<sup>55</sup> Cheryl Peterson, "The Church," *Lutheran Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2016): 47, doi:10.1353/lut.2016.0008.

<sup>56</sup> MacArthur, *MacArthur Commentary*, 1514.

and all have sinned (Rom 3:23). If one believes in Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior, one has moved from death to life, but one is condemned if one does not believe (John 3:18). These foundational concepts of salvation are taught to the youth. With some exposure to this gospel, the youth population may think they are saved from the devil. Salvation is not from the devil. Salvation is deliverance from the righteous indignation of God. Again, the Christian faith has not done an excellent job of teaching this or impressing the metanarrative; the Bible tells the story of salvation from the beginning through Revelation. The Old Testament and the New Testament bring together the whole story, the metanarrative. The metanarrative comes for most as follow-on lessons.

The first offering to the unsaved will be a gospel presentation. After one is saved, discipling should follow until that one is prepared to give a gospel presentation of their own. Paul encouraged Timothy to educate believers and make them witnesses. “And the things that thou hast heard of me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also,” (2 Tim 2:2). MacArthur says, “This process of spiritual reproduction demonstrated by Paul and Timothy is to continue until the Lord returns.”<sup>57</sup> Post-salvation education should always produce believers capable of presenting the gospel. The truth must be passed on to the next generation, and that generation must then reach the next.

### The Gospel

The gospel is the good news. Though all men and women have sinned and have earned God’s righteous judgment, they are offered salvation through Jesus. Salvation is for all who will believe this gospel. Jesus affirmed that God requires those who have eternal life (salvation) to

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<sup>57</sup> MacArthur, *MacArthur Commentary*, 1806.

believe in the One God sent.<sup>58</sup> This gospel is sound theology that is foundational to all true ministries. Youth ministry is where the fundamentals of the faith are taught. The passion and love must be palpable in the voice of the youth minister and the youth workers. The evident peace and security of the believers, the ministers, and youth workers are seen as desirable. The youth must see and want what you have, observe the fruits of love, joy, and peace, and like that for themselves. When the Spirit is in charge, the mind wonderfully claims non-anxious energy that is easily perceived by others.<sup>59</sup> This grace God has given is free but not cheap but came by the shedding of blood (Heb 9:22). Grace is goodness received but not earned, and salvation is made permanent in the power of God as Jesus said, “I will not cast any out,” (John 6:37). Grace unto salvation was paid in full by the one who knew no sin but was made sin that others could be made the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus (2 Cor 5:21). This message that Jesus is so much the way, so much the truth, and so much the life, that if one confesses Jesus as Lord and believes that God raised Him from the dead, by the authority Scripture, that one is saved (Rom 10:9). Saved is freedom from the penalty of sins committed.

The youth need to know that all are sinners (Rom 3:23). The youth seem to have an acute sense of seeing others’ hypocrisy and an equally acute failure to recognize the hypocrisies they bear. All are sinners to include the youth. The penalty for sin is death, but God’s plan for you is eternal life through Jesus Christ; this is grace (Rom 6:23). Grace underserved. This grace cost God His most precious, most glorious treasure in heaven, Jesus. In Jesus, only the believers are blessed in salvation (Acts 4:12). Bringing that message to the youth and the world is the mission.

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<sup>58</sup> Kara E. Powell and Chap Clark, *Sticky Faith: Everyday Ideas to Build Lasting Faith in Your Kids* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 35.

<sup>59</sup> John Ortberg and Scott Rubin, *The Me I Want to Be: Becoming God's Best Version of You* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 115.

All believers have this mission, this commission to go and teach all the truth of Jesus Christ (Matt 28:20). A subset of that mission is youth ministry. The Bible says to train up a young person in the way they should go (Prov 22:6). Training youth is mandated straight from the Word of God. The Word of God is the “why” of youth ministry, Jesus is the “who” of youth ministry, bringing the gospel is the “what” of youth ministry. When souls are saved, we rejoice but, the church does not stop there. There is discipling to be done.

### The Narrow / Broad Gospel

McGarry warns of a “narrow gospel.” A narrow gospel saves but does not continue mentorship of the gospel into creation, believer's world view, the fall, redemption, and power for living.<sup>60</sup> Many youth programs push the narrow gospel in that an intensive discipleship program does not follow a young person's salvation experience. A gospel that highlights the person and work of Jesus Christ through the cross and empty tomb (as great as that is) but lacks applying Christ's power every day is narrow. The broad gospel secures salvation and goes on in teaching and mentoring. The broad gospel leads Christians to fulfillment in all aspects of their life in Jesus Christ.<sup>61</sup>

Ministry is mentoring a new believer to become a faith warrior. The gospel, the good news of a loving God, an atoning sacrifice, a risen Savior, provides the way of salvation. This gospel is the message that brings peace. Unfortunately, many churches stop there. A teen Christian brought to salvation and then not mentored likely becomes a young adult that chooses to break fellowship with church later as a young adult. The church needs to do more than just get

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<sup>60</sup> McGarry, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 117.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

them in. God has a mission for His believers, the commission to teach ALL the truth of Jesus Christ. Evangelism is not a task for a neophyte, which is what a believer is if not mentored post-salvation. Paul noted the spiritual maturity lacking in Corinth through his first letter to them, where he opined that he could not share the meat of the Word because they were still babies in the Faith (1Cor 3:1).

The youth are presented with the gospel. Many are saved but so lightly mentored and relationally socialized in the church that they become nominal Christians, ripe for false religionists to propagandize into a better organized, but false religion, or have their baby faith easily crushed by a college professor with a practiced but errant argument. Then, perhaps, they just fall away from the faith over time. The Word of God is the most potent tool in youth ministry for retaining youth in the church. The Bible says of itself it is profitable unto instruction in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16). According to the Word, a young Christian can be well equipped and prevail in life as they are given a Spirit of power and love and a sound mind (2 Tim 1:7). That young, saved mind needs to be provided with the Bible's instruction, that the Christian might be thoroughly prepared to work for Christ (2 Tim 3:17).

When the youth make a profession for Christ, that is truly a time of celebration. Jesus said, "I tell you there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God when a sinner repents," (Luke 15:10). The learning has only just begun; Jesus has sent his workers to find the lost sheep as depicted in the symbology of Matthew 18, but when the sheep are found, Jesus expects that the sheep will also be fed (Luke 21:17). When the youth are brought to salvation and then not mentored in a vigorous Bible-based program, God is ultimately cheated out of the service of what should be young, vibrant believers and cheated on the future work of evangelizing young adults as the youth transition. Jesus has said, "The harvest truly is great, but the laborers are

few...," (Luke 10:2). The Word is the foundation of ministry; Jesus is the personal Savior sustaining Christians and making the high commission possible. Let those who mentor young people to salvation continue to build up the body of Christ into a priesthood of believers vested in church fellowship, socialized with the whole church, partakers of the meat of the Word, and prayer warriors called to the harvest and called to the high commission.

The theological foundation is sure in Jesus Christ, who said, "The gates of hell will not prevail against my church." The Rock of the church is the confession that Jesus is the Son of God, the Christ (Matt 16:16-17). Jesus is the lamb that takes away the sins of the world, (John 1:29), but He is also the judge and the King that will say one day, "Come ye blessed of my Father or depart from me you cursed into everlasting fire," (Matt 25:34,41). The theological foundation is solid in Jesus as the vine that all the branches are connected. The branches all work in Jesus to bring fruit. All the branches work together in Christ, even as all the church members and ministries deliver a broad Gospel.<sup>62</sup> In other words, the theological instruction in Christ Jesus is critical, but the way that theology is presented is critically communal.

