

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY  
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

FACTORS LEADING TO STUDENT MINISTRY RETENTION IN MID AND  
LARGE SIZED SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCHES:  
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Baylor Clark Whitney, Sr.

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past 15 years, the exodus of students from the church after high school graduation has emerged as a pressing issue in Christian leadership and education. Much research has focused on the quantitative rate of students leaving church after graduation (Barna, 2011; Earls, 2019; “Reasons 18- to 22-Year-Olds Drop Out of Church,” 2007; Trueblood, 2019). Researchers have cited the need for qualitative research to better understand the student ministry retention phenomena (Shields, 2008). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover some factors which led to post-student ministry retention among young adults who participated in student ministry at a Southern Baptist church with an average attendance of 200 or greater. To explore the reasons why young adults stay connected to church, phenomenological interviews were conducted with a research population of nine young adults ages 18-22 who are currently involved in a local church. The research setting was Southern Baptist churches. Interview transcripts were be coded and analyzed with the goal of finding common themes and dynamics that encourage post-student ministry retention.

*Keywords:* Youth ministry, student ministry, Southern Baptist Convention, post-student ministry retention.

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## **Dedication**

I wish to dedicate this research project to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, my wonderful wife Aaryn, my son Baylor Clark II, and the churches where I have been privileged to serve. May the Lord use this work to encourage teenagers to have a faith that lasts a lifetime.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Liberty University (LU)

Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)

## CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

### Introduction

In recent years, the drift of young adults from the church after high school has been a major issue in Christian leadership and education. Many researchers have identified the phenomena as one of the most significant issues regarding the future of Christianity in America (Ketcham, 2018; Parr & Crites, 2015; Powell et al., 2011; Trueblood, 2019). While much attention has been given to understanding the scope of the problem, far less attention has been given to understanding how students themselves experience student ministry and the forces and factors that encourage lifelong church participation.

Understanding *how* students experience ministry is crucial to obtaining a robust understanding of the post-student ministry retention phenomena. The philosophical underpinnings of qualitative research help focus on “an individual’s experience from their own perspective” (Roberts, 2020, p. 143). By understanding young adult’s experience from their own perspective, church leaders can understand which elements of student ministry have the most significant influence on teenagers staying connected to the church after high school. Furthermore, they can focus on developing and strengthening those elements in their ministry in order to encourage lifelong faith among teenagers.

This chapter will outline the background to the problem and detail some of the dynamics influencing post-student ministry retention. Furthermore, the purpose statement, research questions, and assumptions and delimitations will be considered. Relevant terms will be defined. Lastly, the significance of the study and summary of the design will be presented to lay a foundation for this research study.

## **Background to the Problem**

In order to assess the problem of teenagers leaving the church, church leaders must understand theological, theoretical, and thematic dynamics that influence this problem. Aspects related to the current generation and current church practices must be outlined to provide background to the research problem. Additionally, outlining the importance of the church's focus on students and the importance of student's involvement in the church helps provide the background to the research problem.

### **Advent of Adolescence**

Student's stage of life plays a significant role in their faith development. This stage of life, adolescence, is shaped in part by culture and has profound implications for all aspects of student's lives (including major life decisions like staying in church after high school graduation). Rienow says that

A new invention is mangling the lives of our children and grandchildren. This new invention is not a cell phone, video game, or tablet. It is adolescence. In the twentieth century we invented a new category of personhood – this foggy, lengthy, aimless period of transition between childhood and adulthood. As a result, thousands of men and women in their 20s and 30s have the outward appearance of being adults but still think and act more like children (Reinow as cited in Ross, 2017, p. 44).

Many of those graduating high school find themselves with a lack of purpose and overall life direction. This lack of purpose and direction has an impact on students leaving church. Powell (2016) relates that

the lengthening of adolescence is shown in the delayed timing of five traditional demographic markers of adulthood (leaving home, finishing school, getting married, having a child, and becoming financially independent). In 1960, 66 percent of American men and 77 percent of American women had completed all five of these milestones by age 30. In 2010, only 28 percent of men and 39 percent of women had done so by age 30 (p. 29).

With this lengthening of adolescence, there is an emerging sense among American students that they can prolong the major decisions and events often associated with adulthood. The dynamics of adolescence converge with generational characteristics to influence the post-student ministry retention problem.

### **Generation Z**

Shockingly, only thirty-four percent of Generation Z believes that “lying is morally wrong” (Barna Group, 2018, p. 5). This generation has distinct characteristics that influence the post-student ministry retention problem. Generation Z consists of 25.9 percent of the U.S. population (White, 2017, p. 37). Generation Z can generally be described as those born between 1995 and 2010 (p. 38). The Barna Group (2018) relates that “one of the defining influences on Gen Z is that they have come of age in a world saturated by digital technology and mediated by mobile devices” (p. 15). The Barna study revealed that “one-quarter of Gen Z (24%) strongly agrees that what is morally right and wrong changes over time based on society” (*Gen Z and Morality*, 2018, para. 2). Generation Z’s (defined by Barna Group as “born between 1999 and 2015”) views of morality stand out when compared to older generations (such as the eldest generation (defined as “those born before 1946”) (2018, para. 3 & 11). When comparing these generations, the Barna study found that “fully three out of five among the eldest generation (61%) strongly agree that lying is immoral, while only one-third of Gen Z (34%) believes lying is wrong” [only members of Gen Z ages 13 to 18 were included in the Barna study] (*Gen Z and Morality*, 2018, para. 3 & 11).

There are theological, theoretical, and thematic influences that shed light on the problem of students leaving the church after high school graduation. By understanding these influences,

Christian leaders and educators are better equipped to provide lasting solutions and encourage lifelong faith in the lives of students.

### **Students Leaving the Church**

Students leaving the church after graduation is a pressing issue in Christian leadership and education. A Lifeway Research study found that “66 percent of students who were active in their church during high school no longer remained active in the church between ages 18-22” (Trueblood, 2019, p. 12). In the Lifeway study, “‘active attendance’ is defined as twice or more per month” (p. 13). Likewise, Kinnaman noted that “millions of young adults leave active involvement in church as they exit their teen years. Some never return, while others live indefinitely at the margins of the faith community, attempting to define their own spirituality” (Kinnaman, 2011, p. 19).

When reflecting on the Fuller Youth Institute’s Sticky Faith study, Powell (2017) notes that “across cultures, a major turning point for young people’s faith seems to be high school graduation. Multiple studies highlight that 40 to 50 percent of youth group seniors – like the young people in your church – drift from God and the faith community after they graduate from high school” (p. 17). Ross (2017) believes that “half of church youth abandoning their faith is not the whole story. An additional 40 percent of youth group members will become lethargic church adults, showing little transformation and making little Kingdom impact” (p. 9).

Addressing the root issues that lead to students leaving the church and discovering the factors that encourage lifelong church participation will help the entire church. Creasy Dean (2010) notes that “youth ministry is the de facto research and development branch of American Christianity, which is why attending to the faith of adolescents may help reclaim Christian identity for the rest of us as well” (p. 6). The findings related to post-student ministry retention

have a direct impact on overall church health since this generation of students will become the next generation of church leadership. Additionally, Trueblood (2019) notes that “it is safe to say the goal of student ministry . . . is not to merely turn students into great church attenders.

However, it is also safe to say church involvement is a clear indicator of a person’s spiritual health” (pp. 13-14). Since spiritual growth happens in the context of community, a person who is developing a lifelong faith will be connected with the overall church (pp. 13-14).

### **Importance of the Church Focusing on Students**

The faith development of students is of utmost importance. A Barna study found that “nearly half of all Americans who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior do so before reaching the age of thirteen (43%), and that two out of three born again Christians (64%) made that commitment to Christ before their eighteenth birthday” (*Evangelism Is Most Effective Among Kids*, 2004, para. 2). Powell (2011) agrees that “the reality is that students’ faith trajectories are formed long before twelfth grade” (p. 23). Clydesdale (2007) says that “given the seeming importance of retaining youth for most religious groups in the United States, it is striking how haphazardly most congregations go about it” (p. 205).

Ketcham (2018) notes that “decreased participation in the local church after high school is a primary measurement accompanying the declaration that youth ministry practices aren’t consistently fostering a sustained faith. Yet *do we believe being part of the church is critical to Christian life?*” [emphasis original] (p. 19). This foundational question helps provide background to researching post-student ministry retention.

### **Importance of Students Being Involved in Church**

God designed the church as the primary context for spiritual growth in the life of His people. Grudem (1994) defines the church as “the community of all true believers for all time”

(p. 853). This church is the community where believers live out their faith. Garland (2012) sees the church as a community where “everyone needs to be folded into intimate family relationships, just like those Jesus had with his disciples and closest friends” (p. 111). In the context of this family, the Holy Spirit facilitates spiritual growth in the believer’s life. Lowe and Lowe (2018) demonstrate the importance of Christian community for spiritual growth:

Defined natural ecologies like forests, gardens, vineyards, and fields—as well as defined social ecologies such as families, mission agencies, churches, and other faith communities—enable us to see that anything or anyone cannot grow apart from organic connections and interactions to other living things and people. In God’s ecology, individual things and people do not grow apart from one another. They grow in connection to and through interaction with the ultimate source of life and with other growing things and people (pp. 11-12).

Christians need connection with other believers in the faith community context of churches. This church community functions as the environment where spiritual growth occurs.

This growth happens in the church context by God’s design. Ketcham (2018) notes that “by God’s initiative, we are a people belonging to God and existing for God’s purposes” (pp. 110-111). Thus, the purpose of the local church is to provide a community of faith where believers can become more like Christ and bear witness to Christ through spiritual growth. Students need to fully experience this community so that they can flourish spiritually, become conformed into the image of Christ, and help others come to know Christ.

### ***Importance of Intergenerational Relationships***

If believers need connection within an overall church to grow spiritually, it follows that the spiritual growth of students takes place in the context of intergenerational relationships. The Bible is clear about the importance of intergenerational relationships within the church. All generations are commanded to worship and serve God together as part of a vibrant community of

faith. Ross (2017) cites several passages in conveying the theological importance of all generations being connected to the church:

- “One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts” (New American Standard Bible, 1995, Psalms 145:4).
- “Both young men and virgins; old men and children. Let them praise the name of the Lord, for His name alone is exalted; His glory is above earth and heaven” (NASB, Psalm 148:12-13).
- “So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (NASB, Romans 12:5).
- “For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (NASB, Galatians 3:27-28) (pp. 128-129).

True biblical community involves many generations interacting with each other. Older generations are tasked with passing along the faith to younger generations (Titus 2, 2 Timothy 2:2). Diversity in the body of Christ exists between different races, socio-economic classes, and generations. McGarry notes that “students are not simply called alone, but into community. They are invited into a diverse and intergenerational fellowship of Christians who are quite different from one another” (McGarry, 2019, p. 91). Identity in Christ is the bond that brings diverse people together. Students need to build bonds with other believers in the church to grow as followers of Christ. Accordingly, Lifeway Research’s 2017 study found that the strongest predictor of a student staying in church or leaving church after high school was “adults investing in them between ages 15-18” (Trueblood, 2018, p. 18).

### ***Importance of Discipleship***

There are several measures that people believe determine an effective student ministry: large attendance, variety of activities, and approval of teenagers, parents, and church leaders (Ross, 2017, p. 7). However, Ross (2017) believes that the real measure of effective student

ministry is this question: “Are we consistently introducing teenagers to Jesus and then discipling them into believers who will, for a *lifetime*, love God, love people, and make disciples for the glory of God?” (p. 7). Helping students grow as followers of Jesus is the foundational purpose of student ministry. Reflecting on a study of 6,000 pastors, student pastors, student workers, parents, and teenagers, Johnston and Levert (2010) found that a major factor in the problem of students graduating from their faith after high school is that “these students have not learned the value and importance of spiritual growth” (p. 43). This growth is commanded by Jesus. He made the mandate for discipleship clear when he said “if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 20:23 ESV). Leading students to follow Jesus through discipleship is the basis of student ministry.

### ***Importance of Student Ministry Programming***

Flowing from the importance of discipleship is the importance of student ministry programming. Do aspects of student ministry programming, like camps, retreats, mission trips, Bible study classes, etc. contribute to the foundational student ministry purpose of making disciples? Martinson et al. (2010) notes that based on:

Survey responses of 2252 youth and the interviews at the onsite visits in twenty-one congregations, we can clearly see the impact of youth ministry on the lives of young people. When youth were specifically asked about the impact that their involvement in youth activities had on their religious faith, they responded *very positively*. Their involvement deepened their relationship with Jesus and their understanding of the Christian faith, and helped them apply faith to their daily lives (p. 124).

As students are involved in student ministry, the question must be asked: “What specific student ministry programming elements contribute to spiritual growth and helping students become mature disciples?” Student ministry programming elements are what students experience each week. These events, experiences, and groups form the structure that helps achieve the foundational goals of student ministry. The characteristics of these programming elements, and

their effectiveness in encouraging spiritual growth and church participation, are important to understanding the overall student ministry dropout rate.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Much attention has been given to determining the rate by which students are dropping out of church after high school graduation (Ham et al., 2009; Parr & Crites, 2015; Powell et al., 2016; Ross, 2017; Shields, 2008; Trueblood, 2019). Although some solutions to the problem have been presented, the majority of current research is primarily concerned with the quantitative rate of how many students are leaving the church and the quantitative survey factors cited as related to church involvement (Barna, 2011; *Most Teenagers Drop Out of Church When They Become Young Adults*, 2019; Trueblood, 2019). Little qualitative research has been done to understand how students experience church and student ministry before high school graduation. Such research provides a more robust understanding of the post-student ministry retention problem and help student ministry practitioners and educators address the problem at hand. Research has noted that further qualitative research related to student ministry needs to be conducted (Buchanan 2015; Shields, 2008).

Additionally, current research has mostly focused on students from a wide variety of denominational backgrounds (Barna, 2011; Kinnaman, 2011; Trueblood, 2019). There remains a gap of research regarding young adults who are currently connected to church and who were active student ministry participants in a Southern Baptist church with an average attendance of 200 or greater. This phenomenological study sought to understand what factors contributed to these young adults remaining actively involved in church after high school graduation. Young adult's past experience of student ministry was be researched.

As Trueblood (2019) cites the importance of relationships with students and adults for student ministry retention, the research sample's relationships with adults during their time as students were studied. As Martinson et al. (2010) cites involvement in student ministry activities as influential in the student's faith development, student ministry aspects like programming and focus on discipleship were also be explored for possible connection to increased post-student ministry retention and church involvement as a young adult. By understanding these factors and their relationship to the overall student ministry retention problem, Christian leaders and educators will be better equipped to encourage lifelong faith among students.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the personal perceptions and experiences that led to post-student ministry retention among young adults age 18-22 who participated in student ministry at a Southern Baptist church with an average attendance of 200 or greater. Post-student ministry retention is defined as "the process of assimilating active high school youth ministry participants into the life of the larger church post-youth ministry" (Shields, 2008, p. 18). Young adults are defined as individuals ages 18-22 who were active in a Southern Baptist Church during their teenage years. Student ministry is defined as "Specific and intentional ministry to adolescents in middle and high school as part of the overall work of the local church" (Buchanan, 2015, p. 28). Southern Baptist church is defined as a church that affiliates with the Southern Baptist denomination and adheres to the Baptist Faith and Message (*About the SBC - SBC.Net*, n.d.).

The guiding theory of this research was Planned Behavior Theory. This theory "traces attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control to an underlying foundation of beliefs about the behavior" (Ajzen, 1991, p. 206). Postulated by Ajzen, Planned Behavior Theory

believes that “attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms with respect to the behavior, and perceived control over the behavior are usually found to predict behavioral intentions with a high degree of accuracy” (p. 206).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1.** What are the most common aspects of student ministry that young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church, cite as the reasons they stayed active in church after high school graduation?

**RQ2.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry experience as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ3.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their relationships with adults as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ4.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry’s focus on discipleship as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ5.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of student ministry programming as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

### **Assumptions and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

1. This study assumed that individuals who are spiritually mature will continue to stay connected to the local church after they graduate from high school and leave the student ministry.
2. This study assumed that the guiding theory, Planned Behavior Theory, accurately connects a person’s “attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control” with their foundational belief about the behavior itself (Ajzen, 1991, p. 206).
3. This study assumed that the research sample will have adequate memories of their student ministry experience during their teenage years.

4. This study assumed that young adult's perceptions and experiences of their teenage years are accurate descriptions of their own experiences and not unduly influenced by other people's experiences.

### **Delimitations**

1. This study focused on young adults who participated in the student ministry of a mid to large size Southern Baptist church. This study did not focus on churches associated with other denominations.
2. This study focused on young adults ages 18-22. Participants younger than 18 or older than 22 were outside the focus of this study.
3. This study focused on young adults who were a part of churches with an average attendance of 200 or greater. This study did not focus on churches that have less than 200 in attendance. Student ministry retention in smaller churches (who may not have a student pastor) was outside of the purview of this research.
4. This study focused on spiritual factors and church programming that led to post-student ministry retention (parental spiritual involvement, intergenerational relationships, student ministry focused on making disciples). Other factors that influence post-student ministry retention in church, such as sociological and cultural influences, were outside the purposes of this study.
5. This study focused on the perceptions and experiences that young adults had when they were students. The perceptions and experiences of parents, youth workers, student pastors, and other church members were outside the purview of this study.

### **Definition of Terms**

1. *Adult relationships*: The connectedness that students have with other generations within the local church that encourages spiritual growth, community, and service (Ross, 2017, pp. 157-160).
2. *Discipleship*: The Christian's practice of learning how to live their lives by following Jesus, the Master Teacher (Ross, 2018, p. 180-181).
3. *Generation Z*: "Generation Z can generally be described as those born between 1995 and 2010" (White, 2017, p. 38).
4. *Post-student ministry retention*: "The process of assimilating active high school youth ministry participants into the life of the large church post-youth ministry" (Shields, 2008, p. 18).

5. *Southern Baptist Convention*: “A voluntary association of Baptist churches across America that was formed in the nineteenth century” (Shields, 2008). These churches emphasize the autonomy of the local church, salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the importance of baptism by immersion, congregational church government, and the authority and inerrancy of the Bible (2008).
6. *Student ministry*: “Specific and intentional ministry to adolescents in middle and high school as part of the overall work of the local church” (Buchanan, 2015, p. 28).
7. *Student Ministry Programming*: The activities that a student ministry participates in on an ongoing basis. Student ministry programming can include weekly Bible study (Sunday School/small groups), church-wide worship service, student worship service, discipleship groups, outreach activities, summer camp, mission trips, retreats, and Disciple Now weekends.
8. *Student Pastor*: A person who has “a specific responsibility for leading the church’s youth” (Buchanan, 2015, pp. 26-27). This person can be a volunteer, bi-vocational leader, or full-time vocational minister (p. 27).

### **Significance of the Study**

Researchers (Trueblood, 2019; Powell, 2017; Parr and Crites, 2015) have asserted that a high level of students are leaving the church after high school graduation. However, Shields’ quantitative study (2008) demonstrated that his sample of conservative Southern Baptist churches had a high level of post-student ministry retention. Although a great deal of attention has been given to the rate of post-student ministry retention, less attention has been given to how young adults currently involved in church previously experienced student ministry. To this author’s current knowledge, there has not been a qualitative study focusing on the factors leading to post-student ministry retention in large Southern Baptist churches. At the end of his study, Shields (2008) noted that there is a gap in the research regarding post-student ministry retention in large Southern Baptist churches:

A possibility for future research would be to perform qualitative ethnographic interviews with cross-sections of different age segments and compare the results, looking for similarities and differences which might lead to a more coherent theory of retention. Instead of categorizing young adults based on pre-determined criteria for inclusion, such

an ethnographic approach may allow for more narrative stories to emerge and converge into a tapestry of youth ministry commitment and post-graduation involvement (p. 183).

Little qualitative research has been conducted focusing on young adults who have stayed connected to church after high school graduation. Buchanan (2015) notes that “student ministry research is still largely untapped” (p. 146). Further qualitative research, conducted in the context of Southern Baptist Churches, reveals why the retention rate among these churches is higher than what other researchers have observed.

These practitioners can improve the health of their student ministry by focusing on the factors that are most important keeping students connected to church. Research has cited connection with adults as a major factor in determining a student’s involvement in church after high school graduation (Trueblood, 2019). Furthermore, factors related to discipleship like wanting the church to be involved in everyday life decisions and regularly reading the Bible are also linked to student ministry retention (Trueblood, 2019). These factors need to be further studied and developed to have a more robust understanding of post-student ministry retention and the dynamics of young adult’s church involvement.

Student ministry practices and programming must also be understood in relationship to the post-student ministry retention problem. Broyles (2009) provides the descriptive, empirical data of student ministry programming and practices that is needed to “validate or challenge past and equip future conclusions within the field” of student ministry (p. 2). Student ministry programming (and the values behind the programming) must be examined through the actual past student ministry experience of young adults who are currently connected to church.

By digging deeper into these factors and understanding how these young adults experienced student ministry, Southern Baptist church leaders and student ministry practitioners can be better equipped to encourage students to develop a faith that lasts a lifetime. In turn, as

student ministries get healthier, local churches will increasingly flourish as missional communities of faith.

### **Summary of the Design**

This phenomenological study was conducted by interviewing young adults who are connected to a local church and who previously participated in a student ministry of a Southern Baptist Church with an attendance of 200 or greater. A phenomenological, qualitative study was well-suited to study the phenomena of student ministry retention because it focused on the experience of young adults from their own perspective (Roberts, 2020, p. 143). Additionally, phenomenology helped understand young adult's experience in student ministry, their relationships with adults in the local church, their student ministry's focus on making disciples, and the value of student ministry programming. Each of these factors were be explored as the research questions are studied. Additionally, a phenomenological design helped the researcher understand each individual's student ministry experience and how this experience influenced young adult's decisions to stay in church. These interviews were conducted according to a set of questions developed by the researcher which seek to understand the factors that led to the young adult's commitment to church after high school graduation.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Although modern student ministry has only emerged in the last two centuries, the existence of modern student ministry rests on theological and theoretical foundations that go all the way back to Creation. Accordingly, to understand the scope of the post-student ministry retention problem, it is important to understand the theological and theoretical foundations of student ministry as a whole. This chapter will detail the theological foundation of student ministry, identified in the Bible's teaching on discipleship and the story of salvation that can be traced throughout Scripture. Additionally, theoretical foundations of student ministry as a whole, such as the history of student ministry and the structure of modern student ministry will be provided. After outlining the theological and theoretical foundations, literature related to the post-student ministry problem will be outlined.

