

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

**Connecting Youth to the Gospel: The Role of Theology and Apologetics**

Submitted to Reginald Weems

In fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of  
the Doctor of Ministry Degree

Department of Christian Leadership and Church Ministries

by

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Liberty University John W. Rawlings School of Divinity

**Thesis Project Approval Sheet**

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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Connecting youth to the Gospel sounds like a basic undertaking. However, evidence shows students know very little about the Gospel. While they grow up in church and attend Sunday school, there is still a lack of desire from students to want to know who God is. There needs to be a path to teaching students the genuine and deep teachings of the Gospel. This topic is important because as students grow older, they may grow apart from what they learned in Sunday school. When they are challenged and distracted by the world, they need a strong anchor to keep them close to Jesus.

The purpose of this thesis is to shed light on students who leave the Church when they graduate high school. They leave and avoid plugging into another church, or they stay in town but do not want to plug into a church. There are several issues of why students leave, and it is important that the church realizes and responds to the students who are leaving the church. The goal of this paper is to inform and give a possible solution to students leaving and not coming back to the church. It is also to inform teachers and students of the inevitable danger that is coming when these students graduate high school. The research method will be qualitative. This text aims to encourage and inform the reader of the problem and solution for students who leave the church. How does the church prepare students for this issue? How does the church help those who have already or are going to leave the church?

Youth, Apologetics, Theology, Relationships, Discipleship, Education, Curriculum

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Sunnyside Baptist is currently working through an epidemic, not COVID-19, but a hoard of students leaving the church after graduating high school and moving off to college. Students are leaving the church at an alarming rate, and something needs to change to fix the problem. Several books have been written about teens leaving the body of Christ, and some solutions and programs have been developed to help solve the problem. However, students will continue to leave the church until they establish an intrinsic connection to the gospel. By nature, young people are inquisitive, and unfortunately, this nature is unintentionally discouraged within the church in several ways. The most common is by telling students to ‘just have faith’ instead of taking the time to answer or hear the students’ questions or concerns. Adults who serve as leaders or teachers in the church have neglected to nurture students’ inquisitive nature. This does not quench their thirst for answers; instead, it dulls their interest in the faith and indirectly teaches them not to ask questions.

These students soon become irregular from church and offer several excuses for why they have been absent. One of the excuses commonly heard at Sunnyside Baptist Church is that the church is full of hypocrites. The students notice the double standard displayed by older church members, including some in leadership roles. The students witness the difference in how some church members act in church versus outside of the church. While this objection is relatively accurate, students often miss a simple theological principle that would help curb this excuse. Moreover, it is seldomly taught. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners and, many of the Jews did not like that Jesus was associating with sinners. When

confronted about it, Jesus replied, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mark 2:17).<sup>1</sup> While contextually, this verse could be used for evangelism, it also shows that the people He was bringing into the fold were broken people who needed to be healed and changed. This is also seen in the letters Paul wrote to various churches, in which he identifies the sins of the recipient church.

Another common excuse students use is that science has disproven the Bible and God. Some students say, “There is no reason to have a superstition of an existence of a god.” However, if students were taught apologetics early in their Christian education, they would be prepared to combat this fallacy and refute the claim apologetically. God’s likelihood of existing can be proven through reason. One argument could be the moral argument which shows that there is order to the universe. If people are random acts of nature, then there is no point in morality.<sup>2</sup> These objections are commonly used by students who desire to leave or have lost interest in the church. While answering these questions may not stop students from leaving, they can quench their thirst for knowledge and curb the likelihood that common misconceptions of the church will be spread. Another common reason students desire to leave the church is that they want to do whatever they want without consequences or judgment. Some doubt scripture for many reasons. Teaching theology and apologetics is not enough. Teachers can teach theology and apologetics, but it will make no lasting difference in students remaining in their walk with Christ without the student's desire to learn.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New American Standard (Anaheim: Lockman Foundation, 1998).

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Nashville, TN: HarperCollins Publishers, 2017), 16.

The Christian education of youth in churches is an important topic that most church members recognize and support. However, the church can be hesitant or reluctant to evolve and change from “the way they have always done things.” Church members avoid the growing problems in churches because they do not recognize that church members result from the changing society. The culture that today’s youth live in is very different from that in which older members of the church knew. Today’s youth encounter more controversial issues that challenge their faith daily than the older generation experienced in their youth. While the church widely recognizes this, what is not realized is the need for the church to evolve in the way it ministers to the younger generation that parallels our changing society without compromising the doctrines of faith. What students needed from the church decades ago is not the same as today’s students need. Unfortunately, many churches are unaware of this, although the students notice that deficiency. In any case, students notice that the expectation of their Christian education seems to only want them to scratch the surface of the Bible rather than dig deep into scripture.

There is no motivation to teach students fundamental doctrine and apologetics, so they have the means to defend their faith. The standard Christian education for children and youth begins with teaching popular Bible stories as children and then progresses to teaching a basic understanding of good morals for the students to find applicable to real situations. While Bible stories are crucial and an excellent starting point for our children, there are some questions that can be asked while teaching these stories that would challenge the students to develop a deeper understanding of the story and the people in it and make it more applicable. These questions should be addressed as the students mature from children to youth. A close examination of biblical stories causes several questions to arise about the historical context, people involved, and why it was written in the way it was. One example in the first chapter of Genesis is the creation

of the universe. He (God) made light before He created the sun or moon, as one generally understands. At first glance, this does not seem to make sense. This is an ideal situation for the older students to look deeper at scripture to figure out whether the mystery is a contradiction or that the language in Genesis chapter one has nuances that require further clarification. Students are inquisitive beings by nature; they often have the desire to ask questions but are easily embarrassed by the question they want an answer to, or they think it is unanswerable, so it's not worth bringing it up. However, the students do not realize that while many of these questions can be difficult to answer, they are excellent questions that most students share. Unfortunately, some teachers are intimidated by these questions. Many teachers at Sunnyside are caught off-guard by these types of questions and unknowingly respond in a dismissive manner that often deters students from asking future questions. As a result, students stop asking these questions, and eventually, that grows into the students cease participating in Sunday school. An often-forgotten trait of students is that they are very impressionable, and their curiosity is fragile. It must be nurtured and guided to flourish as they seek out and attain more knowledge. When students do not feel encouraged or supported, they unintentionally withdraw intellectually and inhibit their learning experience.

In addition to fostering an encouraging and supportive learning environment, teachers also need to be very aware of how they respond to students' answers, whether correct or incorrect. When this happens, students can feel dismissed or poorly corrected rather than working through a lesson with constructive criticism. When presented with a difficult question, it is beneficial to guide students to the solution or the answer in an encouraging manner. The fragility of students' reasoning must not be overlooked. All Christians should strive to seek out solutions or answers instead of dismissing someone's legitimate question. Theology is essential

for students to build a firm foundation as they grow up and their faith matures. The more they grow and mature in their faith, their thoughts will challenge their beliefs and education.

Apologetics is paramount and something that every student should learn. Defending the faith is about learning to guard and explain to those who question one's faith. It is to help protect against self-doubt and other times where one's faith is at risk. For this reason, teaching theology and apologetics to not only the students but also to adult members needs to be a priority, so the foundation that has been built from children does not crumble when it is challenged. Furthermore, validating our student's thirst for knowledge will help cultivate relationships that may strengthen students' chances and desire to participate as active church members after high school graduation.

### **Ministry Context**

Sunnyside Baptist Church is in Kingsport, Tennessee. The population of Kingsport, TN, as of 2017 is 53,374, with a median household income is \$41,597. The area is primarily Caucasian American, with a percentage of 90.1%. The remainder of the population is 3.3% African American, 2.9% Hispanic, and the rest are mixed. Considering the demographics of Kingsport, it is understandable that Sunnyside is primarily Caucasian American.<sup>3</sup> Most of the members live within a fifteen-mile radius of the church. Sunnyside Baptist is a conservative Southern Baptist church. Pastor Jack Campbell started the church in 1947 and has been a cornerstone in the community. Sunnyside has had several pastors and grown significantly since its conception. The church initially met at a local school building in the community, where

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<sup>3</sup> "Kingsport, Tennessee," Kingsport, Tennessee (TN 37664, 37857) profile: population, maps, real estate, averages, homes, statistics, relocation, travel, jobs, hospitals, schools, crime, moving, houses, news, sex offenders, accessed January 20, 2021, <http://www.city-data.com/city/Kingsport-Tennessee.html>.

fourteen people from the community came to the service to be the church's charter members in September of 1947. Most church people are within a thirty-minute drive of the new building, located across the street from the original building that housed the church.<sup>4</sup>

When Sunnyside first started, there were only fourteen members initially, until the pastor at the time wrote a letter to all the missionary Baptist churches in the Holston Association of Kingsport asking for help with growing the church and constructing the church building. The original fourteen church members would invite friends and family to help pour into this new Baptist church. The community donated materials, money, and time to the building of Sunnyside Baptist Church.

In 1974, God called a new pastor to Sunnyside named Richard Ratliff. During his time as a pastor at Sunnyside, membership expanded, and the church family outgrew their church building. They constructed a new church building across the street because of the fast-growing number of members attending Sunnyside Baptist Church. However, the church desired to add a family life center to their new building, so Reverend Ratliff shared a vision of a new wing with a gym, kitchen, and classrooms for adults and children.<sup>5</sup>

When Reverend Ratliff retired, Jack Parrott came to pastor Sunnyside. Pastor Parrot engaged in the Sunnyside culture and worked to continue the growth of the church family. He wanted to expand the sanctuary and add a playground for the children at the church. During this time, Sunnyside Baptist adopted the mission statement, "Magnifying Jesus and Sharing His Love." Sunnyside wanted to pour love into the community from heart-filled Jesus-loving people.

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremy Garrett, "History," accessed January 20, 2021, <https://www.sunnysidebaptistchurch.org/welcome/history/>.

<sup>5</sup> Garrett, "History."

In 1997, the church adopted the goal of “equipping the saints to spread the Gospel.” In order to work towards fulfilling this goal, they established an education program for the children’s ministry that would begin to cultivate their knowledge of the Bible and the faith. This initial children’s education program made such a lasting impression on the Sunnyside children that it is still fondly remembered by several church members that are now adults at Sunnyside Baptist Church. During this time, Dr. Parrott also began to lead a church plant in Michigan, and the Sunnyside family supported the church plant by helping fund the construction of a building and then continued to work to charter another church.

In 2007, Jack Parrott retired and turned leadership of Sunnyside over to Dr. Roy Graves. Dr. Graves continued to expand the church family even more. He had the vision to expand to another larger auditorium. The church was at capacity in their current auditorium with two services at maximum occupancy. The church needed a larger auditorium that could fit approximately 700 people. Dr. Graves pushed to break ground for the current building, and its membership has sustained. Dr. Graves retired in July of 2019, and Sunnyside is still searching for a new pastor but hopes to have a new shepherd soon.<sup>6</sup>

Sunnyside Baptist Church in Kingsport, Tennessee, had an average of seven hundred people during a Sunday morning service before COVID-19. Post COVID-19, attendance has decreased to approximately one hundred and fifty people during a Sunday morning service. The majority of those people are adults aged forty years and above, a few college students, senior adults, and families with youth and children. While during the pandemic, there are several reasons for people being absent from service, from not wanting to wear a mask, pre-existing

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<sup>6</sup> Garrett, “History.”

health conditions, to watching the service online. These diverse reasons make it challenging to determine who and why members are not coming to church.

The youth ministry at Sunnyside Baptist Church has had two youth pastors in the past fifteen years. The first youth pastor was called to Sunnyside for approximately ten years. He grew the ministry from a few students on Wednesday nights to an average of sixty students. Of the students that have graduated from the youth group, some have remained active in the church as college students and adults, while others have left the church. Students have been involved in different ministries at Sunnyside Baptist Church over the years. An example of this is some of the students have come back to work with youth in small groups. This same youth pastor worked diligently to help the students grow in their faith by taking them on mission trips and conferences.

Recently, a new youth pastor led Sunnyside's youth ministry. This youth pastor has shifted from service missions to discipleship missions. Students learn the importance of service and how it can be a tool for evangelism. Moreover, the students are learning how to make disciples that go out to make disciples themselves. Pastors cannot be the only people in the church who share the gospel and grow the church. The church family is the one who should be making disciples alongside the pastor. In addition, the students learn how to study scripture and are then quizzed on apologetic arguments, like the problem of evil. During the COVID-19 quarantine, students have been learning online and have not had near as many apologetic challenges to their faith. They are currently struggling with their lack of social interaction. Many students are suffering from depression and a lack of motivation. Ministry has had to change drastically in the past year because of the worldwide pandemic.

The current name of the youth ministry is “4:12”. The name comes from Paul’s letter to Timothy, in which he says, “Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.”<sup>7</sup> This passage has two concepts. The first is the most obvious understanding of this passage, which is encouragement for Timothy. Paul exhorts Timothy and explains that he should be encouraged even when people are looking down on him. Like Timothy, students are often misunderstood and disrespected due to their age. Sunnyside's youth are encouraged to do their best in their efforts and show themselves to be above reproach. The second concept taught in this passage is for the older generations. People should not look at the younger generation as less than the older. Adults often unknowingly disrespect youth simply because of their age. The youth ministry at Sunnyside Baptist Church teaches students how to react to disrespect which simultaneously teaches them to respect all generations when they grow up.

Sunnyside had approximately 600-700 in attendance on a Sunday morning pre-COVID-19. The attendance is now 200 in-person for a Sunday morning service and about 400 views online. From birth to sixth grade, children averaged thirty students and youth at fifty from seventh to twelfth-grade pre-COVID-19. Since re-opening, all ministries in the church have decreased attendance. The children’s ministry has less than fifteen, and youth is between twenty and thirty students when this project is undertaken. There are one hundred thirty-nine college students that are previous students between the ages of eighteen to twenty-nine, that were all involved in the church ministry within the last ten years. While most of these students have not been to Sunnyside or any other church in over a year, approximately thirty-five students have remained active in ministry from 2019-to 2020. These students attended church over the past two

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<sup>7</sup> 1 Timothy 4:12

years, but even fewer actively attended a church service at least once a week. Many of these students and young adults have been absent from COVID-19 precautions. However, many of the missing college students are healthcare workers or do not feel comfortable attending large crowds. Therefore, it has been challenging to get an accurate attendance of college students since the pandemic began in February 2020.

Most of the students aged eighteen through twenty-nine grew up in the church at Sunnyside, where the ministry's main focus was missions and service. During the student's time in youth ministry, they learned how to serve the community in various ways. For example, they would volunteer at local soup kitchens and work with different homeless communities in the Kingsport area. These students were also taken to other communities across the United States to learn about other societies and cultures within the American culture. In addition to their frequent mission trips, the students also engaged in the Strength to Stand conference in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, during their time in the youth ministry. This conference is a yearly event where the students have the opportunity of being led in worship by different bands and learn from speakers sharing the gospel. These same students have gone on to attend another annual conference called Passion for college students. Many of the students who do not regularly attend church will come to these events for various reasons.

Sunnyside Baptist has specific ministries that focus on youth, children, and young married couples. There is no ministry for single adults, and the college students usually only come together for Sunday school. However, while there are three colleges within Sunnyside's vicinity, there is no outreach program for local unchurched college students. There is a weekly class, but since it is not promoted in the community, only those that have grown up in the church know about it. Most students who grow up at Sunnyside tend to leave the church and move away

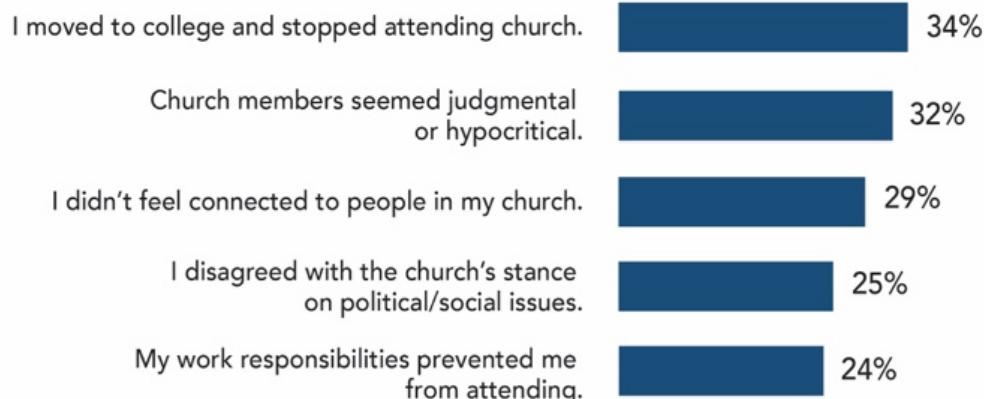
due to college or occupations. Unfortunately, the students who have left the church seem to have no immediate intention of returning or getting involved with another church.

### **Problem Presented**

The problem is that the students at Sunnyside Baptist Church in Kingsport, Tennessee, appear to lack a basic understanding of theology and apologetics.

## **Top five reasons church dropouts say they stopped attending church**

*Among young adults (ages 23-30) who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school:*



**Notes:** Respondents were asked to select all that apply.



LifeWayResearch.com

Figure 1. Top Five Reasons Students Leave the Church<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> “Most Teenagers Drop out of Church When They Become Young Adults,” Lifeway Research, August 11, 2021, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>.

Students at Sunnyside Baptist Church are leaving the church at an alarming rate. Once students graduate high school, they are often not seen in the church. Some students relocate due to higher education or occupation, where they do not know how to get involved in a church. Some are excited by freedom from their parents and begin to make their own decisions and routines. Furthermore, during this phase of early adulthood, their social circles and influences change and challenge their faith. When asked why they have stopped attending church, the students often give excuses that can easily be countered by sound theology and apologetics. The issue is that the students are unprepared to defend their faith and handle challenging questions. Unfortunately, the students are not educated on these things from the church programs they attended before high school graduation, nor at home. Teenagers are inquisitive and enjoy learning as long as it challenges them and keeps their interest. Together, teachers and parents need to make their students' and children's Christian education and spiritual development a top priority and instill spiritual disciplines.

Teachers at Sunnyside Baptist Church are expected to teach a church-approved curriculum. However, the curriculum has much to be desired. The literature is composed of essential life lessons that can be deduced by having a basic understanding of the Bible. The curriculum is not challenging nor engaging for the students. Moreover, the curriculum does not encourage the students to do any independent study during the week to prepare for the upcoming lesson. A bigger concern is that the current curriculum does not have any educational goals or objectives for the students to learn throughout the course year. Students need to be challenged in their relationship with Jesus, knowledge of the Bible, and set standards to meet. The curriculum could be improved if it forced the students to search the scriptures to complete the lesson goals. The curriculum includes books for each student to follow along with the teacher during the

lessons. The books consist of basic applicatory information that is easy for the students to follow. The information is very relatable for the students. However, theology and apologetics are not taught in this curriculum.

In addition, there are two parts to the Christian education program, the curriculum and the teacher. Even if the curriculum were perfect, there would still be a need for excellent teachers. The Sunday school program consists of diverse volunteer-based teachers. While some teachers have the passion and gift of teaching, unfortunately, some fill the role because no one else will. Teachers must have humility and have a teachable spirit themselves. A Sunday school teacher must create a learning environment where the students are eager to listen and learn. Often, the teacher's goal is to get the lesson taught within the allotted time and often forget to engage the students and nurture their desire to learn. Teachers unintentionally dismiss questions they don't understand or can answer, rather than humbly telling the student they do not know, but they will work on finding the answer. Students must have a grounded belief that they know their opinion and objections matter to their teacher to foster genuine learning.