The youth ministry should come alongside the parents, work with the church, reach the young people for Christ. The youth ministry should work with the preacher, the music ministry, and the young adult class to bring the Gospel of Jesus unto Salvation. But not stop there, disciple the young people into the maturity of the Faith. This collaborative process is by the Word's design as there is safety in a multitude of counselors (Prov 11:14). Peter encouraged the younger to be subject to the elder (1 Pet 5:5). The elders are blessed with wisdom and understanding. One does not get all their learning from one source. There are many Christians with knowledge and

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<sup>62</sup> Holly C. Allen and Christine Lawton, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 112.



gifts. The youth of the church needs more than the youth minister. They need the parents, the youth workers, the preacher, the music minister, the deacons, the elders, the Sunday school teachers, and the other congregants' fellowship in the church. There is knowledge to be gained, relationships to be developed, so that the young Christian may become a gospel gossiper as preacher A.P. Gibbs would say.<sup>63</sup>

The theology of youth ministry is summed up in witness, discipleship, and missions. As stated earlier, Jesus is the ministry's main focus, including volleyball, basketball, concerts, fun activities, and other youth group outreach. But getting the kids to show up is the first challenge; that is why fun activities, sports, and concerts are often used to draw them in. The kids come to have a good time and find a good Savior. The youth program is designed to come alongside the parents, the pastor, and the congregation to witness Jesus to the youth.

Discipling the youth is as important as witnessing in the first place. The new believers need to grow in faith. The broad gospel brings salvation and growth in the faith. The youth ministry's success depends on making the kids and the parents feel welcome at the church. Paul says to welcome one another as Christ has welcomed others (Rom 15:7). Peter says to show hospitality (1Pet 1:9). The youth ministry's success depends on relationship development with the parents, youth pastor, youth workers, young adult staff, young adults, and the participation of the youth themselves. The youth who age out of the youth group must already have good and growing relationships with the members of the young adult class to feel welcome at the next level. A fundamental Bible study is the most significant factor contributing to the youth group's growth and development. However, young adults choosing to continue fellowship with the

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<sup>63</sup> Gibbs, *The Preacher, and His Preaching* (1960), 88.

church were those with church relationships outside the youth group. Socialization and Bible instruction are connected in that disciples are nurtured in relationships.

### **Theoretical Foundations**

The theoretical foundation is the how of ministry and how the Bible is used to prosper God's purposes. A quick look back at how the Word has been organized to minister to the youth may inform current and future organized instruction. During the Reformation period of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the Puritans, a group that sought to purify or cleanse their church of Catholic practices, used catechesis, a formulaic set of religious instructions to pass on their faith to their youth.<sup>64</sup> C. H. Spurgeon put together a collection of catechesis he borrowed from other faith groups, including Baptists. Spurgeon said, "The use of Catechism in all families is a great safeguard against the error of the times."<sup>65</sup> Historically catechesis stressed the importance of the Commandments, the Apostle's Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the sacraments.<sup>66</sup> The first Christians, Jewish converts, were taught their oral traditions, now written in the Mishna. Written instructions are helpful in all walks of life. In the Army, a written how-to is called a program of instruction. Augustine made the most detailed and developed catechetical (instructional Christian) model. The program was divided into progressive stages. The metanarrative (the overarching lesson that Jesus is the Savior from Genesis to Revelation), basic Bible instruction, and congregational worship made up stages 1 and 2 of the Augustine (catechetical) model. Baptism preparation, learning about the Lord's Supper, and the Apostles Creed was stage 3.

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<sup>64</sup> McGarry, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 57.

<sup>65</sup> Sam Hughey, "A Puritan Catechism, Charles Spurgeon / *The Reformed Reader*," last modified 1999, [https://www.reformedreader.org/ccc/puritan\\_catechism.htm](https://www.reformedreader.org/ccc/puritan_catechism.htm).

<sup>66</sup> McGarry, *Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 57.

Baptism and participating in the Lord's Supper completed stage 4 of Augustine's catechetical model. The completion of stage 4 meant that the believer was considered a neophyte.<sup>67</sup> That is an intense program of instruction; it could take years to get to baptism.

#### Teach / Preach the Word

Youth ministry needs an organized approach to explain the gospel, teach the fundamentals, and disciple the youth to a healthy and growing faith. Catechistic programs of the past used a question-and-answer format. But to start there, the catechist and the learners need to share a common heritage. In the past, culturally, the values of teachers and students were less divergent than today. Today's gospel minister has to build a shared understanding with the youth members by spending time with them. The primary common understanding must be the truth of the gospel. The youth members will arrive with many errant beliefs and customs. Today's youth also get a more potent dose of the lost culture through the internet and smartphones. So, the gospel is taught first, revisited often, then built on through discipleship.

As a faith group, the Baptists have not done as good a job teaching the gospel's truth and Scripture's basics to congregants as the false faith religious groups have with their false dogma. The false religious groups tend to be more homogeneous and rooted in family tradition, leading to the group's effective instruction. Baptist ministers often engage in false religious groups' false doctrinal arguments but not readily the rank-and-file Baptists. Just getting people saved is not enough; discipleship must follow. The Baptist believer must command the true metanarrative that Christ is from the beginning to the end of the Bible, the primary protagonist. Every believer must be equipped to defend their faith with proof texts and contend for the faith when challenged. Augustine had a progressive program of instruction designed to produce a believer

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<sup>67</sup> McGarry, *Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 58-59.

capable of equipping one to give an answer to every man that asks the reason for the hope that is in themselves (1 Peter 3:15). Augustine called this level of a believer “the Faithful.”<sup>68</sup>

The Augustine plan is not the only way to build faithful believers. There has always been more than one way to do most tasks. There is a great diversity of “how” in the Protestant Faith, but something has gone wrong over the years. Evangelical churches teach the gospel but not enough to satisfy Matthew’s Commission to obey all that Christ commanded. There seems to be a significant push to get a confession of faith but not as high an effort to mentor young people into a more robust, more knowledgeable faith... just get them in. Something has gone wrong. How does one know something has gone wrong? One looks at the statistics. Six times as many young adults are dropping out of the church as compared to a generation ago.<sup>69</sup> They are not dropping out because the church is doing a better job of discipling the youth. This researcher contends that church atmospherics, relationship building, and teaching of the Word have been lacking the youth or not stewarded most advantageously. As a result, young adults are mostly absent from the church.

The “how” of ministry is the domain of the church and the ministers. The “how” will be affected by the ministry’s opportunities and the ministers’ talents. Whatever the church’s “how” looks like, a few non-negotiables need to be part of the mix. The youth must be socialized with the other believers, not just those involved in youth ministry. The youth need more than a youth worker and a few peers to connect with the church. Regular co-worship with the church is a must. That is regularly participating in the corporate worship of liturgy, music, communion, and seasonal events. Youth are social beings, but that sociability must be fostered in discipleship.

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<sup>68</sup> McGarry, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 59.

<sup>69</sup> Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian*, 188.

The youth need to be socialized in group activities like social events, outreach programs, fellowships, and Bible studies.<sup>70</sup> The church must be a safe, friendly place filled with loving, friendly, outgoing members, making visitors want to engage, be mentored, and disciplined in the Word.

Take care of the atmospherics, socializing, and instruction in the Word while the youth are still part of youth ministry. Before a youth ages out of the youth group and becomes a young adult, ask these questions: Does the youth have a relationship outside the youth group? Does that youth have a positive experience with the larger church? Does the youth see value in fellowship with the church? If the youth's answer to these questions is "No," then the youth turned young adult's response will be "No," as well. The church's "how" must get ahead of and address each issue if young adults are to be part of church fellowship. Trust relationships can make the answers to these questions "yes." The catechetical process of the past was highly relational. Bonds of trust made more profound knowledge passable.<sup>71</sup> Before the catechetical model, Jesus called disciples a small group and fostered trust with them, and invested time, energy, and love in them, eventually giving them the commission to teach the gospel to the world. The church's "how" must include the church's atmospherics, socialization of all the members, youth, and high-quality instruction to the congregants.