### **Theological Framework for the Study**

A robust understanding of the post-student ministry retention problem must be grounded in Scripture. The Bible provides the foundation on which a study about post-student ministry retention can be structured. This section will outline the metanarrative, or grand over-arching story, of the Bible. Buchanan (2015) the church's mission in general, as well as its specific mission among young people, is built upon the Bible's big story of redemption through Jesus Christ (p. 35). Within this story, examples of young people used by God will be considered to show God's heart for students. Furthermore, Old and New Testament Foundations of student ministry will be put forth to provide the basis for researching the post-student ministry phenomena.

## **The Story of Scripture and Students**

The story of Scripture begins at creation and continues on throughout the entire Bible. The end of the Bible makes clear that this metanarrative continues on after the canon of Scripture was closed. By understanding the story of the Bible, students find purpose and meaning in their own lives. Thus, any study of retaining students in the church after high school graduation must recognize that the story of Scripture plays a large role in the faith development of students.

Furthermore, forming a theology of student ministry is of utmost importance to finding the solution to post-student ministry retention. Ketcham (2018) notes that:

the information we gain from the data is important, but decisions based on this information must undergo theological reflection. What we learn from the social sciences needs to become a point of reference for us to imagine the faith in our day, rather than adopting the information without regard to our theological convictions (p. 18).

Therefore, this theological foundation needs to serve as the filter by which the practices that contribute to post-student ministry retention are studied.

### ***Creation***

The story of the Bible begins in Genesis: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1). The metanarrative affirms that there was an intelligent, intentional Creator that caused everything in creation to exist. Framing a Biblical worldview for students, beginning with creation, is of utmost importance. Percy (2005) relates that “every worldview starts with an account of Creation, which shapes its concepts of the Fall and Redemption. As a result, whoever has the authority to shape a culture’s Creation myth is its de facto ‘priesthood,’ with the power to determine what the dominant worldview will be” (p. 154). Since the teenage years are formative for a person’s worldview, students need to understand the role that Creation plays within the metanarrative of Scripture.

Additionally, the Creation account relates that God created man and woman in his image (Gen. 1:26-27). “While this unique characteristic includes, moral, intellectual, and governing capacities, the *imago Dei* is primarily a relational capacity. All people are designed to dwell in personal fellowship with God, and this distinguishes us from the rest of creation” (Newton & Pace, 2019, p. 52). Hall (2016) notes that part of the image of God is also “Rationality—the human capacity to reason and speak, just as human “logic” derives from the divine *logos* (Greek for “reason” and “word”), the “Word” who was with God in the beginning and who enlightens everyone (John 1:1, 9).” The beginning of the Bible demonstrates that all people are designed to be in a relationship with their Creator. Tragically, this relationship has been broken by sin.

### ***Fall***

After creating the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve, God placed them in the Garden of Eden. This perfect place was where man dwelled with God in a perfect relationship. In this relationship, God gave Adam one boundary: “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Gen. 2:16-17).

Adam and Eve were tempted by the serpent to break the one rule God gave them to follow. In disobeying God, Adam and Eve introduced sin into the human race. This original sin, referred to as “The Fall,” brought disastrous consequences upon humanity. Shame, separation from God, disease, pain in childbearing, and death are just some of the consequences introduced into the story of humanity because of Adam and Eve’s sin (Gen. 3).

Grudem (1994) notes three ways in which Adam and Eve’s sin is typical of all kinds of sin. First, “their sin struck at the basis for knowledge, for it gave a different answer to the question, ‘What is true?’” (p. 492). Second, “their sin struck at the basis for moral standards, for

it gave a different answer to the question ‘What is right?’” (p. 492). Third, “their sin gave a different answer to the question, ‘Who am I?’” (p. 492). Thus, knowledge, morality, and identity were all questioned during the Fall. Not only do the Fall’s consequences effect students today, students are constantly tempted to question the foundations of truth, morality, and identity from a secular worldview. Students need to be well equipped to see the origins of their story through the origins the grand story of Scripture.

### ***Redemption***

Even in the midst of The Fall, there was a promise of redemption. In Genesis 3:15, God told the serpent: “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” God made another promise to Abraham that he would multiply his descendants into many nations and bless the world through his offspring (Gen. 17).

In Exodus, God used Moses to deliver the Hebrew people from Egyptian slavery. To this people, often called the Israelites, God delivered a set of laws and established a covenant with them. Through this people, God gave promises of a coming Messiah that would deliver people from their sins. Throughout the Old Testament, Israelites went through cycles of sin, consequences, repentance, and restoration. Through prophets, priests, judges, and kings, God maintained His relationship with Israel and continued His promises to provide a lasting redemption from sin.

To fulfill these promises, Jesus was born to a young woman named Mary. Fully God and fully man, Jesus lived a perfect life in accordance to God’s promises and God’s plan. Acts 10:38 says that “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (ESV).

Throughout His ministry of healing and miracles, Jesus repeatedly maintained that His mission was to die as redemption for the sins of the world. Luke 15:31-33 records Jesus saying that:

Jesus took the Twelve aside and told them, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again (ESV).

Colossians 1:20-22 records the purpose of Jesus’ death:

And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him (ESV).

Thus, Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, reconciling God and man and redeeming mankind from bondage to sin and Satan (Grudem, 1994, p. 580). After his death, burial, and resurrection, Jesus commanded that His followers take His message, the Gospel, to the world so that people can be redeemed and experience a relationship with God.

Followers of Jesus need to both understand and experience the redemption that Jesus brings to a person’s life. The message and mission of Jesus infuses the lives of those who have been redeemed with passion, purpose, and calling. Jesus also gives the redeemed a new identity as part of the family of God. This part of this story encourages disciples to take part in the mission of God: spreading this glorious message among the nations.

### ***Restoration***

After Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection, He ascended into heaven (Matthew 28). Before doing so, Jesus promised that He would one day return to His followers. In John 14:3,

Jesus says that “and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (ESV). After Jesus’ return, God promises that “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God” (Romans 14:11 ESV). At this time, the Bible promises that “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev. 21:3-4 ESV).

This final redemption, when those who trust in Christ are restored into a perfect relationship with God, will mark the ultimate restoration of Creation. In this way, the metanarrative of Scripture provides student ministry with a theological foundation. Student ministry points students to the story of Scripture to find answers to their origins, their sin problem, their redemption through Christ, and how the world will be restored.

### **The Mission of God and Students**

Before ascending into heaven, Jesus commanded that His followers make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:18-20). This mission of God includes worship of God from every people group of the earth (Rev. 5:9, 7:9). The Great Commission involves followers of Jesus taking the Gospel to the ends of the earth in obedience to Jesus’ command in order to fulfill the promise of God. All followers of Jesus, including students, are tasked with obeying this command and joining God where He is at work around the world. Newton and Pace (2019) note that “our goal in any aspect of discipling students must be to train and equip our students to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) (p. 110).

Ross (2009) notes that “there’s a world of difference between saying ‘God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life’ and saying ‘God has a wonderful plan for the nations, to sum

up everything in heaven and earth under Jesus as Lord, and He loves you enough to give you a strategic place in it” (p. 77). The mission of God infuses student ministry with purpose.

As the mission of God is accomplished, the Bible views youthfulness as an opportunity to set the example in the faith. In 1 Timothy 4:12, Paul instructs Timothy to “Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (ESV). Young people are given a stewardship by God to use their youthful years in a way that honors Him and advances His mission. As they do so, they set the example for others and follow the example of older believers. For example, Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to imitate him as he imitated Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

Within the story and mission of God, there remain specific theological foundations that guide student ministry theory and practice. From biblical examples of students used by God to the important role that church plays in the faith development of students, these foundations set the stage for the study of post-student ministry retention in the local church.

### **Examples of Young People Used by God**

Throughout the Bible, there are examples of God using young people for His purposes. Mary “may well have still been a young teenager” when she gave birth to Jesus (Blomberg, 1992, p. 57). The disciples were probably all “between the ages of 13 and 30 at the time they followed Jesus” (*How old were Jesus’ disciples?*, 2020). Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, remained faithful to God even though they were put through intense secular training in Babylon (Darling, 2007, p. 212). As a young man, Joseph was sold into slavery but displayed integrity and character, rising to high positions of leadership influence (p. 66). These examples are just a sample of the many ways God uses young people for his

purposes. In addition to these examples, the Bible also includes instruction that lays the foundation for student ministry.

### ***Old Testament Foundations***

Southern Baptists have a rich history of basing their beliefs and practice on the Bible (Bush & Nettles, 1980). Accordingly, any study of Southern Baptist student ministries must provide a biblical rationale for student ministry and student pastors. Ross (2017) notes that “is there an approach to youth ministry that *is* biblical? Is there a role for the youth pastor that *is* biblical? The answer to both questions is a resounding ‘yes’” (p. 49).

Throughout the Old Testament, there are examples of the people of God passing down the faith to other generations in the context of community. Psalm 145:4 notes that “One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.” Perhaps the greatest foundation of student ministry in the Old Testament is Deuteronomy 6:4-9. In this passage, called the *Shema* (“listen”), the verses describe the importance of families passing knowledge of God down to the next generation within the context of the Jewish community.

These verses state:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Thus, passing along the faith to the next generation was of utmost importance. This practice belonged both to the family and the community as a whole. McGarry (2019) demonstrates that:

The temple did not employ youth workers who organized games, service projects, and Bible lessons; but the broader community played a vital role in ministry to the next generation. Parents were given the primary calling to impress the commands of Scripture

on their children's minds and hearts, but this was never meant for parents alone. Because parents would be raising their children on the family compound, surrounded by extended family and the broader community, all the generations of Israel were expected to come together in order to raise up the younger generations for covenantal faithfulness (p. 20-21).

Ross (2017) sees the role of student pastors as having roots in these communities described in the Old Testament. He believes that "youth pastors can find the roots for their vocation in the pages of the Old Testament. During the period of the exile, the Israelites built synagogue schools to teach their children Hebrew so they would be able to read the Torah" (p. 55). Additionally, "the company of the prophets led by Elisha in 2 Kings 4:38 demonstrates another type of youth-focused educational group that was present in the Old Testament" (p. 55-56). Thus, the witness of the Old Testament demonstrates that passing along the faith was both the responsibility of the family and the faith community in which the family belonged.

### ***New Testament Foundations***

According to Newton and Pace (2019), the passage that most clearly talks about the teenager years is 1 John 2:12-14. They relate that:

The apostle here refers to this phase as young adulthood and distinguishes it from early childhood and seasoned adulthood. John is addressing those of various maturity levels within the body of Christ. While he is primarily referring to their spiritual development, he uses the physical stages of life as a natural parallel . . . young people are categorized as those who have the adult expectations of spiritual responsibility while still developing in their spiritual maturity (pp. 19-20).

When these verses are viewed in the context of other young people used by God in the New Testament, like Jesus' disciples, Timothy, Titus, and others, we see that God places high expectations on young people's spiritual growth and uses His Holy Spirit to mature them spiritually. When looking at the young adult age groups, Ross (2017) notes that

Scripture clearly delineates three pre-adult age-group categories as objects for intentional ministry: infancy, childhood, and pre-age-of-love (teenagers). Exegesis also reveals that biblical ministry within each of these categories requires a joint effort on the part of the

home and the church. The dynamic interplay between home and church is slightly different for each category, but effort from both institutions is required in order to accomplish biblical ministry (p. 54).

In the same way the Old Testament community partnered with families to pass along the faith to the next generation, the New Testament pattern reveals that young people need to grow spiritually and require a specific ministry.

When it comes to New Testament support for the role of the student pastor, Ross (2017) writes that

For example, Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:11-12 that Christ made some to be apostles, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers. This passage indicates that offices in New Testament churches had different roles for the same purpose of building up the body of Christ. Understood in this context, although the terms ‘assistant pastor’ and ‘associate pastor’ were not used in Scripture, some pastors probably oversaw certain ministries more than others. Today, these areas can involve children’s ministry, youth ministry, adult ministry, music ministry, and others. These ministers should be equally qualified according to the biblical requirements for pastors, and they should lead their ministries according to biblical principles. In so doing, they can take care of specific areas in a church – including youth ministry – for the sake of the body of Christ. The contemporary youth pastor is consistent with a New Testament ecclesiology” (p. 58-59).

Thus, the role of student pastor is critical to accomplish the ministry to young people set forth in the Bible. The student pastor’s task is to help young people set the example in “speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim. 4:12). Within the theological foundation of student ministry, it is necessary to examine the biblical rationale for specific student ministry themes and practices.

### **Family Discipleship**

Passages like Deuteronomy 6 demonstrate that God designed the home to be the primary avenue for discipleship. Rienow (2013) says that: “God did not create the family simply to provide food, shelter, clothing, and companionship. The family is a spiritual institution with a spiritual purpose. God created the family for ‘disciple making’” (p. 146). The family was

supposed to teach God’s commandments both inside and outside the home: “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (Deut. 6:7 ESV). Just as the Old Testament community partnered with the family, the modern church needs to equip families to disciple students. As families disciple their students, the result will be increased discipleship among generations in the overall church.

### **Intergenerational Discipleship**

Furthermore, as they partner with families, churches need to prioritize intergenerational discipleship. The Bible records many examples of intergenerational discipleship. Embree (2018) notes several examples that demonstrate the priority of one generation passing their faith along to the next generation:

- Eli and Samuel (I Samuel 3)
- Timothy and his mother and grandmother and Timothy and Paul (2 Tim. 1:5)
- Elijah and Elisha (2 Kings 2)
- Naomi and Ruth (The book of Ruth)
- Moses and Joshua (Deut. 31)
- Mordecai and Esther (The book of Esther) (para. 6).

Unfortunately, many student ministries do not prioritize intergenerational discipleship.

Ross (2009) relates that

Today teenagers go along with and support church youth programs as long as there is a momentary payoff, such as fun trips, glitzy youth centers, and more time with peers. As teenagers begin to approach graduation, these momentary payoffs become less important, and they disappear from the church. They leave because they have experienced church mostly in teenage-only appendages and have not felt connected with the congregation. They leave, in part, because they have failed to build heart connections with their own parents or with significant adults” (p. 175).

The Biblical example and instruction indicate that intergenerational discipleship needs to be a vital part of student ministry in the local church. God's desire for the local church is that it grows together in maturity and Christlikeness (Eph. 4:15). These discipleship-oriented relationships provide the context that the Holy Spirit can use to provide spiritual growth.

### **The Importance of the Church for Spiritual Growth**

The church is the context for intergenerational discipleship and is seen as a partner to families in discipling their children. The goal of discipleship is sanctification, becoming more like Christ and being conformed to His image (Romans 8:29). The Holy Spirit uses relationships within the church to encourage discipleship, sanctification, and spiritual growth. Black (1998) notes that:

Youth are important members of the church family. They need the growth and joy that comes from mutual involvement in the larger congregational experiences. A youth group that is only an appendix to the life of the church family is missing the wealth of relationships that comes from the whole family of God. By seeing the whole growth cycle and the ways God works with people of all ages, youth can learn more about the constant, all-encompassing love and concern of God. Youth ministry should be ministry *with* youth and not just *for* or *to* youth (p. 45-46).

Thus, effective student ministry that encourages spiritual growth must seek to fully integrate students into the overall church community. Cannister (2013) relates that “transformation happens most deeply in the lives of teenagers when they are engaged in the broader life of the church and connected to a network of caring adults” (p. 117).

Within the church community, two agents of spiritual growth work together to mature students in their faith: the Word of God and the Spirit of God. “Through the indwelling presence of his Spirit, we are joined together with one another and exist as one body (Eph. 4:4-5). Communal fellowship with other believers reflects this spiritual reality and is an essential part of our spiritual growth” (Newton & Pace, 2019, pp. 52-53). Additionally, the Spirit of God uses the

Word of God for “teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” in student’s lives as they grow in spiritual maturity (2 Tim. 3:16 ESV).

### **Summary of Theological Framework**

The story of the Bible provides the basis for student ministry. Student ministry and student pastors can find precursors to their ministry throughout the stages of Scripture. Time and time again, God has used young people for His purposes. Furthermore, the biblical pattern for discipleship involves one generation passing the faith along to the next generation. This discipleship happens both within the family and within the church. These theological insights provide a basis by which post-student ministry can be examined.

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

When studying post-student ministry retention in Southern Baptist Churches, it is helpful to detail the theoretical practices and the history of modern student ministry. Both the history and theory of student ministry provide relevant context that enable effective study of post-student retention. Additionally, the guiding theory of this study, the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) will be detailed to provide a basis for the research study.

### **Theory of Planned Behavior**

The theory of Planned Behavior links actions with underlying beliefs. This social science theory postulates

that attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms with respect to the behavior, and perceived control over the behavior are usually found to predict behavioral intentions with a high degree of accuracy. In turn, these intentions, in combination with perceived behavioral control, can account for a considerable proportion of variance in behavior (Ajzen, 1991, p. 206).

When studying post-student ministry retention, this theory is useful because young adult’s current involvement in church needs studied for a possible link to beliefs that were previously

formed in the context of a local church's student ministry. Student's "underlying foundation of beliefs" about the behavior of church attendance is connected to "attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control" (p. 206).

## **Student Ministry History**

### ***19<sup>th</sup> Century Roots***

Modern American student ministry finds its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many precursors to student ministry were parachurch organizations:

When young people began to migrate to cities during the Industrial Revolution, some Protestant leaders began to worry about the effects of urbanization on Christian young people. The YMCA and YWCA movements were the earliest answers to that worry, and the Ys quickly spawned dozens of other organizations, such as Christian Endeavor, the Epworth League, and many more (*What's History Got to Do with It?: Understanding the Roots of Youth Ministry in America - Youth Specialties*, 2009).

There are several forces and factors in American Christianity that led to the rise of modern student ministry. Senter reveals three theoretical bases that paved the way for student ministry beginning in the nineteenth century. First, the Sunday School movement had a large impact on the formation of modern student ministry. Senter writes:

The Sunday school found its initial theory in the rabbinic tradition of passing their religious tradition from generation to generation through rote memory of Torah for young people. Though Rabbis pushed mature students to interpret and not just recite, the majority of Sunday school teachers were satisfied with the recitation of Scripture and its application to life (Senter III, 2014, p. 47).

Additionally, Senter cites Christian revival and Christian nurture as factors leading to the formation of student ministry (2014). He notes that "Presbyterian pastor, Theodore Cuyler, conceived of prayer meetings for youths that would perpetuate the prayer revival tied to the YMCA in 1857–1859" (p. 47). Another pastor named "Horace Bushnell, called for basing ministry to children and youth in Christian nurture, stating 'the child is to grow up a Christian, never knowing himself as being otherwise'" (p. 47).

## *20<sup>th</sup> Century Development*

Throughout the history of student ministry, it seems that the local church has followed the practices pioneered by parachurch organizations. Senter notes: “youth ministers employed by local churches have adapted many of the ministry strategies developed by parachurch workers and used them within local church youth ministries” (Senter, 2010, p. 75). Two of the parachurch organizations that had the most influence shaping modern student ministry are Young Life and Youth for Christ:

Back in the 1940s Jim Rayburn began a ministry to reach teens at the local high school, which became Young Life (YL). Their mission – to introduce adolescents to Jesus Christ and to help them grow in their faith – remains to this day. The strategy was and is for caring adults to build genuine friendship with teens and earn the right to be heard with their young friends. At the same time, Youth for Christ (YFC), was holding large rallies in Canada, England, and the United States. YFC also quickly organized a national movement that turned into Bible clubs in the late 50s and 60s, shifting the focus from rallies that emphasized proclamation evangelism to relevant, relational evangelism to unchurched youth (Wright, 2012, para. 3).

Ross (2018) notes that both Young Life and Youth for Christ grew rapidly in the years following World War II. This growth coincided with a focus on “evangelizing teenagers outside the church, especially those segments of teenagers the church was not reaching” (p. 11). Ross notes that “a hallmark of most parachurch groups was the youth rally, featuring exciting music, creative skits, and young and dynamic speakers. In larger cities, Youth for Christ built large halls for Saturday night rallies that attracted large crowds and featured speakers such as a very young Billy Graham” (p. 11).

Responding to this growth and desiring the same effectiveness in their ministries, local churches “began to imitate the parachurch groups” (p. 11). “The key seemed to be young leaders who could provide high-energy activities and programs specifically with the teenagers” (p. 11). However, there are several problems with the parachurch model which include parents handing

over their spiritual influence to young leaders, students not experiencing multigenerational relationships in the congregation, and a focus on excitement and events rather than discipleship (2018).

Over the course of the history of student ministry, different strategies have been employed to address the unique developmental needs of students. These needs must be examined before establishing the purposes of student ministry.

### **Student's Developmental Needs**

Erikson used the analogy of a trapeze artist to describe the developmental process of adolescents (Anderson, 2004, pp. 60-61). Young adolescents are like trapeze artists and as they

begin the swing toward adulthood, the trapeze bar is still on the side of childhood. However, once that bar has been grasped, the process will continue, and that movement is back and forth. One moment young adolescents want the privileges and security of childhood. The next, they seek independence, wanting no reminders of the past . . . By understanding the developmental process, adults can be helped to affirm the image of God in adolescence, to look with awe at the creative work of development in youth, and to say with the Creator God, "It is very good!" (p. 160).

Thus, adults have the privilege of coming alongside adolescents as they swing between childhood and adulthood. Meaningful relationships during the developmental process provide the context for imparting wisdom to adolescents as they make decisions with their budding independence. These relationships are a crucial factor in the developmental process of adolescents. Daniel (2002) notes that "healthy adolescent development seems to require six support factors: family support, positive family communication, other adult relationships, caring neighborhood, caring school climate, and parental involvement in schooling (p. 2). These observations lead to a theoretical examination of popular student ministry purposes and practices.