The excuses young adults give for not coming back to church may be misleading. They are more interested in condemning the church to justify their fleshly desires rather than looking at issues objectively. One of the excuses commonly heard at Sunnyside Baptist Church is that most people who go to church are hypocrites. The students who complain about the double standards shown by church members begin radical shifts to their worldly desires as soon as they leave the church. They also recognize that these are the very same people who are leaders within the church. There is also the issue of students who argue against the church because they claim science has disproven the Bible. They do not want to believe or attend a church that is against science. Students have come to think that evolution and the Big Bang Theory are a fact because

it is taught, but both are actually just theories. When these same students try to discuss these issues with their Sunday school teachers, they struggle to offer answers that satisfy them.

These students have an apparent lack of education in fundamental theology and apologetics. When these students are in middle and high school, they do not receive the training they need to enter the secular world when they enter college or the job force. The curriculum given to students is a simple application lesson that teaches good morality and fundamental faith. Students crave and are looking for more. They need more so they can defend their faith when it is challenged. The church has sent students into battle with no armor and no training to defend against the world's blasphemy. Churches need to do a better job teaching students and training them to be disciples of Jesus, who make disciples.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this Doctor of Ministry action research thesis is to educate students at Sunnyside Baptist Church in Kingsport, Tennessee, about theology and apologetics by engaging students before they graduate high school.

The research in this paper is about educating students and their parents. Since there is a lack of understanding of theology and apologetics, they must first learn how to apply everything they learn to further God's Kingdom. Churches need to pay attention to the departure of youth from the church post-graduation and design a plan to combat the issue. If young adults are not sought after, they will continue to leave the church. If the younger generations are not filling the pews now, slowly but eventually, congregations will die off. Parents play an essential role in developing their children's spiritual walk. Often, parents unknowingly limit their teaching so as not to step on the toes of church leaders who have experience teaching children. Often, church leadership forgets that parents need to be encouraged and reminded that while it is suitable for

others to educate their children, the responsibility is theirs. The best advocate for a child is their parents. Students whose education is supported by their parents will have a better chance of retaining information and using it in the future. Christian education should be given the same respect and priority as secular education. Parents must enforce and live out what students learn in the church inside the home.

Therefore, parents should be aware of their role in their child's attendance in church. Parents often feel that attending church should be a choice for their children to make to prevent them from resenting the church later on in life. However, when it comes to secular education and sports, parents tell their students they must attend. This nonverbally communicates that attending church is optional. There is no urgency for learning about Christ and serving within a church. Parents are the first line in teaching their children about Christ. "You shall teach them diligently to your sons 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 up" (Deut 6:7). Parents are commanded to disciple their children. While many parents choose to send their child to a secular school and Sunday school, ultimately, they remain responsible for their child's education. If the church is not meeting the child's educational needs, parents are commanded by scripture to rise up and fill in the gap for the sake of these young teen Christians. Without the support and involvement of parents, it is exceedingly difficult to educate young Christians. A partnership between church leaders and parents offers the most success beyond high school graduation in the student's education.

For those who do not have parental support or involvement, there should be a group of spiritually mature adults to step in and help disciple those who are spiritual orphans. Several students come to church with a friend or on their own because their parents are unbelievers.

These students have no family support and, therefore, are even more reliant on their friends and the church's leaders. These students benefit from being spiritually adopted by people willing to pour into them. It would be optimal to make a ministry specifically for these students to hold them accountable and receive encouragement. Students who are on their own will have a better opportunity for discipleship and remaining in the Word if they have mentors in the church.

While it is essential to have parental involvement with youth and their Christian education, there is also a need for well-trained teachers equipped to handle the students' inquisitive nature. Young believers must learn the importance of discipleship through theology and apologetics. These concepts solve many problems when it comes to students leaving the church. The teachers who never stop learning make themselves the ideal teachers for youth students. Unfortunately, teachers either have no desire or time to continue to learn, and some do not understand how it can benefit the student. Furthermore, a community for teachers can hold each other accountable, challenge and encourage each other. Unfortunately, many Sunday school teachers only spend a few minutes a week planning their lessons and usually only read off whatever curriculum they are using at the time. Teachers should know theological doctrines and learn to ask complex questions that require complex answers to prepare for their inquisitive students.

### **Basic Assumptions**

The research in this paper is to give the most objective data based on research, observation, and interviews. However, some assumptions can be made. The first assumption in this study is the honesty of the people who are being interviewed. There is no accurate way to guarantee that each person will answer truthfully. The study will provide answers anonymously, but there may be distrust in some who are participating. The second assumption is that each

person interviewed is the age which they claim. Finally, this study believes that everyone's recollection of their past is correct. While this paper assumes all responses are accurate, it is easy for people to remember past experiences differently than reality.

### **Definitions**

While some of the following words are familiar, the definitions of these words must be explained to understand the research thesis. Each of these words has a specific context surrounding the understanding behind them. The words referenced in this thesis use these definitions in the way they are defined below.

1. Apologetics – Defending the Christian faith with reasoned arguments.
2. Gospel – The Good News. All humans are sinners and deserve eternal life in hell. God made way for eternal life by sending His son Jesus to suffer and die on the cross for sins and then be buried. Jesus then was resurrected from the dead overpowering death and sin. Jesus shows that all who believe will have eternal life.
3. Morals – A standard of behavior that is objectively deemed suitable by the creator God of the universe.
4. Theology – The study of the nature of God.
5. Primary theology – Theology that is required for salvation within the context of Christianity. However, when discussing primary theologies per denomination, these can change. For example, The Baptist church requires baptism by water to be obedient to the Lord. Other denominations disagree.
6. Secondary theology – Theology that is not required for salvation within the context of Christianity. However, when discussing secondary theologies per denomination, these

can change. For example, some Baptist Churches believe end-times theology to be premillennial and pretribulation.

7. Doctrine – Beliefs about theology that Christians form and adopt.
8. Watered Down – This phrase is used to depict something that has been diluted.

### **Limitations**

While this study attempts to be as objective and accurate as possible, there are still limitations to the research that are out of the author's control. The first limitation noted is that people may not participate. Researched individuals may deny wanting to participate. A lack of diverse participants will affect the research results. Another limitation is the integrity of the participants. Some may choose to be dishonest for various reasons which would taint the research. There is also no way to control participants who may respond based on emotional responses that could affect the data. If one becomes upset during their interview, they may give a biased response because they may think emotionally instead of rationally. The research will show whether there is a lack of theology and apologetics among young adults, but it cannot explain all reasons why young adults leave the church. Despite each of these limitations, the reader will still be able to make a reasonable conclusion based on the research conducted.

### **Delimitations**

The delimitations of this research paper are the limits of the study bestowed by the author. The first delimitation is the group of people that is researched within the church. The individuals researched will be college students in their undergrad and young people early in their career to document the transition from high school to adult life and their relationship with the church. The research will also expand to the parents of undergraduate students. Gathering information from parents will increase the amount of objective data for this research paper.

Another delimitation of this paper is that the research will only be based on the students at or from Sunnyside Baptist Church in Kingsport, Tennessee. While there are other churches in the area, only Sunnyside Baptist Church will be included in this study to narrow down the root issue influencing young people leaving the church. In addition, the observation window of this research project is a delimitation. This research project took two years to implement the intervention and observe students. However, a complete analysis would take six to twelve years because those who graduate could be observed with a full six years in the implementation project. Students will only have an opportunity to offer their opinion on the topic and how the proposed change may affect the outcome for future students. Finally, there will be a limitation on the reasons students may be leaving. This paper only looks at the effects of theology and apologetics within the church. This paper does not reflect students' issues of rebellion.

### **Thesis Statement**

If the church changes how it teaches students in apologetics, the students at Sunnyside Baptist Church in Kingsport, Tennessee, may remain involved in their church or join another church closer to their college or occupation after high school graduation.

The students at Sunnyside Baptist Church need to be pursued. Currently, the education of teenage students is severely lacking. Students ranging from twelve to eighteen years old who receive a deeper Christian education outside the Bible would help them remain involved in the church after high school graduation. The church needs young adults to sustain the quality of education in the church. A significant gap between teenagers to adults in their late thirties is a problem that will hurt the church in the next couple of decades. If churches want to remain and grow, there needs to be a change in how outreach and education are done for teenagers and young adults.

Teenagers work through various challenges as they receive a public education from middle school through college. If Sunnyside Baptist Church delays or does not teach theology and apologetics to middle and high school students, they will likely not attend church when they become young adults. Students in middle school should begin to learn life application of the Bible. There should be primary theological teaching and basic apologetic training. While the church should be careful about overwhelming the students at a young age, no one should be afraid of teaching them theology and apologetics, even if they are basic for younger ages.

Students leave the church because they lack a theological and apologetic understanding of their relationship with God. Also, they have not been taught or trained to defend their faith when it is challenged. While it is up to the Holy Spirit to change hearts, that does not negate the church's responsibility and educate the young Christians. Sunday school teachers and other leaders at Sunnyside Baptist Church should be prepared to answer challenging questions a student may have or be willing to find the answer for the student. These questions are valid, yet teachers unintentionally dismiss the student's question. As a result, the students do not feel comfortable asking questions and seeking a deeper understanding of scripture and God. These unanswered questions reside in the young adults' hearts as doubt and can instill a lack of confidence in the church regarding the real questions. Unfortunately, this indirectly communicates that even the church leaders do not completely understand God, the Bible, or the faith.

Sunnyside Baptist Church cannot sustain the church without having young adults a part of the community. So many young adults are falling away and not returning; it will eventually destroy the church. There will not be much of the church family without the younger generation in a couple of decades. Those who have grown up in the church do not want to change the

established strategy despite its ineffectiveness. This strategy may have worked a few decades ago, but it is no longer enough to sustain the church in an exceedingly secular world.

## **Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework**

### **Literature Review**

Over the last few decades, there has been an increase in senior high school and college students who have stopped attending church regularly. These students have several diverse excuses to explain their absence from the church. While some are understandable, others seem to be indulgent excuses. The exodus of our youth from the church is slowly becoming a discussion point amongst church leadership. Recently, there have become several sources on this topic; they attribute the decline in attendance to a lack of parental involvement. Parents are naturally role models for our children, but more than being an example, children need their parents to share their faith and knowledge with them and teach them how to follow Christ. There is also a disconnect within the Christian education system, between the goals of the curriculum and the results. Unfortunately, by the time many students get to high school, they only have a basic understanding of Bible stories; but they lack an understanding of the theological foundations and relevance in those Bible stories. The need for better Christian education correlates to the church's goals and responsibilities for its people.

Moreover, there are many complexities in determining what everyone's role is and in what capacity they are to serve within that role when it comes to youth ministry, but one thing that can be agreed upon is that everyone has a role. Finally, there is the problem of the student not wanting to be conformed to Jesus. They do whatever they want. The only way they can be free from discipline is to reinforce the doubts of their relationship with Jesus.

## Losing Youth

After researching literature on youth ministry, there are apparent issues in the church that need to be addressed. Churches across the United States are seeing an exodus of young adult students from the church. Ken Ham, the author of several books on apologetics and youth ministry, wrote the book *Already Gone*. The book's premise is that of the students in youth ministry and even children's ministry who currently attend a church service, about two-thirds of those students are already emotionally and spiritually absent from the church. While research shows that many youths will leave the church between their last years in high school or their first years in college, Ham posits that these students were already gone before they physically left the church.<sup>9</sup> Mark Devries points out that more than half of students who attend church as children will leave the church before they reach the age of seventeen.<sup>10</sup> Devries agrees with Ham that even after the completion of high school, students' attendance will continue to decline. He says that only one-third will remain in the church out of all the students who attend church regularly as a child.<sup>11</sup> The absence of youth is staggering. Research reflects that about sixty-one percent of young adults who were regular members of a church in high school are now avoiding the church and showing no interest in the faith or actively reading their Bibles.<sup>12</sup> It is scary to think that students active in the church will soon leave the church for various reasons. While the reasons students may give are not a part of this theme, they will be thoroughly examined in other themes.

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<sup>9</sup> Ken Ham, C. Britt. Beemer, and Todd A. Hillard, *Already Gone: Why Your Kids Will Quit Church and What You Can Do to Stop It* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2009), 22.

<sup>10</sup> Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry: Why Most Youth Ministry Doesn't Last and What Your Church Can Do about It* (Surry Hills, NSW, Australia: Read How You Want, 2010), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>12</sup> Ham, *Already Gone*, 24.

Ham makes excellent points in his book; he takes the time to show research as well as personal experience.

On the other hand, while some students desire to continue their relationship with Christ, they are afraid to challenge professors and classmates. Students should be encouraged to challenge others as long as they are graceful and respectful to whoever they are addressing and whoever may be listening.<sup>13</sup> Due to the commonly used biblical curriculum in many churches, students are fairly ignorant of basic Bible teachings. A detailed assessment of the current Lifeway curriculum will be presented later in Theoretical Foundations. Barna states that only one-third of students believe that the Bible is completely accurate in its instructions.<sup>14</sup> Barna also says that while conventional churches acknowledge students' exodus, they also are partly responsible for the challenges of the students. While churches tend to agree that the decline in youth and young adult membership is a problem, they are either unwilling or lost on addressing and resolving the problem. Barna continues his argument by looking at parental responsibilities to the student; he says that even if the parent does everything right, it does not guarantee the parent's/church's desired result. Students must and will make a choice to stay committed to the church for themselves.<sup>15</sup>

The mass exodus of young adults leaving the church is no surprise to some church leaders. According to John MacArthur, churches have recently been attempting to entertain their members rather than teach them how to worship and make disciples.<sup>16</sup> While this contributes to

<sup>13</sup> Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 152.

<sup>14</sup> George Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting: Raising Your Kids to Become Spiritual Champions* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Incorporated, 2010), 27.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 30-33.

<sup>16</sup> John MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel: When the Church Becomes like the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010), 47.

the decline in student membership, surprisingly, churches do not have a sense of urgency to address the problem. David Kinnaman says that the disengagement of teenagers hurts the church because it creates a deficit of young talent, energy, and leadership.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, this is also exacerbated by those church members who do not respect and value the younger generations.

Furthermore, in addition to losing youth, bringing them back also presents a challenge because many young adults do not feel Christians' intentions are sincere. Many young adults do not feel like Christians show genuine interest in them as individuals.<sup>18</sup> They believe Christians only reach out to them because it is mandated by scripture, but they lack love and compassion. Statistics show that most teenagers who consider themselves Christians will leave the church within ten years. While these teenagers are taught to have an emotional relationship with God, relying on an emotional relationship with God is not sustainable long term. Emotion cannot and is not the foundation of salvation. Kinnaman also discussed emotions and relationships; while they are an essential part, the relationship will crumble if emotions are the foundation.<sup>19</sup> Many churches unknowingly steer away from change and preserve tradition. According to Alister McGrath, the older adults (50 plus years) who grew up in church make it more about nostalgia rather than using what was learned from the past to influence the present.<sup>20</sup> Apologetics allows people to appreciate their Christian faith. The older adults want students to hear the familiar Bible stories but neglect to teach the biblical context and theological meaning of each story. McGrath says that apologetics can help believers identify with their Christianity rather than merely claiming their beliefs. In addition, many Christians, especially youth, feel profound guilt

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<sup>17</sup> David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity-- and Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 17.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 58

<sup>20</sup> Alister McGrath, *Mere Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2016), 30.

from the sin in their life and leave the church because they have not resolved their relationship with Jesus.<sup>21</sup>

While there are many excuses students may use for not attending or participating in church, there is research on the students who remain. Previous research shows that when parents attend service regularly, it is more likely that the child will continue to attend in their adulthood. While they may rebel or fall out of the practice of regular attendance at one point, the majority will return. However, the permanent apostasy of youth from the church has increased over the past twenty-five years. Many of the children who stop coming do so because, as they age, their parents stop requiring them to attend services.<sup>22</sup> There is a significant gap in churches between high school graduates and young adults. While many churches recognize the gap, very few pay attention to the problem.<sup>23</sup> Andrew Root holds church leaders and their churches accountable for their negligence to this growing problem. The loss of youth has a lot to do with their views about the Bible, and examining students at a young age and then later as young adults can be a litmus test for a true believer and who is not.<sup>24</sup> Losing youth is an epidemic that must be addressed by the believers, and saying, “we have always done it this way” is a neglectful excuse to allow youth to continue in apostasy.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 47-50.

<sup>22</sup> Roger Dudley, "Youth Religious Commitment over Time: A Longitudinal Study of Retention." *Review of Religious Research* 41, no. 1 (1999): 110-21, accessed December 2, 2020, <http://www.doi.org/10.2307/3512430.111>.

<sup>23</sup> Wesley Black. "Stopping the Dropouts: Guiding Adolescents Toward a Lasting Faith Following High School Graduation." *Christian Education Journal* 5, no. 1 (Spring, 2008): 28-46, <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Fstopping-dropouts-guiding-adolescents-toward%2Fdocview%2F205462014%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12085>, 43.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 14.

## Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in a child's Christian walk is indispensable. A parent who requires their child through encouragement to attend weekly services is more likely to shape their child to remain in the church or return after rebelling. In addition, Ham states that children would greatly benefit if their parents would teach them in elementary and middle school to defend their faith. Students who do not have a basic understanding of apologetics are missing the roots needed to protect and defend their faith and will likely fall away once they are in college.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, parents have entrusted the duty of discipleship to youth pastors and Sunday school teachers. Furthermore, now that parents have relinquished the responsibility of teaching their children, students are only getting a fraction of the apologetic education needed to be prepared for what they will face in college.<sup>26</sup> College is a difficult time for students, and parents need to recognize this when they are young rather than nearer to their upcoming high school graduation. Therefore, it is the parent's responsibility to equip their children to love and obey God; discipling children is a must for parents. While parents can receive help from pastors and friends and are encouraged to do so, they still are the first line of defense for any student struggling with their faith.<sup>27</sup> Barna also agrees that the role of parents is to be active in their students' spiritual lives at an early age. However, while it is the parent's role to disciple, the results of a student's walk with Jesus will be between the student and God.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ham, *Already Gone*, 91.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>27</sup> Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington, and Robert Emerson Coleman, *DiscipleShift Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 15.

<sup>28</sup> George Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions: Why Children Should Be Your Church's #1 Priority* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 26.

Research and statistics are essential for finding out trends for students and the relation to their parents. According to Pew research, a parent's religious preference is usually inherited by the student. For instance, if the parent is an atheist, the child will most likely be an atheist. It is difficult for a child to become religious if the parent does not have a religion.<sup>29</sup> This statistic seems obvious, but it is vital to note that it should change how the Gospel is shared with students who do not have a religious background. The relationship between students and parents is also significant; usually, they place the same priority on religion as each other does. Seventy-three percent of youth share their parent's ideals on the importance of religion in their lives. Furthermore, it is rare for students to attend a church service without their parents. Another critical research fact from Pew is that two-thirds of students actively serving in the church do so alongside their parents. The majority of students will not take the initiative to decide to attend church on their own.<sup>30</sup>

Commitment to a religious organization is usually high when parents are actively dedicated and serving. Therefore, parents naturally transfer their beliefs to their students when their relationship is positive and interactive. The likelihood that teens will remain active in the church if these three things are present (committed parents, transfer of beliefs, good relationship).<sup>31</sup> While it is human nature to rebel, it is less likely that teens will rebel if they are relationally close with their parents. Furthermore, it is also expected if teens rebel, they will return to a relationship with Jesus.<sup>32</sup> In addition, it is imperative for the church to partner with

<sup>29</sup> Jeff Diamant and Elizabeth Podrebarac Sciupac, "10 Key Findings about the Religious Lives of U.S. Teens and Their Parents," Pew Research Center, September 10, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/09/10/10-key-findings-about-the-religious-lives-of-u-s-teens-and-their-parents>.

<sup>30</sup> Diamant and Sciupac, "10 Key Findings."