McGarry puts forward his bare minimums of youth ministry, five must-haves to properly execute youth ministry. Mc Garry's number one is "parents first." Youth workers are critical agents in the youth's spiritual development, but parents are responsible for their child's spiritual

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<sup>70</sup> Leslie J. Francis et al., "What Helps Young Christians Grow in Discipleship? Exploring Connections Between Discipleship Pathways and Psychological Type," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 2020, 03, doi:10.1080/13674676.2020.1767556.

<sup>71</sup> McGarry, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 60.

development. The youth worker is a co-evangelist to come alongside the parent and help.<sup>72</sup>

Second, churches must worship together; separate services for teenagers are not modeled in the Bible.<sup>73</sup> The children and youth should be given the opportunity to worship with their parents.<sup>74</sup>

Third, the discipleship of the youth must be a priority. That is teaching the youth how to evangelize. Fourth, evangelism is every believer's responsibility.<sup>75</sup> Fifth, the essential manual for any ministry is the Bible. This source is profitable for teaching and training in righteousness. The Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God, or it is not.

Mc Garry believes the Bible is the Word and recommends that it be the Ministry's primary text. Finally, the gospel must be a pillar of your youth ministry program. The problem with the gospel is most programs have a very narrow gospel. The narrow gospel gets one saved but does not build on salvation. The broad gospel proclaims grace, but it also reveals peace and hope.<sup>76</sup> Because many teach a narrow gospel, a teen can be saved but still suffer anxiety and depression and never grow into a mature faith. The new convert must be guided to a full gospel and a complete relationship with Jesus, start a lifetime journey to an even more meaningful and fulfilling relationship with Jesus Christ, who is the author and finisher of the faith (Hebrews 12:2). The process of bringing a broad gospel starts with making visitors to the church or the youth ministry feel welcome. The process continues into socializing visitors and youth with the church membership, after this, and of critical importance is bringing the undiluted teaching of the

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<sup>72</sup> McGarry, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry*, 160.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

Bible. Primary to the process is that God's Word goes out and does not come back void (Isaiah 55:11). The gospel is never preached or spoken in vain.<sup>77</sup> What good is effective atmospherics and socialization if the full counsel of the Word is not taught? The answer, of course, is no good. However, without adequate socialization across and within the church, how will the counsel of the Word be shared?

### Socialization

The second element of the thesis postulates that socializing the believers as youths will enhance the possibility; they will become continuous worshipers choosing to continue fellowship with the church upon reaching independent adulthood. Religious socialization is an interactive process whereby trusted and valued senior members of an organization impart social importance and spiritual understandings to the junior members of an organization. The junior members are not computers waiting to be programmed; they have considerable agency to resist the values others encourage.<sup>78</sup> In the Baptist setting, this religious socialization process is short-circuited before it has a chance. Many Baptist organizations will separate members by age for instruction and forfeit opportunities for relationships and socialization with other age groups and church members. Allen's research revealed that to make a more effective socialization program that builds affectionate and sustained experiences between church members requires change from a peer-centered program that values efficiency to a model that values fostering relationships. Spending time with folks has to be seen as more important than getting things done.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Albert Barnes, *Barnes Notes on the NT (Barnes)* (Wordsearch12 Publications, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> Darren E. Sherkat, "Religious Socialization," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*: Cambridge University Press, (2003), 151, DOI:10.1017/CBO9780511807961.012.

<sup>79</sup> Allen, *InterGenerate Transforming Churches*, 29.

Churches are doing their adolescent attendees a disservice by segregating them into age-specific ministries.<sup>80</sup> Different services for each age segment of membership prevent any influence older members could have on younger members and prevent new relationships' possibilities to develop cross-generationally. All Christians are undergoing the process of discipleship. This discipleship may be informal, but it is an ongoing lifelong process even if Christians are unaware.<sup>81</sup> This socialization is a kind of informal Christian discipleship process. This discipleship is called for in the Great Commission of Matthew 28, extends to all ages, and depends on interpersonal relationships and practical Bible knowledge transfers. Compartmentalizing discipleship to a subset of academics shared with a narrow set of attendees is to short-change the discipleship and socializing process. Discipleship is about forming a Christian, not just adding temporal competence.<sup>82</sup> The church is supposed to be the place where building Christians are accomplished. The atmospherics must be welcoming. The social interaction between church members and others must be warm and loving, and the Biblical knowledge shared must be faithful and true; then, continuous worshipers are developed according to the Great Commission.

So far, the conditions required for effective ministry and retention of young adults have been put forward. The challenges to good atmospherics, socialization, and Bible instruction have been discussed. The next chapter will assess a true church for the required elements of effective ministry and form possible mitigations to improve its ministry.

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<sup>80</sup> Mel Walker, *Inter-Generational Youth Ministry: Why a Balanced View of Connecting the Generations Is Essential for the Church* (2013), 182.

<sup>81</sup> Steven L. Porter, "Will/Heart/Spirit: Discipleship that Forms the Christian Character," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 16, no. 1 (2019): xx, doi:10.1177/0739891318820334.

<sup>82</sup> William F. Cox and Robert A. Peck, "Christian Education as Discipleship Formation," *Christian Education Journal: Research on Educational Ministry* 15, no. 2 (2018): 244, doi:10.1177/0739891318778859.







## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The project aimed to address the problem that young adults were not choosing to attend church. The methodology of addressing this problem of young adult absence from the church started with acknowledging the problem. After conducting a literature review of what is known about the issue, the following working thesis was formed (When youth are nurtured in the proper atmospherics, properly socialized, and taught the Word of God, they may become continuing worshipers choosing to fellowship with the church). Then, work with the church followed. First, permission was obtained to conduct the research on and through Crawford Road Baptist Church (CRBC). The second step was to survey the church members referencing the thesis's three aspects: atmospherics, socialization, and instruction. Third, after the survey findings were processed, a working group (a cross-section of the church membership) was set up to review the survey findings and propose adjustments to improve atmospherics, socialization, and instruction practices.

The hypothesis was that positive atmospherics in church help retain young adults. Atmospherics include cleanliness of the facilities, friendliness of the people, and the visitors' impressions. The theory also was that building relationships (socialization) with church members outside the youth group helped retain youth as they become young adults. The most crucial part of the thesis was that gospel and Bible teaching were critical to maintaining continuing worshipers from the youth and young adult demographics. After all, what good are atmospherics and socialization if the true doctrine was not being taught? The surveys assessed the perceived importance and effectiveness of applied atmospherics, socialization (relationship building), and Bible instruction to the CRBC's membership. The working group studied the survey findings to

improve CRBC's performance to increase the number of young adults who would continue fellowship at the church after they aged out of the youth group.

The first two parts of the thesis, church atmospherics and relationship building outside the youth group, are the parts in which the working group had the most input. According to the theory, atmospherics and relationships are essential to young adult retention. If visitors can not feel at ease in the church setting and do not get a sense of being welcome, no relationships will form, and no meaningful transfer of instruction will take place.

CRBC already had a strong atmospherics program. One of the deacons coordinated welcoming, and another worked closely to provide security. The well-staffed usher ministry ensured that folks were welcomed when they entered the church, and the ushers assisted the visitor in any way they needed. The outreach committee greeted the visitors again from the pulpit and encouraged them to fill out a visitor card so that someone from the outreach committee could visit with them later at their home. The people of the church were outgoing and friendly as well.

There are more limitations to CRBC's socialization program because they do not have a formal socialization program. The church is divided in that Sunday school is age-segregated. There are limited opportunities for cross-generational associations. The informal options for cross-generational association include the short 15 minutes between church opening and the start of Sunday school, the 15-minute break between Sunday school and the beginning of corporate worship in the sanctuary, and the 15 to 20 minutes people meet and mingle after the corporate service just before leaving for dinner. The youth and the young adults meet separately apart from the church's leading body for Sunday evening and Wednesday service. Corporate structured cross-generational opportunities for discipleship are few. The church organizes fifth Sunday sings, monthly fellowships, and holiday fellowships, but other gatherings are age-specific,

organized by different Sunday school classes. Corporate structure by age works against cross-generational socialization and therefore hinders cross-generational discipleship.