## **Student Ministry Purposes**

Five functions of the church have been identified as “evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, service, and worship” (Pace and Newton, 2019, p. 65). Similarly, five purposes of the church (worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship) have been observed in two passages of Scripture: the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) and the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37-40) (Fields, 1998, p. 46). This section will examine these five purposes in the context of student ministry.

### ***Evangelism***

Evangelism and missions should be a vital part biblically-sound, Gospel-based student ministry. Jesus commanded His disciples to “Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation” (Mark 16:15 ESV). However, instead of taking Jesus’ command seriously, “so many of us view outreach as an add-on to an already overscheduled life. If evangelism is seen as one more thing to do, it only contributes to the burdensome pile-on that so many of us experience in ministry” (Rahn & Linhart, 2009, p. 15). Stier (2015) concurs that “the modern youth ministry model has largely abandoned the focus of Jesus and delivers, instead, a series of competing programs. We have exchanged mission for meetings . . . we have turned outreach into a program, instead of a lifestyle” (Ross, 2018, p. 165). Accordingly, a large study revealed “only 20 percent of youth pastors named evangelism as a high priority” (p. 165).

Priorities of parents are similar to the priorities of student pastors. When observing parent’s priorities for their teenager’s student ministry experience, a Barna study observed that “notably, while ‘outreach to teens who do not attend church’ ranks low on the list of parent priorities, nine out of 10 say it is very (51%) or somewhat important (39%) to them. Like youth pastors, parents acknowledge that outreach and evangelism are important—but not as important

as their other priorities” (2016, p. 17). Perhaps parental priorities are related to the increase of attractional and entertainment-driven youth events. Newton and Pace (2019) note that:

We cannot compromise the truth and the mission for the sake of attraction and attendance. When we model this type of approach, we consequently cause our families to fall into a mind-set that they have to do the same thing. As a result, parents lose confidence in the power of the gospel and become less intentional about modeling and sharing the message of Christ in their lives and in their homes (p. 67).

Newton and Pace also believe that “perhaps the greatest indicator of our student’s spiritual maturity, and thereby the greatest testament to our efforts to disciple them, will be their commitment to share their faith” (p. 103).

Short term mission trips and service projects have emerged as a common student ministry practice. Eighty-eight percent of student pastors surveyed in the Barna study noted that their church has participated in a youth service or mission project within the last two years (p. 99). Remarkably, only thirty-six percent of student pastors listed “outreach or evangelism to the people or organization you are serving” as a top-three goal for a youth service project or mission trip (p. 100). It seems that a lack of intentional evangelism in weekly student ministry practice coincides with a lack of evangelism during short-term mission trips.

### ***Discipleship***

Pace and Newton (2019) note that “evangelism find its fulfillment in the process of discipleship” (p. 68). Barna (2016) notes that “when they are asked to identify the top two goals of youth ministry, a substantial majority of church leaders choose “discipleship and spiritual instruction” as one of their highest priorities” (p. 12). Fields (1998) notes that “because students respond to spiritual input in different ways, we can’t franchise a discipleship program that will work with every student. The bottom line is that there is no one way to disciple students” (p. 157). He goes on to define discipleship as “helping students become more like Christ” (p. 157).

Accordingly, Gallaty notes that disciple-making “is intentionally equipping believers with the Word of God through accountable relationships empowered by the Holy Spirit in order to replicate faithful followers of Christ” (Ross, 2018, p. 181).

Despite discipleship plans and programs varying for each student ministry context, there are three common discipleship practices in current student ministry: family-based discipleship, open-group discipleship, and covenant-based discipleship. Family discipleship focuses on equipping parents to disciple their children through family worship and accountability. Student ministry practices that equip and intentionally invest in parents fall into this category. Open-group discipleship includes Sunday School classes and small groups. These discipleship opportunities are often Bible studies that are open for any teenager to attend with “no commitment and no expectations” (Ross, 2018, p. 181). Additionally, covenant-based discipleship groups foster deep relationships through commitment and accountability (2018). These smaller, more intimate groups meet together to practice spiritual disciplines with the goal of deepening their relationship with God (2018).

### ***Worship***

Both corporate worship and worship services designed specifically for students are vital parts of student ministry. Burns and DeVries relate that “although worship can be intensely personal, students best express worship in the midst of community. Worship is their chance to engage the living God in a personal way, in the midst of a community of others seeking His face” (Ross, 2018, pp. 203-204). Newton and Pace (2019) believe that “as student pastors and leaders, we must come alongside our parents in modeling worship as life and life as worship. That which we exhibit in everyday practice will be emulated by our students as their personal obedience and corporate worship” (p. 75-76).

In student ministries today, forty-eight percent of student pastors communicate that large-group worship is an activity they offer for students (Barna, 2016, p. 40). Additionally, eighty-four percent relate that attendance in the main worship service is an activity their student ministry participates in (p. 40).

### ***Service***

Another core function of the church prevalent in student ministry is service. Nine of out ten student pastors say that their ministry participates in service (Barna, 2016, p. 63). Accordingly, parents report that sixty-five percent of teens volunteer “at least once every few months” (p. 63).

As student pastors lead their ministries to participate in service, they also have a responsibility to help students discover their spiritual gifts. Fields (1998) says that “one of the thrilling roles I have as a youth worker is helping students understand that they have been gifted by God (Rom. 8; 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4). I love to say ‘Congratulations, you’re gifted!’ It is wonderful to see their eyes get big when they find out that God has gifted every believer” (p. 176).

### ***Fellowship***

Fellowship includes the practices and priorities of student ministry that encourage students to be connected to other believers in the body of Christ. Pace and Newton (2019) observe:

Many churches assume fellowship is an inevitable by-product of the other four functions – evangelism, discipleship, service, and worship. However, the modern understanding of fellowship is not what the early church practiced or intended. First-century believers approached fellowship with a spiritual understanding and an intentional mind-set that produced genuine community, or *koinonia*, the way the Lord intended (p. 70).

Thus fellowship contains an element of authentic community that encourages students to build relationships both with their peers and others in the body of Christ. Fields (1998) believes that:

the most effective way to produce biblical fellowship in student's lives is through their participation in small groups. Because they provide more personal attention than do larger programs, small groups are a long-term solution to the bigness of our culture. They provide a sense of belonging, for which teenagers are desperately seeking, that makes cliques, gangs, and cults so attractive. In the church, small groups are essential, especially to adolescent spiritual maturity. All of the healthy youth ministries I have observed maintain a small-group structure (p. 137).

Although structure creates an environment for community and fellowship, students are often distant from their peers. A Pew research study revealed that “only 21 percent of teenagers say they spend time with their closest friends at church” (Ross, 2018, p. 215). Student pastors are tasked with creating environments where fellowship flourishes and encouraging community among students.

### **Summary of Theoretical Framework**

The history of student ministry in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century provides the context surrounding the modern student ministry climate. parachurch organizations paved the way for local-church student ministries. As a result, many student ministries in modern churches reflect structural and programmatic similarities to parachurch student ministries.

Furthermore, student ministry practices are best understood and analyzed under the paradigm of the five purposes of the church: evangelism, discipleship, worship, service, and fellowship. These five purposes are prevalent in student ministry in varying degrees.

Understanding the role of student ministry in these five purposes and looking at the historical foundations of student ministry enable an effective study of post-student ministry retention in the local church.

## Related Literature

After reviewing the theological and theoretical foundations of student ministry, it is helpful to examine literature related to post-student ministry retention in church. Three topics relevant to the topic include retention, student ministry models, and Generation Z.

### Retention

Post-student ministry retention is an issue framed by a wide-range of statistics. Some grab the attention while others are based on solid data and research. Furthermore, these statistics serve as a springboard into literature that discusses the practices that both encourage and discourage post-student ministry retention in the local church. This section will examine the wide-range of statistics that frame this issue as well as analyze some of the literature that seeks to provide solutions to the problem.

### *Retention Statistics*

Over the past twenty years, there have been scores of statistics cited about students leaving the church after high school graduation. These statistics have been taken from both formal and informal studies. Additionally, statistics represent a wide range of denominations in America. The National Association of Evangelicals, which represents 45,000 local churches from 40 different denominations, passed a resolution in 2006 that states:

research concerning the evangelization of the millennial generation has indicated that an unacceptably low percentage of the current teenage population in the United States will identify themselves to be evangelical Christians by the age of twenty, leading to significant implications for the future of the Church . . . the epidemic of young people leaving the evangelical Church indicates the need for committed and strategic planning as well as creative and innovative approaches in youth ministry for the 21st century (*Engaging and Empowering the Young Generation*, 2006).

Before studying factors related to student ministry that encourage or discourage post-student ministry retention, it is important to analyze these statistics to determine the extent and nature of the problem at hand.

**Gallup (2002).** A Gallup Youth Survey from 2000 found that students were religious during their teenage years, but that their religious commitment declined as they enter adulthood (George Gallup, Jr., 2002). Gallup research also found that “Fifty-four percent of teens aged 13 to 15 reported having attended church in the past seven days, as did 51% of 16- to 17-year-old teens. The figure drops to 32% among 18- to 29- year-olds but rises again to 44% among 50- to 64-year-olds and 60% among those aged 75 and older” (2002, para. 4). The research found that students’ religious identification is closely related to their parent’s religion, but that this identification wanes as students enter adulthood and become more independent (2002).

**Barna (2006).** Barna’s (2006) research report was based on over twenty-four thousand interviews with adults and students conducted from 2001 to 2006. Eighty-one percent of students surveyed say they attended church for at least two months during their teenage years (2006). Accordingly, the research found that sixty-one percent of the young adults surveyed were involved in church at one point in their lives but ended up being disconnected from the church (2006). Only twenty percent of twentysomethings “have maintained a level of spiritual activity consistent with their high school experiences” (2006, para. 6). This study also gives insight into the notion that disconnected students will come back to church later in life (perhaps when they have children): “the new research pointed out that just one-third of twentysomethings who are parents regularly take their children to church, compared with two-fifths of parents in their thirties and half of parents who are 40-years-old or more” (2006, para. 7).

**Lifeway Research (2007 and 2017).** The 2007 Lifeway Research study is perhaps the most widely cited research related to the student ministry retention issue (Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, 2016). This study surveyed one thousand adults between the ages of eighteen and thirty in April and May 2007 (*Parents & Churches Can Help Teens Stay in Church*, 2007). Additionally, participants were not all seniors who graduated from their student ministry (Powell, Mulder, and Griffin, 2016). Furthermore, “the research design did not factor in parachurch or on-campus faith communities in its definition of college ‘church’ attendance” (p. 319).

A related study was conducted by Lifeway in 2017, approximately a decade after the original study was conducted. The later study found that sixty-six percent of American young adults “who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year as a teenager say they also dropped out for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22” (Earls, 2019, para. 2).

The later study also found that “the dropout rate for young adults accelerates with age” (Earls, 2019, para. 6). Sixty-nine percent said they were church attenders at age 17, while fifty-eight percent said the same at age 18, and forty-percent were attending church at age 19 (Earls, 2019). When asked why they left the church, ninety-six percent cited a change in life situation as a reason (2019). The research found that:

Fewer say it was related to the church or pastor (73 percent); religious, ethical or political beliefs (70 percent); or the student ministry (63 percent). The five most frequently chosen specific reasons for dropping out were: moving to college and no longer attending (34 percent); church members seeming judgmental or hypocritical (32 percent); no longer feeling connected to people in their church (29 percent); disagreeing with the church’s stance on political or social issues (25 percent); and work responsibilities (24 percent). Almost half (47 percent) of those who dropped out and attended college say moving to college played a role in their no longer attending church for at least a year (2019, para. 11-13).

Additionally, students who attended college (66 percent) and those who did not attend college (68 percent) leave the church at similar rates (Trueblood, 2019, p. 16).

Thus, the life change that happens after high school graduation seems to be the predominate factor leading students to drop out of church. However, a majority cite church, religious beliefs, and student ministry as a factor related to post-student ministry retention. Also, the dropout rate of students leaving the church after high school seems to be just as high in the present day as it was over a decade ago when the original study was published.

**Shields (2008).** Shield's study (2008) set out to evaluate the claim that seventy to ninety percent of students from conservative Southern Baptist churches leave church after high school graduation. This quantitative study used a survey instrument to evaluate the faith involvement of young adults from twelve Southern Baptist churches. Shield's research found that "an overall retention rate of 88% was observed for all levels of youth ministry commitment, and over 70% of the survey respondents reported that they never dropped out of church between the ages of 18 and 22" (p. 216). Shields also found that: "since higher levels of youth ministry commitment yielded corresponding higher percentages of retention (92.8% at the level of Engaged Disciple), then some of the perceived deficiencies with youth ministry may not be philosophical - the problem might be one of involvement" (p. 180).

Shield's research is pertinent to this study because it is one of the only scholarly studies done on students who were involved in the student ministries of Southern Baptist churches. Additionally, Shield's study demonstrates the notion that the level of a student's church involvement as a teenager often correlates with their church involvement as an adult.

**Pew Research Center (2009, 2011).** This survey found that Americans change their religious identification regularly and early in life (*Faith in Flux* | Pew Research Center, 2009).

Approximately half of American adults changed their religious affiliation at least once in their lives and “most of those who change their religion leave their childhood faith before age 24” (2009, para. 1). This Pew study was conducted as a follow-up to the “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” which was conducted in 2007. The 2007 survey found that twenty-eight percent of American adults changed the religious affiliation from the one in which they were raised (2009).

The 2009 survey found that there are:

major differences in childhood religious practices and commitment between lifelong Protestants and those who have left Protestantism to become unaffiliated. Former Protestants who are now unaffiliated are less likely to have regularly attended worship services as a child and even less likely to have attended regularly as a teenager. They also are much less likely to report having attended Sunday school or having had very strong religious faith as a child or a teenager. The faith of most people who have changed religions was on the wane in the year or two prior to leaving their childhood religion, with few saying they had very strong faith during this time (2009, para. 11-12).

This study reveals that changing religions is a common practice among American adults.

Furthermore, whether or not an adult adheres to their childhood faith seems to be related to their level of church involvement as a teenager.

**Powell, Griffin, and Crawford (2011).** Powell, Griffin, and Crawford’s book *Sticky Faith* (2011) relates that “our conclusion is that 40 to 50 percent of kids who are connected to a youth group when they graduate high school will fail to stick to their faith in college” (p. 15). Additionally, they say that “only 20 percent of college students who leave the church planned to do so during high school. The remaining 80 percent intended to stick with their faith – but didn’t” (p. 15).

**Kinnaman (2011).** Kinnaman (2011) notes that the student ministry retention problem (what he labels as the “dropout problem” (p. 21) affects parents, students, and pastors, but they often are uncertain of the full nature of the problem. His study, based on Barna Research, found a forty-three percent decline in teenager’s church engagement as they enter their early adult years

(p. 22). Additionally, Kinnaman cites a 2011 Barna study that discovered fifty-nine percent of Christian young people reportedly “dropped out of attending church, after going regularly” (p. 23). Furthermore, a majority stated that they were less involved in church than they were as a fifteen-year-old. (p. 23).

When reflecting on the retention problem, he believes that “the problem is not that this generation has been less churched than children and teens before them; the problem is that much spiritual energy fades away during a crucial decade of life – the twenties” (p. 22). Kinnaman also believes that the connections students have to Christianity is more of a “cultural identification” rather than a “deep faith” (p. 23). Kinnaman’s findings seem to correlate with other studies as he found that students often have a church affiliation but they lose their connectedness to church during their early twenties. It seems that churches are somewhat effective at reaching students but largely ineffective at keeping students connected to a faith community.

**Powell, Mulder, and Griffin (2016).** Powell, Mulder, and Griffin (Earls, 2019) note that while the 2001 Census reveals twenty-two percent of the American adult population is between ages eighteen and twenty-nine, this same group comprises less than ten percent of church attendees nationwide. They believe that high school graduation is a significant “turning point” for a person’s faith (p. 17). After surveying many studies related to post-student ministry retention, they believe that forty to fifty percent of high school seniors will leave church after high school. To personalize this statistic, Powell, Mulder, and Griffin instruct people to “visualizes a photograph of the young people in your congregation. Now imagine holding a red pen and drawing an X through almost 50 percent of their faces. That many will fall away from the faith as young adults” (p. 18).

After leaving the church after high school, “some—perhaps more than half” will end up rejoining church, “generally when they get married and have children” (p. 18). However, “that leaves close to 50 percent adrift” (p. 18). Additionally, the adults who return to church have all made “significant life decisions about worldview, relationships, and vocation – all during an era when their faith was shoved aside” (p. 18).

**Additional Statistics.** The following statistics, cited by Wright and Graves (2012), have shaped the discussion around the retention issue. The research behind these statistics varies from personal observation to statistical surveys:

- A TIME Magazine article that found sixty-one percent of twentysomethings had participated in church as a teenager but no longer are affiliated with a church.
- A UCLA study that found “while 52 percent of incoming students said that they regularly took part in church events, the number shrinks to 29 percent who are still involved in church activities by their junior year” (2012).
- Josh McDowell provides an estimate that over 69 percent of students leave the church after high school.
- Mark Matlock found that between fifty-eight and eighty-four percent of students leave the church after graduation.
- Ron Luce estimates that “88 percent of kids raised in Christian homes do not continue to follow the Lord after high school” (2012, p. 11).

Because some of these statistics are based on personal observation rather than credible statistical research, there is a need to rely on the data provided from studies with solid methodology and sampling. However, these statistics are often cited in the popular discussion surrounding retention and thus warrant mentioning in this study.

Despite the wide range of statistics related to retention, the majority point to a post-student ministry retention rate of fifty percent or less. The majority of research relates that over half of students will leave the American church after high school graduation. Shield's study (2008) points to a high level of retention among Southern Baptists. This study also found that a student's level of involvement as a teenager will often align with their church involvement as an adult. After examining the statistics, it is helpful to review related literature that communicates common practices churches can employ to encourage post-student ministry retention.

### **Factors that Encourage Retention**

Although the alarming statistics of students leaving the church after high school draw the most attention, there is some literature devoted to finding solutions by keeping students in church. These solutions often center upon factors that churches can focus on to help turn the tide of students leaving after graduation. Three of the factors often cited are deep discipleship, connectedness to adults in the church, and parents who have a strong faith. Furthermore, the relationship between student ministry programming and retention needs to be examined.

### ***Student Ministry's Focus on Discipleship***

Kinnaman (2011) believes that "the dropout problem is, at its core, a faith-development problem; to use religious language, it's a *disciple-making problem*. The church is not adequately preparing the next generation to follow Christ faithfully in a rapidly changing culture" (p. 21). When reflecting on their Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry (EYM Study), Johnston and Levert (2010) agree that "a major contributor to this epidemic is simply (and by 'simply' we mean simply defined, not so simply rectified) this: These students have not learned the value and importance of personal spiritual growth. Chances are they've heard of the idea, but they haven't moved from 'knowing' about spiritual growth to 'owning' spiritual growth" (p. 43).

It seems that a lack of spiritual growth and discipleship is not limited to the students but also extends to youth workers themselves. The National Association of Evangelicals resolution agreed that when it comes to solving the problem of students leaving the church, “the inherent factors of success are awareness and education; training and equipping; evangelism and growth; as well as community and discipleship for students, lay leaders, youth pastors, senior pastors, and denominational executives” (*Engaging and Empowering the Young Generation*, 2006, para. 5). Systemically, the parachurch roots of modern youth ministry have focused on outreach instead of discipleship, training, and equipping. When reflecting on how the church adopted the parachurch model, Ross (2017) notes that: “a parachurch model that was effective in evangelizing segments of lost teenagers was not effective in giving Christian teenagers a lifetime faith, lifetime Kingdom impact, and lifetime love for the church” (p. 11).

A solution that provides deep discipleship is covenant discipleship groups. Ross (2017) notes that “covenant groups provide discipling relationships that involve more commitment and deeper relationships” (p. 184). An emphasis on discipleship and spiritual growth will actively encourage students to have a faith that lasts a lifetime.

### ***Relationships with Adults***

The *Sticky Faith* study found that “by far, the number one way churches made the teens in our survey feel welcomed and valued was when adults in the congregation showed an interest in them” (Powell et al., 2011, p. 77). Martinson et al. (2010) agrees that “a surprising discovery emerges from the findings of the EYM Study – the entire congregation makes a difference in youth ministry” (p. 83). Student’s relatedness and connectedness to adults in the overall church is a factor in post-student ministry retention. Martinson et al. (2010) also relate that:

Young people feel at home in these safe and nurturing communities where their participation, energy, concerns, questions, and faith life are valued. They turn to adults in

the congregation for guidance and care. Young people come to know a living and active God through relationships in the community. They get to know Jesus Christ through the witness of believers and ongoing relationships with persons and communities who know Him (p. 253).

Trueblood (2019) notes that “our research clearly identifies the investment of a variety of adult voices speaking into students’ lives as one of the most influential aspects of their spiritual development (p. 25). Through connecting students with different generations in the church, churches can help encourage a lifelong faith in students. This practice will form the relationships where a culture of deep discipleship is fostered. Additionally, connectedness to adults from different generations will help students see that their student ministry is a part of the church and is not a parachurch organization disconnected from the vibrant faith community.

### ***Parents with a Strong Faith***

As the church provides deep discipleship and connectedness to adults, it must also recognize its role in equipping parents. By far, parents have the greatest spiritual influence on teenager’s lives. Barna (2003) says that “our national surveys have shown that while more than 4 out of 5 parents (85 percent) believe they have the primary responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of their children, more than two out of three of them abdicate that responsibility to their church (p. 83). Ross (2017) says “biblically sound youth pastors acknowledge that God’s *primary* plan for moving the faith down through the generations is the home. Those youth pastors know God’s *primary* plan for getting truth into the lives of teenagers is at the feet of their parents” (p. 79). Research affirms this assertion by demonstrating that many Christian students have an openness to relating and engaging with their parents.