<sup>31</sup> Dudley, "Youth Religious Commitment over Time," 111.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 112-113.

parents in teaching the students to make good decisions through discipleship. Students need their parents to be a part of their religious lives, or else they will not have a sustainable faith after high school.<sup>33</sup>

### The Need for Christian Education

There are many churches that use similar curriculums with it comes to student ministry. Many students are bored with what they are learning because it is so primitive. While most Sunday school classes will teach biblical centered lessons, the students do not learn the theological foundations and how it fits with the rest of the Bible and relates to real life. The lessons are too simple and do not prepare students for growing up in an ever-increasing secular world.<sup>34</sup> The standard student curriculum does not teach on biblical authority, and many students are missing out on these lessons within the home as well. Students are less likely to believe what the Bible says if they do not see it as relevant or authoritative. They have many questions about scripture, and things often go unanswered, which leaves students frustrated and more likely to leave the church.<sup>35</sup> A big part of learning Biblical authority involves apologetics. Unfortunately, most Christians in church either lack apologetic knowledge themselves, so they are unequipped to teach the younger generations in this regard. In every church, there are a few people that are “brainiacs” when it comes to studying the Bible, but these members are rare. Due to the lack of a foundation in biblical theology and apologetics, some students are confused in understanding scripture's absolute truth. This confusion grows into doubts that they try to ignore, only for it to hurt them later when they are in college or the workforce.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the average church does

<sup>33</sup> Black. "Stopping the Dropouts," 28.

<sup>34</sup> Ham, *Already Gone*, 96-97.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 101.

not seem to recognize the lack of spiritual education as a factor that is accelerating the youth exodus. Instead, they focus on enhancing the praise and worship music and the main worship service itself to be more contemporary and multi-generational. While their goals seem to attract people to attend the church, they do not cause people to serve, make disciples, and learn all Jesus has commanded.<sup>37</sup> The older generation of Christians teaches the younger generations as if they live in a religiously friendly environment like Jews of the Old Testament rather than the skeptical Greeks of the time.<sup>38</sup> Ham says the church teaches students that they have no spiritual challenges outside of the church in the real world while living real life. Teens need to be taught how to defend their faith and fight against doubts they may encounter throughout the week. The other problem with student education is the quality of the teachers. Sunday school teachers have the heart to serve and educate the younger generation but are usually not qualified or trained in teaching. Recent research has shown that the average Sunday school teacher does not spend much time studying for their lessons each week, which is detrimental to the student's Christian education.<sup>39</sup> The education of the students should be one of the top priorities for both the teacher and the church leadership. It is great to teach them good morals, but theology and apologetics are the foundations of good spiritual character.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, it is not enough to research the education of students at church, but also, students should be assessed to determine how much theology they know, use, and relate to their lives outside of the church. According to Barna, students admit they are confused about many theological beliefs. Christian students have difficulty understanding world views and belief

<sup>37</sup> Ham, *Already Gone*, 110.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>39</sup> Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, 44.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 53.

systems that are not theirs.<sup>41</sup> In addition, believers do not possess a solid Christian education because it is not being emphasized from the pulpit. According to MacArthur, there is a weakness in the pulpit. Pastors are hesitant to preach on Hell and are afraid to speak on the exclusivity of God's Word.<sup>42</sup> All Christians would benefit from being taught how to defend their faith at a young age. Apologetics is not meant to convert non-believers or evangelize but to fight away the personal doubt of people who are already saved. Defending the faith is reliant on the grace of God; He is the only one that can heal and renew people.<sup>43</sup> Apologetics is meant to be used as a defense, not offense.

While there is great importance in teaching teenagers at a young age, not everyone grows up in a Christian home. This hinders a student's spiritual growth that is out of the church's control; however, they still need to be aware of low parental involvement within their youth's Christian education and how it can be overlooked by detached leaders leading youth ministries.<sup>44</sup> In addition to including apologetics into their student curriculum, students would also benefit from being taught spiritual disciplines, so they can learn to have a relationship with God that extends more than a Sunday morning or a Wednesday night.<sup>45</sup> According to Geiger, the Wednesday night worship service should teach students practical Bible lessons that can be applied to their daily lives.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, the growing trend in youth ministries across the

<sup>41</sup> Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting*, 28.

<sup>42</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 49.

<sup>43</sup> McGrath, *Mere Apologetics*, 43, 45.

<sup>44</sup> Black. "Stopping the Dropouts," 28.

<sup>45</sup> Eric Geiger, and Jeff Borton. *Simple Student Ministry: A Clean Process for Strategic Youth Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 49.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 89.

country is to include more games into their service, which distracts and takes time away from studying the Word and learning to apply God's Word to their lives.

Additionally, older church members tend to feel uncomfortable or even intimidated with the challenging questions of the younger generations. This is a byproduct of the changing times; when the older generation were students, times were different and not as challenging for Christians as they are now. Therefore, while the older generation can recognize that today's students are growing up in a different culture than they did, they cannot relate to them, their challenging questions, or their inquisitive nature. While the church must be an environment where everyone feels supported to share their hearts and burdens and feel comfortable asking any question regarding the faith or the Bible, many Sunday school teachers and youth pastors are ill-equipped to answer these questions. Church members that serve as teachers unintentionally tend to deny or avoid any alleged contradiction simply because they are not confident in their ability or knowledge to answer the question, thus hurting the student's faith in Jesus.<sup>47</sup> If the church can instill a desire for the younger generation to dig deep into scripture, it will benefit as a whole, but the next generation will more than likely keep digging deep in scripture.

Students should realize by the time they graduate, studying the Bible is more than learning about the Bible; it is a way to see God, and He reveals Himself, which has been recorded in the Bible.<sup>48</sup> Too often, churches end up preaching on Biblical truths while never teaching students how to effectively discover those truths for themselves in their Bibles. The most effective lessons are those that incite an emotional response or can be tied to a memory; however, the education that students receive is not adhering to their memories and does not

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<sup>47</sup> Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, 36.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 55.

create an emotional response. Moreover, students will confess their commitment to Jesus, but they have not honed the skill in articulating scripture. While most students can usually quote scripture, they cannot recall the context of the verse, who said it, or its meaning. Root also reiterates the importance of interpreting scripture rather than merely possessing the knowledge. Possessing knowledge is good, but it does not assimilate them into faith. Scripture must be interpreted and then applied.<sup>49</sup> Christian education should be taken more seriously if the church wants to survive another century. The survival of the church is imperative not only to carry out The Great Commission but also for discipleship, accountability and fellowship of believers.

### The Church Goals and Responsibility

Parental involvement and student instruction are essential parts of the church's responsibility to make disciples. The younger generation is naturally curious, and they may ask more questions than teachers and parents have answers. This author does not discriminate against leadership and regular churchgoers when referencing the church's responsibility. The church as a whole must be responsible because all Christians are called to disciple. The church's responsibility is to work with teachers and parents to ensure they are adequately equipped for students' challenging questions. Teachers should be ready to teach whatever age group they are assigned and communicate with them in the best way possible.<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, many churches put together programs for entertainment rather than preparing students for college.<sup>51</sup>

It is easy to act like a Christian when Christians are around other Christians. However, it is more challenging to practice Christian disciplines and morals when Christians are around

<sup>49</sup> Root, *Unpacking Scripture*, 14-16.

<sup>50</sup> Ham, *Already Gone*, 48.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 32.

unbelievers. Preparing students for what they may encounter in the secular world once they start living on their own is paramount to their spiritual health and the success of the future church. If the standard Christian programs continue to operate in a way that uses entertainment to draw students in and then teach simplified Bible stories, they will likely be a stumbling block in the future for youth and children.<sup>52</sup> By reshaping the structure of Sunday school, it will ask more of teachers, but the church will grow in quality.<sup>53</sup> Suppose the church prioritizes the education and discipleship of students without parents holding teens accountable for their spiritual maturation. In that case, it will be increasingly difficult for the church to successfully work with students only one or two days a week.<sup>54</sup> Developing a healthy spiritual life with a strong foundation in scripture for the students requires a partnership between parents and the church. Placing more emphasis on the quality of church members versus the quantity of church members would benefit all generations, not only the younger generation. Too many churches are only worried about raising their numbers by catering to society's viewpoints and keeping members happy. It is well known that America is becoming a nation not united by one common faith in God. If the church could recognize America's depravity, the church could profoundly impact society.<sup>55</sup> According to Root, youth are often told to accept difficult biblical truths rather than to offer a theological or apologetic response to the topic. However, some students will not understand the Bible if no explanation is forthcoming. Students would benefit from being taught biblical interpretations and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>53</sup> Putman, *DiscipleShift*, 12.

<sup>54</sup> Barna, *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions*, 92.

<sup>55</sup> Paul, Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 2011), 60.

how to interpret the Bible. The church (older Christians) wants their youth to possibly read the biblical text rather than actively interpreting the Bible.<sup>56</sup>

Entertainment has become the center of today's culture, so understandably, churches feel compelled to entertain as well. Most churches attempting to entertain realize they are competing against the rest of the world. The more the church moves into a technological world, the more distractions that turn people away from Jesus.<sup>57</sup> MacArthur explains that a market-driven ministry is understandable, but it caters to people who desire to worship themselves. Of the church members drawn to a church by its entertainment and recreational aspect, the majority of them are only willing to worship as long as it does not interrupt their lifestyle or challenge them to change their current lifestyle. Unfortunately, this often goes unrecognized by the church leadership; they start noticing the size and believe their popularity is a barometer for success.<sup>58</sup> There may be a direct correlation between church size and a lack of sermons that challenge individuals. According to MacArthur, a large church size can be concerning because it is evidence that the church's teaching is more attractional than missional.<sup>59</sup> Of course, taking church members through scripture on a deeper level may deter some, but the people who stay will be in a much better position to grow in their relationship with Jesus.<sup>60</sup> Churches will do well for a little while preaching simple sermons, but there will ultimately be spiritual failure in their church members.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Root, *Unpacking Scripture in Youth Ministry*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 30.

<sup>58</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 34-35.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 145.

The church is responsible for making disciples; scripture commands that for all believers.

One of the areas where churches begin disciple-making is within the youth ministry.

Unfortunately, when the results cannot be tangibly seen, they may blame the youth pastor or think more ministers need to be on staff. For some reason, churches do not want to deal with their problems head-on.<sup>62</sup> Youth ministries across the nation are valued and loved; however, genuine investment in the youth is minimal. People like to talk about the youth and how much they love them, but their actions do not reflect it.<sup>63</sup> While youth pastors are usually genuinely interested and passionate for the students, some feel more like spiritual headhunters, merely looking for people to “get saved.”

Furthermore, the older generation would do well to remember their adolescent experiences when working with youth. The adolescent years can be difficult regardless of the decade. However, it is increasingly difficult for youth to be Christians in the present day because of the recent changes in society.<sup>64</sup> Changes in society are easily observed in schools, where prayer has been taken out in the past twenty years, and students are ostracized for bringing their Bibles. Due to this, instilling a commitment and a passion for Jesus into the youth is paramount. By developing hunger for Jesus in their younger years, youth are more likely to retain a relationship with Jesus when they graduate and move away to college.<sup>65</sup> Also, students should start cultivating their servanthood during their time in youth ministry, and the best way to do that is to help them discover their spiritual gifts. Teaching students about their spiritual gifts is a great way to show tangible spiritual formation. Encouraging students to serve in areas of their strength

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<sup>62</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 18.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 31

<sup>64</sup> Dudley, "Youth Religious Commitment over Time," 110.

<sup>65</sup> Black, "Stopping the Dropouts," 30.

will foster an environment for passion to develop. Once spiritual gifts have been determined, creating a leadership team that allows students to serve while taking ownership of their ministry is recommended.<sup>66</sup>

The majority of ministries tend to keep to themselves and fellowship among themselves; while this is understandable, it does the church a disservice. This is a disservice because it is robbing the younger generations from learning and gaining wisdom the older generation. By encouraging multi-generational fellowship and service, youth will begin to appreciate community outreach and the other ministries in the church.<sup>67</sup> The church comprises of many different ministries, and each church member should have a moment to learn about the other ministries and age groups of the church. Also, it would allow students to serve and develop meaningful relationships with the older generations; this strategy will also benefit discipleship.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, with the rapid growth of technology in the prevailing culture, the church has more tools than decades before. Nowadays, the services and programs can be larger and integrate various media/technological components. While there is nothing wrong with these events, they have the potential to subconsciously teach students only to look for God to move at significant events rather than in their day-to-day lives.<sup>69</sup> Overusing programs could condition students to worship in the same style as their youth ministry. Should these events decrease, change, or if they visited another church without similar events or worship style, it could pose an insurmountable obstacle for the youth to overcome.<sup>70</sup> While being technologically advanced is

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>67</sup> Megan G Brown, "Relationships Matter: The Impact of Relationships Upon Emerging Adult Retention," *Christian Education Journal* 13, no. 1 (Spring, 2016), 11.

<sup>68</sup> Brown, "Relationships Matter," 12.

<sup>69</sup> Greiger, Simple Student Ministry, 22.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 38.

not a bad thing, churches need to be cautious of over-programming the youth ministry so much that it numbs students to the quiet and subtle ways God can work in their lives.

### Literature Review Conclusion

The church is experiencing a mass exodus of young adult church members. The catalyst behind their exodus is a complicated one but not unchangeable. Firstly, students can be overlooked while not receiving the love, support, and respect they need from the church. The Christian education they receive in Sunday School and on Wednesday night should be well thought out, and the teacher also needs to be prepared to be challenged as they ask relevant questions to gain a deeper understanding of the lessons. Youth are inquisitive and need to be respected so that they feel like they are important to the church. Secondly, a healthy and mutual partnership between the church and parents is paramount in educating and discipling the students. Fostering parental accountability will help decrease the exodus of students from the church. Thirdly, churches with well-established roles and responsibilities for the staff and its members would eliminate the potential for confusion, strengthen the mission and achieve the church's goals. Those responsibilities extend from training teachers to training parents to disciple their teens.

### Theological Foundations

Diversity among the body of Christ is part of the church's beauty. There is a place for everyone, and everyone is given a spiritual gift at the moment of salvation for use in service to the Kingdom of God. This includes the younger generation; however, this can be easily forgotten. In Matthew's gospel, some children were coming to meet Jesus. However, the disciples saw the children and told them to leave. But Jesus said, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matt

19:14). Sadly, genuine love, support, and service for the youth of the church often only seems to exist in small circles. There is a direct correlation between the ability to love and show respect to all people; without one, there cannot be the other. Furthermore, emphasizing humility while working with students will further cultivate genuine relationships. While students may lack experience, they still have good perceptions and opinions. One aspect that the older generation can show love and support to youth is by listening to them when they express these.

As stated previously, tension can exist between the older and the younger generation not for any specific reason other than misunderstanding each other; this is where humility is needed. If there is no humility, there cannot be love and respect. Both generations are guilty of this, the younger generations as much as the older. While it is never stated outright, in the author's experience there is an underlying ideology that those that tithe more than others should have more input or that their input should be weighted to have more meaning. Implicitly, this offers the impression that the input and opinions of the youth do not and will not be equally considered the same as certain members of the older generation. However, this attitude is far from what the Bible teaches. The Bible is clear on how important the younger generation is to ministry; they are the future church. Isaiah says, "All your sons will be taught of the LORD; and the well-being of your sons will be great."(Isaiah 54:13). If the adult Christians do nothing or just the bare minimum to inspire and love the youth, there will be no church in the years to come.

Paul's letter to Timothy encourages Timothy to be a good pastor and can be applied to pastors across the United States, both young and old. God calls men of all ages from all walks of life to ministry but, there is something to be said for wisdom and experience. There is no doubt someone with age has learned more lessons from the experiences they have witnessed and walked through. However, it is also essential to see the power and will of the Almighty Creator,

God of the Universe. Just because someone is young does not mean that God won't use them as a vessel for His Kingdom. Paul says to Timothy, "Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe." (1 Ti 4:12). While contextually this is for a Pastor, the same principle can be applied to all believers. Those of the younger generation should not allow the negativity of others to affect them but, they should prove themselves above reproach and become an example of a Christian for all people. This concept can also be applied to the older generation as well. It is a biblical understanding that no one should look down on someone's youthfulness.<sup>71</sup> The older must respect the younger, and the younger must respect the older. Unfortunately, this is an evident struggle for both sides. Humility is currently a great need within the church. There is so much more to learn and do if people would unite under humility.

Students often hear adults in church say things like, "The youth are so great. We just love them so much." However, when it comes time to put that 'love' into action, through serving the youth ministry or hearing the youth's opinion, the love goes out the door. Students would greatly benefit from seeing the respect and passion adults have for them expressed nonverbally. "Honor all people, love the brotherhood, fear God, honor the king." (1 Pe 2:17). No matter who or how old someone is, they should always be respected and loved.<sup>72</sup> This is a biblical mandate. Everyone desires and needs to be heard to feel love and respected; youth are no different. Also, just like everyone else, they will leave places where they do not feel loved and respected.

Moreover, it is well known that part of being an adolescent teen is learning how to show

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<sup>71</sup> H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., "1 Timothy," The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 71.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, vol. 37, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 132.

respect despite the circumstances, and while they are learning how to do this, they can be disrespectful. Understandably, adults struggle with the attitudes of some teens and, in return, do not provide them with respect. However, not providing an example of respect hinders youth from further learning how to respect others.<sup>73</sup> The truth of the matter is that it is a false understanding that only those who show respect will be respected. The truth is Christians should always give respect whether they are treated poorly or not. Due to the fact that adults have years of experience, they should be the ones to teach the young people that respect is given whether it is deserved or not. If the attitude is, “you have to give respect to get it,” then obviously, no one will ever be respected because the respect initiation must start somewhere. God mandates that all Christians must respect each other of all ages through the act of love, including the youth.

Christians are hungry for the Word of God, and they are thirsty for a relationship with Him. However, in present-day society, it is very easy to forget to ‘be still’ amidst the daily bustle of life that that hunger and thirst get ignored. Jesus commanded the eleven disciples after His resurrection to make more disciples. A disciple is a pupil or a learner. In the context of scripture, it is specifically a follower of Jesus.<sup>74</sup> When Jesus told His disciples to follow Him, He specifically wanted their obedience. Once He had their compliance, Jesus wanted the disciples to go out into the community and share what He had taught them. The design of Judeo Christianity is to spread the Gospel through discipleship. Jesus taught His disciples how to make disciples of their own on their own. However, oftentimes churches unknowingly tend to forget about the

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Diana Divecha, “Teenagers Might Have a Problem With Respect But It's Not the One You Think,” Developmental Science (Developmental Science, November 13, 2018), <https://www.developmentalscience.com/blog/2017/11/29/teenagers-might-have-a-problem-with-respect-but-its-not-the-one-you-think>.

<sup>74</sup> Dan Nässelqvist, “Disciple,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

Great Commission and try to lead people to confession rather than discipleship.<sup>75</sup> In addition, making disciples is not the only part of the Great Commission that Jesus commanded; he also said to go out and teach others. Christians must train each other in a way that immerses them in the commandments of Jesus.

After Jesus gave the disciples the Great Commission and told them to go to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth, the disciples watched Jesus rise into the clouds. Luke writes, "...as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them. They also said, 'Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.'" (Acts 1:11) These angels had told the disciples that Jesus would come back but while He is away, to go out and make disciples. However, instead of acting on what Jesus told them, they stood and gazed into the clouds. The church struggles with the very same problem; instead of discipling others and pouring into each other, they are preoccupied with the future and Jesus' return. Jesus says, "For this reason, you also must be ready; for the Son of Man is coming at an hour when you do not think He will." (Matt 24:44) While it is human nature to try to figure out the mystery of the 'rapture' or the Second Coming, it has become a distraction from evangelism and discipleship. There are multiple times in scripture when Jesus tells the disciples that they need to be ready for the Master when He comes. However, it is important to note that 'ready' is an action word; being prepared does not

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<sup>75</sup> Francis Chan, Mark Beuving, and David Platt, *Multiply: Disciples Making Disciples* (Detroit, MI: Christian Large Print, 2013), 32.

mean Christians should stare into the sky and wait; it means they need to go out and make disciples, even if that means getting out of their comfort zones.<sup>76</sup>

There is the misconception that the church is only for adults and simply accommodates children and youth with programs or childcare during the main worship service. This misconception is nonverbally communicated to the younger generations. Most churches have nurseries and other programs designed to teach children about Jesus in another format. While these services and programs are necessary and beneficial, the younger generation needs to be welcomed to worship, learn about the Lord, and feel like part of the church like the older generation. Unfortunately, the integration of so many different programs for the younger generation that are scheduled during the main worship service promotes exclusivity instead of inclusivity. This creates an unintentional division in multi-generational churches. This can be rectified by encouraging the younger generations to serve in the main worship service. For example; youth can run slides, sound, and contribute their musical talents to the worship service. In addition, this model can be cultivated at an even younger age by including young children in the main worship service where they can see the older generation model worship, prayer and service to them. This would further teach children to partake in ministry rather than simply be a part of ministry.