Surveying the church was a way to get the church’s sense about young adult retention and raised awareness that young adult retention is an issue that needed addressing.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, a church survey was administered to sample the church body’s attitude toward youth ministry and young adult absence from the church. The working group then reviewed the church survey’s findings to understand better the nature of CRBC’s version of young adult absence from church and postulated ways to mitigate retention issues. The survey is displayed below in Table 3.1.

**Table 3.1 Survey questions given to CRBC,  
“Youth and Young Adult Church Worship Attendance”**

1) Why do young adults statistically attend church less than other segments of the population?

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2) How can the church improve young adult church attendance?

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3) What actions can the church take to encourage young adults to fellowship with the church?

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4) To gain insight on generational sentiment about youth and young adult church attendance, please select your age range below.

Age 15-25       26 -46       47 and up

5) On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest), how important is preaching and teaching the Bible to reach youth and young adults? Circle a number.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

6) On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest), how well does the church preach and teach the Bible to reach youth and young adults? Circle a number.

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

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<sup>1</sup> Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2013), 118.

7) On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest), how important is church atmospherics (making to feel welcome) to reaching and retaining youth and young adults?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

8) On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest), how effective is the church atmospherics at reaching and retaining youth and young adults?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

9) On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest), how important is building personal relationships to reach and retain youth and young adults changed?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

10) On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest and 10 being the highest), how effective is this church at building personal relationships to reach and retain youth and young adults?

1    2    3    4    5    6    7    8    9    10

11) Would you be willing to help the church retain young adults? YES / NO.

12) Can I be counted on to pray for youth ministry? YES / NO.

### **Intervention Design**

The broadest cross-section of the church membership, leadership, young adults, and youth members formed the working group. With prayer, the working group had the best opportunity to develop the most appropriate solutions for CRBC. The youth's perspectives were needed to help estimate the attitude of other member youths to possible solutions before they were attempted. The young adults' insights were an essential complement to those of the older members. The elder church membership brought insight into how the rank-and-file church members would receive committee recommendations. Finally, the leadership carried checks and balances to the suitability of the various possible solutions and brought a servant's heart.

The working thesis called for improved atmospherics, relationship building, and instruction. It was assumed earlier that the working group would have the most input for the atmospherics and socialization aspects of the thesis. As it turns out, the research revealed that the weakest part of CRBC's ministry was proper socialization. CRBC was an amiable place. The facilities were in excellent shape, and professional staff cleans regularly. That seems to satisfy atmospherics. The ministerial staff is more than competent the senior pastor has 30 years of experience. The music ministry was strong and used doctrinally sound song selection. The Word was preached, and the gospel was taught. Wednesday evenings were organized as discipleship training, and the deacons had a train-up program to empower believers to serve as deacons. The church spent money on quarterly training material, and the nominating committee ensured that every church ministry had competent leadership. The Sunday school staff was trained, motivated and loving. Overall, CRBC was doing an excellent job of teaching all that Jesus commanded. That seems to satisfy the instruction part of the thesis. This project went where the discoveries led; therefore, most of the working group's input was directed toward improving socialization.

This project was a team effort: this working group of stakeholders designed all the interventions. The working group reviewed the survey data and brainstormed the main issue and the supporting issues to improve young adult retention at CRBC.<sup>2</sup> After the working group was confident that they had arrived at the best practices, this researcher organized the findings in a format that facilitated the quick understanding from others who did not directly work on this project. The summary findings were presented to the working group to confirm that the summary accurately represents the group's recommendations before meeting with the church council.

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<sup>2</sup> Stringer, *Action Research*, xi.

Afterward, the process went forward. To some degree, every member of CRBC has taken part in the revised practices.

The working group recommended this workaround: the youth and the young adults' classes should combine on missions, sports, and get-togethers. Approval for this suggestion goes through the young adult leader and the youth minister. The working group also recommends an ambassador program. Like an ambassador, members of different age groups will visit other Sunday school classes and improve cross-generational exposures. The ambassador program will require coordination between the Sunday school directors and the affected Sunday school classes. It is believed that most Baptist churches could benefit from the working groups' suggestions as most Baptist churches are organized similarly. The study drove one fact: "the organization of the Sunday schools into separate age groups was counter to improved socialization between the age groups."

### **Implementation of the Intervention Design**

The church council broadly accepted the working group's findings and recommendations, and the conclusions were made official with a majority vote at a church business meeting. The interventions were carried out in the ministries of the entire church. The working group's well-thought-out recommendations have become church-approved interventions which have become standard practice performed by the church membership. The practices will be reviewed later by church leadership to ensure that the desired effects are achieved unless unforeseen consequences are encountered. The leadership will adjust protocols as necessary in coordination with the working group and adjust at the next council meeting.

This process may be informal, but it should be continuous, as changes may have unintended consequences. Prayerfully the efforts will have brought better fruit and led to future



increased young adult retention. Anticipated retention of youth and young adults will follow the improvements primarily of church socialization and relationship building. The problem CRBC has with socialization is the fact that the church separates the people by age groups. As things work now, when a young person is in the youth group, the only people they see not their age are the youth minister and the youth workers. The problem manifests when the young person ages out of the youth group. This new young adult does not know anyone who is outside the youth group at the church. The young adult's only hook to the church is to a group he cannot fellowship with now. He is currently being asked to fellowship with folks with no prior socialization because young adults rarely associate with members outside the youth group. Minor tweaks may be made to atmospherics and Bible instruction, but the most potential improvement at CRBC is socialization practices.

Because this project's timing has been up against the pandemic, the immediate application of socialization ideas is possible, but without the full complement of attendees, the impact of the socialization experiment is more limited. The working group agrees, post-pandemic is a time for rebuilding and reacquainting with previously absent members. The COVID 19 restrictions were relaxed before August 2021, and churches began to reimplement their former services and ministries. The working group thinks CRBC should renew its former successful ministries and reach out to the members that have been absent because of COVID 19 mitigations. Once attendance has returned to pre-pandemic levels and operations have resumed normalcy, socialization improvements may be more fully realized along with an enhanced outreach program. As of this writing (August 2021), the reapplication of many of the COVID 19 protocols has started taking place. The church was at approximately two-thirds of its former

attendance, but with the reintroduction of COVID precautions, the attendance is down to roughly half the pre-pandemic level.