Barna (2010) agrees that “one of the lessons that emerged from the research . . . was that churches alone do not and cannot have much influence on children. In fact, the greatest influence a church may have in affecting children is by impacting their parents” (p. xvii). Zlystra (2018)

agrees that: “All the studies found that the most important influencers in a person’s faith are their parents. Second most important are other adults. (Far less important are their peers.)” (para. 22).

An in-depth research study by Focus on the Family also found that:

As noted, of those who do leave the Christian faith, very few report having had a very strong religious faith as a child or teenager. Specifically, only 11% of those who abandoned their childhood Christian faith said they were taught a very strong faith during childhood. So not surprisingly, homes modeling lukewarm faith do not create enduring faith in children. Homes modeling vibrant faith do. So these young adults are leaving something they never had a good grasp of in the first place. This is not a crisis of faith, per se, but of parenting (*Millennial Faith Participation and Retention*, 2013, p. 4).

Thus, the research shows that parents have a strong influence on their children’s faith.

Furthermore, the level of faith participation a person has as a child often correlates with the level of participation they will have as an adult. Accordingly, when reflecting on his research of social predictors of faith retention, Smith (2003) notes that “the importance of faith in family of origin . . . can significantly influence people’s chances of remaining within or leaving their religious tradition of origin” (p. 200).

The faith connection that children have with their parents is undergirded by an overall connection that teenagers have with their parents. For example, Barna’s 2018 research into Generation Z reveals that “4 out of 5 engaged Christian teens agree ‘I can share my honest questions, struggles, and doubts with my parents’” (p. 82). Additionally, adolescent development research has demonstrated a “positive relation between parental admiration of the adolescents and adolescents’ life satisfaction across all cultures” (Schwarz et al., 2012, pp. 70-71). Both theological and theoretical perspectives demonstrate that parents have a high degree of influence in the development of their children.

### ***Student Ministry Programming***

Although much more research needs to be done about student ministry programming and programming's influence on retention, there is data to support certain the importance special events and ongoing activities for student's faith formation and spiritual growth. Francis et al. (2021) conducted a study on Baptist teenagers that asked participants about group activity's influence on helping them in their "journey of faith" (p. 571). Seventy-five percent of participants said small groups helped them in their faith (p. 571). Additionally, camp (73%), retreats (66%), Christian events (84%) and conferences (54%) were all helpful to the faith development of some of the study participants. Overall, 86% of participants said their church youth group helped them in their "journey of faith" (p. 571).

### **Summary of Related Literature**

A survey of related literature reveals that there are a wide variety of statistics about young people leaving the church. Most studies relate that at least half of students will leave the church after high school graduation. Three important practices that encourage student's connectedness to church and faith that lasts a lifetime are deep discipleship, connectedness to all generations in the church, and emphasis on parents being the primary spiritual influence in their student's lives. Additionally, student ministry programming seems to have an impact on faith formation and development.

### **Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature**

After surveying the relevant theological and theoretical literature, it is important to summarize the rationale for the study. Additionally, the gap in the existing literature needs to be examined so that the relevance of this study can be understood.

## **Rationale for Study**

The literature review informed the study in several ways. First, the theological foundation of student ministry reveals a metanarrative and a mission (McGarry, 2019; Newton & Pace, 2019). “As God in flesh, Jesus could have selected any group of people to become his disciples but He chose a group of teenagers and young adults who were overwhelmingly ordinary. Jesus spent time with His young apostles and empowered them for significant ministry, entrusting them with the mission of the church” (McGarry, 2019, p. 55). God’s story of redemption through Jesus Christ is still unfolding as Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19 ESV) is still unfulfilled.

Furthermore, the rationale for student pastors and student ministry is undergirded by ample biblical support in both the Old and New Testaments. Family discipleship, intergenerational discipleship and the importance of the church for spiritual growth all are important student ministry concepts that find their foundations in the New Testament.

The history of American student ministry reveals the foundations of the retention problem. Parachurch ministries paved the way for local church student ministry. These parachurch ministries were often effective at evangelism and outreach, but were not designed to provide deep discipleship. When local churches adopted the parachurch model, evangelism was sometimes emphasized over discipleship.

The five functions of the church (worship, evangelism, discipleship, service, and fellowship) provide a framework to examine student ministry practices. Additionally, a survey of retention statistics reveal that at least fifty percent of students will leave the church after high school graduation. Three practices that encourage retention are deep discipleship, connectedness to the overall church, and parent’s spiritual influence in the lives of their students.

Trueblood (2019) noted that the top three “strongest predictors” of students staying in church after high school are: 1.) Adults investing in students between the ages of 15 and 18, 2.) Students regularly reading the Bible on their own before age 18, and 3.) Students desiring the church to help them make decisions in everyday life (p. 18). Trueblood also related that research found a 30% decrease in the post-student ministry dropout rate when comparing young adults who said “no adults from their church invested in their lives” during high school (88% dropout rate) and students who said “three or more adults invested in them” (58% dropout rate) (pp. 26-27). Trueblood’s work was based on a LifeWay Research survey study. These surveys included young adults who previously attended a Protestant church at least twice a month during high school (p. 124). This research provides a rationale for studying the qualitative experiences of Southern Baptist students in order to see if their experience reflects the importance of adult relationships, personal spiritual disciplines, and the church helping them make real life decisions.

Shields’ 2008 study noted the need for further qualitative, ethnographic research in the area of student ministry retention (p. 183). Shields believed that “at best, this research will serve as a launching pad for future researchers to replicate similar studies in other denominations and cultural contexts” (p. 183). The current research study seeks to expand Shield’s work on retention by offering a qualitative perspective into the phenomena of post-student ministry retention.

### **Gap in the Literature**

Buchanan (2015) notes that “student ministry research is still largely untapped” (p. 146). This section will detail similar student ministry research studies and demonstrate a gap in the literature where further research is needed.

Shield's 2008 study is interesting because its findings deviate from other retention statistics (88% retention vs. 50% retention). Shield's study is one of the only ones that focused on Southern Baptists (his study was conducted on conservative Southern Baptist megachurches). If the eighty-eight percent Southern Baptist retention rate is still valid a decade later, qualitative research needs to be conducted to observe the factors that have the greatest influence on post-student ministry retention in large Southern Baptist Churches. There has never been a qualitative, phenomenological study conducted on young adults who were connected to Southern Baptist Churches as students and are still connected to church as young adults. This study reveals factors that will help understand and solve the retention problem by focusing on how it is experienced in the lives of students entering young adulthood.

Although this study was phenomenological and not ethnographic, Shields demonstrates the need for qualitative research. Shields notes that "instead of categorizing young adults based on pre-determined criteria for inclusion, such an ethnographic approach may allow for more narrative stories to emerge and converge into a tapestry of youth ministry commitment and post-graduation involvement" (p. 183). This research focused on young adult's student ministry experiences, such as *how* they experienced student ministry and navigated the transition of staying in church after high school graduation. Further research is needed that examines other factors surrounding and related to student ministry experience.

Furthermore, Sirles' (2005) study focused "on the issue of youth leaving the church and youth ministers' understanding of this dilemma" (p. 134). The results of Sirles' study found that "youth ministers might not know their students as well as anticipated" (p. 134). Sirles' study also found that student's "self-directed spiritual activities are significantly related to their lasting faith tendency." (p. 136). Student's personal choice to attend church instead of being made to attend

was found by Sirles to be “very important” (p. 136). Additionally, Sirles found that intergenerational relationships were “significant” in “relationship to the lasting faith tendency of students” (p. 136). Sirles concluded that “a gap in the existing research is how well youth pastors understand the spiritual lives, specifically the tendency to remain connected to a local church after high school, of their students” (p. 137). A study focused on understanding the previous student ministry experiences of young adults could help student ministers understand how students navigate the faith transition that so often occurs around the time of high school graduation. Furthermore, young adult’s memories of intergenerational relationships and spiritual disciplines they practiced as students can also be studied from a phenomenological perspective to examine a possible link between these factors and post-student ministry retention.

Buchanan’s 2015 study on student ministry practices noted that a future study about student ministry practices could include teenagers as well as other groups like senior pastors, ministry volunteers, and parents (p. 147). Buchanan noted that “including these groups in the study would allow the researcher to compare what their responses as to what is the predominant factor influencing student ministry practice to the responses of the student ministers” (p. 147). Buchanan also noted that student ministry research is a field that is “largely untapped” (p. 146). Clearly, more research is needed to understand student’s interactions within student ministry.

### **Profile of the Current Study**

This phenomenological study was conducted by interviewing young adults who are connected to a local church and who previously participated in a student ministry of a Southern Baptist Church with an attendance of 200 or greater. These interviews were conducted according to a set of questions developed by the researcher to understand the factors that led to the young adult’s commitment to church after high school graduation.

The theological foundations of the literature demonstrate the need for student ministry and the role student ministry plays in faith development. The theoretical foundations of the literature reveal historical foundations of student ministry and functions of the church that student ministry commonly fulfills. Related literature demonstrates a vast problem in retaining students in church after high school. This problem has been prevalent over the last two decades. Although some literature has sought to address the problem by focusing on factors that help students stay connected to church, there has never been any qualitative research done on students from large conservative Southern Baptist churches. Such research provides solutions specifically for Southern Baptists and may explain why retention rates among Southern Baptists tend to be higher than aggregate churches.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This phenomenological study sought to understand the experiences of young adults who were active in a mid-sized Southern Baptist church during their teenage years. By analyzing the student ministry experiences of the research population, this study looked for common themes, factors, and influences that contributed to young adult's retention in church after high school graduation. This data can be used by Christian educators and student ministry practitioners to help turn the tide of students leaving the church after high school graduation.

This chapter will begin by outline the research design for this study. This design synopsis will include the research problem, purpose of the research, research questions, and the research design and methodology. Furthermore, the research setting, participants, and role of the researcher will be considered. Pertinent ethical considerations and data collection methods will be detailed. Finally, the process of data analysis used in this research study will be outlined.

### **Research Design Synopsis**

#### **The Problem**

Over the past 15 years, the exodus of students leaving the church after high school graduation has emerged as one of the most pressing issues in Christian leadership (Buchanan, 2015; Ketcham, 2018; McDowell & Bellis, 2006; Parr & Crites, Tom, 2015; Powell et al., 2011; Trueblood, 2019). Powell (2017) summarizes the research by relating that “40 to 50 percent of youth group seniors – like the young people in your church – drift from God and the faith community after they graduate from high school” (Powell et al., 2016, p. 17). Ross (2017) relates

that many of the students who stay in church will become spiritually ineffective for the growth of God's Kingdom.

Most research conducted about this issue has included a group consisting of young adults from several different denominations (Barna, 2011; Trueblood, 2019). Little research has been done focusing on the student ministry strategy of the Southern Baptist Convention. Shields' (2008) quantitative research of student ministry retention in Southern Baptist megachurches noted that further qualitative research needs to be conducted (p. 183).

Qualitative research on the student ministry experiences of young adults in mid to large sized Southern Baptist churches helps Christian educators identify the forces and factors that encourage post-student ministry retention. This identification is useful to student pastors, senior pastors, and church leadership seeking to develop student ministry strategies that encourages young people to stay involved in church. Churches can be healthier by learning what programming elements, shared experiences, and influences encourage students to stay in church (Ham et al., 2009; Parr & Crites, Tom, 2015; Powell et al., 2016). Furthermore, any research that helps address the post-student ministry retention problem will also lead to healthier churches as students stay connected as young adults.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the personal perceptions and experiences that led to post-student ministry retention among young adults age 18-22 who participated in student ministry at a Southern Baptist church with an average attendance of 200 or greater. Post-student ministry retention was defined as "the process of assimilating active high school youth ministry participants into the life of the larger church post-youth ministry" (Shields, 2008, p. 18). Young adults are defined as individuals ages 18-22 who were active in a Southern

Baptist Church during their teenage years. Student ministry is defined as “Specific and intentional ministry to adolescents in middle and high school as part of the overall work of the local church” (Buchanan, 2015, p. 28). Southern Baptist church is defined as a church that affiliates with the Southern Baptist denomination and adheres to the Baptist Faith and Message (*About the SBC - SBC.Net*, n.d.).

The guiding theory of this research was Planned Behavior Theory. This theory “traces attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control to an underlying foundation of beliefs about the behavior” (Ajzen, 1991, p. 206). Postulated by Ajzen, Planned Behavior Theory believes that “attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms with respect to the behavior, and perceived control over the behavior are usually found to predict behavioral intentions with a high degree of accuracy” (p. 206).

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1.** What are the most common aspects of student ministry that young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church, cite as the reasons they stayed active in church after high school graduation?

**RQ2.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry experience as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ3.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their relationships with adults as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ4.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry’s focus on discipleship as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ5.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of student ministry programming as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

## Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological approach. The philosophical foundations of phenomenology focus on an individual's experience from their own perspective (Roberts, 2020, p. 143). Since this method is centered on experience and personal perspective, phenomenology was well-suited to help focus on understanding young adult's experience in mid-sized Southern Baptist churches during their teenage years. Furthermore, the study focused on the research population of young adults aged 18-22 who are currently connected to church. As the young adult's church experience was studied, coded, and analyzed, common themes, influences, and dynamics emerged to help Christian educators and student ministry practitioners address the exodus of young adults from the church after high school graduation.

Furthermore, studying the research population's experience narrowed a gap in current research by focusing on a specific denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention. For example, Trueblood's (2017) study did not focus on a specific denomination but instead focused on a research sample from Protestants. Additionally, this study added to the existing knowledge about young adult's experiences in Southern Baptist churches prior to high school graduation. Shield's (2008) quantitative study noted that further qualitative research was needed. Additionally, this study also provided a basis for further research regarding the post-graduation retention problem.

A qualitative design was appropriate for the nature of this research because the qualitative "approach is based on the philosophical orientation called *phenomenology*, which focuses on people's experience from their perspective" (Roberts, 2010, p. 143). Instead of statistics, this study focused on young adult's experience in Southern Baptist churches. Furthermore, qualitative research process "involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars

to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 4). This research study intended to observe common themes among the research participant’s experience in church prior to graduation. Thus, instead of looking at retention statistics, this research looked at the “essential character” and “nature” of the retention problem among mid-sized Southern Baptist churches (Roberts, 2020, p. 143). In turn, this research helped provide a more comprehensive understanding of the problem. For example, Shield’s (2008) quantitative study cited the need for further research (particularly qualitative ethnographic research) into the research problem of post-student ministry retention.

To understand the nature of the problem through the experiences of the research population, this study utilized a phenomenological research approach. Phenomenological research can be defined as “a design of inquiry coming from philosophy and psychology in which the researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). Additionally, “phenomenology is not concerned with generalizing, quantifying, and finding. It is not rigorous in the experimental sense of having precise, objective measures that can be quantified and proven. Its aim is to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of everyday (‘obvious’) phenomena” (Vagle, 2018, p. 11).

Historically, phenomenology “as both a philosophical discipline and philosophical movement began in Western continental philosophy at the turn of the 20th Century, when Edmund Husserl published *Logical Investigations* (1900–1901)” (Vagle, 2018, p. 6). According to Moustakas (1994), “Husserl’s phenomenology is a Transcendental Phenomenology. It emphasizes subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience and provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for derivation of knowledge” (p. 45). Thus, phenomenology

methodology is rooted in philosophy and is focused on understanding subjective experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13).

To understand subjective experiences, phenomenological research often uses interviews with research participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, 27). However, Vagle (2018) notes that “as previously mentioned, phenomenological methodologies are plural. There is not one single way to design and carry out phenomenological research” (p. 10). Before phenomenological interviews are conducted, the researcher “usually explores his or her own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions.” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). After exploring personal experiences, the researcher will often practice phenomenological reduction (or “*epoche*”), which involves suspending “judgment of the existence and pre-understandings of things outside of the human mind, so that phenomena can be studied in their givenness to consciousness” (Vagle, 2018, pp. 13-14). The phenomenological researcher will often practice bracketing, which is temporarily setting aside biases and assumptions about the research at hand (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). After this process, the researcher conducts, analyzes, and interprets interviews among the research population to better understand the research population’s experience of the phenomena.

The phenomenological method suited this study because it focuses on understanding and interpreting the experiences of the research population instead of focusing on the post-student ministry retention rate (Shields, 2008). Young adult’s experience in church prior to high school graduation was studied with the intention of learning more about what influenced them to remain connected to church after graduation.

## Setting

This study focused on young adults who were active in a Southern Baptist church to help understand why Southern Baptist students stay involved in church after graduation (Shields, 2008). The research population consisted of young adults ages 18-22 who are currently involved in a local church. The age range of 18-22 was selected because that age range is typically when young adults are in college or beginning their careers. Additionally, researching this specific age range ensured that the young adults have recent memories of their student ministry experiences.

Southern Baptist churches served as the primary organizational setting for this research. Young adults with a Southern Baptist church background were selected for this study in part because of the presence that Southern Baptists have in the broader evangelical movement. With 16.2 million members, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is considered the largest Protestant denomination in the United States (*The 15 Largest Protestant Denominations in the United States*, n.d.). Southern Baptists make up 5.3% of the U.S. adult population and make up roughly one-fifth of U.S. evangelical Protestants (21%) (Fahmy, 2019). The SBC consists of over 50,000 cooperating churches and church-type missions (*About the SBC - SBC.Net*, n.d.). Each Southern Baptist church is autonomous and unique, but the SBC is united through a shared commitment to a doctrinal statement of beliefs called *The Baptist Faith and Message* (*About the SBC - SBC.Net*, n.d.)

Within the context of Southern Baptist churches, this research narrowly focused on young adult's experience while in SBC student ministry. Each student ministry is unique, but SBC student ministries function as ministries catering to students within the overall framework of SBC churches. Some evangelical student ministries are led by paid staff while others consist of lay leadership (*The State of Youth Ministry*, 2016, p. 54). Since this study focused on student

ministries in mid to large sized Southern Baptist Churches (churches with an average attendance of 200 or greater), there is a higher likelihood that the research population was in a student ministry with paid staff due to the larger budget that mid-sized churches typically have compared to smaller churches. The geographical setting of this study was the Southeast United States, as video conferencing can be utilized. A majority of participants came from the Southeast as that is the geographical setting of the researcher. When focusing on the research population, pseudonyms for individuals and churches were used to promote confidentiality.

### **Participants**

The research sample included participants who were active in Southern Baptist churches during their teenage years. Furthermore, participants who are currently active in church and who are aged 18-22 were selected to help understand the phenomena of students staying connected to church after high school graduation. During this age range, young adults have recent memories of their student ministry experiences and have made decisions about their remaining in church. This range was also narrow enough to focus on students who are either in college or beginning their careers.

The research sample was purposively selected. Purposive sampling has the objective of producing a sample that can be logically assumed to be representative of the population (“Purposive Sample,” 2008). The intention behind purposefully selecting this sample is to find participants who “will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 185).

Thus, to understand why Southern Baptist students stay involved in church after graduation, participants will be selected who are currently active and committed to their local church. A sample of nine participants were selected from the research population. Because

the sample age range was 18-22, sample participants were mostly college students.

Sampling procedures was based on convenience as participants will participate based on their availability (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 150). During the sampling selection process, other Southern Baptist student pastor and ministry leaders were contacted to help select young adults who are committed to church, serving, and actively growing in their faith. These student pastors and ministry leaders were selected through the researcher's existing contacts in student ministry. State conventions, local Baptist associations, and student pastor network groups may be utilized to find students pastors who are serving at mid to large-sized Southern Baptist churches.

The student pastors and ministry leaders were informed of the selection criteria (see Appendix D). Selection criteria for the research study was based on students who were actively involved in SBC student ministry during their teenage years, are currently age 18-22, and are currently involved in a local church. To aid in the sample selection process, other SBC student pastors were given a questionnaire that lists selection criteria (including the need for young adults who were both formerly active in student ministry and who are currently active in church) (see Appendix J). Additionally, potential participants were given a questionnaire to communicate their prior involvement in SBC student ministry and their current involvement in church as a young adult (see Appendix K). This multi-tier attendance verification helped ensure that participants were both formerly active in a student ministry and currently active in a local church. After a research sample was identified, participants and organizations were given pseudonyms to promote confidentiality. To ensure a variety of student ministries are represented, there was a research population limit of two participants from any one student ministry.

## **Role of the Researcher**

According to Creswell & Creswell (2018), “in qualitative research, inquirers reflect about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations, such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data” (p. 182). This reflection is closely related to bracketing, a hallmark practice of phenomenological research. The bracketing process is an important aspect of research and speaks to the role of the researcher throughout the data analysis and collection processes.

### **Researcher Role**

In light of bracketing, the researcher’s personal background, education, and ministry experience played a large role in this research. The researcher is a third-generation Southern Baptist pastor (my father, late maternal grandfather, and brother are all pastors in SBC churches). The researcher has been in student ministry in different roles for a total of six years (intern, high school associate, and student pastor). Even before beginning his doctoral research, the researcher studied current trends in student ministry. The researcher has led college groups that include students ages 18-22 and have observed both students staying in church and dropping out of church after high school graduation.

As the researcher conducted interviews, it is important to note his relationships to the study participants. Since this research focused on a sample of nine young adults instead of a large quantitative survey sample, it is most likely that the researcher has a previous connection with the participants through mutual friends. The criteria questionnaire included a question that ensures that research participants will not have previously attended a church where the researcher previously served on staff.

Additionally, as a student pastor, the researcher brought a set of assumptions to the study

at hand due to prior knowledge and experience. His study of the literature led him to believe that a lack of discipleship, diminished parent-church connection, separation of the student ministry from the overall church are major factors causing students to leave the church (Ross, 2017). Since he leads a student ministry, he has a bias towards programs and strategies that he currently uses in ministry.

To ensure questions are not biased, the interview questions were submitted to other student pastors, former student pastors, and student ministry experts for feedback (this group was separate from the student pastors and experts contacted to find the research sample). Research interviews were conducted via videoconferencing. Since the researcher is a student pastor and many of the videoconferencing interviews were conducted from the researcher's church office, there was a potential for participants to be influenced by his role and the research setting to provide answers that they believe the researcher wants to hear. They may have believed that superficial answers sufficed instead of accurately portraying their student ministry experiences. To counteract this dynamic, this researcher believes that open-ended questions and the use of pseudonyms helped address these possible obstacles to learning about their true experience in student ministry. According to Bevan (2014), the "influential phenomenological researcher Giorgi" believes that "questions are generally broad and open ended so that the subject has sufficient opportunity to express his or her viewpoint extensively" (p. 137).