Christianity is about inclusive outreach and discipleship. How can the church disciple and grow if it is unwilling to evaluate itself and change when needed? The disciples had a similar issue in Matthew 24. Some children came to have Jesus pray for them, but the disciples turned them away, assuming that this was not a place for children. Maybe their thinking was that Jesus

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<sup>76</sup> John Calvin and William Pringle, Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 162.

did not have time or maybe His message wasn't intended for children, but Jesus said, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me: for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."(Matthew 19:14) This is an important example for the church to always remember, the children and youth of the church are essential and just as important as everyone else in the church. Their curriculum should not be taken lightly, and the goal should be to train children and youth to be the best Christians they can be and prepare them for life in the secular world. When students go to school, they will be pulled in several different directions, all of which will demand their attention. For this reason, it is crucial for the Christian education of the students to be relatable, impressionable, and effective to firmly root the students in Christ because the time spent in youth ministry is invaluable. As stated before, the students are the church's future; without the younger generation, the church will surely die.

Moreover, the priority of every believer is to their children. Moses commanded the Israelites to teach their children. During biblical times there was no Sunday school or a similar religious education system; children received their biblical training in the home; a child's education was the responsibility of their parents. Unfortunately, nowadays, things are very different; children do not always have parents who are believers, or if they are, they could be new believers themselves. Older believers may not have received sound biblical education either to pass on to their children. In these cases, the church can step in to guide a child's parent in teaching and discipling the child who is now a believer.<sup>77</sup> Biblically, parents are charged with teaching their children about the gospel and modeling the relationship with Jesus. Nowadays, families that model the biblical structure of a family are not as common; in these cases, the

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<sup>77</sup> John Peter Lange, Philip Schaff, et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Proverbs* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 192.

church can provide that instruction for the children. Another reason it is so important to make the most of the worship and Sunday school hours is that it is the only biblical instruction and example some children get all week. It is not enough to lead someone to Jesus, but they must also learn to relate to Him.

In order to build a strong foundation of biblical education, lessons on doctrine that are sound and unwavering are required. Sound doctrine is a healthy doctrine. Paul states it best in his letter to Timothy when he emphasizes the importance of doctrine stating that it is fundamental. Paul's conviction over sound doctrine was that the alternative was diseased.<sup>78</sup> Integrating lessons on the commands of Jesus and biblical principles strengthen the Christian education system. Many church members, both young and old, could benefit from learning about fundamental doctrines that would help maintain their relationship with Christ.

If Christians are not educated in theological doctrine, they will struggle to further their relationship with Jesus. Paul also warns of the consequences of teaching sound doctrine and enforcing it within the church. Some only desire to hear good things in every church. They crave novelty and anything that satisfies their selfish desires.<sup>79</sup> However, Paul writes to Timothy and says, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim 4:3–4). Paul relays to Timothy the importance of being ready to pastor and have good answers for doctrine in any season. Like Timothy’s audience, the present-day church prefers to hear easy and positive sermons, not realizing that their relationship and understanding of Jesus can only deepen

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<sup>78</sup> Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, vol. 34, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 71–72.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 244.

and grow so much by not balancing these sermons out with serious and convicting sermons.

They are lukewarm content people who want the church to be as it was when they were little.<sup>80</sup>

In addition to theology, apologetics is necessary. Peter wrote a letter to the believers who were scattered abroad, in this letter, he writes to encourage believers to show unbelievers their commitment and worship to God. Christians should always be prepared to defend their faith.<sup>81</sup> Defending one's faith can be done in a few different ways. The first way is to protect one's faith from doubt; there is always doubt, which clouds the minds of believers. People can doubt God and the ability that He could forgive every one of their sins, as well as wanting to save everyone from their sins. This alone is a very hard fundamental belief to wrap one's brain around. On the flip side, doubt can enter a person's mind regarding whether they believe it or not. Overcoming self-doubt can be challenging but not impossible.

Secondly, defending one's faith requires other believers' support, fellowship, and encouragement. Sometimes one's faith is challenged simply by miscommunication or poor explanation during a Sunday school lesson or worship service. This is where having fellowship with like-minded believers can be invaluable to share struggles and doubts in an effort to seek clarity. Thirdly, a Christian may encounter an unbeliever asking challenging questions, and without obtaining the tools to defend and explain the faith, these can become stumbling blocks for the believer. If students have learned apologetics, they are more likely to fend off skeptics without causing their faith to falter.

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<sup>80</sup> H. D. M. Spence-Jones, ed., *2 Timothy*, The Pulpit Commentary (London; New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1909), 57.

<sup>81</sup> John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 108–109.

The Bible is clear on the importance of teaching. James realized the importance of education and explained that those who teach would be under stricter judgment (James 3:1). Paul writes to the Ephesian Church and explains the spiritual gift of education, among others, is to equip the saints. Paul is clear on how important teaching is within the church, providing the Christians with the necessary skills and knowledge to build the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-12). In this text, Paul speaks of pastors and teachers; while it is a requirement that pastors are able to teach, this does not mean teachers are qualified to be pastors. Both teachers and pastors must have a talent for interpreting scripture.<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately, not all who teach Sunday school have the gift of teaching or are called to teach but rather are serving to fulfill a position. This is when knowing the spiritual gifts of the church family can be so important; it allows church leadership to encourage members to serve in the areas where God has gifted them. People who have a heart for young people are more likely to reach students because they will see their passion for them and be drawn to it. However, the relationship between the Sunday school teacher and the students can extend outside the classroom by visiting and encouraging students through whatever they may be going through in their walks with Christ. The best teachers are the ones that create a relationship that lasts and impacts that student for a lifetime.

Theology and apologetics are two important concepts for students to learn today. In the Bible, the necessity for understanding doctrine is clearly stated. Doctrine is the basis for both theology and apologetics and will ensure students have a strong foundation in their faith and biblical understanding. Unfortunately, many churches are teaching false doctrine, making it difficult to discern for those who were never taught about doctrine as a student. The problem with weak doctrine is that it weakens the student's theological foundation. When they graduate

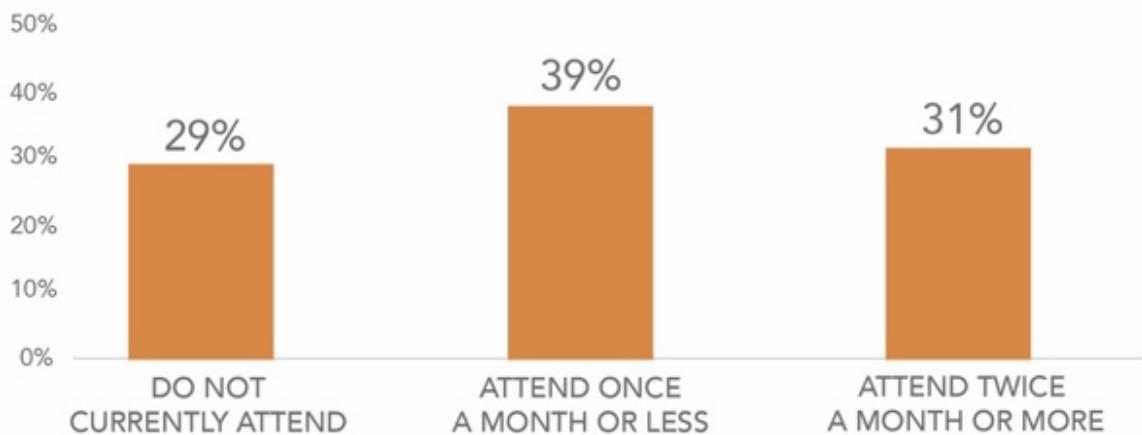
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<sup>82</sup> John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 280.

high school and enter the workforce, they realize they have a weak foundation when their beliefs are challenged, and doubt begins to set in and ultimately leave the church. In addition to doctrine, lessons on apologetics are also weak within students' education. This author has observed that students are taught to have blind faith; however, blind faith is not sustainable when challenged or doubted. Teachers like to paraphrase Jesus and encourage the students to have a child-like faith (Matthew 18:2-4). This researcher has witnessed teachers and leaders using this to tell students to have blind faith. Jesus tells His disciples to have faith like a child, but this does not mean Christians should have a child-like education in the Bible and faith. Educating youth is not taken seriously enough in churches; many Sunday school teachers educate students on basic morals and theology. The mass exodus of students and young adults from church that is being witnessed across the nation tells us that it is not enough to keep students engaged and equipped to combat the secular world. According to the chart below (Figure 2), students are less and less involved in the church.

## Current church attendance among those who dropped out between ages 18-22

Among young adults (ages 23-30) who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school:



LifeWayResearch.com

Figure 2. Church attendance: Ages 18-22<sup>83</sup>

### Theoretical Foundations

Sunnyside Baptist Church in Kingsport, Tennessee, is currently using “Bible Studies for Life” by Lifeway for their student curriculum. Lifeway has a scope and sequence for this curriculum. The site claims, “As kids grow, their understanding of foundational truths grows with them.” While Lifeway does offer a curriculum for adults, only the children and student curriculums will be discussed. The scope and sequence begin with lessons for young preschoolers, middle preschoolers, older preschoolers, younger kids, middle kids, preteens, middle schoolers, high schoolers. The preschool lessons teach children that God loves everyone, including themselves, even when they make wrong choices. The elementary-aged students’

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<sup>83</sup> “Most Teenagers Drop out of Church When They Become Young Adults,” Lifeway Research, August 11, 2021, <https://lifewayresearch.com/2019/01/15/most-teenagers-drop-out-of-church-as-young-adults/>.

curriculum teaches them that God extends forgiveness for all sins before and after salvation. They also learn that when Jesus died on the cross, He proved His love for them. At the preteen level, the curriculum leads students in the concept that no one is out of God's reach; everyone is equal in God's eyes, race and gender do not matter; God loves all. In middle school, the students learn about God's righteousness, and God has a plan to restore the fallen and broken world. Finally, the high school students learn that God grieves the impact of sin and will one day make everything right.<sup>84</sup> The curriculum is consistent in these concepts; it teaches the students to gain a basic understanding of God and the Gospel.

The curriculum being used at Sunnyside is part of the issue with the church's Christian education. While the curriculum is a good gesture, it fails to engage the students and only presents a simplified Gospel message. There will be more explanation on this simplified Gospel in a later chapter. Youth today have multiple resources and have the entire Bible at their fingertips. They even have access to various translations, yet they do not understand the format and meaning of the punctuation found in the Bible. Sunday school gets away with teaching a fundamental Christianity that does not hold up to the pressure that the students will have to endure in the future and does not teach Gospel to its fullest extent. These students have a narrow understanding of forgiveness and the grace of God. While the curriculum's intent is good, concepts are explained in a simple way that does not prepare students for their Christian life as an adult.<sup>85</sup> In the 2021 fall curriculum, "Bible Studies for Life," the lessons engage the students by giving real examples of how doubting salvation is an issue that is difficult to overcome. The

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<sup>84</sup> "Levels of Biblical Learning," Lifeway, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/special-emphasis/levels-of-biblical-learning?intcmp=SRDR-biblical-levels-of-learning>.

<sup>85</sup> Greiger, *Simple Student Ministry*, 49.

lesson encourages the students to examine their lives and continually turn from sin.<sup>86</sup> There is no teaching on how to have a relationship with Jesus or study the Bible. A person can try not to sin as much as they want, but Christianity is not about avoiding sin. It is about having a relationship with Jesus, and in doing so, people will sin less.

The preschool curriculum is written to teach the children how to trust the adults that are leading them as well as trusting God. In addition, they are to learn basic behaviors and etiquette in kindness. The younger preschool-age students learn songs about Jesus and what Jesus looks like in pictures. The curriculum also gives simple memorable Bible stories that teach the children how to identify the characters in the stories. Once these concepts have been introduced, children are encouraged to retell the stories in their own words. They learn how to express their feelings and show the love of God. They are also to understand that Jesus is a friend and helper that they can talk to whenever they want. When they are close to finishing preschool, they learn about using the Bible to ask and answer questions about God. Finally, they learn to use short and simple Bible verses to apply to their lives.<sup>87</sup>

Elementary students between first through fourth grades begin with the younger and middle kids' curriculum. Students in this grade range learn how to enjoy learning from the Bible and are introduced to sin, its meaning and begin to have a basic understanding of it. This concept is excellent and vital to know. Students at this age can understand the consequences of their sins. This understanding is not only temporal but spiritual as well. Sin has natural and societal repercussions, but it also has the spiritual, which is eternal life in Hell. In addition to the

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<sup>86</sup> Jeff Belcher, ed., “Sure of Forgiveness,” in *Bible Studies for Life*, 2021st ed., vol. Fall (Lifeway, 2021), pp. 1-112, 3.

<sup>87</sup> ““Levels of Biblical Learning,” Lifeway, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://www.lifeway.com/en/special-emphasis/levels-of-biblical-learning/older-preschool?intcmp=LOBL-OlderPreschool-DATE>

consequences of sin, it is also important to have a basic understanding of the gospel at younger ages. The curriculum guides students to learn the importance of knowing biblical answers and applying the biblical content to situations. Students also learn how to find a life-applicable Bible verse. The second half of the children's curriculum is learning to develop personal values, such as honesty and integrity. At this point, the curriculum authors expect students to begin to realize their brokenness and their need for a Savior. They also start to introduce the students to self-awareness and how their actions can affect other people.<sup>88</sup>

At the preteen phase of the curriculum, the students learn to develop love and listen to their conscience. The fifth and sixth-grade students learn to seek out spiritual answers from their Bible or apply previously learned biblical examples in daily life situations. The teachers strive to build a relationship with the students. These students learn good morals and a basic understanding of the faith. The preteens should have a basic account of the gospel. They are taught to know how to admit they are a sinner and believe God raised Jesus from the dead, and then they are to confess with their mouth that Jesus is Lord.<sup>89</sup>

This next section is an overview of what middle school students learn from seventh to twelfth grade. In these grades, they start digging deeper into the Christian faith. In middle school, they begin to learn the core beliefs of Christianity. They are encouraged to develop and think critically about their worldview and others' worldview. Middle school students generally begin to ask about the purpose and their identity and self-image in Christ. They learn about relationships with others and develop an ability to connect Biblical truths and apply them to their lives. Finally, they realize their basic spiritual disciplines.<sup>90</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Levels of Biblical Learning. Young, Middle Kids

<sup>89</sup> Levels of Biblical Learning. Preteens

<sup>90</sup> Levels of Biblical Learning. Middle School

High school students are at the final stage in the youth and children Bible Studies for Life. The curriculum has goals for the concepts they should know upon graduation. High school students must be able to articulate what they believe and how to respond to their surroundings in a Christ-like manner. They also are to cultivate a deeper understanding of their faith. Finally, these students are to understand tithing and stewardship. They will also learn to lead others and develop relationships to enhance their relationship with God.<sup>91</sup>

The curriculum used at Sunnyside Baptist Church does an excellent job of explaining how much God loves everyone regardless of what they have done. They learn about the consequences of sin and a basic code of morality. While these concepts are suitable for a student to learn, it only prepares them for a basic understanding or a surface-level Christianity. The students at Sunnyside would strongly benefit from a curriculum that created a firmer foundation. Learning how to deepen, defend, and share their faith is crucial for security in their salvation and growth in their walk with Christ. Their current curriculum assumes there is a God according to their scope and sequence.<sup>92</sup> While this is a crucial worldview, some students at Sunnyside struggle with skepticism. A curriculum that addresses skepticism and prepares them for the secular world and the difficulties they may encounter would be more fruitful. Teachers should be able to partner with a curriculum that encourages the students to grow their relationship with Jesus and study sound doctrine.

Youth are struggling all over the United States. They are confronted with sexual impurity, broken homes, and living in a secular world.<sup>93</sup> The students at Sunnyside struggle with

<sup>91</sup> Levels of Biblical Learning. High School

<sup>92</sup> Levels of Biblical Learning. High School

<sup>93</sup> J. J Turner , “10 Challenges Facing Christian Youth,” Articles of Variety, March 7, 2017, <http://www.jeremiahinstitute.com/index.php/church-and-ministry/youth/195-10-challenges-facing-christian-youth>.

these same issues, but many are also struggling with assurances of their salvation. Younger students learn basic morality and a basic understanding of the story of Jesus. The problem with the lessons is that they have little depth to them. Children and youth learn to practice good morals, profess a love for Jesus, and believe that Jesus has an unconditional love for them. Unfortunately, when these students graduate high school, they leave the church and are likely not to come back.<sup>94</sup> Students from ages eighteen to twenty-nine are either absent or have irregular attendance at Sunnyside. They may come to a Christmas or Easter service, but they have no commitment to the church. Students give various reasons for leaving the church. Many believe there is no tangible evidence of a God or that Jesus is the savior of sinners. Also, students succumb to their fleshly desires and the desire to do whatever they want. God demands glory in general. Everything Christian should live their life to give God glory. If people continue their hedonism, they will only see themselves as a god rather than the one true God. Students learn a simple gospel that does not provide a firm foundation to stand on. It is easy to practice Christianity around other Christians. However, this cookie-cutter Christianity does not hold tight when leaving for college.<sup>95</sup>

Sunday school is one of the primary avenues where students receive their Christian education. However, Sunday school has been adapted to teach young Christians more about morality than a relationship with Jesus. Morality should be a product of Christianity, not the foundation. Churches encourage students to make good choices and stay out of trouble. However, the church's mission is not to keep youth out of trouble but to make disciples who come to a saving knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:3-4). Students must learn the importance

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<sup>94</sup> DeVries, 31.

<sup>95</sup> MacArthur, *Ashamed of the Gospel*, 47.

of a relationship with Jesus, just as learning the difference between right and wrong. Many students have a grave misunderstanding that Christianity is only about morality and restrictions on what they are allowed to do. Christians who focus on the “dos and don’ts” of character find emptiness instead of a saving knowledge of the truth.

Another reason students leave the church is because of peer pressure. They struggle combatting against friends, colleagues, and professors who either challenge their beliefs or hold different beliefs than they do. Students’ beliefs are being challenged daily in a college setting. Often, Christians who desire to maintain their relationship with God fall short because they fear others' persecution, whether friends or teachers.<sup>96</sup> According to Barna, students are taught basics in Sunday school, but only one-third of students believe the Bible is accurate. Some churches have become aware of this issue but have not addressed it.<sup>97</sup> Even though the church has recognized the absence of the younger generation, time has shown that the church is generally reluctant to change its teaching methods. Too frequently, leadership in the church pushes to format youth education the same as it was done in the past because tradition is comfortable. People should opt for change when what is being attempted is no longer working.

Furthermore, despite the data on youth leaving the church, there are ways to help students stay active in the church. Youth who have parents requiring them to attend service are more likely to continue to attend service after high school. However, many parents argue that they do not want to make their children attend because they do not want them to resent church later in life. Unfortunately, the data shows the opposite result. While it is true that students may resent the church because of the requirement, it is more likely that the student will remain in church

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<sup>96</sup> Beckwith Relativism, 152.