## **Chapter 4**

### **Results Introduction**

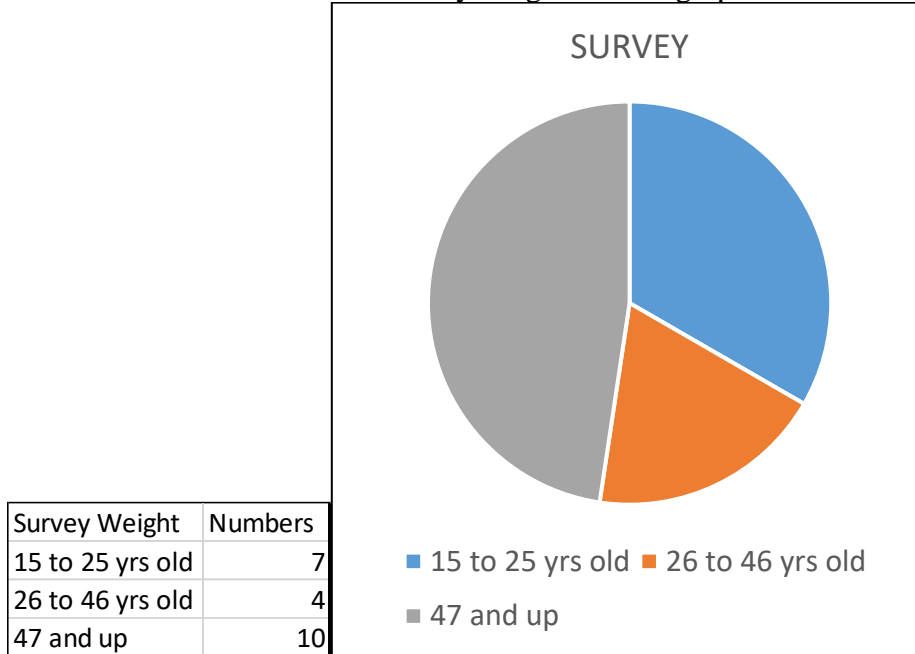
The working group reviewed the church-wide survey findings and used that as the starting point for this study. The survey results were expected with the following caveat: the senior group was more informed than the other members as expected, but they were also more critical, and this researcher did not anticipate that. The numbers and graphs will reflect the seniors' critical assessments as the project unfolds. The survey format asks how important different aspects of ministry are then asks how the church is performing in the various aspects of ministry. The seniors saw more importance in the thesis elements: atmospherics, socialization, and instruction, but reflected more disillusion with church performance in these critical areas.

The working group has made a few recommendations for procedures to the church based on the surveys, group discussions, and COVID considerations. The working group was a cross-section of the church population, but it also has some of the strongest Christians, experienced elders, and experienced leaders. Recommendations that made it through the working group were well vetted before presenting to the church council. The adjustments the church implemented will be reviewed for their effectiveness in improving ministry. Chapter Four will then be organized as follows: Survey Findings and Working Group Discussions.

### **Survey Findings**

The surveys revealed three age demographics and their assessments of critical aspects of Crawford Road Baptist Church's ministry. The age groups were 15 to 25 (the youth), 26 to 46 (young adult), 47 and up (senior adult).

Table 4-1  
Survey weighted demographics



The survey questions were, why young adults attend church less than the other age groups, how young adult church attendance could be improved, and what actions the church could take to encourage young adult fellowship with the church. The other questions asked the research participants to estimate how important a task was on a scale from 1 to 10 and then estimate how well the church performed that task on the same scale. The tasks surveyed and graphed made up the elements of the thesis.

The first survey question (why young adults attend church less than other age segments) was assessed. The 15 to 25 age group saw the issue for the young adults as a priority issue. Time was spent pursuing personal interests, and secondarily the youth perceived that some young adults were being left behind in that all their friends had left for college or work in other areas. The young adult perspective was a little more cynical. The young adults (26 to 46) attributed absence to sleeping in, working, and rebellion. The senior adults (47 and up) saw the world working against young adult fellowship through glorifying activities outside the church. The

seniors also saw personal failings of the young adult in the form of sleeping-in and rebellion. The seniors also viewed the situation practically; if no childcare services were offered or none of their friends attended, why would they attend? These were the answers that Crawford Road Baptist Church (CRBC) members have postulated. These findings were the participant's true thoughts. The research proceeded as though the survey takers' evaluations were accurate unless contra indicators were otherwise shown.

The second survey question (how the church can improve young adult church attendance) was answered. The youth thought changing the music (contemporary), changing the preaching, making services more central to young adults, and advertising would increase young adult attendance. The young adults wanted more than theoretical sermons. They longed for practical applications. The young adults preferred music other than traditional hymns and desired more social events added to the calendar. The seniors believed that the music was a factor but understood that most of the church (other seniors) wanted to keep traditional music for corporate worship services. The seniors counseled more opportunities for social interaction and more follow-up with discipleship but cautioned that there is no quick, easy answer and that prayer is needed to manage young adult retention wisely.

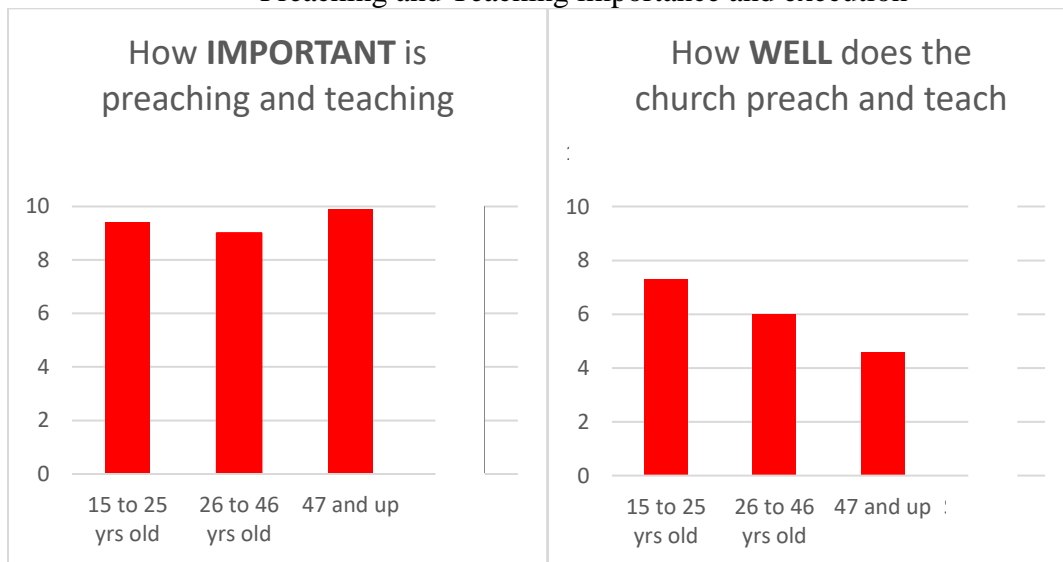
The third survey question (how the church can encourage young adult fellowship with the church) was answered. The youth thought more sports and social activities would encourage young adults to fellowship. The young adults wanted more practical application in sermons and more adult getaways. The seniors believed more small groups studies and short missions would be encouraging to young adults.

Question four was where the survey takers identified the age group to which they belonged. More than half of the respondents were senior adults. Approximately a quarter of the

respondents were young adults, and youth filled the remaining quarter of respondents. The senior adults were the most significant population at CRBC.

Question five and six went together. Number five asked how important was preaching and teaching on a scale of 1 to 10, with ten being the most significant. Number six asked how well the church was doing in preaching and teaching on that same scale. The youth said the importance was 9.4 out of 10, and the church’s execution was 7.3 out of 10. The young adults assessed importance at 9 out of 10 and judged the execution level at 6 out of 10. The seniors had the harshest assessment, with 9.9 for significance and 4.6 for execution.