Additionally, the researcher's education and experience as a student pastor was a bias as he analyzes the data collected from the interviews. The researcher practiced bracketing as well as conducted thorough analysis to help overcome this bias.

## **Bracketing**

Before data is collected through interviews, researchers using the phenomenological method typically explore their “own experiences, in part to examine dimensions of the experience and in part to become aware of personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions” (p. 27). These prejudices and assumptions of the researcher are “*bracketed* or temporarily set aside so that we can examine consciousness itself” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). Wertz et al. (2011) note that “abstaining from or ‘bracketing’ prior knowledge of the subject matter allows the researcher to . . . freshly reflect on concrete examples of the phenomena under investigation” (p. 125). Chan et al. (2013) agree that “efforts should be made by researchers to put aside their repertoires of knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences in order to accurately describe participants’ life experiences” (p. 2). One of Chan et al.’s strategies for promoting bracketing includes “planning for data collection using semi-structured interviews guided by open-ended questions” (2013, p. 1). This strategy was employed as the interview instrument is developed. The interview questions were open-ended to help limit the biases of the researcher.

## **Pre-study**

Additionally, before data is collected through interviews, the phenomenological researcher will sometimes engage in “pre-study” by informally observing the phenomena so that he or she can “get a good sense how it might manifest in the contexts” in which the phenomena is studied (Vagle, 2018, p. 18). In this research, “pre-study” was conducted by the researcher looking at the church websites, publications, social media posts, and live-streamed services of the various Southern Baptist churches that the research population participated in during their teenage years.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study consisted of recorded interviews with young adults who are 18-22 years old. Individuals under the age of eighteen were not included within this study. In order to promote confidentiality, each participant signed a release prior to the recorded interview. This release acknowledged that the study protects the identity of each research participant and that stating the interview recording was to be used as data for research (see Appendix C). Additionally, the participant release included a statement that relates the researcher's intent to provide pseudonyms for each participant who is interviewed. Although pseudonyms were used, participants will consent to release their voice recording and interview transcript for further research. The recording process and storage of the data collected was disclosed to the participants before the interview. Data was collected through recording the video conferencing calls. After the recording process was communicated, individuals will be given the opportunity to opt out of the study at any time.

Before research was conducted, the research design and methodology will be submitted to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Liberty IRB has a clear application process through the Cayuse system. The application checklist provided by the IRB stipulated that the researcher complete Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) training. Additionally, permission request letters, recruitment materials, consent materials, and the research instrument were submitted to the IRB for approval.

After the interviews are conducted, data was placed in a password protected cloud storage account as well as a password protected USB drives. The USB drive will be stored for three years after the publication of the study. This process will ensure that the interview data is safeguarded.

## **Data Collection Methods and Instruments**

In order to understand the phenomena of post-graduation retention, this study utilized phenomenological interviews as the primary method of data collection. This section will describe how interviews helped collect data to answer research questions. Instruments used to collect data will be described. Furthermore, compliance with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) procedures and the IRB approval process will be outlined.

### **Collection Methods**

When using the phenomenological research method, data is usually collected by interviews with research participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 13). Interviews are conducted “to get at the essence or basic underlying structure of the meaning of an experience” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). For this study, research participants took part in interviews to discover their past student ministry experience and the relationship of that experience with their current involvement in church as a young adult. Additionally, multiple interviews from young adults that participated in student ministries from different churches added to the credibility of the study. Furthermore, multiple interview questions were asked based on each research question to ensure that the interviews accurately explore the research questions (see Appendix L). Each research question had three to five corresponding interview questions to ensure the research questions were explored appropriately during the semi-structured interviews.

### **Instruments and Protocols**

This study utilized semi-structured interviews to study the phenomena of post-student ministry retention. Vagle (2018) notes the effectiveness of this unstructured interviews for phenomenological research:

Although phenomenological researchers use a variety of interview strategies and techniques, the unstructured interview is the most popular for it tends to be the most

dialogic, open, and conversational. It is important to remember that phenomenological research is not experimental, comparative, or correlational. It is not important to the phenomenologist how one interview is the same or different from another. Rather, all interviews are treated as exciting opportunities to potentially learn something important about the phenomenon. In many phenomenological studies it is not necessary nor even desirable to ask the same questions in the same way. The goal is to find out as much as you can about the phenomenon from each particular participant (pp. 86-87).

In order to find out the most information about how young adults experience the phenomena of post-student ministry retention, semi-structured interviews were conducted. These semi-structured interviews flowed from a structured interview protocol and gave opportunity for unstructured follow-up questions (see Appendix L). Vagle notes that unstructured interviews begin with a “clear sense of the phenomenon” and require the researcher to be “responsive to the participant and the phenomenon throughout the study” (p. 87). This requirement for unstructured interviews was also necessary for this study’s semi-structured approach.

Although Ganeson and Ehrich’s 2013 phenomenological study of students entering high school collected data through journal entries and not interviews, their goal was similar to this research in that it was designed to “produce clear and accurate descriptions of a particular aspect of human experience” (Polkinghorne, 1989 as cited in Ganeson and Ehrich, 2013). Interviews helped the participants describe their experience with transitioning away from student ministry after high school graduation.

This study utilized a semi-structured interview question guide to conduct semi-structured interviews with research participants (see Appendix L). A group of three student pastors and former student pastors (different from those who help with population selection) were asked to help review potential interview questions and evaluate the potential interview questions based on their perceived effectiveness in answering the underlying research questions (see Appendix B).

The semi-structured guide consisted of general introductory questions about the research participant's current and former church involvement. Additionally, several interview questions were asked that directly relate to each research question (see Appendix L). Each research question had three to five corresponding interview questions to ensure the research questions were explored appropriately during the semi-structured interviews.

**Table 1: Correlation Between Research Questions and Interview Questions**

<b>RQ 1. (common aspects cited leading to retention)</b>	<b>RQ 2. (value of past student ministry experience as it relates to current church involvement)</b>	<b>RQ 3. (value of past relationships with adults as it relates to current church involvement)</b>	<b>RQ 4. (value of student ministry's focus on discipleship as it relates to current church involvement)</b>	<b>RQ 5. (value of student ministry programming as it relates to current church involvement)</b>
IQ 1-1. After you graduated high school, what kept you involved in church?	IQ 2-1. Looking back to your time as a student, how valuable was your student ministry experience?	IQ 3-1. How did you interact with adults during your time as a student in student ministry?	IQ 4-1. How did your student ministry help you grow as a follower of Christ (encourage discipleship)?	IQ 5-1. What activities did you participate in during your student ministry experience?
IQ 1-2. What do you remember most about your student ministry experience before graduation?	IQ 2-2. In other words, how did your student ministry experience as a student help you become the young adult you are today?	IQ 3-2. Describe the kinds of relationships you had with these adults. How did these relationships grow?	IQ 4-2. Did your student ministry ever talk about discipleship or define the term for you? If so, describe how discipleship was presented in your student ministry.	IQ 5-2. Describe any ongoing activities that helped you grow as a follower of Christ.
IQ 1-3. How did you make the decision to stay connected to a local church after high school graduation?	IQ 2-3. Describe how your student ministry influenced your decision to stay connected to a church after graduation.	IQ 3-3. How did these relationships as a student influence the young adult you are today?	IQ 4-3. Describe how your student ministry helped you grow as a follower of Christ. Did this growth influence your decision to stay involved in church after high school graduation?	IQ 5-3. Describe any special events that helped you grow as a follower of Christ.
IQ 1-4. How did your student ministry experience	IQ 2-4. How does your previous student ministry	IQ 3-4. How did these relationships influence your		IQ 5-4. How did these activities influence your

before graduation influence your decision to stay in church after graduation?	experience play a role in your church involvement now (even if you changed churches)?	decision to stay in church after graduation?		decision to stay connected to church after high school graduation?
	IQ 2-5. What specific factors in your student ministry helped influence your decision to stay in church after high school graduation?			

These open-ended questions were asked to help the participant reflect on their experience with the phenomena. The interview format was flexible to allow for unplanned follow-up questions. Thus, follow-up questions were developed as the interview itself is conducted.

Since the interviews were open-ended, these questions may not have been asked sequentially. Each interview lasted approximately between thirty minutes and one hour. This time frame allowed the interview guide to be followed and provided time for follow-up questions.

## **Procedures**

After the IRB approved the proposed research, the research process moved to the participant selection stage. Participants were selected by the researcher contacting other Southern Baptist student pastors and ministry leaders. Through an email and questionnaire, these student pastors were asked to select participants who are young adults (aged 18-22) who are committed to church (see Appendices C and I). Furthermore, student pastors were asked to select students who were actively involved in SBC student ministry during their teenage years (defined as students who attended student ministry activities at least three times per month on average during

their high school years) (see Appendix J). These three factors were the focus of selection (not other factors like spiritual maturity, church service, etc.).

After student pastors filled out their questionnaires, potential participants were contacted. The first contact was an email from the researcher to provide general information about the research study, give the participant the questionnaire verifying study eligibility, and the consent form (see Appendices B, E, and J). After participants filled out the questionnaire, the researcher texted them to find a time to videoconference.

Once the interviews were scheduled, the researcher arranged to meet over the Zoom web conferencing service. Additionally, an additional person not in the research was will be employed for a mock-meeting to field test the data recording procedures.

Online interviews were recorded using Zoom's call recording feature. After the interviews are conducted, data was placed on a password-protected USB drives and a secure cloud storage account. This process ensured the interview data is safeguarded.

To ensure confidentiality, research participants were given pseudonyms for the written interview transcripts (after the interviews were conducted). Researchers desiring to use the raw interviews for further research will be required to gain the interviewee's permission before viewing and researching the interview recordings. Interview transcripts with pseudonyms will be released upon request.

### **Data Analysis**

After phenomenological research data is collected, the researcher will typically transcribe the interviews with research participants and analyze them through "the methods and procedures of phenomenal analysis" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118). This section will describe the methods used to analyze the interview data. Interview data was analyzed to see if common themes emerge that

research participants cite as encouraging post-student ministry retention. Furthermore, the trustworthiness of the research analysis process will be described. Factors of trustworthiness such as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability will be outlined.

### **Analysis Methods**

There are several nuances of data analysis methods that are unique to phenomenological research. Vagle (2018) provides four analytical commitments to phenomenological data analyses:

1. Whole-parts-whole process (reading the text as a whole, line-by-line, and asking follow-up questions with the intent of finding common themes).
2. A focus on intentionality and not subjective experience.
3. A balance among verbatim excerpts, paraphrasing, and your descriptions/interpretations.
4. An understanding that you are crafting a text—not merely coding, categorizing, making assertions, and reporting (pp. 109-111).

In this study, several readings of each transcript were conducted before that particular transcript was coded. Follow-up questions during the interview itself were asked of the participants in order to find common themes that emerge around the phenomenon of post-student ministry retention. Furthermore, intentionality was the focus of analysis. In phenomenological research, intentionality “is used to signify how we are meaningfully connected to the world” (Vagle, 2018, p. 28). Descriptions and interpretations in the data analysis process were balanced with direct quotes and paraphrasing of what participants said in their interviews. Finally, the researcher had an underlying commitment to crafting a text about the phenomena of post-student ministry retention rather than simply coding and reporting the data.

Additionally, there are two strategies unique to phenomenology that are commonly employed by researchers: phenomenological reduction and horizontalization (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). First, phenomenological reduction refers to the researcher returning to the essence of the experience over and over throughout the research process in order to “derive the inner structure or meaning in and of itself” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27). In other words, the phenomenon being studied is isolated “in order to comprehend its essence” (p. 27).

Furthermore, researchers commonly use horizontalization, which is “the process of laying out all the data for examination and treating the data as having equal weight; that is, all pieces of data have equal value at the initial data analysis stage. These data are then organized into clusters or themes” (p. 27). These themes were compared with the underlying research questions themselves to see if any of the themes present in the interviews shed light on the overall research questions. In other words, the themes emerging from the open-ended interview questions were studied for possible relationship with the study’s research questions. These themes sometimes related to more than one of the research questions. However, in the data analysis stage, each research question and corresponding interview questions were studied individually.

After outlining nuances of phenomenological analysis, the process of data analysis specific to this study will now be detailed.

### ***Transcription***

After interviews are conducted, the audio of each interview was developed into word-for-word into transcripts. To aid in this process, a transcription service called Otter was utilized. Before inclusion in the research paper, quotes from the transcripts were verified with the audio recordings.

### ***Organization***

Digital copies of the transcripts were securely stored on a USB thumb drive along with audio recordings of the interview. An additional copy of each document and recording will be stored using iCloud secure cloud storage.

### ***Coding***

To organize the data into clusters and themes, a coding method was employed. Coding the interview data helped analyze the large amount of data gleaned from the nine interviews. Possible phrases that may emerge to be coded are included in the following sample table. The interviewees' pseudonyms, phrases cited, and number of times that phrases are cited are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2: Phrases Emerging from Interview Data**

	<b>Discipleship</b>	<b>Parents</b>	<b>Older People / Other Generations</b>	<b>Camps</b>	<b>Small Group Bible Study</b>	<b>Caring Adults</b>
<b>Jack</b>						
<b>Cathy</b>						
<b>Sam</b>						
<b>Ruby</b>						
<b>Robin</b>						
<b>Zack</b>						
<b>Trey</b>						
<b>Jennifer</b>						
<b>Troy</b>						
<b>Rubin</b>						

The coding process included open, axial, and selective coding in an effort to understand the themes, patterns, and relationships that emerge from the interviews.

### ***Analysis of Themes, Patterns, and Relationships***

Open coding involves turning data into “small, discrete components” and coding data pieces descriptively (*How To Do Open, Axial, & Selective Coding in Grounded Theory — Delve*, n.d.). Interview transcripts will first go through an open coding process. Then, axial coding which finds “connections and relationships between code” and then condenses “codes into broader categories” will be used (*How To Do Open, Axial, & Selective Coding in Grounded Theory — Delve*, n.d.). Lastly, data will be analyzed by selective coding, which enables the researcher to “select one core category that captures the essence” of the research and then the researcher identifies “connections between this overarching category and the rest of (the) codes and data” (*How To Do Open, Axial, & Selective Coding in Grounded Theory — Delve*, n.d.).

### ***Data Validation***

Data was validated by the researcher reviewing codes and the audio recordings to make sure the codes accurately describe what the interviewees said in their interviews. Additionally, data (while using pseudonyms) will be made available upon request for other researchers seeking to validate the data.

### ***Summarization of the Data***

Data was summarized using interpretation, direct quotes, and paraphrasing (Vagle, p. 109-111). Tables and visual aids were developed to help communicate the themes and dynamics that emerge from the interviews. Additionally, tables that compare and contrast the participant’s demographics were provided.

## **Trustworthiness**

According to Roberts (2010), “qualitative researchers often use the term trustworthiness to refer to the concept of validity. It’s the credibility factor that helps the reader trust your data analysis” (p. 161). The trustworthiness of this research project was of paramount importance to ensure that research findings can be used to help Christian leaders and educators provide real-world solutions to the post-student ministry retention problem. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) note that “being able to trust research results is especially important to professionals in applied fields because practitioners intervene in people’s lives” (p. 237). The reader must be ensured that data was collected and analyzed correctly so that they can trust research findings. This section will outline the measures this study has taken to ensure trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

### ***Credibility***

Credibility, or internal validity, “deals with the question of how research findings match reality” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 244). Credibility in this study began with a multi-tier involvement verification process. Both student ministry practitioners and research participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire indicating their level of church involvement (see Appendices C and D). This verification ensured that research participants are actively involved in church.

Additionally, the research sample included participants from different churches and geographical settings to ensure that the themes prevalent in post-student ministry retention do not occur in one setting. To promote credibility, this study compared the data transcripts several times to make sure the coding process accurately describes what the interviewees state as reasons why they stayed in church after high school graduation.

### ***Dependability***

Other researchers need to be able to understand the researcher's decisions in order to promote the study's overall dependability (*Four Factors to Consider in Nursing Qualitative Research*, 2016). Dependability in this research study was ensured by the researcher clearly outlining the research methods, instruments, processes, and analysis so that other researchers can understand how the researcher made decisions and conducted the research process. The research instruments were provided so that other researchers can conduct similar research projects.

### ***Confirmability***

Confirmability has to do with "the level of confidence that the research study's findings are based on the participants' narratives and words rather than potential researcher biases" ("What Is Confirmability in Qualitative Research and How Do We Establish It?," 2017). Confirmability was ensured by making the data available to other researchers upon request. Transcripts using the interviewee's pseudonyms were provided upon request. Additionally, the researcher's process of bracketing and mitigating bias also increased confirmability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 27).

### ***Transferability***

Transferability can be defined as "the ability to transfer research findings or methods from one group to another" (*Four Factors to Consider in Nursing Qualitative Research*, 2016). Transferability in this research project was ensured by describing the demographics of the research population and describing the research setting. By doing so, other researchers can understand the context surrounding the research findings and conduct further research accordingly. Additionally, this study ensured transferability by describing the interview questions and protocol that could be applied to other research studies.

This study focused on young adults who are currently active in church and formerly active in student ministries in Southern Baptist Churches with an average attendance of 200 or greater. Different denominations and different sized churches can be studied using a similar approach to the one that guided this research study. By changing the variables of denomination and size of church, similar studies can be conducted using the same methodology. Additionally, this study could be transferred to young adults who are not currently involved in church to see what forces and factors influenced them to leave church after high school graduation.

### **Chapter Summary**

This phenomenological study sought to understand the experiences of young adults who were active as students in Southern Baptist churches with an average attendance of 200 or greater. The focus of this research was to determine what factors are cited by young adults as influential in their decision to stay connected to a local church after high school graduation.

This study included a research sample of nine young adults (aged 18-22) who are currently active in a local church. The setting for this study was Southern Baptist Churches. Ethical practices and the role of the researcher were be considered as the research project was developed and conducted.

Data was collected through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. These interviews were recorded and confidentiality was ensured. After data was collected, a process of transcription, coding, and analysis was conducted to determine if common themes emerge related to post-student ministry retention. The trustworthiness of the study, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability was ensured.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

### Overview

The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences of young adults who are currently involved in church and who were previously involved in the student ministry of a Southern Baptist Church with an average attendance of 200 or greater. This study sought to understand the factors that young adults cite as beneficial in helping them stay connected to a local church after their high school graduation.

This chapter focuses on analyzing the data collected from the nine phenomenological interviews. This chapter will describe the research and data collection process as it was actually conducted. The compilation protocol and measures will be described. Additionally, the demographic data of the research sample will be presented. Additionally, the data organization, analysis, and coding process will be described. The findings of this study will be organized by each of the study's research questions.

This study interviewed nine young adults who were previously active in Southern Baptist student ministries in churches with an average attendance of 200 or greater. The nine research participants represented the student ministries of seven different churches. The churches that the young adults previously attended student ministry activities at were located in five different states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas. The young adults are currently active in churches in three different states: Arkansas, Georgia, and Tennessee. Six of the participants are currently active in churches other than the ones they attended during their student-ministry involvement; three are currently attending the same church they were attending at the time of their high school graduation.

The ministry leader referring each participant filled out a questionnaire verifying their eligibility to participate in the study (Appendix J). The questionnaire asked the leader to affirm the potential participant's age, former church involvement, and current church involvement. Additionally, each participant filled out a screening questionnaire verifying their age, former level of church involvement, and current level of church involvement (Appendix K). Furthermore, former church involvement was a specific question on the semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix L).

Once participants were verified as eligible to participate in the study, the researcher set up online Zoom meetings with them. The meetings were recorded and the open-ended interview guide was followed. Once all nine interviews were complete, the researcher began the data analysis process. Raw audio data was converted into transcripts using an online service called Otter.

Each interview transcript was read through three times before each respective interview was coded. The interviews were analyzed and broken into small parts of data. These parts of data went through an open, axial, and selective coding process. This process helped the researcher analyze the data for themes leading to post-student ministry retention among young adults. Additionally, this process helped the researcher arrive at the essence of the young adult's previous student ministry experience. Through the interview and analysis process, the researcher was able to observe several emerging themes. The importance of church being the context for faith relationships and community was evident throughout the interviews. Additionally, the young adults highlighted opportunities for serving the church as beneficial for their faith development. Young adult's experiencing and observing spiritual growth was also a theme that

emerged in the research process. The research compilation and analysis process will now be presented in detail.

### **Compilation Protocol and Measures**

After eligible participants were recruited, Zoom video interviews were set up to collect the research data. Nine different interviews with participants who attended student ministries in five different states were conducted. The researcher used the native Zoom recording feature for each of the nine interviews. The recording feature was helpful because it captured both audio and video files of the recording.

The recording process went smoothly at the aggregate level. Poor internet connection occasionally prohibited the researcher from understanding what the participant was saying or obscured the participant's audio communication. The researcher asked participants to repeat themselves on at least one occasion so that the intent of their response could be understood.

The researcher followed the Semi-structured Interview Guide (Appendix L). He would occasionally ask follow-up or clarifying questions. On at least one occasion, the participant was able to expound on a topic that was supposed to be addressed later on in the interview. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher the flexibility to increase understanding of the participant's experience. Additionally, the researcher often added in a final question that asked the participants what advice they would give to seniors about to graduate high school. This question was insightful and benefited the research study, despite it not being included in the semi-structured interview guide. This question helped the researcher understand young adult's experience with the phenomena of post-student ministry experience by giving them an open-ended opportunity to respond.

After the audio and video data was collected, it was saved and eventually stored on a password protected USB drive. The files were uploaded to the cloud transcript service called Otter. The researcher used the Otter service to review transcripts and assign speaker labels to the transcripts. Participant's pseudonyms and the researcher's name were the labels for the two speakers. Each transcript was read three times before the transcript went through the open coding process. The researcher occasionally made notes about the transcripts during this process.