<sup>97</sup> Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting*, 27.

because of the necessity of the weekly attendance. Students need their parents to help guide them to make the right decisions, just as when it comes to making healthy food choices. Students have no choice in whether or not they go to school. Why should it be a choice when it comes to attending church?<sup>98</sup>

A students' Christian education must extend beyond the classroom. The church needs to work with the parents to encourage them in discipling their children. A parent does not learn all the ins and outs of parenting as soon as a child is born. Therefore, older parents with grown children active in the faith are great candidates for discipling young parents. The only way to learn is to be taught or through experience. The more parents that are discipled, the more likely they will disciple their children. In turn, students will have better support, fellowship, and role models in Christianity.

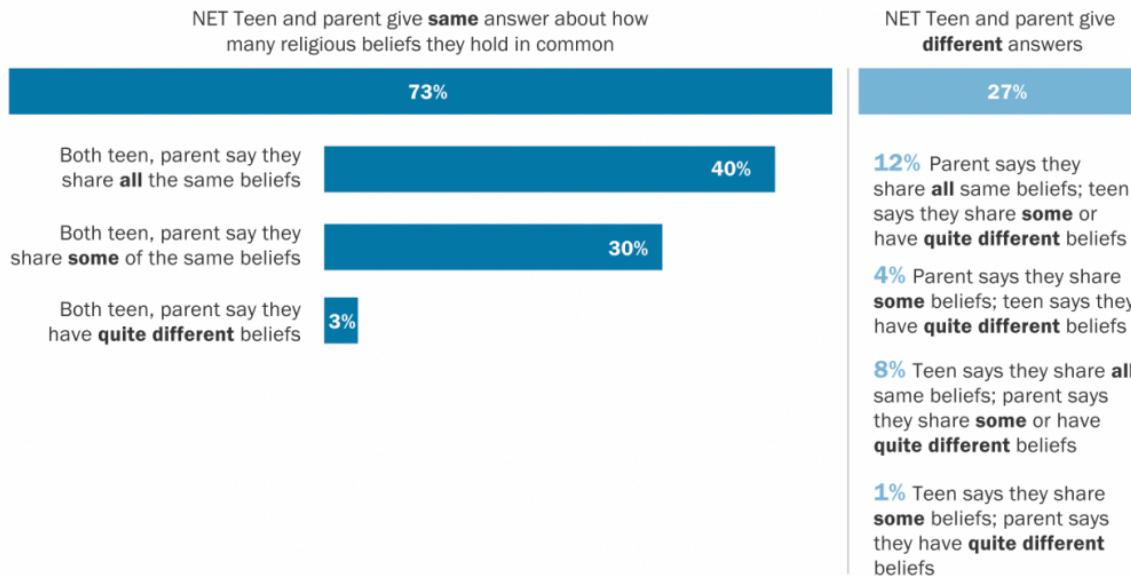
Christians should be aware of the importance of the parent in the student's relationship with God. In figure 3, the stats show that 40% of teens share all the same beliefs. Then 30% of teens say they have some of the same beliefs, while only 3% say their beliefs are different from their parents. This data indicates that parents are important in one's Christian walk. This study did not survey Christians alone, but unbelievers and even atheist or agnostic backgrounds. The church needs to encourage parents to be involved with their children. Some parents are worried about being overprotective to where the student will rebel against the church. However, the parent needs to show their child how important it is to have a relationship with Jesus.

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<sup>98</sup> Ham, *Already Gone*, 91.

## Four-in-ten teens say they share all the same religious beliefs as their parent – and their parent agrees

Among U.S. teens who were surveyed alongside one of their parents ...



Note: Those who did not answer are not shown.

Source: Survey conducted March 29-April 14, 2019, among U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 and one parent of each teen. Teens and parents were instructed to complete the survey separately.

"U.S. Teens Take After Their Parents Religiously, Attend Services Together and Enjoy Family Rituals"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Figure 3. Parent's Versus Children's beliefs.<sup>99</sup>

There are also studies on parents and their involvement with their student's secular and Christian education. Parents who work and encourage their students in education are more likely to establish a stronger relationship with their children. Students who have parental support in their Christian education tend to have a better chance of their Christianity surviving the changes and peer pressure in college.<sup>100</sup> Unfortunately, many parents do not realize it is their responsibility to educate their children in this regard. Parents tend to put the burden of education on their children to pastors and Sunday school teachers. Students in public and private schools

<sup>99</sup> "Religious Habits of U.S. Teens," Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, July 9, 2021, <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/09/10/u-s-teens-take-after-their-parents-religiously-attend-services-together-and-enjoy-family-rituals/>.

<sup>100</sup> Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting*, 42.

receive their education eight hours a day, five days a week. However, when it comes to Christian education, students are learning maybe two days a week for a total of one or two hours each day. Considering the tiny amount of time given to Christian education each week, parents should mandate church for their children.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The students at Sunnyside Baptist Church are leaving the church and the faith shortly after graduating from high school. In the past, the youth group was very large. There was an average of about sixty students in the group. The college ministry that outreaches to these graduated students only has about twenty students accounted for. Considering the size of the youth group in the past and understanding that some people have moved away, it still does not explain the reason for the college ministry at Sunnyside, averaging about twenty students. When questioned about their attendance, students explain both reasons and excuses for why students leave the church.

Since this study focuses on the church's responsibility to serve the students, the reasons are considered a potential failure on the church's behalf; however, the excuses are not mentioned. The reasons students give are understandable objections to the church's structure and disposition towards the younger generation. Some of these reasons are understandable, such as relocating for college or being hindered from attending service. On the other hand, an excuse is an objection fabricated to justify avoiding church. While these excuses are not necessarily the only reasons students leave the church, they still offer church leadership some insight into the problem that exists within so many student ministries across the country. Determining the common issues of all these reasons is imperative to stop the mass exodus of young adults that the church is witnessing. The purpose of this study is to examine and determine what the common issues are in efforts to propose a resolution that can be applied to all student ministries nationwide.

The approach for this research is qualitative. This means that the researcher will survey the students to categorize and collect primary data (reasons and concerns). This data will then be entered into the study for analysis and interpretation. Once the surveys are complete, the remainder of the study will be conducted via interviews. These interviewees will remain anonymous to protect the integrity of this research project. Anonymity encourages the students to respond transparently and honestly, producing more accurate results. The interviews will reveal intimate opinions and perceptions of the students during their time in the youth ministry and afterward. The questions will be thought-provoking for the students to accurately portray their thoughts and ideas. Each interview will discuss their survey answers in detail; in some cases, the interviewer will ask follow-up questions based on their responses in the survey.

In order to maintain qualitative research, the researcher will work to inform students and parents of the investigative research. While collecting anonymous data presents a challenge for the researcher, the protection of the participants must be given the highest priority.<sup>101</sup> When contacting students for each interview, the researcher will stress confidentiality. This means that the students will be referred to in gender-neutral pronouns. Therefore, copies of the interview recordings will be kept to compile data for this paper; they will remain secure on the researcher's computer. The notes that were taken are also secured on the researcher's computer. This paper will discuss students' answers without revealing the participants' identities. Moreover, due to the nature of the subject of youth leaving the church, the answers may unintentionally incite negative feelings in some church members and leadership as well.<sup>102</sup> Students will reflect on previous graduates who have been seen leaving the church and propose the reasons as to why they

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<sup>101</sup> Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: a Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, Or: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 34.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 36.

continue to stay away. It is imperative for the researcher to hear the students' reflections with an open mind and heart in an effort to strengthen student ministry throughout all churches.

The qualitative research used for this paper will be completed thru interviews and surveys. It is essential to record all interviews and take detailed notes during this process. Most of the data is opinion-based, and therefore, determining an objective quantitative result can be challenging but still achievable. One of the challenges is that students may offer several different responses that are unique. The data may have a variety of answers given for the same questions.

There will be a total of thirty students who will be interviewed. Each of them will share their opinion on their experience. These differences make it difficult for qualitative research, but quantitative research is still promising because of the number of students that are involved. However, since students will likely share overlapping experiences, the results from the data should reveal several themes in the qualitative results.<sup>103</sup> The researcher will organize the student's answers into different categories and then identify the themes based on recurring phrases and synonyms. The researcher will use these as a starting point to begin analyzing the data collected.<sup>104</sup> These questions for the participants are designed to incite complex answers from them. While most interviews will include difficult questions, the surveys will expect short answers. The surveys are simple questions that can help categorize the students systematically. For example, many students may say that apologetics is very important, whereas others may believe it is useless or unimportant. The surveys are a starting point in categorizing the answers and establishing themes. The interviews will be the follow-up research asking the students to clarify and explain their survey answers. This researcher will avoid asking questions that may be

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<sup>103</sup> Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 184.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 203.

sensitive to the participants. The survey and interviews should not create issues that may hinder participants from answering questions boldly and honestly. Students are also encouraged to speak their minds and avoid giving answers they think the researcher wants to hear.<sup>105</sup>

### **Intervention Design**

The first step in the intervention plan is to change the current curriculum, Bible Studies for Life for students, presently used by most teachers in the Sunday School program at Sunnyside. The scope and sequence of the old curriculum were discussed in chapter two in the Theoretical Foundations section. The middle school grades will implement a new curriculum covering essential topics and doctrines of the Christian faith. Each lesson will include two parts: fundamental principles and apologetics of Christianity. The first part will use Bible stories that reflect the fundamental principles related to Christianity. Students will learn the basic doctrines of creation, sin, grace, salvation assurance, sanctification, etc. The sixth through the eighth-grade group is ideal for learning these concepts and building a foundation on them. In addition to doctrine, this age group will learn basic apologetics from these same biblical concepts. Each apologetic concept may take up to three weeks to teach and discuss. Teachers will ask the students complex questions to challenge them during each lesson. The teachers will also inform their students of the topic for the following week, whether it is doctrine or apologetics.

Once the middle school curriculum is established, the high school lessons will be written. Each week students will receive a simple assignment. The handout (See Figure 4 below) gives directions on how to fulfill the assignment for the week. Some weeks will focus only on a paragraph or two of scripture. However, the assignment can include an entire chapter depending

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<sup>105</sup> S. P. Mukherjee, *Guide to Research Methodology: an Overview of Research Problems, Tasks and Methods* (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2020), 77.

on the teacher. The following is an example of the high school handout given to students each week (see Figure 4) and some points relating to the design.

John 19:23-42

**Pray First! Read first 5 sections 4 times a day in a row. Write notes or questions you may have about each section each day. Then on the Saturday and Sunday read the entire chapter and your notes corresponding with each section 2 times. Be prepared to discuss on Sunday.**

1. Monday Vs. 23-27
2. Tuesday Vs. 28-30
3. Wednesday Vs. 31-33
4. Thursday Vs. 34-37
5. Friday Vs. 38-42
6. Saturday Vs. 23-42
7. Sunday Vs. 23-42

Figure 4. Sample of High School Handout

- The directions begin with telling the students to pray. How will they learn while studying if there is no communication with God? There needs to be a connection with God; otherwise, this will just be reading.
- The purpose of the notes is to help and challenge the student to extract what the text is saying. If they take notes, they will likely remember what they have studied. In addition, students who take notes will more than likely dig deeper into the text to find context and meaning.
- The students are challenged to answer certain questions while they are reading. These questions help students pay attention and study what they are reading. Often, some people read but do not pay attention to these basic questions that add so much to the context.

- The assigned reading for each day follows the directions. For example, on day 1, the students are to read verses 1-4. Day 2, read verses 5-10, and so on. Each day will outline a small passage the students can study. They will read each section four times in a row until day six. On this day, the student will read the passage in its entirety two times. Then on the following day, which is the same day for discussion. The students also read the passage twice. Despite being distracted by various extracurricular activities, this concept helps engage students throughout the week.
- They are encouraged to spend a minimum of five minutes each day reading their Bible. The idea is that by challenging the students with a short amount of Bible study time, such as five minutes, a discipline will be established and grow into a desire that will make students hungry for more time with the Word and build their relationship with God. In addition to the new curriculum, students are encouraged to develop and cultivate relationships for fellowship and accountability.

In addition to the assignment, there is a handout with instructions on keywords to notice while reading (see Figure 5). Students are instructed to look for conjunctions like “but,” or “and” because these words are used to change the sentence flow in a purposeful way. For example, Paul writes to the Roman church that everyone is a sinner, and no one is good. Then in verse twenty-one, he uses the word “but.” Paul uses this to explain the Gospel and how wonderful God is for the provision of grace. Students are also encouraged to look for conditional words like “however” or “if.” These keywords modify the contents of the passage and require further examination. The following section is words that need more consideration, such as “for” and “therefore.” When someone sees the word “therefore,” they must see what it is there for.

<p><b>Look For These:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Contrasting Words, (But)</li> <li>2. Conditional Words (However, If)</li> <li>3. Why are they <u>there</u> words? (For, Therefore)</li> <li>4. Punctuation. Period, Comma, Colon, Semicolon.</li> <li>5. Literary Genre. (History, Law, Wisdom, Psalms, Prophecy, Apocalyptic, Gospel, Letter.)</li> <li>6. Sentences, Paragraphs, thoughts, main idea.</li> <li>7. Vocabulary. If you don't know a word, look it up.</li> </ol>	<p><b>Answer These Questions:</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Who is the speaker?</li> <li>2. Who is the author?</li> <li>3. Who is the speaker talking <u>to</u>?</li> <li>4. Who is they?</li> <li>5. Who is us?</li> <li>6. What scripture is being quoted from the OT?</li> </ol> <p style="text-align: right;">□</p>
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Figure 5. Instruction for Keywords Handout

Punctuation is also a crucial aspect of studying the Bible. For example: “Let’s eat grandma” versus’ “Let’s eat, grandma.” The differences in punctuation change the intent of the passage. The first phrase without the comma between “eat” and “grandma” is a problem because it sounds like the person speaking suggests they should eat their grandmother. However, common sense says that is not the author’s intent. Students will learn the importance of punctuation when reading scripture and interpreting the reading. The Bible being written centuries ago and translated several times presents challenges to modern readers (students) who must make sure that every word and punctuation they read is being examined and carefully considered.

The students need to realize that the Bible is not one complete book, but many written in several different genres of literature by various authors over several millennia. The first literary genre found in the Bible is called a narrative. These are books either tell a story or explain events that have occurred. It is also referred to as history. The second literary genre of the Bible is poetry. Certain parts of the Bible use more figurative language, such as in the book of Psalms. This book is a collection of different poetry of that culture and period in which it was written.

The third genre is wisdom. An example of this genre can be found in the books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. Another genre that is seen in the Bible is prophecy. These are books include both major and minor prophets. A major prophet simply means their particular book was larger than the other minor prophets. The minor prophets have shorter books written about them; being a major or minor prophet is not to be considered a classification or judgment based on their ministry while here on earth. The gospels are a literary genre only seen within the New Testament. These are accounts of the life of Jesus Christ and His teachings.

Another genre specifically seen in the New Testament is the letters. There are many of these letters written to different churches in the Holy Land. These are letters mostly written by Paul, the apostle, specifically addressed to various churches he had visited. Finally, there is the genre called the apocalypse. Both the book of Revelation and Daniel are examples of apocalyptic literature. They contain both revelations and prophecies that are warnings to believers to be ready for the Kingdom of God.

Depending on the genre, the meaning of what is being read changes drastically. For instance, while reading, students must pay attention to vocabulary, verbiage, and words that are unfamiliar. Students are encouraged to write down the words they are not familiar with and look them up to better understand Scripture.<sup>106</sup> When people read the Bible, it is imperative to consider what the literary genre adds to the interpretation of the scripture. The importance of literary genre is paramount because it can change the context and meaning of the text.

The lesson is designed to force students to ask themselves a series of questions during their Bible study. An example of the questions accompanying each reading is located on the

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<sup>106</sup> Mel Lawrenz, “The Many Genres of Scripture,” Bible Gateway Blog (Bible Gateway Blog, August 5, 2020), <https://www.Biblegateway.com/blog/2016/03/the-many-genres-of-scripture/amp/>.

previous page (See Figure 5). In addition to the questions, the lesson gives some objective points for the students to contemplate that will help them understand the context and author's intention of the scripture. In addition, it is crucial for the reader to determine the speaker in understanding the scripture. While this may seem simple, there are times when the speaker differs from the author and can be confusing to determine.

For example, Matthew 4:9 says, "All these things I will give you if you fall down and worship me." However, this verse sounds very encouraging if taken out of context and assumed Jesus said it. Upon further examination, it is evident that Satan is the speaker of this verse, directed at Jesus in an attempt to tempt Him. Secondly, the author of the book and their intention are to be considered. Why were they writing? Who were they writing to? What is the purpose or intention of the book? These answers will change the reader's perception and understanding of the scripture. Whenever one is reading, determining the author's intent is of the highest importance. Moreover, if students are only attempting to understand scripture through their lens, there is a danger that the real message could be lost.

The Old and New Testaments are interdependent. While some people in the church feel that the Old Testament is no longer important because the New Testament abolished the Old Testament.<sup>107</sup> This researcher has heard church members say this very same thing. In reality, the New Testament is the Old Testament with the mysteries revealed, and the Old Testament is the New Testament without the mysteries revealed. Many events are amplified because of the Old Testament. For example, when Jesus died on the cross, Jesus called out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Some take this as it is said, but if one knows the Old Testament, they

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<sup>107</sup> Andy Stanley, *Deep and Wide: Creating Churches Unchurched People Love to Attend* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 55.

would know that He is referencing Psalm 22, which in hindsight eerily describes the crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>108</sup> Several examples of this can easily be found using a Reference Bible. Often there are verses from the Old Testament quoted in the New Testament to further explain or support a teachable objective. Therefore, knowing the full context of the quoted verse is indispensable in understanding the author's intent of the message. Finally, the reader determines who the "they" and "us" are in the passage. Commonly, scripture passages are misinterpreted because these pronouns were not identified correctly. While this high school curriculum is more challenging and thought-provoking than most curriculums used today, students today are intelligent enough to learn how to study the Bible in this manner.

The next step in the intervention plan is training youth leaders/teachers on how to encourage discussion within their groups/classes. Teachers must take time each week to review the material and anticipate the students' questions. While students will not get all the answers, these questions will be thought-provoking, encouraging the students to think critically. The purpose of discussion questions is to incite discussion, not necessarily to teach. Some teachers tend to lecture rather than discuss the topic. Teachers need to learn how to stimulate discussion with the students. There will be silence in the classroom, and the teachers need to be comfortable with allowing silence. Too often, teachers will offer the answer during moments of uncomfortable silence rather than pulling the answers out of the students or guiding them to the answer. This training will also train youth teachers on positive responses to questions asked by the students.

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<sup>108</sup> John Calvin and William Pringle, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 318–319.

Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect a teacher to anticipate and be prepared to answer every question that the students may have; but responding to students in an encouraging and complementary manner is the most beneficial in creating a comfortable environment for the students to inquire and discuss. The purpose behind including this in the teacher training is that it has been noted that teachers unknowingly often react negatively to problematic and challenging questions. This causes the student and classmates to shut down and feel uncomfortable discussing, answering, or asking further questions.

This concept also applies to responding to students when an incorrect answer is offered. Responding to a student can be either productive or counterproductive. Even if a student is wrong, finding the good in the student's response will go a long way in teaching and fuel discussion among fellow students. In addition, it is more productive not to focus or dwell on the incorrect response for long and move along to asking another student to help find the answer. While it is important for students to learn how to accept being wrong, it is also important that they can take constructive criticism and understand that periodically offering incorrect answers is the best way to learn.

Furthermore, once an open, supportive, and encouraging learning environment is established, students will be more receptive to taking corrections and asking questions on various scripture passages. The environment plays a vital role in student participation. However, there will be times when students are silent despite the lesson topic. Stimulating discussion with students can be particularly challenging, but the discussion will eventually come with patience and a positive environment.