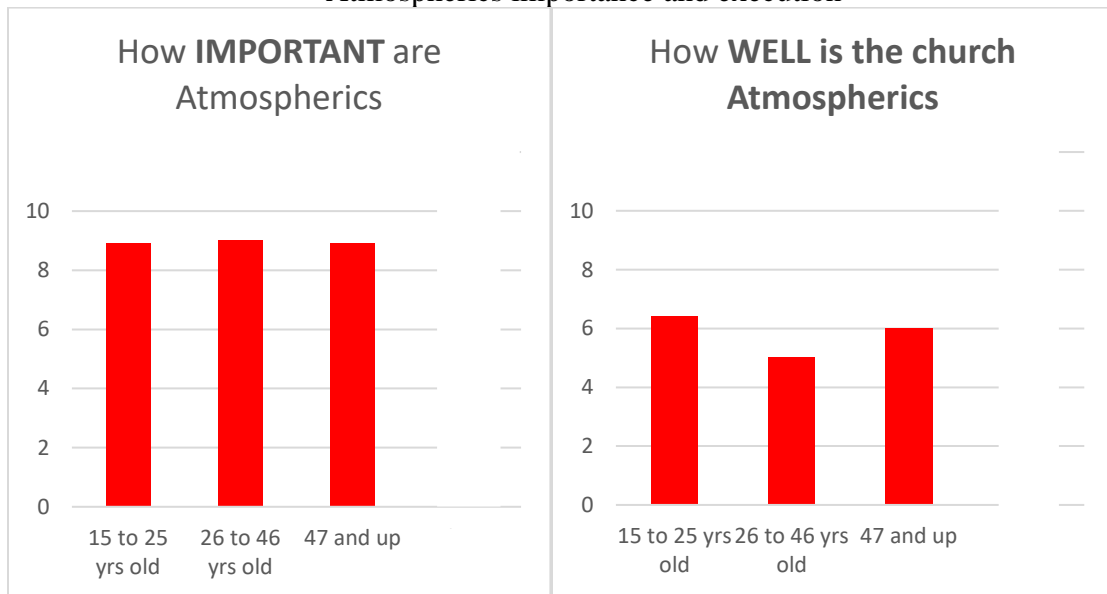
Table 4-2  
Preaching and Teaching importance and execution



Questions 7 and 8 asked how important atmospherics were and how the church was at executing good atmospherics. Questions 9 and 10 referred to the importance of personal relationships and how well the church was doing in that category. Preaching and teaching were central to the commission, and atmospherics and socialization lend to the effectiveness of preaching and teaching. Therefore, each element of the thesis, atmosphere, socialization, and instruction, were essential and needed to be executed with excellence.

Atmospherics (how one is made to feel welcomed by church members and the pleasing aesthetics of the facilities) was assessed almost identically by the three age groups. The youth gave an 8.9 for importance and a 6.4 in execution out of 10. The young adults considered 9 of 10 for importance and a 5 for church execution of atmospherics. The senior adults saw the atmospherics as an 8.9 out of 10 and the accomplishment of proper atmospherics as a 6.

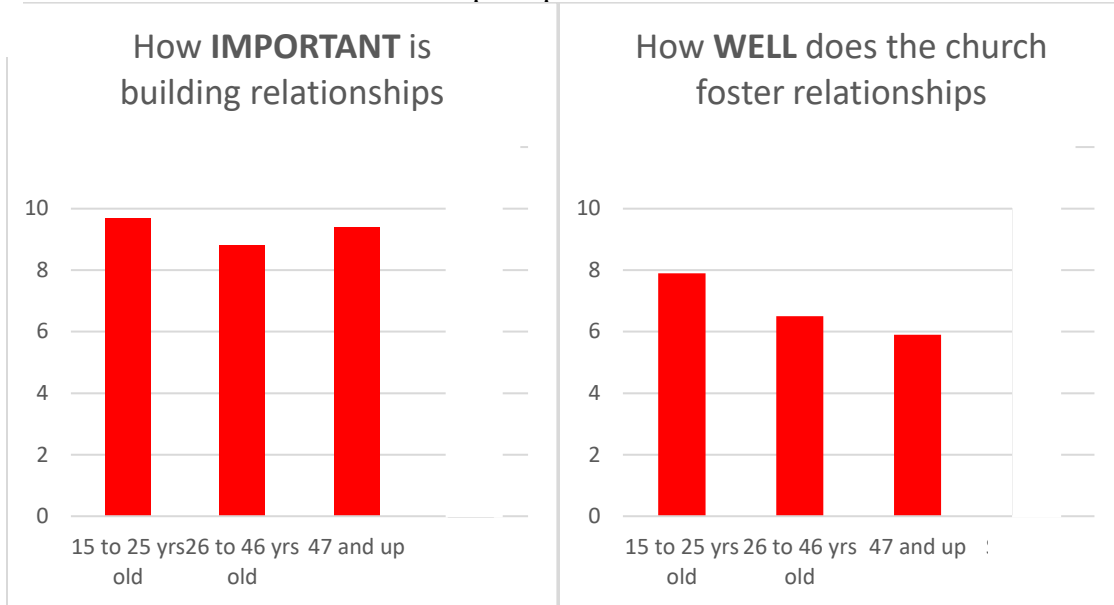
Table 4-3  
Atmospherics importance and execution



Relationship building and socializing are used interchangeably in this study. The whole point of socializing was the fostering of connections, relationships between members of the church. The youth saw personal relationships (questions 9 and 10) as a 9.7 out of 10. The youth reckoned the church’s ability to manage this at 7.9 out of 10. Young adults were assessed an 8.8 for importance and a 6.5 for accomplishment. Senior adults held a 9.4 for importance and gave a 5.9 for effectiveness.



Table 4-4  
Relationships importance and execution



Collectively, the church has said that the importance of preaching and teaching is a 9.4 out of 10. The church assessment of its preaching and teaching is approximately 6 out of 10. The church saw atmospherics, collective importance at roughly a 9 out of 10. The church viewed the effectiveness of its atmospherics as a 6 out of 10. In the relationship development area, the collective assessment is 9.3 for importance and 6.7 for practice. There were improvements to be made in every category. When the church survey was averaged together in practice, the church did not score more than a 6.7 for preaching and teaching, for atmospherics, or for socializing the members, yet the church assessed the importance to be at least 9 out of 10 in each category. According to the assessment of the surveyed church members, there was room for improvement. The working group then met and considered what to recommend to the church.

As a point of interest, a comparison was made between the national statistics and CRBC. The national stats are better than CRBC; 90% of CRBC are not attending any longer. CRBC's Sunday school records revealed that only 10% of the youth have transitioned to the young adult Sunday school class. The Rainer Research Group estimated that by the time the youth reached

twenty-two years of age, 70% would have left the church.<sup>1</sup> However, a doubt lingers in that the CRBC records do not reflect how many former attendees are attending church somewhere else.

### **Working Group Discussions**

The researcher briefed the working group about the project goals before allowing the group to begin assessing the survey results. The prework briefing was as follows. This project has grown from the late teen to the twenty-something absence of young adults from church fellowship. Hopefully, this project will shed light on the issues that affect young adult retention. This project needs a working group with enough diversity and depth to interpret the survey and form recommendations for the church. Consider the thesis: suppose the youths of Crawford Road Baptist Church (CRBC) were nurtured in the proper atmospherics, socialized in meaningful relationships, and taught from the Word of God, then the youth would become continuous worshipers in young adulthood. This working group's mission was to ensure that CRBC maximizes the atmospherics, socialization, and instruction in the Word to retain as many young adults as possible.

The working group met four times to consider the survey findings and engage each other in open discussion. The primary debate was the music for the first two meetings. The working group considered all the survey findings, but the music was of first importance during meetings one and two. Many youths and young adults surveyed call for contemporary music; a small number of the 47 and up age range adults recommended contemporary music also. The working group agreed that more contemporary music might benefit worship but understood that the church body would not tolerate a sudden radical change in worship protocol. Possible mitigation

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<sup>1</sup> Drew Dyck, *Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith. . . and How to Bring Them Back* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 17.

considered was playing contemporary style music as background ahead of starting the corporate worship service. The issue with this suggestion is the people talk over the background music, as noted by the music minister. The few minutes before the corporate service was considered unofficial fellowship time. Another possible response was to use contemporary music for the special music while the church continued to sing hymns. This mitigation is essentially in effect already. The working group agreed a contemporary song could serve the fellowship part of corporate service (the part of the service when church members visit and greet one another between singing and preaching). No issues were put forward against this mitigation, and this is a recommendation as yet not made.