This researcher placed great importance and emphasis on the accuracy of data reporting. To make sure the data was accurately understood, the researcher listened to the actual audio recording during the data coding process. As data was put into the codebook, the researcher often listened to the audio file alongside the transcript to make sure the data was accurately entered. This verification was particularly important when word-for-word quotations were put into the codebook. The researcher determined that this method of checking the transcript with the raw data before coding was more efficient than making sure each transcript itself was completely accurate. This researcher estimates that Otter is 95% accurate in transcribing the interview's words and matching speakers to their words. Several of these inaccuracies were corrected as the data was put into the codebook, which increased the transcript's accuracy well above the estimated 95%. Through this process, the researcher assured that the data put into the codebook to be analyzed was accurate and reflected the researcher participant's answers. Any typos from data in the codebook were corrected if they were placed in this dissertation. Additionally, if transcript data is requested by other researchers, this study's researcher is committed to reviewing the transcript data again to ensure pseudonyms have replaced actual names and church names and that there are no typos that obscure the data's meaning.

After the interview audio files were placed into the Otter transcription software, the coding process began. In open coding, “the data are divided into segments and then scrutinized for commonalities that reflect general categories or themes” (Leedy et al., 2019). Data is broken up into “discrete parts” and then labeled with codes (*How To Do Open, Axial, & Selective Coding in Grounded Theory — Delve*, n.d.). This research project’s codebook included 395 discrete parts that were coded. The participants’ pseudonyms were used in the codebook. Pseudonyms were also given for the names of the participant’s churches. Most pieces of data were assigned to a corresponding interview question. Each interview question, except for the first five questions, had a corresponding research question.

After the data went through the open coding process, axial codes were selected. In axial coding, core categories emerging from the open codes are selected (Leedy et al., 2019). These core categories serve “as an *axis* around which certain other categories appear to revolve in some way” (2019). After the axial coding process, an over-arching selective code was determined to describe “*the* core concept in the phenomenon, and a theory is developed based on this concept and its interrelationships with other categories” (2019).

### **Demographic and Sample Data**

To establish a research participant sample, ministry leaders and student ministry practitioners were contacted and informed about the study. Over 40 emails about the study were sent out to practitioners (Appendix D). Some of these were personal friends and acquaintances, but several were “cold contacts” or friends of friends. The researcher posted in student ministry social media groups in an effort to find participants about the study. Additionally, the researcher used the approved IRB social media post in an effort to recruit participants directly (Appendix H).

Through these efforts, participants were referred to the researcher. The researcher's use of a Participant Contact Questionnaire (Appendix J) helped put all the referrals in one place. Additionally, use of this questionnaire was the initial step in screening participant's eligibility in the study.

Participants were contacted directly through a recruitment email (Appendix F). The email included a link to the Participant Questionnaire, which provided the researcher with cell phone numbers and also required the potential participant to verify their eligibility of study criteria (Appendix K). The study criteria listed in the Participant Questionnaire included the following questions:

1. Will you be under the age of 22 on December 31, 2021?
2. Were you involved as a student in a student ministry at a Southern Baptist Church with an average attendance of 250 or greater?
3. On average, how many times did you attend student ministry activities per month?
4. Are you currently involved in a local church?
5. On average, how many times do you attend your current church per month?
6. Do you have access to a webcam and microphone to conduct a web interview through Microsoft Teams or Zoom?
7. When you were a teenager, what churches did you participate in student ministry?

Furthermore, a copy of or link to the Participant Consent Form was included in these emails (Appendix C).

After potential participants filled out the Participant Questionnaire and confirmed their eligibility, the researcher contacted them through text message. This text sought to set up a time for a Zoom video interview. Once an interview time was agreed upon, the researcher sent each participant a link to the Zoom meeting as well as a link to fill out the Participant Consent Form (Appendix C). The Consent Form included information about study criteria, the purpose of the study, interview length and protocol, benefits and risks of the study, and information about

confidentiality. Participants were also assured that study participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

The research population consisted of nine individuals who participated in the student ministries of churches in five different states.

**Table 3**  
*Participant Profile and Demographics*

Name	Gender	College Type	Church during Student Ministry Size (estimate)	Church during Student Ministry State	Attending a different church than one at high school graduation?	Age at Salvation (approximate)
Eric	Male	Private/Christian	500	AR	No	7 (made profession but became real during first year in student ministry)
Jennifer	Female	Public	500	TN	No	14
Kelsey	Female	Public	300	AR	Yes	7
Derek	Male	Private/Christian	200	AL	Yes	5
Trent	Male	Public	500	TN	Yes	8
John	Male	Public	4,000	GA	No	6
Hannah	Female	Private/Christian	15,000	TX	Yes	6
Caleb	Male	Private/Christian	300	TX	Yes	8
Mary	Female	Private/Christian	15,000	TX	Yes	11

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

The data analysis of the interviews yielded 395 pieces of data. These 395 pieces of data yielded 134 open codes. After the open coding process was complete, five axial codes emerged from the data set: church, life-change, serving, relationships, and community. After the axial

coding process was complete, one selective code emerged that describes the overall phenomena that was studied: intentionality.

All data was collected through the interview protocol. The semi-structured interview guide provided the framework for data collection (Appendix L). To increase the credibility of the interview guide instrument, a panel of student ministry professionals were employed to review the questions (Appendix B). The instrument began with five initial questions about the participant's demographics, background, and church participation. These five questions included:

1. What is your current job or educational pursuit?
2. When did you get saved? When did you place your faith in Christ?
3. What church did you participate in during your teenage years? Please describe what the church was like.
4. How often did you attend church and your student ministry during your teenage years? Were there times that you attended more than others? If so, why?
5. Did you have to find a different church after high school graduation? What did you look for in this new church after you graduated?

The responses to these questions were recorded in the codebook. After the five initial questions were asked, interview questions directly corresponding to the five research questions were asked.

### **Research Question 1**

*What are the most common aspects of student ministry that young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church, cite as the reasons they stayed active in church after high school graduation?*

This research question is open-ended with the intention of finding which aspects of student ministry young adults cite as being beneficial to their retention in church after high school graduation. This research question had four corresponding interview questions in an effort to better understand the phenomena of post-student ministry retention. From this research question, themes such as relationships with adults, service opportunities, and discipleship emerged as consequential in encouraging post-student ministry church involvement.

### *Relationships with Adults*

The research participants frequently cited relationships with adults as the conduits by which they were encouraged to stay in church and developed the habit of church attendance. A range of relationships with different kinds adults were cited: parents, student pastors, student volunteers, and other church family.

Although the influence of parents is not part of the direct focus of this study, parents were frequently cited as influential in young adult's decision to stay in church. Eric, who grew up at a mid-sized church and attends a small Christian university, said his parents were a primary factor in his habitual church attendance. When reflecting about his church involvement as a teenager, he stated that "the whole time, I was going to church all the time." Eric said that there were three factors that helped him stay involved in church: "the Lord developing habits in me personally," "spiritual disciplines," and "relationships with adults and others."

Surprisingly, John said his church involvement is more of an instinct than making a specific decision to stay in church. He said that his parents had a large influence on his church involvement being an instinct in his life. Additionally, parents provide built-in accountability for his church attendance since he lives at home as a young adult.

Caleb said that the "foundation" his family laid kept him involved in church. The influence of parents and family sometimes manifested itself in intentional conversations about retention. Kelsey remembers her parents having an intentional conversation with her about going to church after high school graduation. She remembers other people's intentional conversations about staying in church (i.e. her student pastor) and perhaps with a hint of fear said she didn't want to end up on a "bad path" in life.

Derek said his mother and father's spiritual influence and prayers "kept (him) going." Derek cited family relationships above student ministry experience when thinking about factors that led to his post-student ministry retention. Since Derek's father is a pastor, his desire to support his dad's ministry led to him staying in his father's church even when he thought about going to another church. Derek also indicated that community kept him retained in church and that he knew of the benefit that church involvement provides. He knew that people at his church cared about him.

Jennifer, a senior at a public university, cites "the people" of the church as keeping her involved in church after high school graduation. Her church family is like a home to her and she says "it felt easy going back." She cited her two student pastors as people who she connected with. Jennifer said that her decision to stay in church was active and not passive. She said she made a choice to be involved. Trent, who grew up at the same church as Jennifer, said that the adult volunteers in his student ministry were there for him when he needed someone to talk to. He seemed encouraged by their church involvement when he said "just seeing that they were in the same position when we were kids, and that they grew up in the church . . . and that they're still going to church" showed him that "Oh, they did it. I can do it."

Thus, the data gathered from the interviews demonstrated that different kinds of relationships influence young adult's church involvement after high school graduation. Parents, interns, student pastors, and adult volunteers are each mentioned as contributors that encourage church involvement.

### ***Service Opportunities***

Service opportunities also emerged as an aspect of student ministry that encouraged post-graduation church attendance and involvement. Trent served on his student ministry's worship

team. At the time of the interview, Trent was just a few weeks into his freshman semester, so he had not had the opportunity to start serving in a local church. However, he has begun to look for ways to serve at the new church he has been attending. With confidence and excitement in his voice, he said “I’ve already seen opportunities that were kind of similar to my church, that I have seen that I’m like, oh, I can do that. I did that in church at home, oh, I can do that.” These opportunities include the worship and media teams, which are areas of service where Trent served during his teenage years.

Similarly, Mary looked back on her student ministry experience and said that the “thing (she) remembers most is like the opportunities we were given to serve.” She remembers serving by setting up chairs for her church activities and teaching a small Bible study group. Similar to Trent, Mary’s service opportunities was related to her post-graduation church selection. In college, she said she desired a church where she could serve and “just go and like put up chairs or put chairs away.” Likewise, Eric was given opportunities to serve as a teenager, like play guitar on the church worship team. Since he was serving in this way every Sunday, he was always at church. It was evident to the researcher that this opportunity to serve his church made Eric feel valued and connected to his faith community.

### ***Discipleship***

With warm memories, Trent looked back and remembered “you could see, like the discipleship, like actually around us in the youth group . . . we were constantly growing.” For Eric, “relationships” and “spiritual growth” were factors that contributed to his church involvement. These relationships and spiritual growth happened in the context of discipleship relationships. An adult leader at his church encouraged him to join a discipleship group, where he practiced spiritual disciplines like journaling and Bible study. This adult leader was a college

student who served as a church intern. Eric said that “his love and fervor for the Lord was huge for me.” Eric said with confidence that this experience was “really big time, spiritual growth for me.” His discipleship group happened organically by the college intern asking him to be a part of it; the discipleship group was not a student ministry-wide ordained activity.

Mary said “being discipled and poured into by people” is what kept her involved in church. After her girl’s minister started discipling her, her spiritual growth “soared.” The passion in her voice indicates the importance that discipleship and spiritual growth have in her life. Hannah, who attended another campus of the same church as Mary, remembers the student ministry interns who discipled and invested in her. From “late night conversations” about ministry and missions to coffee and Bible study, these discipleship relationships that occurred in her student ministry had a profound impact on Mary’s faith development. Now, as a college student herself, she seeks out younger students to mentor.

### ***Intentionality***

Mary’s church helped her understand the importance of finding a church after her graduation; this importance was followed-up by a podcast Mary listened to called “Becoming Something” that gave young adults practical advice for finding and selecting a church to attend. Kelsey also said that people were intentional about telling her to stay involved in church. Jennifer said her decision to stay in church was an active decision. She said “it wasn’t something I was like if it happens, it happens, that kinda thing. I was choosing to stay there.”

### ***Habits***

Hannah related that making the decision to stay in church was not much of a process. She said with certainty that, for her, it was more of a question of “where am I going to church now?” than “am I going to church?” For Eric, he felt like his church involvement was not something

that he necessarily processed; he said “it was just going to happen.” He cited “habits” as keeping him involved in church. John said that it would be strange for him not to attend church. When asked how he made the decision to stay connected to church, John said “I don’t even know that I would consider it making a decision” and that he “never thought about not going to church.” He said that staying involved in church was more of an “instinct.”

### ***Summary of Research Question 1***

Young adults who are currently active in church cite relationships with adults as determining factors that encourage them to stay involved in church after high school graduation. These adult relationships frequently happen in the context of the student ministry. Participants cite Bible study leaders, mentors, student pastors, and ministry interns as important to them.

Student ministry also provides the context where young adults serve in the local church. Young adults in this study placed a great emphasis on their service opportunities in the local church. Similarly, young adults also place a high level of importance on discipleship and spiritual growth, which often happens in the context of student ministry. Intentional preparation for church attendance after the milestone of high school graduation is also cited as a contributing factor to the church attendance of young adults. Young adults also believe that habits formed during their teenage years kept them involved in church.

### **Research Question 2**

*How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry experience as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?*

This research question focuses specifically on the value of student ministry in relation to young adult’s church involvement. This research question is connected to Research Question 1

and seeks to dive deeper into examining the relationship between student ministry experience and retention. This research question had five corresponding interview questions on the Semi-structured Interview Guide (Appendix L). The study of this research question revealed that for the most part, young adults greatly value their former student ministry experience. They cite relationships, spiritual formation, discipleship, and student ministry activities as factors of student ministry that were beneficial to them.

### ***Relationships***

Caleb, whose father is a music pastor, remembers his first student pastor's involvement with students even before Caleb entered the student ministry. He describes his student pastor as "very personal" and "invested" in students. He remembers conversations that he had with this student pastor as they rode in the car together. Caleb's parents were close to this student pastor and his wife. After this student pastor transitioned to a new place of ministry, another student pastor began to serve who was less relational than the first student pastor. Caleb believes that his first student pastor made more of an impact because of his relationships with students. Eric also valued his student pastor by saying honestly that pastors can be "intimidating" but that his student pastors were not as intimidating. Thus, he approached his student pastor with spiritual questions.

Jennifer believed her student ministry experience was "really valuable." Her student ministry gave her community that she believes is important since the teenage years can be difficult. She said "you also kind of had that support system to where you didn't really feel like isolated or alone or excluded." She said she still talks to people from her first student ministry trip and that she has relationships that last years. John also cited the value of the community that

church provides: “if you just stop going to church . . . then you kind of lack that community or the community you make is not the best.”

When asked how his student ministry helped influence his decision to stay in church, Trent said that having many of his friends in the student ministry encouraged him. He related that bonding with others in Christ who were his age influenced him so that when he is in college he desires to find others “who are in the same boat” as he is. Likewise, his student ministry had an intern program that helped college-aged young adults serve in the student ministry. Trent believes that it was good to talk to these interns because they were close to his age. Trent said he bonded with an adult leader at camp and feels that he can speak and “confide” in him. Trent also cited the influence that his student pastors had on his life. Thus, relationships with peers, college interns, adult leaders, and student pastors were all beneficial to Trent.

### ***Spiritual Formation***

Trent passionately emphasized the importance of student ministry by saying “it was extremely valuable.” He made many memories as a teenager in the context of his student ministry. He remembers some of these memories as comical as well as some that are “deeply spiritual, and like changed, like my whole, like, spiritual path and like turning a different direction, the direction I needed to go.” Thus, student ministry influenced his spiritual growth in a significant way.

Eric placed a high value on the importance of student ministry when he said “God used . . . the student ministry . . . to help me grow closer to Him and stay in church.” Eric believes that the student ministry helped encourage his spiritual growth as a teenager in a way that the church should be doing for all ages. Kelsey said her student ministry was “super valuable” and that she grew spiritually in her student ministry.

### ***Discipleship***

Eric said his student ministry experience was “very valuable.” He believes the student ministry helped him study the Bible. His study ministry was the context by which his “D-Group” (small discipleship group) was formed. Also, spiritual disciplines like journaling were formed in the overall context of the student ministry.

Mary emphasized that her student ministry was “incredibly valuable.” She was given teaching responsibilities as a student and believes that the most valuable thing her student ministry did was “pour into” her and provide one-on-one coaching for bible study, application, and teaching. Mary was equipped and encouraged to teach other students by relationships with adults who were discipling her. After she taught for two semesters and was discipled, she “fell in love with it”. She saw friends get saved and prayed with them. She said “in my student ministry, I was so clearly able to see God work and God move.”

### ***Student Ministry Activities***

When speaking with the research participants, it often difficult to separate student ministry activities from other factors cited as beneficial to post-student ministry retention because student ministry activities are frequently the context by which relationships, discipleship, and spiritual formation occur. The research participants cited many student ministry activities as important to them. Kelsey said camp was beneficial in helping her become the young adult that she is today. She made a spiritual decision at camp, and believes if she had not gone to camp, that decision would not have been made. Additionally, her student ministry gave her the opportunity to participate in mission trips, which contributed to her call to missions after she finishes her education.

Hannah said her student ministry is “fundamental” in her personal story of what God has done in her life. Hannah’s student ministry gave her an opportunity to go to Student Leadership University, where she learned more about apologetics. This background in apologetics enabled her to witness and converse with students in her high school after a tragedy occurred.

### ***Summary of Research Question 2***

Hannah passionately emphasized that her student ministry experience was “hugely, hugely valuable.” She said she would not be the person she is today and likely would not have her call to ministry without her student ministry experience. Many research participants placed similar value on the role of student ministry in their faith formation and post-student ministry involvement in church. Relationships with adult leaders, college interns, peers, and student pastors are all viewed as important. Discipleship groups and spiritual growth opportunities also mattered to some of the research participants. Additionally, student ministry activities were memorable to some of the research participants. These activities provided the context for relationships to grow and spiritual growth to occur.

### **Research Question 3**

*How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their relationships with adults as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?*

Research Question 3 focuses specifically on the influence of relationships on the church involvement of young adults. This research question was related to the Research Question 1, which was the broadest research question of the study. This research question had four corresponding interview questions in the Semi-structured Interview Guide (Appendix L). Exploring this research question revealed not only why relationships are beneficial for retention,

but how these relationships actually occurred within the context of student ministry and the overall church. Participants often described how these relationships grew and developed, providing further insight for strengthening church involvement post-graduation. Themes that emerged from this research question are a variety of relationships, emulation, mentoring relationships, and multigenerational relationships.

### ***Variety of Relationships***

Eric remembered that his relationships with adults varied in depth and that “some were more personal” than others. He remembers some dynamics that were “they were a teacher and I was a student” as well as some “more personal” relationships with adults that he would “hang out” with. John remembers the close relationships he had with adults. He remembers the variety of relationships well: “I had different people that I would go to for different things.” Research participants described relationships with student pastors, adult Bible study leaders, disciplers and mentors, college-aged interns, and other student ministry staff as influential parts of their student ministry experience.

### ***Emulation***

John said that he wants to be like some of the adults he related with during his student ministry experience. He linked this emulation to their church involvement: “their involvement in church is, I think, (what) probably contributes to their character. And so because I want to be like them, I also want to emulate that and contribute to church.” Similarly, Caleb described how his previous student ministry experience influences his current service in the student ministry of another church. When the researcher followed-up with a question and asked him if he wanted to be the person for other students that his student pastor was for him, Caleb responded confidently by saying “exactly.” Hannah described a similar dynamic when reflecting on the influence that

discipling relationships have on her. She now invests in other college students in the same way that student ministry interns invested in her during her time in student ministry.

### ***Mentoring Relationships***

Jennifer said that her student pastor became a “mentor,” “example,” and “leader” to her. She knew she could rely on him for “advice” and “prayer.” Eric remembers a college student who turned into his spiritual mentor through a discipleship group. He said that this mentor’s “love and fervor for the Lord was huge for me.” Caleb reflected on his time in student ministry and described imperfect dynamics like some people not being mentored or disciplined. It was obvious to the researcher that Caleb believed in the importance of mentoring.

### ***Multigenerational Relationships***

Derek said that he loves interacting with people and growing up as a pastor’s child provided opportunities for him to interact with adults. He said that he found it easy to interact with people who were “way older” than him. Conversely, Kelsey described herself as shy and said she would not interact with adults unless they approached her first. However, Kelsey said that she knew people in her church genuinely cared about her and that adults from her former church will sometimes reach out and ask her to serve with church activities, like Disciple Now (D-Now) weekends (student ministry events that frequently use college students as small group leaders).

John remembers his dad encouraging him to talk to adults and get outside of his comfort zone in social settings. John’s mentor was the oldest adult serving in his student ministry at the time. John described this man’s “depth” and “wisdom.” The gap in years between John and his mentor was significant; but the interviewer easily understood that the depth of John’s relationship with this mentor had a great influence on his life.

Eric's multigenerational relationships were important to him. He values the wisdom that these older believers gave to him. Furthermore, Eric did not want these relationships did not end at graduation; he is about to start a discipleship group with an 83-year-old and a 79-year-old.

### ***Summary of Research Question 3***

This research question revealed that a variety of relationships in a student ministry have an impact on young adults when they reflect on their prior student-ministry experience. Student pastors, Bible study leaders, discipleship group mentors, college interns, camp counselors, and other student ministry staff can all be vital parts of teenager's spiritual formation. These relationships were often multi-generational and the age gap between teenagers and the adults varied. These relationships frequently take on the form of mentoring relationships, which are seen as beneficial by young adults. Additionally, some young adults in the study cited their desire to emulate the example of the adults they knew during their time in student ministry. Participants often cited relationships with adults in their answers to questions corresponding to the first two research questions of this study. The fact that participants mentioned relationships before relationships were brought up by the researcher demonstrates the importance that some participants placed on their relationships with adults.

### **Research Question 4**

*How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry's focus discipleship it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?*

This research question focused on discipleship and the relationship that discipleship within the context of previous student ministry experience has with young adult's church current church involvement. This research question had three corresponding interview questions on the

Semi-structured Interview Guide (Appendix L). Part of the goal of this research question was to determine how discipleship helped young adults grow as a follower of Christ. Additionally, this question sought to understand how young adults remembered discipleship being presented in the context of their student ministry. A possible relationship between discipleship and young adult's decision to stay involved in church after high school graduation was also explored. An emphasis on discipleship groups, a desire for lifelong discipleship, and the importance of apologetics are three themes emerging from the exploration of this research question.