Lastly, while it is preferred for all lesson plans to be organized, teachers should not be too rigid in sticking to the plan but allow the lesson to go wherever the passage and student

discussion is leading. Teachable moments happen when students are engaged and inquire about a particular subject. Organized yet fluid and flexible lessons are beneficial in the long term. This includes not avoiding complex and challenging topics that can be presented in certain scripture passages. Students are often intrigued by the challenging topics, and when church leaders avoid or gloss over these topics, it only sparks more curiosity. The avoidance of challenging and complex topics in the Bible poses a threat to the student's education. As previously stated, students are inquisitive by nature; therefore, they will seek out answers to their questions from other resources.

Unfortunately, not all resources have a sound doctrine or even correct information. The church, specifically its pastors, must lead its sheep to the truth. Finding a doctrinally sound curriculum is one of the ways that the pastor shepherds the church. "Then I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you on knowledge and understanding." (Jeremiah 3:15) In this passage, God promises that He will bring shepherds to lead them in knowledge and understanding. This is a reference to pastors who would later lead churches.<sup>109</sup> The avoidance of difficult passages can be counterproductive and sabotage the learning environment. Although sometimes the answers are not clear or even definitive, exploring the topic and possible answers and interpretations can also reinforce to the students that one person cannot possibly know everything, but learning never stops at any matter age.

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

All of the students at Sunnyside will be involved in the evaluation and implementation of this new curriculum and the practice of new teaching methods. The students that will be a part of

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<sup>109</sup> John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 180–181.

the intervention plan are only middle school and high school grades seventh through twelfth. By the time the research for this project is completed, some of the students will be in college. The interviews will have some students that were not a part of the intervention plan to gauge a difference in the implementation plan. While all students will be involved in the new curriculum, participation in the survey and interviews will be on a voluntary basis. Those who choose to participate will be informed of the project's purpose and the desired results.

As the intervention plan is implemented, there will be a significant change in the style of teaching as well as their involvement in the ministry. It is important to note that some students will not be able to complete the intervention plan due to graduating from high school. The full span of this project is approximately two years; however, the research portion of interviews and surveys will only take a couple of weeks. There will be college students involved in the project by participating through the completion of surveys and interviews. The advantage of gathering data from college students is that most are not a part of the curriculum change. The majority of these college students have been through Sunnyside's youth program and have either chosen to stay active within the church or leave. Before the commencement of this project, the senior pastor will review the intervention plan for approval. Once approval is granted, the plan's implementation will not be difficult, and the study's parameters will be discussed with the participating students.

Evaluating the success of the intervention plan will have a few obstacles. Some participating students that have undergone part of the intervention plan will graduate and be in college before its completion and the time for their interview. Furthermore, a portion of the participating students will only have had six months in the program due to grade level promotions during the span of the project. The majority of the participating students will be in

the program for a year and a half. Lastly, some of the participating college students that will be interviewed have not had any experience in the intervention plan but have experienced Sunnyside's previous curriculum and youth program. This group of college students will be very useful in gauging the success of the intervention plan based on the difference between the two youth programs. For clarification, high school students are considered as those that are in grades six through twelfth. The college students are considered students who have partially completed the intervention plan before graduating or those who have not undergone the plan but have participated in the interview process.

Previous youth programs are comprised of service projects, games, and a fifteen-minute Bible lesson. Previous youth leaders taught morality while emphasizing the importance of service. While serving the community is a crucial spiritual discipline is important to note that it is not one of God's commandments. Students get used to games and playing around, but there will not be games, food, and other things to keep them in church when they graduate. Youth ministry cannot be a babysitting service or an entertainment opportunity. Of course, there is no problem with ministries dedicated to serving local communities. However, the commandment is to make disciples and share the Gospel. Does sharing the gospel serve the community? If so, how? Therefore, the church's service to the unchurched community has to be more than a good deed, but rather service with the gospel intrinsically weaved into it. Churches with service ministries should make sure they are also sharing the gospel and following up with people they encounter.

In the book of Acts, there are several examples of the church predominately serving within itself more than the local unchurched community. In Acts 4, the religious leaders imprisoned Peter and John for proclaiming the name of Jesus. After their release, Peter and John

immediately returned to their respective churches and praised God. Then they began to distribute goods and meet the needs of the community of believers. Christianity is very diverse; service is just one of the many disciplines within Christianity. Even though Jesus did not explicitly say to serve the unchurched, it is still a great tool to share the Gospel. Serving the unchurched community creates an avenue for sharing the Gospel and making disciples.

The first step in the intervention plan will be examining students who are currently in middle and high school as well as those who have graduated high school. This research will encompass students aged between twelve to twenty-nine years old. Students will have an opportunity to ask questions related to the study. The first data collected after observation will be surveys (for the full survey, see Appendix B). The survey will be administered via a virtual google document and printouts that can be completed in person. The students should answer these questions independently without any help from friends, and confidentiality will be encouraged. If students receive assistance, they may skew their answers and taint the results. The results will be written out on a “Numbers” spreadsheet.

Once the students finish the survey, they will continue to the interview portion (for the interview questions, see Appendix C). These will be recorded for accurate data collection. Students will remain anonymous in the research results; only the researcher will know their identities. The interview questions were designed to require a well-thought-out answer rather than a yes or no. The intent is to force the students to offer a deep answer that requires critical thinking. The data collected must be as accurate and truthful as possible. Students must answer honestly and avoid offering answers based on their perception of the desired results. Interviews will extract individual opinions on current and previous youth ministries. At the end of the

interviews, some students may be asked follow-up questions in an effort to clarify previous interview answers.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Student Survey Question Results

Over two years of observation and data collection from current high school students and graduates, the project yielded 47 surveys and 30 interviews. The first portion of data collection was gathered in the form of a survey which consisted of 11 questions regarding the student's demographic, church attendance, and personal view on theology and apologetics. The first question in the survey was, "Which best describes how often you attend church on Sundays from grades sixth through eighth.?" (See Figure 6). Survey results reflected a high percentage of students, 87.2%, expressed they attended Sunday service three and four times a month. In contrast, a small minority attended one to two times a month and less. Based on these figures, students are regular and consistent in attendance during their middle school years.

**3. Which best describes how often you attended Church on Sundays from grades 6-8?**

47 responses

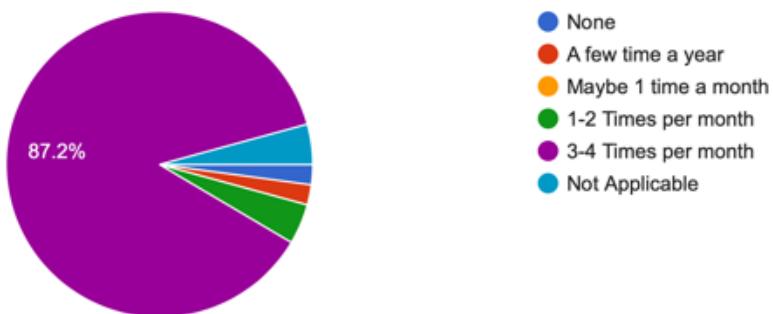


Figure 6. Church Attendance from Grade 6 – 8 (Student Survey Q #3)

The second chart (see Figure 7) shows the results of the frequency of students in grades ninth through twelfth who attended Sunday service. A ten percent drop is noted in Sunday service attendance in this age group than the previous younger age group. Students explained their lack of attendance was due to busier extracurricular schedules. The students also noted that with having the ability to drive themselves, parents allowed them to choose if they would attend themselves. Students follow family precedent when it comes to church attendance. However, when a personal choice is granted, a students' attendance begins to waver. These results will be further explained later when interview and follow-up questions are discussed.

**5. Which best describes how often you attended Church on Sundays from grades 9-12**  
47 responses

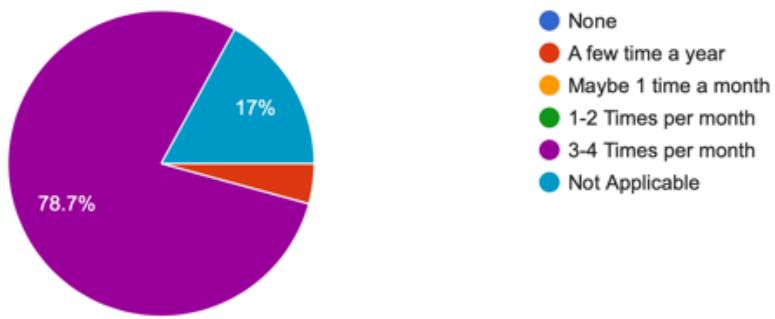


Figure 7. Church Attendance from Grade 9 - 12 (Student Survey Q #5)

After recording the church attendance of the student, the next survey question asked, "How important is theology to you on a scale of 1-10?" (see Figure 8). 34% of students rated the importance of theology as a ten with being very important. Similarly, 21.3% of students rated theology as an eight on the scale of importance. While these percentages by themselves are low, combined, they show that half of the students surveyed viewed theology as very important. In discussing this topic in the interviews, several students offered interesting insights as to why they believe theology is so important.

**8. How important is theology to you on a scale of 1-10?**

47 responses

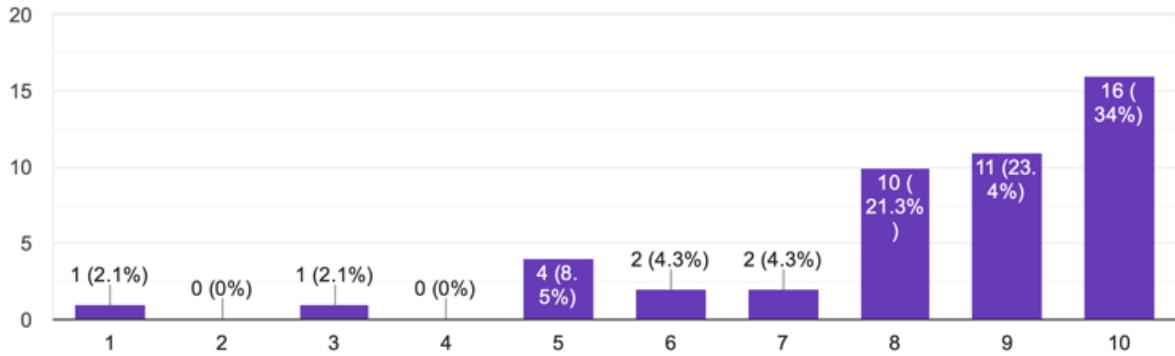


Figure 8. Importance of Theology (Student Survey Q #8)

Likewise, the next survey question asked, “How important is apologetics to you on a scale of 1-10? (See Figure 9). The data responses from this question are a little different from the responses from the previous question regarding theology. According to survey results, students ranked theology as more important than apologetics while recognizing the importance of both theology and apologetics.

**9. How important is Apologetics to you on a scale of 1-10?**

47 responses

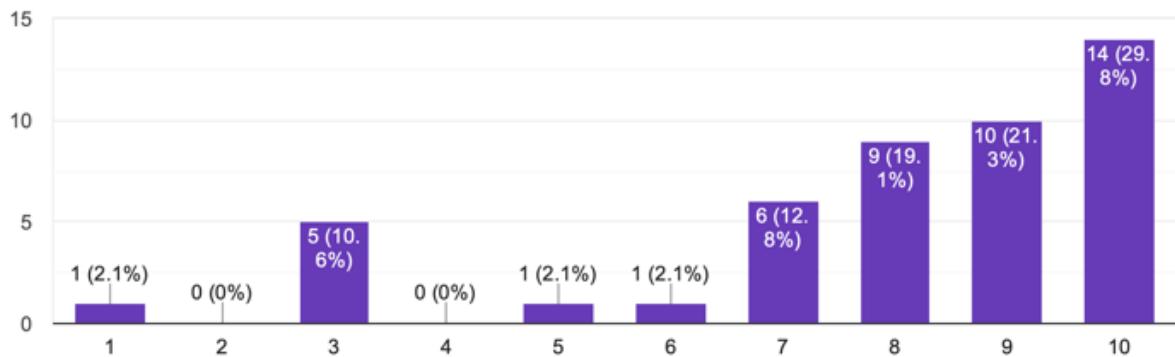


Figure 9. Importance of Apologetics (Student Survey Q #9)

The implementation of the intervention plan has shown to make a significant difference in students' views on theology and apologetics as far as learning and applying to daily life. When asked how well the church has prepared them for Christian life in the secular world, the answers varied (see Figure 10). Surprisingly, while a small group of students felt the church has done a good job teaching and preparing them, those answers have changed since implementing the intervention plan. The explanation of this shift is explored in the student interviews which, offer more details on the specific answers of each student.

10. How confident do you feel the Church has prepared you for the challenges you may face in the secular world on a scale of 1-10?

47 responses

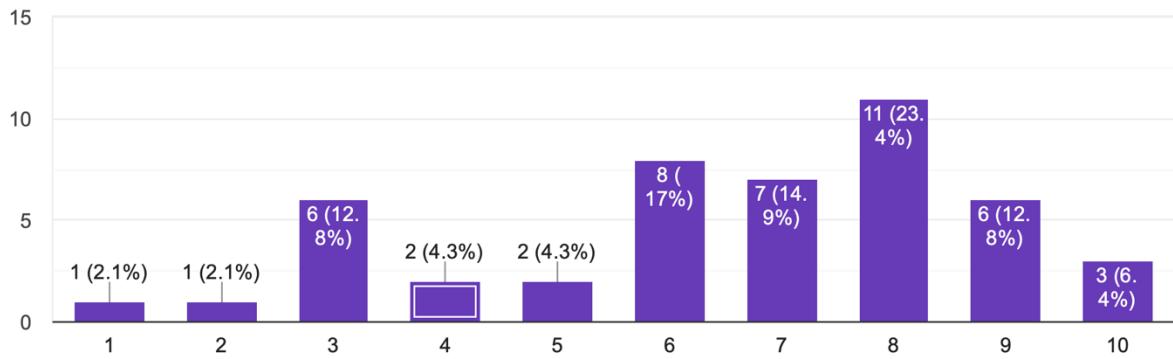


Figure 10. Confidence in Church Preparation (Student Survey Q #10)

Moreover, the discussion of survey answers was intentionally included as part of the interview process. For example, in this chart (Figure 10), several students referred to their involvement and view of the church overall versus specifically after the intervention plan. Interviewing the students was imperative to obtain more clarification on the hard data from the surveys. An obstacle encountered during the research was the misunderstanding of certain questions by the students. For example, a few did not understand the terms and definitions of

theology and apologetics. Therefore, the data results changed even further after data from the interviews were collected. The next section discusses the interview results, understanding why the questions were answered in the way they were, and how answers continued to change upon further explanation.

Lastly, a group of college-aged students was also included in the research for this project. College-aged students are defined as those of an appropriate age to move out of the house yet still living at home with their parents (see Figure 11). 40.4 percent of college students surveyed currently live at home with their parents. 23.4 percent of the students had moved out by the time the survey was administered. Upon comparing the participants' age with their answers, students over twenty possess a deeper understanding of the need for a foundation in theology and apologetics. As noted previously, most middle and high school students do not have enough life experience to realize the correlation between theology, apologetics, and a strong foundation for their relationship with Christ.

Did you move out of your parents' house for college?

47 responses

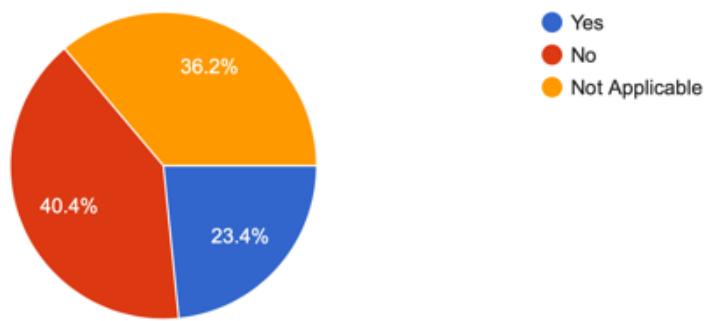


Figure 11. Moving Out of Parent's House (Student Survey Q #12)

### Parent Survey Question Results

As stated previously, the parent's role in disciplining their children and being a role model of an active relationship with Christ is paramount. The question, "What do you feel your role is in your student going to church?" was asked of parents and met with surprising results (see Figure 12). 27.3% answered that their role was to offer encouragement to attend service, but ultimately feel that it is the student's choice. 18.2% of the surveyed parents stated that their students would attend regularly and consistently without being obligated by the parent. 9.1% of the parents said they encourage their child to attend church but ultimately do not give them a choice not to attend. Finally, 45.5% of parents answered that their student is not offered a choice on attending church or not. The reasoning expressed by these parents is that with freedom of choice comes the possibility to make negative decisions and acquire negative influences that could shape them or impact them for the rest of their lives.

#### 3. What do you feel your role is in your student going to church?

11 responses

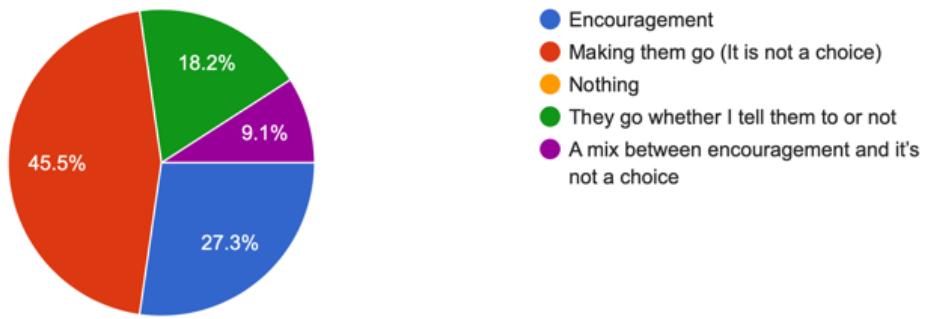


Figure 12. Parent Role to Student Going to Church (Parent Survey Q #3)

The parents were also asked their thoughts on the relevance of theology and apologetics.

The first graph reveals the majority of parents feel that theology is a top priority (see Figure 13).

Parents see the need for theology to be included in Christian education programs in order to prepare children for a future in the secular world.

#### 8. How important is theology to you on a scale of 1-10?

11 responses

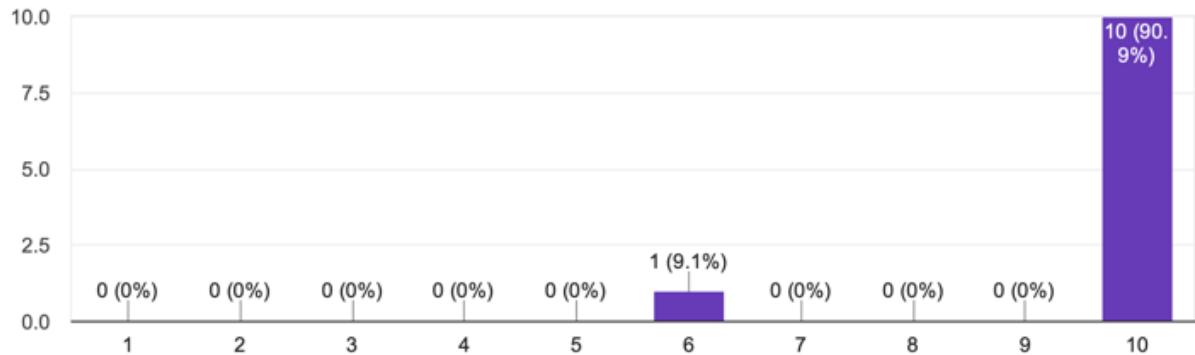


Figure 13. Importance of Theology (Parent Survey Q #8)

The second graph reflects parents' views on apologetics (see Figure 14). Similar to theology, the majority of parents believe apologetics is just as important as theology with the exception of a few.