The working group wondered if anyone knew of a church that transitioned to contemporary music from traditional hymns and thrived. No members knew of such a church, but many were aware of a large church in the area that tried to force the contemporary issue and suffered a mass exodus. Many worshipers came to CRBC because it is a well-known traditional program. The working group researched the music question in-depth and found that young people prefer Rock and Pop music for leisure listening. Contemporary music actually belongs to the Baby Boomers; much of the contemporary music listened to today is over 20 years old. For example, "Thank You" by Ray Boltz was dropped in 1988, 33 years old.<sup>2</sup> An American Enterprise Institute study found that worship style based on contemporary music had no impact on the pace of church decline. Churches that reversed their decline had new inspired leadership and more committed church membership participating in church activities and supporting the

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<sup>2</sup> "Teens and Church Music: What Do They Really Think?" *Reformed Worship*, accessed July 4, 2021, <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-1997/teens-and-church-music-what-do-they-really-think>.

institution financially. Churches thrive and improve when people are deeply committed, not because someone decided to include contemporary music.<sup>3</sup>

The music minister, a working group member, held a sensing session with the church's young adults. The music minister's main takeaway from our young adults was they liked upbeat and happy music, not a specific genre. An inquiry during the meeting found that the youth members of the working group were not listening to contemporary Christian music, but two others (older Christians) out of the working group did listen to this type of music. The working group was satisfied that contemporary music was not the answer to low young adult attendance. Atmospherics, personal relationships, and preaching have more bearing on ministry than a music genre. The music discussion continued to the second working group meeting. The Working group has decided to offer no radical changes to the music for this traditional church. However, to make minor incremental adjustments in music, the church would tolerate it. Any adjustments to music will not include songs that repeat the same lyrics excessively, portraying a lack of theological depth.

The working group agrees that selecting and mixing in contemporary songs for the fellowship part of the corporate service would be accepted but call it traditional inclusive, not a blended music service, or push back from the church's main body would come quickly. The working group determined that one should judge music and songs by the quality, the message, and how it makes one feel, not if it is of a specific genre. The working group also pointed out that personal preference for musical styles is unimportant, but how the music ministers to the

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<sup>3</sup> Lyman Stone, "Promise and Peril: The History of American Religiosity and its Recent Decline," *American Enterprise Institute - AEI | The American Enterprise Institute, AEI, is a Nonpartisan Public Policy Research Institute with a Community of Scholars and Supporters Committed to Expanding Liberty, Increasing Individual Opportunity and Strengthening Free Enterprise*, April 2020, <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Promise-and-Peril.pdf?x91208>.p.50.

congregation is essential. The working group believed dead music (not theologically profound) made for a powerless corporate worship service. The group agreed that preaching that was not doctrinal was not preaching and that teaching that was not doctrinally correct was not teaching. Therefore, singing that was not doctrinally sound is not singing, at least not singing fitted for worship.

The second meeting of the working group also considered socialization (a vital part of the thesis). Socialization appears to be the weakest part of the ministry at CRBC. Separate services and classes divided by age/generation made communication intergenerationally difficult and hindered relationship building. The pastor reported that Baptist churches have separated like this since the 1950s. The Working group acknowledges the pastor's point and adds that the COVID-19 lockdowns have become an obstacle to more active social and music ministries. The pandemic interfered with church ministry in the most fundamental way. Most ministries are based on the presence of a minister and the presence of people. Interaction between people at the same place at the same time is fundamental to ministry. Visitation at homes or the hospital are ministries of presence. Church fellowship, mentorship, instruction, and preaching are fundamentally ministries of presence. COVID-19 made people fearful of being in the presence of other people. The media pushed daily the dire consequence of the pandemic. The effect was people stayed home. The people did not go to church, did not attend choir, did not assemble for worship, and did not participate in outreach for the church. Hospital visits were disallowed. Churches met with much fewer worshipers. Contact among believers was reduced to observing church services on Facebook, making phone calls, sending texts and e-mails. Many less fervent members simply fell away, people that may have been brought into a higher form of fellowship had the forced separation of the pandemic not happened. Interference of that nature requires time

for the church to recover fully. At CRBC, though services have fully returned, the weekly attendance is approximately two-thirds of its former number as of June 2021. As of August 2021, a new form of COVID-19, the delta variant, has begun to chill CRBC's attendance, now down approximately 25% from June.

The working group has considered but as yet has not recommended an ambassador program to improve cross-generational exposure. With the Sunday school director's assistance, the ambassador program could select volunteers from the Sunday School classes to attend the other Sunday school classes to facilitate communication and relationship building one Sunday per month. The working group also considered instituting monthly early morning corporate get-togethers, for example, "Coffee with the pastor" or "Breakfast fellowship" or "Preassembly worship service." These events would get all the classes together for breakfast so that socialization may be encouraged. The working group did not make this recommendation as the church already had a brotherhood breakfast program that is executed monthly. The brotherhood breakfast could be leveraged to achieve some of the socialization aims advanced by the thesis. The working group felt that combining youth and young adult retreats and connecting youth and young adults' missions would bring the youth and young adults together. That was recommended, and the youth leaders and young adult leadership are working together to achieve better socialization between the classes. The youth and young adults have shared a cookout and plan to work together on a water filtration mission that helps people in areas without clean water.

The third meeting of the working group considered the socialization problem and postulated how small groups management could impact CRBC's socialization status. Reorganizing small groups by interests instead of age would be a considerable change. The

working group determined that now is not the right time, possibly after a total return to normal, but went ahead and postulated how this small group reorganization might be accomplished:

- 1) Change the groups every quarter or every 6 to 8 weeks; otherwise, groups that meet longer may resist the change.
- 2) The group size should be 6 to 12 persons.
- 3) The church could host a variety of groups. Possible groups are Divorce recovery, Discipleship, Fishers of Men, Sewing circle, New Membership,
- 4) We will need to do training for group leaders and hosts.
- 5) The small groups can do missions to the homeless, other outreach, research ideas.

The working group sees opportunities for fellowshiping with music classes, drama groups, hunting clubs. There are opportunities for fellowship in performing another living Lord's Supper, hosting a Vacation Bible School (VBS), and holding crafts shows at church. Other ideas include fundraisers, quarterly cookouts, monthly fellowships specific to invite new folks to corporate services. Some of these suggestions are already part of CRBC's standard set and will be reactivated as the Covid-19 restrictions are further relaxed; however, the new variant threatens more delay.

The fourth meeting of the working group came to a few conclusions. The working group noted that the pandemic was the most prominent obstacle to ministry. The regular ministry has been nonexistent for too long. The church has not been meeting at capacity. The choir has not been meeting. The youth ministry has declined during the pandemic restrictions. Therefore, the working group considered all the inputs: the surveys, the group discussions, the researcher's work, and the realities of ministry previously mentioned and made a few decisions for the church's good. Remember that the working group comprises a good cross-section of the church

and includes the pastor, the music minister, the youth minister, and a few elders. It was decided in this meeting that CRBC needs Care, Prayer, and Recovery (CPR). We need to restart and rebuild this ministry's normal functions after the pandemic's chilling effects. The fact is CRBC is a traditional church, and in the best of situations, change will likely be resisted. Right now, attendance is still off because of COVID-19. The restrictions brought by health concerns were ending with vaccinations and states starting to reopen, but a new strain of COVID-19 is recasting doubts that life will ever return to a pre-COVID-19 normal.

The church restarted normal operations and hours on 21 March 2021. The church needs to reestablish ministry, which is best done through the many already accepted practices. The church needs to reach out and reembrace the membership that has been absent through the pandemic. After that, regular outreach for others should start. The working group felt strongly that a brand-new project is not the immediate way ahead for CRBC at this time; reestablishing former ministries and relationships would be most advantageous.