### ***Emphasis on Discipleship Groups***

Eric stated that his "D-Group" (small discipleship group) showed him what discipleship looks like and helped him form spiritual habits. Although Derek said his student ministry did not include discipleship, he was in discipleship groups with other people who helped bolster his spiritual growth. He stated that he led a "D-Group" on his own and placed an importance on the relationships that are formed through discipleship groups. This "D-Group" was with his music minister's son and a friend from another church. They went through Romans together and had accountability. It was evident that this discipleship group encouraged Eric's faith.

Mary said the importance of discipleship was presented in her student ministry. She was intentionally discipled by her girl's minister. For three years, they met together and went through a book of the Bible. This discipleship was beneficial to Mary's faith formation. In her student ministry, Mary remembers that students could sign up for discipleship at the start of each school year.

### ***Desire for Lifelong Discipleship***

It was clear that Eric did not want the spiritual growth he experienced during his student ministry years to end after high school graduation. Eric linked his spiritual disciplines, habits,

and “D-Group” participation to his church involvement. He doesn’t want his spiritual growth to stop; he wants to continue the spiritual growth. He believes in discipleship so much that he is about to start a “D-Group” with an 83-year-old and a 79-year-old. Eric’s student ministry helped encourage spiritual habits that last long after high school graduation.

Mary made it clear that: “discipleship is one of the biggest reasons that I continued in my faith and continue wanting to go to a church and wanting to find that community.” The discipleship that her student ministry provided paved the way for her to select a church where she could find community and a place to serve after she began college.

### ***Importance of Apologetics***

Hannah said that her student ministry is “fundamental” in her testimony. Shortly after saying this, she started talking about her love for apologetics, which began in the eighth grade. She attended Student Leadership University, which is a program that encourages discipleship, leadership, and apologetics. The speaker she heard at Student Leadership University is a world-renowned apologist. Mary believes this exposure to apologetics strengthened “the intellectual side” of her faith. She emphasized “I *know* that I believe (Christianity) but there are reasons why I can believe this.” When an unexpected high school schedule change placed her on the debate team, she began to interact with Atheists, Hindus, and Muslims. Her student ministry training in apologetics enabled her to interact with these different beliefs and provide a witness for her own faith.

After a debate team member committed suicide, Hannah said that her team was devastated. Her student ministry helped her minister to her hurting teammates. About two weeks later, two of her debate teammates wanted to have a debate about the existence of God. The training that her student ministry provided in apologetics helped Hannah give an argument for

the existence of God. Her student ministry sent interns from the church to help serve the team dinner. In this way, Hannah was able to use her training in apologetics to live out her faith.

Mary, who attended another campus of the same church that Hannah attended as a teenager, said that her student ministry had a small book on discipleship that they encouraged students to go through. This book included an element of apologetics.

Kelsey remembers D-Now weekends that were focused on apologetics. This apologetics training helped her understand the reasons why she believed what she believed as well as gave reasons supporting the reliability of the Bible. She said convincingly that the focus on apologetics through these events were “really cool.” She also went through a book on apologetics with her student pastor.

#### ***Summary of Research Question 4***

Exploring this research question revealed that discipleship is a common factor in encouraging post-student ministry church attendance and involvement. Small discipleship groups, or “D-Groups”, often provide the context where relationships are built and spiritual growth occurs. Young adults who were a part of intentional life-on-life discipleship as a teenager do not want that spiritual growth to end at graduation. Instead, the discipleship spark provided during their teenage years is often fanned into a flame that desires a lifetime of spiritual growth and discipleship. Furthermore, emphasizing apologetics alongside discipleship seems to be beneficial in faith formation. Participants valued the opportunities they were given to explore the reasons behind their faith and spiritual beliefs. Participants often related the value of discipleship in their answers to the interview questions that corresponded to Research Questions 1 and 2. This citation of discipleship before it was brought up in the interview guide undergirds the emphasis that some participants placed on spiritual growth and discipleship.

**Research Question 5**

*How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of student ministry programming as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?*

This research question focused on the special events, ongoing activities, and other programming that make up a student ministry's calendar. The purpose of this question was to determine if these events and activities are related to young adult's experience of staying in church after high school graduation. Furthermore, if a relationship between activities and retention exists, this question sought to determine what specific aspects of student ministry programming are beneficial to encourage church involvement after graduation. This research question had four corresponding interview questions in the Semi-structured Interview Guide (Appendix L). Examining this research question led to participants citing several special events and ongoing activities that were beneficial in their spiritual growth and encouraged their church attendance post-graduation. These events and activities included summer camp, Discipleship Now (D-Now) weekends, mission trips, Sunday morning Bible studies, small discipleship groups, and student ministry weekly worship services.

***Summer Camp***

Camp was cited throughout the semi-structured interview guide and not just at the end when specific questions were asked about special events. It is clear that young adults value their camp experience based on the intensity of their responses and the frequency that camps are mentioned. Mary remembers the life-change she saw at summer camp. Her student ministry went to the beach every summer and she says that experience "was really cool."

Trent related that camp was powerful and helped him grow closer to God. He believes that the different environment that camp provided got him used to different church environments in college. Eric also remembers the spiritual growth he experienced by participating in student ministry camps. He could see “salvation taking place” and benefitted from setting distractions aside through his camp participation.

Caleb remembers how camp helped him explore his call to ministry and learn about how he could serve the local church. He attended a one-week camp for worship leaders called “Worship U.” This camp enabled him to serve with instruments, sing, and learn about technology in ministry. He was also able to practice with the worship band. This experience was beneficial for his spiritual growth.

### ***D-Now Weekends***

Disciple Now, or D-Now, weekends seemed to be a good student ministry memory among the research participants. These weekends can be described as summer camp in a weekend. Students frequently stay at church member’s homes, participate in student worship and recreation, and are led in small groups by college leaders. Kelsey said that D-Now weekends and camps happened on a yearly basis in her student ministry. She said events helped her growth the most. She believes that different locations and speakers helped her “pay attention a little better.” The themes behind camps and D-Nows helped her too.

John remembers his church’s D-Now weekends and said “the only time I ever heard the word discipleship was D-Now.” He has recently begun to fully understand discipleship. Caleb remembers his student ministry’s D-Now weekends and that there were new people teaching and a different format. These small groups during the D-Now weekend helped his spiritual growth.

### ***Mission Trips***

Mary said that mission trips got her outside of her comfort zone. Through these types of events and others, she was able to build relationships with other people in her church. She remembers watching her student pastor share his faith on a mission trip and that his passion for evangelism was evident.

Kelsey's student mission trips also helped her get out of her comfort zone. During a mission trip to Chicago, she led a Bible study at a Kid's Camp Vacation Bible School, even though she had never previously served in that way. She loved going on mission trips and serving. She links her involvement in mission trips to a calling to missions after her education is completed.

### ***Bible Studies and Discipleship Groups***

Kelsey said that her student ministry's ongoing activities "ingrained in me an importance of being in church." For the research participants who were interviewed, these ongoing activities often included bible studies. Mary was given teaching responsibilities in her student ministry's bible study groups program. God used this area of service to help her grow spiritually. Eric was involved in small discipleship groups as well as Sunday school-type Bible studies. He remembers interacting with his Sunday school teachers. The classes at his church were generally divided by age and gender. Additionally, Eric said that about half of his student ministry was involved in small discipleship groups.

John's student ministry offered discussion-based Life Groups on Sunday mornings. These life groups gave him the opportunity to bond with a group leader who would frequently tell his group about the need to remain in church. This teacher also would cite retention statistics

to his group of middle school boys and encourage them to develop a pattern of church involvement that lasted after high school graduation.

### ***Student Ministry Worship Services***

Trent's experience with student worship services was pivotal in his spiritual development. He remembered attending a Wednesday night service as an eighth grader and being challenged by the student pastor to follow Christ and be obedient to him. Kelsey's student ministry had a weekly worship service with a student-led praise team. She fondly remembers going out to eat afterwards with her friends. Caleb remembers his student ministry worship service with everyone together on Wednesday nights. When hearing about the participant's experience with student ministry worship services, the researcher got the impression that the totality of the services throughout years of student ministry involvement was usually a stronger memory than any one specific worship experience. Student worship services were described as giving opportunities for relationships and community to form. Furthermore, student worship gave opportunities to serve in the band and hear messages from God's Word.

### ***Summary of Research Question 5***

The last research question revealed the special events and ongoing activities that are cited by research participants as beneficial to their faith formation. It was obvious that special events like camp and D-Nows were important for making spiritual decisions. Young adults valued getting out of the routine so they could focus on their faith. Similarly, ongoing activities like Bible study classes, small discipleship groups, and student worship services helped provide the context where relationships were formed over time. Additionally, these ongoing activities provided students with a place to serve and grow in their leadership development. Spiritual disciplines like Bible study and accountability were also made possible through these ongoing

activities. Study participants often cited specific events and ongoing activities in their answers to the interview questions corresponding to Research Questions 1 and 2, demonstrating the value of these experiences in their faith development.

### **Evaluation of the Research Design**

The semi-structured interviews were well-suited to understanding the phenomena of young adult's church attendance after high school graduation. Research participants shared valuable insights about their student ministry experience.

The length the interviews varied from thirty minutes to one hour. Some participants were more conversational than others, a dynamic that the researcher attributes primarily to their personality differences. The researcher would frequently ask "is there anything else you want to add?" at the end of the interview. Sometimes this question yielded a few more insights into the research participant's experience, while other times the research participant did not wish to add anything else to the interview.

The researcher believes that the review of the Semi-Structured Interview Guide by the panel of student ministry professionals strengthened the effectiveness of the interview guide. The questions sometimes overlapped each other, which helped the researcher go deeper into the participant's experience and arrive at the essence of the phenomena of post-student ministry church attendance.

After questions about research participant's demographics, the Semi-Structured Interview Guide began with questions based on Research Question 1, which was the most open-ended and overarching of all the research questions. Frequently, students would provide answers in Research Question 1 and 2 that linked relationships, discipleship, and events to their post-graduation church involvement, even though these three factors were planned by the researcher

to be examined in Research Questions 3-5. The fact that the participants cited these factors as beneficial before the Semi-structured Interview Guide examined them strengthens the argument that relationships, discipleship, and events can encourage post-student ministry church involvement. Furthermore, this dynamic enhances the credibility of the research design because it demonstrates that the participants were not led in one particular direction that may have been unrelated to their actual experience. If the research design began with questions about relationships, discipleship, and camp instead of being more open-ended at the beginning, this dynamic could not have been observed and the research study would not have been as credible.

Additionally, the aspect of confidentiality in the study likely encouraged more openness and authentic answers from the research participants. The research participants seemed to be open, and often enthusiastic about sharing their student ministry experience. Although he knew the study was focused on student ministry experience, Derek felt open enough to say “it wasn’t my youth ministry that kept me in church.” Sadly, Derek also stated that “I never had a great experience with student ministry, honestly.” This honesty encouraged the researcher because it revealed that participants were allowed to share their actual experience and that any pro-student ministry bias was successfully minimized within the study.

When evaluating the research methodology, this researcher recognizes that more questions could be asked about relationships, such as whether these relationships grew because of participation in the student ministry or because of participation in the overall church. Accordingly, this study could have benefitted from a differentiation between relationships with adult student ministry volunteers and other relationships with different generations of adults in the overall church. Such a differentiation in the research questions and interview questions would have enabled the research to study and analyze each respective category of relationships and

evaluate any difference the two types of relationships' perception and influence on post-student ministry retention.

Furthermore, this study could have benefitted from additional questions about the size of the participant's former student ministries as well as the actual number of church attendees in participant's former churches that they attended during their teenage years. The participant selection process included a question verifying that the participants were involved in churches with 200 or more people, but custom questions about student ministry size and church size would have allowed for a clearer picture of the young adult's church experience prior to high school graduation.

This study could have also benefitted from preliminary questions about the type of high school that participants attended: public, private, or home-school. Although this information often came up naturally in the semi-structured interviews, a formal collection of this data would have been helpful.

A focus group or survey approach to collecting data may have yielded additional insights to the post-student ministry phenomena, but the semi-structured interview guide seemed to be flexible for participants to respond according to their personal experiences.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

### Overview

This chapter will use draw conclusions from the data while interacting with the precedent literature. This chapter includes the purpose of the research project and lists the research questions. Furthermore, research conclusions, implications, and applications are presented. The limitations of this study, suggestions for further research, and a closing summary are also detailed.

### Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the personal perceptions and experiences that led to post-student ministry retention among young adults age 18-22 who participated in student ministry at a Southern Baptist church with an average attendance of 200 or greater.

### Research Questions

**RQ1.** What are the most common aspects of student ministry that young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church, cite as the reasons they stayed active in church after high school graduation?

**RQ2.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry experience as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ3.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their relationships with adults as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ4.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry's focus on discipleship as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ5.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of student ministry programming as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

## **Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications**

This section will provide conclusions to each research question. Theological and theoretical implications, research limitations, suggestions for further research, and a summary of the findings are also included.

### **Research Conclusions**

This research study found that multigenerational relationships, intentional discipleship, and service opportunities are highly linked to post-student ministry retention. When analyzing the participants' experiences and what they cite as beneficial for encouraging them to stay in church, the researcher selected one over-arching word to describe the phenomena: intentionality. Churches who are intentional about ministry to students can encourage students to have a lifetime of church involvement.

Participants provided vivid and detailed insight into their student ministry experience and offered many interesting answers about what influenced their post-high school graduation church involvement. The subsequent section details different conclusions that emerge from each of the five research questions. The themes emerging from each research question are identified in italics in their respective section.

### **Conclusions for Research Questions**

#### ***Conclusion to RQ1.***

*What are the most common aspects of student ministry that young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church, cite as the reasons they stayed active in church after high school graduation?*

This foundational research question sought to understand the factors and dynamics of student ministry that young adults cite as beneficial for their post-high school graduation church

involvement. Overwhelmingly, this research study found that *relationships with adults* emerged as a primary factor that influences church involvement. Trent was encouraged by the church involvement of the adult volunteers he saw in the student ministry:

They just sit on the back couches on Wednesday nights and just be there for kids. Like it was, you know, teenagers, they go through that stage where like talking to mom and dad is weird. So just having another adult in the room that like, you know, you can go talk to you and listens to you. And also to see people that are like, older than you that are being like, lights of God, I feel like it's a good thing. Because like, you don't be "Oh, I'm in the youth room. There's no adults in here, which means that after youth and when I graduate, I really don't have to go to church." So but just seeing that they were in the same position we were when we were kids, and that they grew up in the church in the youth group and that they're still going to church. It kind of gave me like, Oh, they did it. I can do it.

Trent's experience was similar to several of the other research participants. The dynamic and importance of adult relationships concurs with Lifeway Research's study that found "the investment of a variety of adults voices speaking into students' lives as one of the most influential aspects of their spiritual development" (Trueblood, 2019, p. 25). The same Lifeway Research study demonstrated that "one of the most clear-cut solutions in the whole of our research" is that "the more adults investing in an individual student's life, the less likely the student is to walk away from church after graduation" (p. 27).

Lifeway's research was conducted on young adults with a Protestant background. The current study focused young adults with backgrounds in Southern Baptist churches. This researcher concludes that relationships with adults seems to be as important for Southern Baptist students as these relationships are for students of other denominational backgrounds. Furthermore, this study's qualitative phenomenological focus on understanding the actual experience of young adults confirms what the quantitative study data reveals: relationships with adults are of utmost importance for faith formation and church retention.

Through Research Question 1, the researcher determined that young adults also place a high level of importance on *service opportunities*. Research participants cited their participation in service opportunities like teaching, playing in a worship band, and going on mission trips. Eric remembers “serving on the worship team” and “playing guitar every Sunday.” He said this *service opportunity* played a role in his church involvement. Kesley said “I really enjoyed going on all the mission trips. And so I knew that like, being church, you got those opportunities, and you've got to go and like serve other communities. And so that was part of why I wanted to get involved in a good church during college.” To many of the study participants, service opportunities helped foster community, encourage spiritual growth, and form habits of church involvement that lasted after high school graduation.

This study grouped students’ service inside the local church through worship and teaching with service opportunities outside the church like mission projects and trips. This mission trip participation appears to correlate with Barna’s 2016 research that revealed that nine out of ten student pastors say that their ministry participates in service projects and activities (Barna, 2016, p. 63). Although this aspect of Barna’s research appears to focus on service opportunities in the community rather than giving teenagers opportunities to serve inside the church, it reveals that giving students an opportunity to serve is a common aspect of student ministry programming.

This study also found that *discipleship* and spiritual growth contribute to young adult’s church involvement. This growth often occurs in the context of a mentoring or discipling relationship with a trusted adult. Mary remembered trying to grow in her faith alone for “several years and it (didn’t) work. However, when her student ministry’s girl’s minister started discipling her “my spiritual growth just like soared. And I just fell in love with community and

discipleship being such a huge, huge part of my life. And that just encouraged me . . . I feel like I couldn't get through college without having a Christian community with alongside me and having that church where I'm serving.”

The importance of discipleship that this study revealed is correlated by Kinnaman's 2011 work that states: “the dropout problem is, at its core, a faith-development problem; to use religious language it's *a disciple-making problem*” (p. 21). In this study, several of the young adults appeared to have a deep passion for discipleship and disciple-making. Relationships with adults have clearly impacted their spiritual growth and current church involvement. Churches and ministry leaders will be wise to focus on providing the context and community where these types of disciple-making relationships can flourish.

Accordingly, this study found that an attitude of *intentionality* about the post-high school graduation church attendance dynamic is important. Several churches took an active approach in helping study participants approach the decision to stay in church after high school graduation. This real-life intentionality aligns well with the wealth of resources that attempt to explain and address the post-student ministry retention problem (Kinnaman, 2011; Parr & Crites, 2015; Trueblood, 2019).

The examination of Research Question 1 also showed that *habits* made during teenage years are beneficial for encouraging students to stay in church after graduation. The dynamic of *habit* provides a more nuanced understanding to the current research. Kinnaman (2011) believes that “the problem is that much spiritual energy fades away during a crucial decade of life – the twenties” (p. 22). The current research study found that, for at least a few study participants, their decision to stay in church was not much of a decision at all; instead, it was a natural continuation of a habit of church involvement that began during their teenage years.

***Conclusion to RQ2.***

*How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry experience as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?*

This research question built on the Research Question 1 by specifically examining the value of student ministry experience related to young adult's church involvement. Participants cited the value of key *relationships* such as their relationship with their student pastor. Eric found that he could approach his student pastor with spiritual questions. Caleb described his student pastor as "very personal" and "invested" in student's lives. This practical importance of student pastors aligns well with the Biblical rationale for student pastors provided by Ross (2019).

Jennifer believed that her student ministry gave her a "support system" of relationships that helped her navigate the challenging teenager years. Relationships with adults and peers emerged from the interviews as important aspects that add to the overall value of student ministry. This relational community seems to be important to faith formation. This dynamic contrasts with a Pew Research study that found that "only 21 percent of teenagers say they spend time with their closest friends at church" (Ross, 2018, 215). Perhaps this overall low-level of community and relationships within the church contributes to the overall retention problem. Participants of this study indicated that many relationships mattered to them; their relationships with student pastors, adult leaders, college ministry interns, and peers were all portrayed as beneficial. This affirms Ross' (2018) assertion that "God hardwired human beings for relationships. It should come as no surprise that most life-altering discipling takes place in the context of relationships."

Accordingly, this study also revealed that *spiritual formation* and *discipleship* are important aspects of student ministry that are needed to address the post-graduation retention problem. This finding correlates with Lifeway's research that students "regularly reading the Bible privately prior to age 18" and their desire for "the church to help guide their decisions in everyday life" are strong indicators of their post-graduation church retention (Trueblood, 2019, p. 18).

Participants in this study also cited *student ministry activities* as beneficial to them. These activities frequently help student ministries live out the five functions of the church. Pace and Newton cite "evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, service and worship" as the five functions of the church (2019, p. 65). Activities like retreats, Bible study groups, mission trips, and student worship services each enable student ministries to fulfill these five functions. This study found that student ministry activities often provide the context where faith is formed and church involvement is encouraged.

### ***Conclusion to RQ3.***

*How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their relationships with adults as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?*

This research question focused the value of young adult's past relationship with adults. This study found that strong relationships with adults as a student is related to church involvement as a young adult. A variety of relationships seems to be helpful to student's faith formation. For example, John said that "I had different people that I would go to for different things."

These relationships frequently included *emulation*, or a desire on the part of teenagers to be like the adults who were investing in their lives. John said about adults: “their involvement in church is, I think, (what) probably contributes to their character. And so, because I want to be like them, I also want to emulate that and contribute to church.” This close observation of adult’s character is reflected in Black’s (1998) assertion that:

Youth are important members of the church family. They need the growth and joy that comes from mutual involvement in the larger congregational experiences. A youth group that is only an appendix to the life of the church family is missing the wealth of relationships that comes from the whole family of God. By seeing the whole growth cycle and the ways God works with people of all ages, youth can learn more about the constant, all-encompassing love and concern of God. Youth ministry should be ministry *with* youth and not just *for* or *to* youth (p. 45-46).

As students experience relationships with adults, they experience the love of God and see the ways that God is working within all ages of the church.

In this study, relationships were often *multigenerational* and included the dynamic of *mentoring*. Just as Embree (2018) notes the many biblical examples of one generation passing along their faith to another, multigenerational relationships are important to students’ faith development. This multigenerational discipleship often happens as one older believers disciple and mentor younger believers. This practice embodies the truth of Psalm 145:4, in which one generation passes long faith to another (Ross, 2017).

#### ***Conclusion to RQ4.***

*How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry’s focus on discipleship as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?*

Examination of this research question revealed that an *emphasis on discipleship groups* can be a vital aspect of student ministry that encourages post-student ministry retention. Eric’s

experience with discipleship groups as a student led him to have a *desire for lifelong discipleship*. He cited his desire for the spiritual growth that began as a teenager to continue. The emphasis that some participants placed on discipleship, D-Groups, and ongoing spiritual growth aligns with Ross' (2017) measure of effective student ministry: "Are we consistently introducing teenagers to Jesus and then discipling them into believers who will, for a *lifetime*, love God, love people, and make disciples for the glory of God?" (p. 7). Furthermore, although each of the D-Groups in the study may not have included an element of covenant, the study participant's remembrance of the value of D-Groups aligns well with Ross' view that covenant-based discipleship groups foster deep relationships through commitment and accountability (2018). Francis et al. (2021) found that 75% of the Baptist teenagers they surveyed indicated that a small group had helped them in their "journey of faith" (p. 571). Although the characteristics of these small groups was not detailed, the quantitative study from Francis et al. (2021) and the qualitative results of this study both indicate that small groups can encourage spiritual growth and faith formation.