#### 9. How important is Apologetics to you on a scale of 1-10?

11 responses

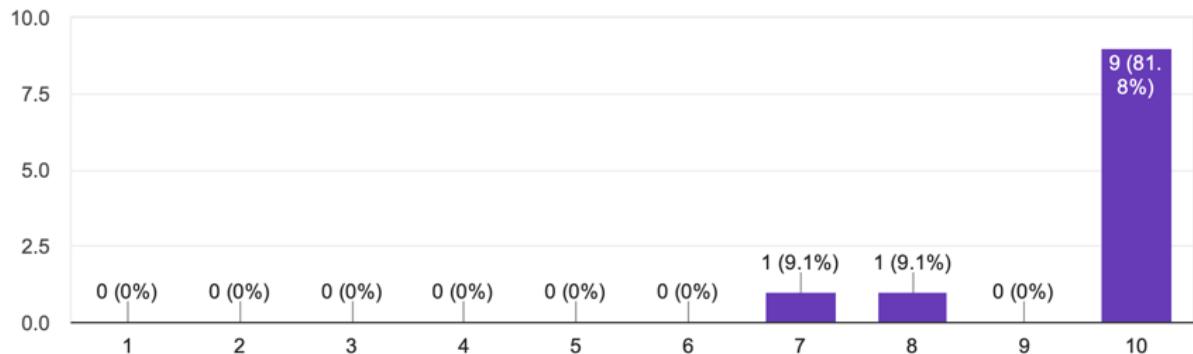


Figure 14. Importance of Apologetics (Parent Survey Q #9)

The few that disagree stated that they felt apologetics are inferior to theology, but this finding will be discussed more later in the interview analysis.

The last two charts of the parent's survey results reflect personal opinions on how prepared the parents were for the secular world based on their Christian education as an adolescent. The first graph (see Figure 15) indicates a wide variation in the parent's opinion on how effectively the church had educated and prepared them for the secular world. The results showed that while a high percentage felt like the church was very effective, 27 percent felt that the church only did an average job or did not effectively prepare them for the secular world at all (scoring below 7 on the scale of 10).

**10. How confident do you feel the Church has prepared you for the challenges you may face in the secular world on a scale of 1-10?**

11 responses

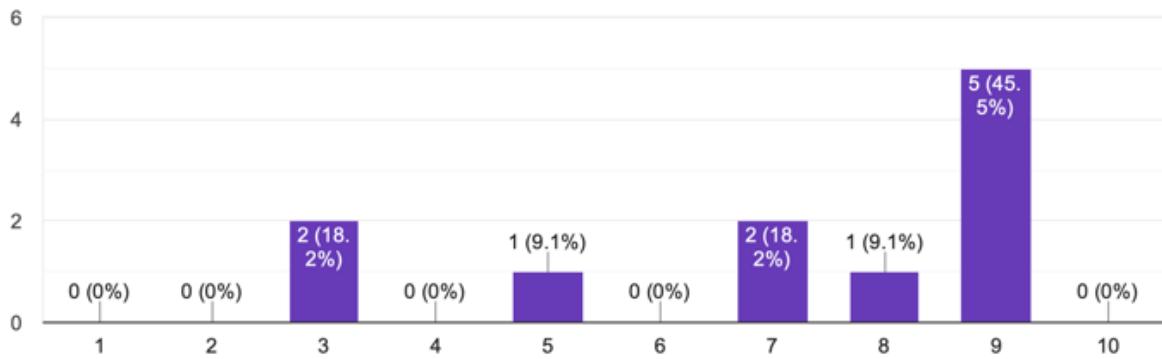


Figure 15. Confidence in Church Preparation for Parents (Parent Survey Q #10)

Many parents agree that their child's education is their responsibility, but they want the church to have an effective influence in reinforcing what the students learn from home. On the other hand, the parents are united in feeling equally confident in the church's ability to prepare their students. Since the implementation of the intervention plan, parents have been satisfied with the education their students have received. Students have a better knowledge of reading and

studying their Bible independently. They have begun to learn about theology and apologetics to make effective arguments and defend their faith on their own. These students now are more confident in what they believe and why they believe it.

The last chart (Figure 16) reflects their opinion on how their child has been educated and prepared since the intervention plan has been implemented.

**11. How confident do you feel the Church has prepared your child for the challenges they may face in the secular world on a scale of 1-10?**  
9 responses

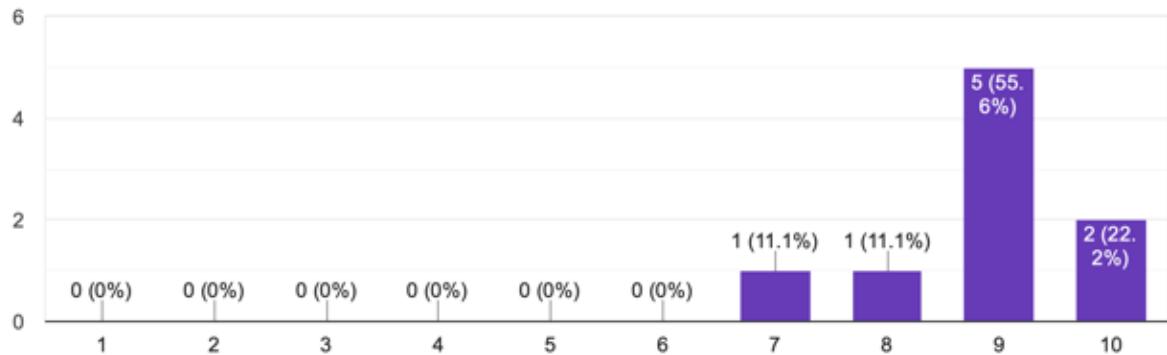


Figure 16. Confidence in Chruch Preparation for Students (Parent Survey Q #11)

### **High School and Middle School Interviews**

Every student who filled out the survey was asked to participate in a confidential interview. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the students were interviewed over the phone. Each student was asked specific questions based on their survey answers. For example, several of the students answered that the church is ineffective in preparing them for the secular world in the survey. When asked to elaborate on this during the interview, the students had several different answers regarding why they felt this way, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. In the next section, the student's interviews are numbered one through

twelve. These numbers are arbitrary and serve only to distinguish the interviews and organize the information. The confidence of these students is respected, and the paper will not divulge any responses that will reveal the student's identity.

### High School Middle School Interview One

In the first interview conducted, the student indicated on their survey that they have consistently attended church since they were young. This discipline had been instilled in them by their parents, who encourage and support them in attending services and participating in church activities. This student expressed that they believe it is not the church's responsibility to prepare students for the secular world but rather a personal responsibility. Despite regularly attending church since they were a small child, the student noted a shift in the purpose of their attendance during high school. They began to participate with a focus and purpose on worship and glorifying God. Before this shift, their church attendance was based on family routine and parental influence. The student hinted that implementing the intervention plan has changed their perspective on the church for the better.

Student One feels the intervention plan has been beneficial in teaching them how broken the world is. The intervention plan has helped them look at life through the lens of sin and how the world has fallen because of original sin. Now they can correlate the hardships and struggles that they see the church and loved ones go thru with the fallen world we live in. In addition, the student has learned the importance and value of making disciples, which is to share and teach others not only about the Gospel but also the spiritual disciplines of leading a Christian life. During the interview, the student stated how their teacher's influence in changing how they view their relationship with God. They explained, "When I was younger, worship was not important. I didn't understand why church mattered. Now I desire to have more opportunities to worship

Jesus.” The final interview question was about the student’s opinion as to why so many students stop attending church after high school graduation. The student stated, in their opinion, one reason students seem to fail to attend church after graduation is because they view Christianity more as a priority and obligation rather than a relationship with God that will glorify Him in them. Furthermore, the student added, “I did not love Jesus like I should have. I realize my relationship with God is about Him and not me.” The interview with this student was very encouraging to the researcher and shed some great light on the issue of Christianity losing youth after they graduate high school.

### High School Middle School Interview Two

In the second interview, the student began the session by wanting to change one of their answers from the survey. In the survey, the student ranked theology a five out of ten and apologetics a six out of ten, but after giving it more thought, they realized both were more important and should be ranked higher. The student expressed a new understanding of how important Christians know what they believe and why they believe it. They explained that they now understand that theology is for their personal relationship with Jesus, while apologetics is for their relationships with other people through Jesus. Student Two also explained they went to church when they were younger because their friends participated in the AWANA program in their church. AWANA is a children’s program centered around a biblical curriculum that comes from the verse in 2 Timothy 2:15 “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth.” This verse is where the program has gotten its name, AWANA. The acronym stands for “Approved Workmen Are Not Ashamed.” It is a ministry set up to teach children to memorize Bible verses. The church the

student attended previously did not have a thriving youth ministry, so their family decided to attend Sunnyside Baptist Church for Wednesday night lessons.

Regarding theology and apologetics, the student understood the importance of both theology and apologetics. The interviewer asked them to explain in their own words why theology and apologetics are essential to having a healthy relationship with God. The student explained that theology allows people to further their relationship with God by deepening a believer's understanding of God's character and what they believe. If one does not know what they believe about God, how can they claim to know God? When describing apologetics, they articulated that it was a required tool for evangelism; Christians need to be prepared to give an answer for their faith, whether it be for defending or evangelizing unbelievers.

The interview with student two ended on the topic concerning students' preparedness. Student two expressed the personal opinion that the church had not prepared them for the secular world as they thought it should have. While the student recognizes that the church adequately taught them Bible stories with life application, the student was never taught how to study the Bible independently. The student pointed out that before starting the intervention plan, the little theology training they did receive did not have much depth, and they have no recollection of learning any kind of apologetics. The intervention plan is a three-year program, and this student has only completed the first year so far. Student two also commented that they think a lack of accountability plays a role in graduated students being absent from the church. Being a part of a youth ministry is an easy place to make relationships and hold each other accountable with like-minded ones. However, it becomes much harder to keep oneself engaged and invested within the faith through entering adulthood. They also expressed that those individuals were probably already straying off the path of Christianity and desired to do other things with their time.

### High School Middle School Interview Three

In the third interview conducted, the student rated theology and apologetics at a nine out of ten. During the interview, the student first spoke about primary theologies and then secondary theologies. A primary theology pertains to the requirement for salvation, while a secondary theology that deals with non-salvific matters may have slight differences in doctrine. For example, One can still be saved and believe they can lose their salvation. However, if someone believes that Jesus is not the only way, that becomes a primary theology problem. While student three stressed the importance of theology, they also stated that most of it was not worth dividing over. Believers are all brothers and sisters in Christ and should do their best to be unified despite having differences in opinion or interpretations of scripture.

When the student was also asked to explain why they attend church, they explained that it was for worship and fellowship with the youth group. They also added that they have recently learned that fellowship with other believers is a form of worship. They expressed a deeper understanding of the importance of making relationships with believers rooted in Jesus. This student recognized the importance of accountability and discipleship, and because of that, they strive to pour into others. Be an example of a Christ-follower to the community and in the church and lead the best they can through Christ. On the topic of mission trips and discipleship retreats, the student explained that they did not realize how impactful these could be until their new youth pastor implemented them. Moreover, they explained that they had attended previous mission trips and retreats in the past but, the last few trips have been pivotal and more effective in their spiritual growth.

Furthermore, student three stated that they consider theological issues dealing with salvation to be primary issues and of the highest importance. The student explained that they

enjoyed how theology challenged one's mind and the importance of having healthy theological debates with one another in an effort to sharpen each other. Moreover, according to the student, a secondary issue can reflect how one interprets the Bible and how it can influence one's opinion rather than someone's opinion dictating their interpretation of the Bible. The student concluded the interview by explaining the benefits of having a firm understanding of apologetics. One of those benefits is that it helps deepen our faith and overcome doubt. Theology is the foundation of a relationship with Jesus and apologetics defends that foundation of faith.

#### High School Middle School Interview Four

Student four currently attends church because they desire to grow and mature in their faith. They enjoy listening to the sermons and lessons as well as worshipping the Lord. The student also expressed how they enjoyed giving God glory by worshiping through song. During the interview, the student remarked how the retreats they have attended since the intervention plan was implemented have been deeper and more fulfilling than others they have attended in years past. They expressed the value of the meaningful connections made with other attendants, said they feel like part of a family, and enjoyed engaging in deep conversations with fellow students their age. During these retreats, they have learned the relationship between service and evangelism and how to share their salvation testimonies with each other.

On the topic of the relevance of theology and apologetics, they stated that knowing what it means to be saved is of the utmost importance and correctly studying the Word of God is paramount to having a relationship with Him. In addition to theology, apologetics helps defend the faith and make disciples. They said they know the importance of using theology and apologetics to disciple, evangelize, and each other accountable to God. The preparedness to give an answer helps with the effectiveness of salvation.

Lastly, student four offered their opinion on the effectiveness of how the church prepared them for the secular world and their take on why students leave the church after high school graduation. The student reported that the church has helped them be grounded in their faith and warned about the secular world's dangers. The student has a firm foundation in what they believe and knows how to study the Bible and formulate their own opinion. When asked what the church had done that made them feel prepared for the secular world, the student explained that the change in the curriculum due to the intervention plan has greatly impacted them. Regarding the mass exodus of graduated students, the student said that the easy thing to do is leave. However, believers need to make an effort to stay in the church. The student explained, "...if you do not have a strong relationship with God and you do not have a desire to grow in that relationship, then you will leave the Church."

#### High School Middle School Interview Five

In the interview with student five, the student desired to change one of their survey answers from a seven out of ten to a nine out of ten when ranking the importance of theology and apologetics. The student explained they misunderstood the question, thinking it was asking how well they demonstrated the importance of theology and apologetics in their daily walk with Christ. The student explained that while they feel that both theology and apologetics are important, they stated that they think theology is slightly more important than apologetics. They enjoy being a witness and acting out their faith rather than answering for their faith. This does not mean that apologetics is unimportant, but it does mean that theology is more important in their eyes. It is important to note that this student has been a part of the intervention plan for one year due to promoting up during its course.

The student expressed how the church interests them; they are curious about the Bible and enjoy learning about God. They also appreciated their relationships with fellow youth in the ministry because they kept them accountable and offered encouragement. The student stated that without having these relationships, it would be difficult to attend church. They also recognize the importance of the discipleship retreats that allow students to open up to one another and discuss opinions and personal struggles. These opportunities help students grow closer together and thus grow closer to Jesus.

When it comes to theology, core beliefs are crucial. However, it is equally crucial for Christians to be open-minded on opposing thoughts on certain topics. One issue the student has encountered with older believers within the Church is that some Christians are close-minded to opposing or even different interpretations on a particular subject for the only reason that they have been taught one way since they were a child. However, as people grow in their walk with Jesus, they must relearn things to make sure their understanding when they were younger is correct. Believers in Christ should always be willing to learn; studying God's Word is continuous. While it is easy to become comfortable in ideals that one has grown up learning, sometimes one learns or perceives lessons incorrectly. Hence, a willingness to re-learn and adjust our interpretations when needed is vital.

According to student five, the church does not do a very good job preparing adolescent Christians for the secular world. In their opinion, the church exaggerates how evil the world is, and they do not believe it is as dangerous as the church makes it seem. In addition, the student feels the church needs to improve how Christians treat non-believers without trying to force their beliefs on unbelievers. On the topic of church attendance, the student feels that many students ultimately leave the church because their parents do not instill regular church attendance as part

of their family routine while growing up. They become distracted by extracurricular activities and academics that take their focus off Christ. Furthermore, the students who end up leaving the church may not have enjoyed church for various reasons. For example, some students may have felt judged by others or seen too many hypocrites in the church. They may have noticed that some church-goers have a bad attitude and are not focused on God but on trivial matters within the church.

#### High School Middle School Interview Six

In the interview with student six, they also wanted to clarify their survey answers. The student explained that, in their opinion, learning about God is more important than defending one's faith. While defending the faith is extremely important, without a firm foundation and knowledge of God, defending the faith is more difficult and challenging. Student six has recently started attending Sunnyside Baptist Church about a year ago after leaving their previous church. They desire to strengthen their relationship with Jesus and make connections with fellow like-minded believers through discipleship and accountability. The student possesses a firm realization of the importance of learning and knowing how to study the Bible correctly in order to live their life like Jesus. The student expressed appreciation for the mission trips Sunnyside hosts because those trips have opened their eyes to how broken the world is and is in need of Jesus. Learning how to evangelize with others has helped the student truly know what it means for people to have a relationship with Christ and learn the importance of sharing the Gospel.

When prompted about theology and apologetics, the student felt it was important that Christians need to know who God is and what He desires from those who believe in Him. As Christians increase their knowledge of God, their relationship with God will grow deeper. Theology and apologetics are also paramount for evangelism. How can someone tell someone

about Jesus if they do not know who Jesus is? Furthermore, evangelism can be intimidating when considering what people may ask. Some may have difficult questions, but if apologetics is well understood, the individual will be more likely to be comfortable sharing the Gospel and defending the faith.

Student six states that the Wednesday night youth lessons are thought-provoking and challenging. They stated that they appreciate learning how to share their testimony and the Gospel, which is part of the intervention plan. The student appreciates the fellowship and accountability that comes from the relationships that they have built within the Sunnyside youth group. This student has only been attending Sunnyside for a year but was involved in a church before Sunnyside. The student explained that they had learned similar lessons in previous churches, but there is something different about Sunnyside because of the depth of the learning that takes place. The student then transitioned to possible reasons students leave the church. They expressed that some people leave because the church is an inconvenience to their extracurricular activities. In addition, other activities are more stimulating; some do not make time for Church, and some have bad influences. Of course, not all influences are bad, but even good influences can distract people from attending Church. The student's final thoughts on people leaving are because many churches do not offer a ministry for college-age students. They enjoy the youth at Sunnyside because there is fellowship and discipleship. Unfortunately, many churches lack opportunities to serve and fellowship on a deeper level.

#### High School Middle School Interview Seven

During an interview with student seven, they claimed that they mostly get their biblical education from the church and enjoy learning about God. The church plays a bigger role than primarily teaching and creates opportunities for members to develop and create lasting

relationships built on accountability and discipleship. When the student was talking about relationships, they pointed out that the most important relationship is the one with God, and in order for that relationship to grow, they need to spend time with Him through prayer and studying the Bible. Within a relationship with Jesus, there is always the topic of His love for His people. The student knows that while they cannot comprehend God's love, they enjoy learning more as God continues to reveal His unconditional love for us. The student displayed a solid understanding of how important they are to God.

This individual stated that theology and apologetics are both very important. In their opinion, theology is important for sharing the Gospel with those who have never heard it before. Learning theology strengthens the relationship believers have with God and gives more clarity in attempting to understand Him. Possessing an understanding of apologetics helps understand difficult theological teachings and discern one's testimony. The fact that apologetics exists proves that other people struggle logically and philosophically with many questions from the Bible.

Student seven has only been a part of the intervention plan for one year. However, they understand how critical evangelism is, and learning how to be prepared to share and defend the faith has strengthened their walk with Jesus. This individual has also taken opportunities to share the Gospel since being a part of the intervention plan because they feel more confident and prepared. The interviewee speculated that students leave the church because they move away and are not able to find a new church. This could be because they do not know how, or it could be because making new relationships with people can be intimidating. The student voiced that they would like to be more educated and prepared for life in the secular world than the students who graduated before them.

## High School Middle School Interview Eight

Student eight has only been a part of the intervention plan for six months. They previously attended another church but was unsatisfied with the youth program and wanted more out of their relationship with Jesus. The student heard from a friend that already attended Sunnyside that it was easy to get involved in the youth ministry, so they have joined the ministry. While this student knows that nothing is more important than one's relationship with God, they do not possess a full understanding of theology and apologetics at this moment but has a desire and interest to learn more. In the interview, the student expressed their hunger to be firmly rooted in their relationship with Christ but knows they currently are not. They desire to read their Bible more and have a closer relationship with God. In the past, the student has made excuses for not praying or reading their Bible, but presently they realize it has to be a priority in their life in order to be fully identified in Christ. The student also expressed a desire to be mentored by an older brother in Christ.