### **The Way Ahead**

Before CRBC's way ahead is examined, it is worth noting how other churches managed their ministry challenges. Of the three elements in the thesis, atmospherics, socialization, and Bible instruction, the element with the most significant church failings is socialization. Allen made a note of a church that improved the socialization process in practical intergenerational ways. Small churches cannot have multiple programs, a program for every segment of the church population. Instead of trying to add to the program offerings, they made the programs they had already intergenerational. Modifying or adding to a successful program the church already has is generally more feasible than building multiple new programs that will stretch assets and not correct socialization challenges. Allen recommends making the core of your church life inclusive



and welcoming to all, regardless of age or stage. That way, all will know that every program is for them.<sup>4</sup> Melissa Cooper, Allen's friend and intergenerational book contributor has had success with the way ahead just described. Building programs around commonalities other than age and stage encourages cross-generational mentoring and, therefore, improves socialization and retention of membership.

Amy Kappen, another Allen colleague, helped implement a program called Generations in Faith Together, GIFT at her church. The program addressed weak parental participation, and it borrowed from other programs in that it worked like a combination of Vacation Bible School, camp meeting, communal worship, and a little like Sunday school even though the GIFT program took the place of Sunday school. For the past twenty years, the GIFT program has made worship at Kappen's church more social, and the members are closer as they all share worship.<sup>5</sup>

Not until after the ministry has recovered from the effects of the pandemic and returned to normal operations, will the working group make or recommend new ideas for the church. Once any new programs have been put into practice for a year or more, attendance tracking may be one metric that could speak to the tangible results of the interventions used at CRBC to improve the retention of young adults. However, socializing the youth with the broader church outside the youth group was a more qualitative endeavor. Building quantitative metrics may not be possible. Claiming successful socializing if more young adults choose to continue fellowship with CRBC after aging out of the youth group would be a welcome but quantitative metric.

A program designed to teach the youth and retain the young adults is essential even if not tracked by any metrics. This project has raised awareness among CRBC membership that each

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<sup>4</sup> Holly C. Allen, *InterGenerate: Transforming Churches Through Intergenerational Ministry* (2018), 23.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

member is critical to church ministry by socialization to the prayerfully continued fellowship of the young adults. Each church member is a part of the atmosphere, and each member is a potential relationship that may be one more point of positive contact, or a hook a visitor, marginal attendee, or youth has with the larger church.

This project has pointed to the importance of personal growth. It is another result of mentoring relationships and tailoring processes and services to serve church attendees better. Relationships among the membership strengthen as they co-labor and serve Christ. Leadership knowledge base increases as they see new ideas work or when they fail. There are many positive ancillary effects to a ministry project, even if the project's primary goals are not fully achieved.

For now, because COVID-19 still presents with ongoing concerns, these three recommendations are what CRBC will be using and calling the way ahead: 1) First importance is given to reclaiming the former successful ministries and reestablishing former relationships, 2) No new programs and no radical changes to the music ministry, 3) the youth and the young adults will work closely together in missions, social events, and fellowshiping opportunities.

The process and the results will be documented but may take longer than anyone has anticipated. The exact way ahead is not entirely determined; the developing pandemic has influences yet to be seen and addressed. The likely scenario, particularly after COVID is passed, is CRBC improves atmospherics at church, socializing the youth with the larger church, and instructing the Word of God to include the saving message of the gospel followed by ongoing discipleship.



## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

After the church has reestablished pre-COVID-19 operating status, which seems to be subsiding, the church will need to consider the new ideas brought by the working group. For example, the church is limited on classroom space, so if the church grows, conducting off-site small groups in the way the working group proposed in chapter four will be necessary. Also, the church needs a Grief Team trained to comfort those going through loss and bring insights of God's perspective reference death and trial. The church restarted full service in March of 2021, and ideally, those services need to be in effect for at least six months before another working group meeting is called in August. That had assumed no continued COVID-19 issues would be pressing ministry, but that is not the case. So, the church holds with the three recommendations of the way ahead presented in chapter four. At some point, COVID-19 will be a memory. Then, the working group would assess the health of the current ministries and consider which of the new programs to recommend to the church council.

The working group used Easter Sunday as a welcome back after the first pandemic relief. There was an Easter egg hunt executed on Saturday, 3 April 2021. The event was advertised, and CRBC prepared to greet visitors and invite them to worship with CRBC. The Easter service on 4 April 2021 was preceded by an early morning "Coffee and Donuts with the Pastor" to promote reconnection and new fellowships. Then CRBC invited the people to worship in Sunday school. It was thought that this might help drive Sunday School attendance. The corporate service was held afterward. This plan was approved through the church council and was executed as prescribed. Since the reopening, the best attendance has been two-thirds of the pre-pandemic

attendance. Now, an apparent second wave will chill ministry as attendance has slipped to approximately half the pre-pandemic amount.

These are the working group's closing thoughts. Reestablishing services and engaging members that have not attended because of the pandemic is the priority. The church has moved to complete services as of 21 March 2021. Easter was a traditional high attendance day, and the working group advantaged that to promote restarting services at CRBC. The working group felt that this was not the time for radically different ideas but instead to renew the former ministries within CRBC. However, the working group agrees that reimplementing the former programs must promote and improve socialization. It is time for youth ministry to work more closely with the other ministries to socialize its members with the greater church. Coordinating to take trips, do missions, and fellowships with young adults is an excellent way to start. The working group will offer no changes to the music ministry. In this area, CRBC's niche is that it is a reliable traditional worship location. The working group decided to preserve that image. CRBC brought the choir back in July 2021, then paused the choir for two weeks as the church monitored the delta variant. The working group's next meeting is not planned but will be on call after the former ministries have been fully reestablished and the delta variant is no longer a threat. That will be the cue to consider the new ideas that the working group discussed.

The point of this program was to impress the importance that church atmospherics, church socialization, and instruction in the Word had on the discipling and retention of youth and young adults. The pandemic's adverse effects had to be dealt with first. That meant reestablishing the ministries as they were formerly known then applying possible improvements to atmospherics, socialization, and Word instruction.

In the future, and after the pandemic, it is anticipated that this research will incorporate the thesis project proposal with church-approved interventions to realize greater retention of young adults. Currently, this project has promoted church membership awareness that atmospherics, socialization, and instruction are critical to young adult retention. It is intended that the reader understand the relevance of socializing the youth with the rest of the church so that when a youth member ages out of the youth group, they already have relationships in the young adult program and the main church. The reader will understand the power of church atmospherics to make a person feel unwelcome or feel like they want to come again. The reader will realize that a youth program needs more than a narrow gospel. The youth need a full gospel, a Word-heavy teaching program that discipled believers to greater levels of faith rather than only being concerned with their salvation. Young people that are not socialized, made to feel welcome, and discipled in the Word are not likely to choose to continue fellowship with church as young adults.

It is hoped that CRBC will retain more of its youth turned young adults through improved atmospherics, improved socialization of the youths with the church body, and teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Other churches should be able to use these principles to retain more of their young adults. The main failing of CRBC was the socialization between age groups. Socialization will be the weakness for other Baptist churches because Sunday schools are set up similarly across Baptist churches. Baptists separate classes by age and causes a silo effect. The silo effect means that the various age groups are isolated from each other. The problem this brings for the youth is when a youth ages out of his group, he may not know anyone who is part of the young adult class he is supposed to join. The challenge for CRBC and the other churches

is to figure out how to encourage fellowshiping across the age groups. Better discipleship and more opportunities for mentoring will follow multigenerational fellowshiping.

Proper stewardship of the youth demands that church atmospherics, socialization practice, and Word presentation be prioritized. If these ministry factors are pursued, especially the cross socialization among church age groups, improved retention of members will follow.

CRBC is working to improve its program. Other churches can do the same. All these efforts were made to share the gospel of Jesus, save souls, and build up the saints.

# LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

## INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 17, 2021

Michael Tyree

Lance Beauchamp

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY20-21-171 Youth to Adult Continuance of Faith: How to Achieve Young Adult Retention Through Pre-Adult Instruction

Dear Michael Tyree and Lance Beauchamp,

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 project with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

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

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

Please note that this decision only applies to your current 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](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**

*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*

**Research Ethics Office**

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