Additionally, this study confirmed Johnston and Levert's (2010) observation that students who leave church after high school have "not learned the value and importance of spiritual growth" (p. 43). This observation was based on a study of 6,000 pastors, student pastors, student workers, parents, and teenagers. This study found that some participants who are currently involved in church place a strong value on discipleship and desire for spiritual growth to continue throughout their lives. For example, Hannah said that she found she needed to "take personal hold of her faith" rather than just attending church. Her church experience as a teenager showed her "the power of fellowship" which is why she said she is still connected to church. The finding of this study aligns with Francis et al. (2021) study of Baptist teenagers which found that

86% of participants “had been helped in their journey of faith by taking part in a church social (or youth) group (p. 571).

This study also found that some young adults cited *importance of apologetics* in their responses. Hannah and Mary, who attended different campuses of the same church, both related elements of apologetics within their student ministry. Hannah’s testimony and call to ministry was heavily influenced by her exposure to apologetics during her time in student ministry. This focus on apologetics demonstrates intentionality from Hannah and Mary’s student ministry. Clydesdale (2007) said that “it is striking how haphazardly most congregations (go about retaining youth in the church).” This study found that student ministry intentionality with *discipleship* and *apologetics* can help foster lifelong spiritual growth and encourage church retention.

#### ***Conclusion to RQ5.***

*How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of student ministry programming as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?*

When reflecting on their student ministry experience, participants remembered certain special events like *summer camp*, *D-Now weekends*, and *mission trips*. These special events often provided the context where deep relationships and community could form. Camps and “D-Now Weekends” enabled students to see life-change and spiritual growth happen in their own lives and in the lives of their peers. Additionally, Caleb’s participation in a camp enabled him to serve and explore a call to ministry. These special moments help fulfill what Newton and Pace (2019) describe as the goal of student discipleship: “train(ing) and equip(ing) our students to fulfill the Great Commission” (2010). This study found that special events like *D-Now*, *summer camp*, and

*mission trips* often encouraged students to participate in the five functions of the church as stated by Pace and Newton (2019): “evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, service, and worship” (p. 65). These five functions are undergirded by the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20 and the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37-40) (Fields, 1998, p. 46). This study’s findings about special events are reinforced by Francis et al., which indicated 73% of participants said attending a Christian camp helped them in their “journey of faith” (p. 571). Furthermore, the percent of participants that cite spiritual retreats (66%), Christian conferences (54%), Christian service projects (64%), and mission tours (58%) as helpful for their “journey of faith” also demonstrates the effectiveness of these events (p. 571).

Furthermore, ongoing activities like *Bible studies*, *discipleship groups*, and *student worship services* were cited by the participants as valuable parts of their student ministry experience. Focus on spiritual growth and discipleship in these ongoing activities aligns with Barna’s (2016) finding that “when they are asked to identify the top two goals of youth ministry, a substantial majority of church leaders choose ‘discipleship and spiritual instruction’ as one of their highest priorities” (p. 12). Fields (1998) notes that “there is no one way to disciple students” and defines discipleship as “helping students become more like Christ” (p. 157). Accordingly, *bible studies*, *discipleship groups*, and *student worship services* each played a role in research participant’s spiritual growth and student ministry experience. Francis et al. (2021) found that 75% of participants said small groups helped them in their faith and 41% said Bible study groups help them in their faith (p. 571). Seventy eight percent of participants also said “church services” helped them in their faith (p. 572). Although student specific worship services were not studied specifically by Francis et al., their data does demonstrate the importance of worship.

This research study revealed that the activities and events that student ministries facilitate have a substantial impact on the faith development of teenagers. This study found a variety of activities and events that were seen as beneficial to spiritual growth and discipleship.

### **Research Limitations**

This study included participants who participated in student ministry in five different states: Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas. A potential weakness of this study is that it may not fully reflect the student ministry experience of young adults who grew up in other parts of the United States. Additionally, the participant's overall church sizes during their teenage years varied from 200 to over 15,000. Churches smaller than 200 were not studied.

Additionally, this study did not control for young adults with parents who are involved in full-time ministry. Data concerning the careers of participant's parents was not included during the participant selection process. Through the interviews themselves, the researcher determined at least four of the participants had parents who were either in ministry positions or on the support staff at a church. This parental involvement in ministry may influence young adult's post-student ministry church involvement.

This study was limited to nine participants. Expanding the participant sample further may yield richer insights into the post-student ministry retention phenomena. This study made a commitment not to interview more than two participants who grew up in any one church. Accordingly, two pairs of study participants attended the same church during their teenage years. One set attended different campuses of the same church. Another attended the same church and there appeared to be about a two-year age difference between them.

### Further Research

Further research is needed to develop a richer understanding of the post-student ministry retention phenomena. This study included churches ranging in size from 200 to 15,000. Further research could focus on young adults who went through student ministry in a more narrowly defined church size. The researcher believes further qualitative studies including churches with attendance ranging from 100-500, 500-1000, 1000-2000, and 2000+ would be beneficial.

*Intentionality* about retention was the overarching theme that emerged from the study. Different sized churches may be intentional in different ways. Broyles' (2009) study on Southern Baptist student ministry programming included churches with attendance from 0-399, 400-699, 799-999, 1,000-1,999 and 2000+. This variation in church size and what intentionality looks like in different churches is a topic for further study. Furthermore, a sample of diverse denominations could be compared in future research to examine which factors emerge that encourage retention. Future researchers could also sample participants from different types of churches, such as seeker-sensitive churches, to see what retention themes may emerge.

Additionally, further research could focus on young adults currently attending either public or private universities. This study included a mix of both. Although it was not an intentional aspect of selection, each of this study's participants currently attend college. Further research could focus on students who are not in college to see if findings are consistent. Additionally, differences between public and private education could be examined for possible influences on post-student ministry retention. Shield's (2008) study revealed that "survey respondents who attended a public high school or were home schooled reported higher levels of current church involvement than young adults who attended a Christian school, non-Christian private school, Catholic school, or other" (p. 171). If young adults who attended different types

of high schools have different levels of retention, further research could examine whether or not students who attend public universities, private universities, or do not attend college at all have different levels of retention.

The influence that parents have in the lives of their students was outside of the purview of this research. Therefore, research about the role that parents play in the post-student ministry phenomena is also needed. Such research could focus on a possible link between parent's influence and student ministry. This link could be explored through a mixed-methods research approach to identify any statistical correlation as well as understand experiences qualitatively. Additionally, the parent's church involvement and service in church could be researched to see if these dynamics play a role in encouraging students to stay in church. Another area of research that is promising is the link between home discipleship and church discipleship. A qualitative ethnographic approach could help understand how these the two dynamics function and relate to one another in people's experiences (*Ethnographic Research | Research*, n.d.).

At least four of the participants had parents who were employed by their local churches (whether as ministers or as support staff). Further research is needed to understand how parent's involvement in local church ministry is related to their student's decision to stay in church after graduation. Are retention rates higher for students whose parents are employed by churches? This dynamic deserves further research.

Eight of the nine participants made professions of faith before they became teenagers. Seven of the nine made their profession of faith prior to their tenth birthday. Further research is needed to see if there is an increased post-student ministry retention rate among students who make professions of faith early in life.

Further research is also needed to go deeper into the importance of relationships. Intentionality in relationships was a consistent theme throughout the research. This study attempted to examine relationships in addition to discipleship and student ministry activities. Further qualitative research could seek to understand *how* relationships in student ministry are formed over time. Additionally, further research could help explain *why* relationships matter in the context of this phenomena.

The participants in this study seemed to indicate that relationship formation and discipleship often occurred synergistically. Broyles (2009) study of SBC student ministries found that 90% of the 414 student ministry mission statements analyzed “proclaimed discipleship / spiritual growth as a driving value of the ministry” (p. 135). This finding demonstrates that discipleship and spiritual growth are a priority for many Southern Baptist student ministries (p. 125). Further research is needed to fully understand both *how* discipleship, spiritual growth, and relationships are emphasized in student ministries and why they influence post-student ministry retention. Furthermore, future research could examine the intentional practices of student ministries who are effective at providing the context for relationships to form.

The research in this study revealed *how* student ministry helped teenagers stay in church after high school graduation. This study revealed several factors that helped lead students to stay in church after high school graduation, such service opportunities, relationships with adults, and the student ministry’s intentionally preparing students to make the decision to stay in church. Further research should be conducted to develop a deeper understanding of *why* these factors influence the post-student ministry retention phenomena.

### Summary

Hannah said with passion that her student ministry experience was “hugely, hugely valuable.” Many research participants had similar experiences. This study found that student ministry can be used to foster lasting spiritual growth and encourage church participation after high school graduation. Relationships with caring adults seemed to be a primary factor encouraging post-student ministry church participation. Additionally, discipleship and a desire for lifelong spiritual growth fostered during the student ministry years was also found to be beneficial. Student ministry leaders who desire to encourage students to stay in church after high school graduation will be wise to focus on creating environments and strategies where deep, discipling relationships can grow between trusted, caring adults and teenagers. Furthermore, special events and ongoing activities can play a strategic role in encouraging community and discipleship. Through partnering with families and encouraging multi-generational relationships within the overall church, student ministry leaders can be faithful to Jesus’ command to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:18-20).

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**APPENDIX A****INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER**

July 14, 2021

Baylor Whitney  
Joseph Butler

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-900 FACTORS LEADING TO STUDENT MINISTRY RETENTION IN MID AND LARGE SIZED SOUTHERN BAPTIST CHURCHES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Dear Baylor Whitney, Joseph Butler:

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 to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

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

Category 2.(ii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording).

Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation.

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

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

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption 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**

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW QUESTION FEEDBACK FORM

FULL NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

EMAIL: \_\_\_\_\_

CURRENT STAFF ROLE: \_\_\_\_\_

CURRENT CHURCH: \_\_\_\_\_

Is your church affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)? Circle one: YES NO

Below is a list of research questions that guide this project. These research question form the basis of the study. After the research questions, potential interview questions are listed for the research project. These questions may be used in the research interviews with the research participants. After each interview question, please provide your feedback. The main feedback that is being requested is whether or not the interview questions effectively open the door to conversations that can help understand the underlying research questions. In other words, do the interview questions set the stage for the research questions to be answered? Thank you in advance for your feedback in helping make the questions more effective.

The following research questions guided this study:

**RQ1.** What are the most common aspects of student ministry that young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church, cite as the reasons they stayed active in church after high school graduation?

**RQ2.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry experience as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ3.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their relationships with adults as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ4.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of their student ministry's focus on discipleship as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

**RQ5.** How do young adults, 18-22 years of age, who were active as a student in a mid to large-sized Southern Baptist Church and are currently active in church, describe the value of student ministry programming as it relates to their involvement in church as a young adult?

Potential Interview Questions (please provide detailed feedback about your perceptions of each questions' effectiveness in answering the underlying research questions).

**IQ1.** After you graduated high school, what encouraged you to stay connected in church?

**IQ2.** What do you remember most about your student ministry experience?

**IQ3.** Looking back to your time as a student, how valuable was your student ministry experience? In other words, how did your student ministry experience as a student help you become the young adult you are today?

**IQ4.** Describe how your student ministry influenced your decision to stay connected to church after graduation.

**IQ5.** What specific factors in your student ministry helped encourage you to stay in church after graduation?

**IQ6.** Describe your relationships with adults during your time in student ministry. How did these relationships influence your decision to stay connected to church after graduation?

**IQ7:** Describe your student ministry's focus on discipleship. How did this focus influence your decision to stay connected to church after graduation?

**IQ8:** Describe your student ministry programming during your time as a student (ongoing Bible studies, camps, retreats, mission trips, etc.). How did student ministry programming influence your decision to stay connected to church after graduation?

## APPENDIX C

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Title of the Project:** Factors Leading to Student Ministry Retention in Mid and Large Sized Southern Baptist Churches: A Phenomenological Study

**Principal Investigator:** Baylor Clark Whitney, Sr., Doctoral Candidate (Ed.D. in Christian Leadership), Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University

#### **Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a young adult age 18-22 who previously participated in a student ministry at a Southern Baptist church with an average attendance of 200 or greater and who is currently active in a local church. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

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

The purpose of the study is to discover young adult's previous personal experiences as a student in student ministry. These experiences will be studied to see which student ministry experiences led to young adults remaining connected to a church after high school graduation.

#### **What will happen if you take part in this study?**

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

1. Fill out the participant form that describes your previous student ministry experience and current church involvement. This step will take about five minutes.
2. Participate in a one-hour interview (approximate) with me to describe your prior student ministry experience. Interviews can be work around your schedule. Interviews will be conducted in person or over web conferencing software (Zoom or Microsoft Teams). Audio and video of the interviews will be recorded.

#### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include understanding student ministry practices that help more students stay in church after high school graduation.

#### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

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

#### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in

future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- Participant responses will be confidential. Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- After the interviews are conducted, data will be placed in a password protected cloud storage account as well as two password protected USB drives. The USB drives will be stored in separate secure locations. The USBs will be stored for three years after the publication of the study. Physical transcripts of the interviews will be organized into file folders (one per interview) and locked in the researcher's office. After the study is published and defended, the physical transcripts will be shredded. This process will ensure that the interview data is safeguarded.
- Data will be used in the future for presentations, writing of research papers, and communicating research findings through articles and blog posts.

### **Is study participation voluntary?**

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

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

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Baylor Clark Whitney, Sr. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at [cell phone] or [email address]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Joseph Butler at [email address].

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

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu)

## **Your Consent**

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the

study after you sign this document, you can contact the researcher using the information provided above.

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

\_\_\_\_\_The researcher has my permission to audio record and video record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

## APPENDIX D

### PERMISSION REQUEST

Dear Recipient:

As a graduate student in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership degree. The title of my research project is “Factors Leading to Student Ministry Retention in Mid and Large Sized Southern Baptist Churches: A Phenomenological Study.” The purpose of the study is to discover young adult’s previous personal experiences as a student in student ministry. These experiences will be studied to see which student ministry experiences led to young adults remaining connected to a church after high school graduation.

I am writing to request your permission to contact young adults ages 18-22 who were previously involved in your student ministry to invite them to participate in my research study. I need your help in selecting these participants. Through filling out the attached questionnaire, I am requesting help in finding participants who are young adults who are committed to the church and actively growing in their faith. These young adults need to be former students who were actively involved in student ministry during their teenage years (defined as students who attended student ministry activities at least three times per month on average during their high school years).

After you help identify potential participants, participants will be asked to fill out a questionnaire and schedule an interview with me. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval or respond by email to [email address].

Sincerely,

Baylor Clark Whitney, Sr.  
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

**APPENDIX E**  
**PERMISSION LETTER**

Please return on official letterhead or copy and paste into an email.

[Insert Date]

Baylor Clark Whitney, Sr.  
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University  
[Address]

Dear Clark,

After careful review of your research proposal entitled “Factors Leading to Student Ministry Retention in Mid and Large Sized Southern Baptist Churches: A Phenomenological Study” we have decided to grant you permission to contact young adults age 18-22 who were previously involved in our church’s student ministry.

We have filled out the questionnaire for each potential participant that you may reach out to in order to conduct your study.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]  
[Your Title]  
[Your Company/Organization]

**APPENDIX F**  
**RECRUITMENT EMAIL**

Dear:

As a Doctoral Candidate in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership degree. The purpose of my research is to discover young adult's previous personal experiences as a student in student ministry. These experiences will be studied to see which student ministry experiences led to young adults remaining connected to a church after high school graduation. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Your former student pastor, [insert name here], has recommended that you be a part of this study.

Participants must be ages 18-22, previously involved in a student ministry at a Southern Baptist Church with an average attendance of 200 or greater, and currently involved in a local church as a young adult. Participants, if willing, will be asked to take part in an interview that should take approximately one hour. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

In order to participate, please click here to complete the questionnaire.

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. After you have read the consent form, please click the [button/link] to proceed to the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the survey.

Sincerely,

Baylor Clark Whitney, Sr.  
Doctoral Candidate  
Liberty University

**APPENDIX G****RECRUITMENT FOLLOW UP EMAIL**

Dear:

As a Doctoral Candidate in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership degree. The purpose of my research is to discover young adult's previous personal experiences as a student in student ministry. These experiences will be studied to see which student ministry experiences led to young adults remaining connected to a church after high school graduation.

Two weeks ago, an email/ was sent to you inviting you to participate in a research study. This follow-up email is being sent to remind you to respond to the questionnaire if you would like to participate and have not already done so. The deadline for participation is August 31, 2021.

In order to participate, please click here to complete the questionnaire.

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. After you have read the consent form, please click the [button/link] to proceed to the survey. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the survey.

Sincerely,

Baylor Clark Whitney, Sr.  
Doctoral Candidate  
Liberty University

## **APPENDIX H**

### **SOCIAL MEDIA RECRUITMENT POST**

**ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS:** As a Doctoral Candidate in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education in Christian Leadership degree. The purpose of my research is to discover young adult's previous personal experiences as a student in student ministry. These experiences will be studied to see which student ministry experiences led to young adults remaining connected to a church after high school graduation. Participants, if willing, will be asked to take part in an interview that should take approximately one hour. If you would like to participate and meet the criteria below, please [click here](#) to proceed to the survey. A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey.

To participate, you must be age 18-22, previously involved in a student ministry at a Southern Baptist Church with an average attendance of 200 or greater, and currently involved in a local church as a young adult.

## APPENDIX I

### RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS FLYER

Factors Leading to Student Ministry Retention in

Mid and Large Sized Southern Baptist Churches:

A Phenomenological Study

- Are you 18-22 years of age?
- Were you involved as a student in a student ministry at a Southern Baptist Church with an average attendance of 200 or greater?
- Are you currently involved in a local church?

If you answered **yes** to all of these questions, you may be eligible to participate in a nutrition research study.

The purpose of my research is to discover young adult's previous personal experiences as a student in student ministry. These experiences will be studied to see which student ministry experiences led to young adults remaining connected to a church after high school graduation. Participants, if willing, will be asked to take part in an interview that should take approximately one hour. If you would like to participate and meet the criteria below, please click here to proceed to the survey. A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey.

Baylor Clark Whitney, Sr. a doctoral candidate in the Rawlings School of Divinity at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Please contact Baylor Clark Whitney, Sr. at [cell phone] or [email] for more information.**

**APPENDIX J****STUDENT PASTOR/MINISTRY LEADER QUESTIONNAIRE**

What is your full name?

What is your phone number?

What is your email address?

What is your current ministry role?

What previous churches/ministry roles have you held?

What is the full name of the person you are recommending to participate in this study?

What is the email of the person you are recommending to participate in this study?

Does this person meet the research criteria:

- Young adult age 18-22
- Involved as a student in the student ministry of a Southern Baptist Church with an average attendance of 200 or greater
- Attended student ministry activities three times per month (on average)
- Currently involved in a local church

**APPENDIX K****PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE**

A copy of the Participant Consent Form will be provided at the beginning of this form.

What is your full name?

What is your phone number?

What is your email address?

What is your current age?

Will you be under the age of 22 on December 31, 2021?

Were you involved as a student in a student ministry at a Southern Baptist Church with an average attendance of 200 or greater?

On average, how many times did you attend student ministry activities per month?

Are you currently involved in a local church?

On average, how many times do you attend your current church per month?

Do you have access to a webcam and microphone to conduct a web interview through Microsoft Teams or Zoom?

When you were a teenager, what churches did you participate in student ministry?

## APPENDIX L

### SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

1. What is your current job or educational pursuit?
2. When did you get saved? When did you place your faith in Christ?
3. What church did you participate in during your teenage years? Please describe what the church was like?
4. How often did you attend church and your student ministry during your teenage years? Were there times that you attended more than others? If so, why?
5. Did you have to find a different church after high school graduation? What did you look for in this new church after you graduated?

#### *Open-Ended Interview Questions*

#### **Questions below are based on RQ1.**

- 1-1. After you graduated high school, what kept you involved in church?
- 1-2. What do you remember most about your student ministry experience before graduation?
- 1-3. How did you make the decision to stay connected to a local church after high school graduation?
- 1-4. How did your student ministry experience before graduation influence your decision to stay in church after graduation?

#### **Questions below are based on RQ2.**

- 2-1. Looking back to your time as a student, how valuable was your student ministry experience?
- 2-2. In other words, how did your student ministry experience as a student help you become the young adult you are today?
- 2-3. Describe how your student ministry influenced your decision to stay connected to a church after graduation.
- 2-4. How does your previous student ministry experience play a role in your church involvement now (even if you changed churches)?

2-5. What specific factors in your student ministry helped influence your decision to stay in church after high school graduation?

**Questions below are based on RQ3.**

3-1. How did you interact with adults during your time as a student in student ministry?

3-2. Describe the kinds of relationships you had with these adults. How did these relationships grow?

3-3. How did these relationships as a student influence the young adult you are today?

3-4. How did these relationships influence your decision to stay in church after graduation?

**Questions below are based on RQ4.**

4-1. How did your student ministry help you grow as a follower of Christ (encourage discipleship)?

4-2. Did your student ministry ever talk about discipleship or define the term for you? If so, describe how discipleship was presented in your student ministry.

4-3. Describe how your student ministry helped you grow as a follower of Christ. How did this growth influence your decision to stay involved in church after high school graduation?

**Questions below are based on RQ5.**

5-1. What activities did you participate in during your student ministry experience?

5-2. Describe any ongoing activities that helped you grow as a follower of Christ.

5-3. Describe any special events that helped you grow as a follower of Christ.

5-4. How did these activities influence your decision to stay connected to church after high school graduation?