While student eight expressed they did not fully understand theology and apologetics, they did explain that theology is the foundation of what Christians believe. The student recognized some church-goers are satisfied going through the motions of being a Christian rather than following Him and seeking after Him. They desire to be the exact opposite of that and want to further their relationship with Jesus. In addition to theology, the student stated that apologetics is necessary for believers to know in order to possess the ability to prove or at least back up their belief. When talking to those who are not Christians, apologetics can help answer many of the objections non-believers have regarding Christianity.

As far as the church preparing students for the secular world, student eight is satisfied with how the church has helped them deepen their relationship with Christ. They said that in the

previous churches they have attended, they were taught how to overcome issues they may face as adults. In contrast, the student also claimed that they were not prepared to respond to others who questioned their faith. There have been many challenges experienced in high school that the student received no guidance from the church on handling. The student enjoyed their education at their previous churches but realized that it lacked life application. The lessons only scratched the surface of scripture rather than digging deep into the Word and getting to know Jesus Christ. However, the last few months in the new youth group with the intervention plan have helped tremendously. The student claimed it is easier to handle the confrontation of non-believers and skeptics alike.

#### High School Middle School Interview Nine

Student number nine began their interview explaining their view on theology and apologetics. The student said that theology is important because it is what Christians believe. There are Christians who either have limited knowledge of what they believe or unknowingly possess incorrect theology. For instance, incorrect theology is when someone reads scripture and then distorts or twists it in a way that fits better with their philosophical views. For example, salvation by works makes sense because it seems to be fair. While on the other hand, salvation by grace through faith seems unreasonable because people should not get something they do not deserve. According to student nine, apologetics is more personal. Apologetics helps restrain doubt and overcome skeptical thoughts that many Christians can have over time. The interviewee stated that when they were younger, they attended church because their friends did. Recently, their heart has changed, and they attend because they now desire a relationship with God. The student has a hunger for a deeper understanding of God and faith and has learned more about theology and apologetics to help them grow in the faith.

Student number nine moved on to say that theology is important because it affects the entire church. When people do not know what they believe, it can create disorder and confusion in the church. Some people will act in a way that they believe is right, while the Bible offers firm guidance on handling certain situations that may arise. The student mentioned the by-laws of a church, stating that by-laws should be used in conjunction with the Bible, but they should never override the Bible. The student expressed that they have experienced a horrible abuse of power from the use of by-laws. There are church members who desire power over glorifying God who will try to gain power and abuse it instead of doing their best to fulfill God's work.

When talking about apologetics, the student revealed that apologetics is very close to their heart because it has played a big role in their testimony. The student explained that they used to struggle a lot with doubt and the existence of God. Since participating in the intervention plan, they have learned some basic apologetics to help subside those issues. Before the intervention plan, the student had never heard about apologetics before. The student has now learned how to defend their faith against unbelievers and themselves. They have learned to defend their faith against their doubts and the challenges they face throughout the week.

Student nine has been a part of the intervention plan for almost three years. While the student was in middle school, they did not have a real desire for learning about God. However, now that they have been a part of this plan for a few years, they have changed their outlook on their relationship with Jesus. By learning about theology and apologetics, the student feels more confident that they can defend themselves and explain their faith to people. They desire to be more like Christ and become closer to Him. The interview also asked about the student's opinions on the graduated students leaving the church. The student claimed that they think adolescents leave the church because their relationship with Jesus and His followers is not a

priority. They leave because they want to do their own thing without judgment or accountability. The student also pointed out that graduated students most likely have an inconsistent schedule and lose their accountability from parents and friends as they move out. The student also voiced that they do not think the church works to create fellowship between members. There are not many opportunities for adult ministries to come together on a retreat or something that brings people together on a deeper level.

#### High School Middle School Interview Ten

The next interview with student ten rated the importance of theology as a five out of ten. This student views theology as learning to understand God on a personal level. However, student ten is not convinced that the Bible is the inherent Word of God. This student prefers to research and prove things for themselves rather than having someone explain them. They believe there are several ways to interpret the Bible. Student ten explained that they do not know if they can trust everything in the Bible because whether God inspired every word cannot be proven since man conducted the Bible canon. The student asked, “When a pastor preaches, the Holy Spirit inspires. However, does that mean every word that comes out of the pastor’s mouth is inerrant? How much God-inspired and how much man’s word is in a sermon? Same can be asked about the Bible.” However, the student considers themselves saved and believes that Jesus died on the cross for their sins, but struggle with some aspects of Christianity. In speaking on apologetics, the interviewee rated the importance of apologetics as a three out of ten. They feel apologetics is unimportant because they do not believe unbelievers will attack them. As of the time of this interview, the student claimed they have not been in a situation where they have needed to use apologetics. However, they believe it will be different when they go to college, and the church over exaggerates the dangers of the secular world.

Student ten is an open-minded individual who wants to hear different beliefs and thoughts on God. During the interview, the student admitted they attend church out of obligation. The interviewee said they believe in God and would feel guilty if they did not go to church. They would feel like they would be letting people down or upsetting their parents. The student expressed they felt a responsibility to the church and had to attend, so their family did not worry about them. The student wants to think outside the box when interpreting the Bible. They said, "I am seeking church; there may be a little rebellion, but I want to try something new. What else is out there? I want to broaden my horizon and try to see where other people get their beliefs." This student is very curious; while they enjoy the church's community, they do not know anything else and want to see what is out there.

Student ten further discussed their belief in theology and apologetics. They said that theology is not essential but believing Jesus died and rose again for all sins is important. Everything else can be up for interpretation. In addition, they stated that apologetics is less important than theology because they cannot imagine any scenario where someone would be challenging what they believe. The student is not a very confrontational person and believes apologetics is just another way to argue. Student ten wants to know what they believe and why rather than discuss their beliefs with other people.

In regards to how prepared the church has made for life in the secular world, the student feels that there is not much to be prepared for because they do not believe non-believers will challenge their faith. They went on to say that attending church can become a burden and knows that people's beliefs change as they get older. Student ten expressed that people who have grown up in the church generally want to experience different things, which is essentially rebellion.

In this interview, student number ten was asked a follow-up question to further clarify their perception in an effort to understand their answers more clearly. When asked, “How do you know something is true?” The student explained, “There are things that are obviously true, like a desk is a desk. However, there are other things that are less tangible. I am not one hundred percent sure about a lot of things I believe in. I guess my beliefs are a gut feeling or maybe the Spirit. There are a lot of things I cannot comprehend, but something can make sense.” The student believes some things require empirical evidence, but some things are beyond a person’s ability to comprehend. The student finished the interview saying they were a believer; they were just in a skeptical place at the moment. This student was a part of the intervention plan for the full two years.

#### High School Middle School Interview Eleven

The interview with student eleven began with a correction for an answer on their survey. On their survey, the student ranked apologetics as more important than theology. However, in hindsight, the student believes theology is more important than apologetics. Their explanation for changing the answer is that theology deals with salvation which is the core of the faith; without salvation, there would be no need for apologetics. With this understanding, the student went on to say that they attend church because they enjoy the accountability, deep connections with peers, and the strengthening of their relationship with Jesus. The student has many peers from the youth group that also attend the same public school, which offers consistent accountability. The student remarked that they enjoy worshiping together corporately with their peers. They also expressed that learning to share their testimony with others through the intervention plan was helpful for self-reflection and the ability to relate to others within the youth group.

In discussing theology and apologetics, student eleven claimed the purpose of a Christian is to make disciples of all nations. They asked a rhetorical question of, "How can you make disciples if you do not have an understanding of what you believe?" The student believes that understanding theology is paramount in having a healthy relationship with Jesus. The discipline of studying God's Word and working to understand scripture as best as possible is critical. Student eleven explained that in their opinion, apologetics is important because people need a reason to believe. During various seasons of life, people can struggle with doubt and other things that understanding apologetics can help resolve. In evangelism conversations, sometimes tricky questions are asked based on false assumptions that can be difficult to answer. Therefore, education in apologetics would make certain conversations to understand and respond without feeling intimidated or unprepared.

Student eleven has been a part of the intervention plan for two and a half years. They believe the church has completely prepared them for life in the secular world. The student explained that the church has poured into them for several years and has recently begun appreciating what others have done for them. They pointed out that Christians will get out of church what they put into it; attending without being involved limits the church's impact on a Christian's life. Being a part of a youth group has revealed the importance of relationships to the student as well as making Christ a priority in their life. Student eleven has recently graduated and moved in with a friend who attends the same church. The student claims they are both holding each other accountable and working on leading others to Christ through discipleship. During the interview, the student suggested that many people only identify as Christian because they live in the Bible belt and Christianity is a societal norm. Unfortunately, there is no real relationship or

foundation in Christ, and their church attendance as adults stems from being forced to attend church as a child where they piggybacked off of their parents' faith.

#### High School Middle School Interview Twelve

The final interview with high school and middle school students is with student number twelve. This student currently attends church because they desire to grow their relationship with Christ. The student desires to grow up and be more like their parents, who have played an influential role in their faith and walk with Christ. The student claimed that if it were not for their parents, they would not have a relationship with Jesus. The student loves making relationships with others and discipling others younger, and this is their favorite part about living out the faith.

Student twelve stated that they believe theology and apologetics are essential. Theology is important because it is the foundation of belief in Jesus; it comprises basic beliefs of the faith. The student also explained that apologetics is also important, so Christians can explain their beliefs to others skeptical about the faith. Apologetics not only helps explain the faith to others, but it also helps with personal doubts.

Finally, student twelve expressed that the intervention plan has helped over the past few years. The intervention plan has helped to teach the student how to listen to God and discern when something is not of Him. Their education at church has also helped the student overcome doubt. However, the student remarked that they desired discipleship to be taught earlier, so they had more time to grow in their relationship in this aspect. On the topic of students leaving the church after graduation, they suggested that many students leave because they were forced to go to church in high school; however, they never really had a relationship with God or others in the

church. The student concluded that it is important to grow relationships with others for accountability and discipleship.

### **College and Career Interview Introduction**

In this section, each student interview will be labeled “CC” and then the number, CC standing for College and Career, and the number being the numerical order of the interviews. While not all of these students are in college, they are all aged between eighteen and twenty-five years. Each participant received the same questions as the high school and middle school students. However, some were asked individual follow-up questions as needed. Eighteen college and career interviews are discussed in this section.

#### **College and Career Interview One**

The first interview with a CC student began with disclosing their current struggles in their walk with Jesus. CC one is currently not attending a church on Wednesday because there is no one else in their age group to relate to. This student recently moved to a different state for college and has been able to reflect on their time at Sunnyside Baptist Church. The student stated in their opinion, Sunnyside is a lukewarm church. They continued that they felt this way while attending Sunnyside. However, since moving and becoming involved with a new church, their spiritual well-being has improved immensely. This CC did not enjoy their time at Sunnyside because there were a lot of cliques, in their opinion. The CC claimed they were hindered by serving in the church by cliques that did not like this individual. If one was not part of a group, there was no fellowship. There were fellowships, but it was difficult because of the cliques. While this CC did not enjoy coming to Sunnyside, they continued to attend for the community and to further their relationship with Christ. At the end of their time at Sunnyside, they hated coming to the church. During their time at Sunnyside Baptist, this CC also witnessed people in

leadership positions who were more interested in power and exerting that power. CC one claimed that these people had no business being in any leadership position. These people would abuse their power and make decisions for the church on their own regardless of the consequences. This CC heard testimony from staff members about the professional misconduct of these lay leaders that has resulted in several staff members who were ran-off by these people in the past. The CC said, "leaving Sunnyside to find a new church has been refreshing."

Since moving to a new area, CC one expressed that they have truly learned the importance of community with believers. In CC one's opinion, church services do not need to be limited to Sundays and Wednesdays because 'church' is not a building and shouldn't be limited to that. The CC has enjoyed learning about God and building their relationship with God and fellow believers for accountability. This CC stated that the new church they have been involved in had been a better community which they found refreshing. This CC only received one year of the intervention plan.

On theology and apologetics, the CC claimed that both are absolutely important. They explained that Christians and Christian leaders must know what they believe and why they believe it. As far as apologetics, the CC stated that it is an effective way to share the Gospel with unbelievers. Moreover, not only is apologetics a defense for one's personal faith but it can be used to help others defend their faith. Defending the faith is a requirement if one wants to survive being a Christian in this secular world.

The CC went on to discuss how prepared they felt for the secular world. The CC explained that they know Jesus Christ and have some basic knowledge of the Bible. However, the majority of their time in Sunnyside has been relatively unhelpful. In any case, they added that "I have learned more in the past year from the new youth pastor than the past eighteen years of

being in church." They claimed that something needed to change. There needs to be more than a story to a lesson, but why it happened and how it applies to everyday life. The church has not prepared the CC for the secular world because they never learned the application behind Bible stories, only the story itself.

Finally, the CC shared their thoughts on why students leave the church after high school graduation. They explained that there is no young adult ministry to advance to when students graduate and promote out of the youth ministry. While youth ministry is beneficial, it does not teach the reality of being an adult in the secular world. The CC explained that they learned how to be a youth all their lives rather than an adult Christian. Moreover, graduated students also leave because they have more freedom, some may have been mistaken on their salvation, and others only went to church because they were forced to go. The CC pointed out several other reasons, such as getting offended by others within the church, witnessing ongoing sin within the church, or hearing a sermon or Sunday School lesson that they disagreed with. However, probably the worst is when church members act ugly to each other and people outside the church. The CC explained that they had witnessed all of these reasons play out at Sunnyside Baptist Church, but they also are aware that other churches have similar struggles but do not feel that it is as prominent as other churches.

#### College and Career Interview Two

In the interview with CC two, they began by offering more explanation of their survey responses. This CC explained that apologetics is a little more important than theology because apologetics is about people, while theology is about worshipping God. This is not to say that worshipping God is not important; rather, the act of worshipping God does not require biblical knowledge, while defending the faith does. Apologetics can help lead those to Christ who

struggle with controversy and doubt. In the interview, the CC stated that they attend church because they want to grow in their relationship with Jesus, learn, and understand God on a deeper level. They enjoy the accountability they receive through their relationships with other fellow believers in the church and serving in the worship band.

The interviewee began to discuss the importance of theology by expressing concern about the number of lukewarm Christians in the church today. In their opinion, many people in the church have no desire to expand their knowledge of God or grow in their relationship with Him. The CC went on to explain that they do not believe in blind faith but believe faith has a reason. It is not following blindly, although a Christian does follow without having all the answers. However, there is still reason to believe, and apologetics is a great tool to help with that reasoning. Apologetics is essential because there needs to be a reason for theology, a tool for explaining it.

This CC has also only been a part of the intervention plan for a year. They stated that they had learned more in the past year than they had their entire time in church. The CC explained that in previous years, youth Wednesday night services included several games and a short fifteen-minute Bible study rather than learning how to read and study the Bible. The CC added that having solid family support has helped them stay in the church. However, the church has not prepared them for the secular world.

On students leaving the church after high school graduation, the CC explained that when students go to college, they desire to become a new person and establish themselves apart from their families. They enjoy the freedom and independence of moving out of their parents' house. In addition, this is very appealing for those that were forced to go to church by their parents but never developed a personal relationship with Christ. However, despite these issues laid out, they

keep coming to church because it is like a second home for them. They enjoy the community and know that people are there to hold the CC accountable.

### College and Career Interview Three

The interview with CC three was very insightful. In their survey, theology was ranked slightly more important than apologetics. They explained the reason for this is that the Christian faith is highly questioned, and some of that is due to Christians misunderstanding the details of doctrines of the faith and/or not being able to explain them. A firm foundation in theology offers guidance for a believer and can be used for one's personal relationship with God. In their opinion, theology is for the Christian, while apologetics is for people. The CC stated that in their opinion, theology supports faith, and Christianity requires some basis in theology, so there is something to believe in.

The CC expressed that they enjoy being a part of a church family for the opportunity to worship corporately. Corporate worship is also a place for the CC to learn new biblical knowledge from the pastor and youth pastor that the interviewee would not be able to learn on their own. The CC explained that around fifth or sixth grade, their senior pastor instilled a desire to learn more and grow in their faith. This individual was graduated before the intervention plan was implemented. However, CC three has been helping the youth for the past three years; therefore, they have witnessed the intervention plan be implemented, which has helped them grow exponentially.

According to CC three, theology is important because it is the foundation of the Christian faith and explains what is in the Bible. To grow in one's knowledge of the faith and the Bible, one must first understand the foundations, just like it would be more challenging to teach

advanced math to someone that does not understand basic math; the same is true for theology, the CC explained. In addition, the Great Commission states that Christians are to teach all that Jesus has commanded; however, if one does not know theology, how can they fulfill Jesus' great commission? As far as apologetics, the student expressed that Christians must have the ability to defend their faith. In present-day society, there are so many outspoken skeptics of the faith that a firm understanding of the Bible and the ability to explain and defend the faith is beneficial for oneself and others. There are those who get caught up in not having the answers; apologetics can help curb this issue.

The CC feels that the church gave them a good foundation in biblical knowledge. The church taught them what they believe and why they should believe it. The student feels prepared to answer what they believe if questioned. The church has also helped them establish accountability just from being around other believers. However, the CC was never taught about apologetics until the new youth pastor came a few years ago. Their education in theology was very rudimentary also. An example of rudimentary theology is that Jesus died on the cross and rose again from the dead. While this is crucial information, it is also very basic. The CC confirmed that until the new youth pastor came, they were only taught the basic concepts of theology.

On the topic of students leaving the church after graduation, they expressed that church is not always fun and engaging. While there are events to help people get involved, "you will keep them how you got them." The student gave this quote when explaining that some only come for fun but do not out of hunger for the Word of God. While it is ok to have these events, there should be more on preparing believers for life as a believer in the secular world. Also, without sound theology and apologetics, doubt can creep in from negative experiences.

Finally, CC three explained that they had continued their walk with Jesus because their relationship with God is personal. They do not need others to keep that relationship, but the accountability from others helps immensely. The CC explained that they do not attend church for others but God alone. They want to make a difference and desire to grow in their faith. They realize the need for mature Christians to step up and lead others in the church by making disciples.

#### College and Career Interview Four

The fourth college and career student had a different upbringing than the previous college and career interviews. When they were younger, the CC went to church but stopped attending when their mother was diagnosed with cancer. The church was a good distance from their house, and CC four did not have a license at the time or other modes of transportation at the time. They expressed that they wanted to go but were unable because of circumstances. However, they remember that the longer they were absent from the church, the more their desire to attend decreased. Over time, they became comfortable with not attending church. In addition, the church the interviewee attended was very conservative. The CC recalled their previous church was very legalistic with a lot of judgment, self-righteousness, and gossip. However, the CC now attends church regularly.

The interviewee stated that while they had learned a lot of biblical knowledge, it didn't resonate in their heart until much later on. The CC stated that they did not get saved until they were already in college, around the age of twenty-two. Before their salvation, they remember finding satisfaction in the world through drugs, gluttony, lust, pride, yet nothing filled the void. Eventually, the CC came to a point where they had severe anxiety and could not see a future, but God showed them they had to change. They currently attend church and enjoy being grounded in

a community of accountability with fellow believers. They have also made Christian friends, held others accountable, and offered discipleship to younger Christians.

The interviewee expressed that theology and apologetics are equally important, and it is crucial for students to have a firm understanding in both of these. CC three expressed that theology is important because God reveals Himself through the creation of the world, but it only understands the aspects of theology from God's perspective that is truly liberating. An understanding of theology can shape lives and worldviews for those who are willing to learn and submit. They explained that apologetics is essential because it strengthens one's faith and can increase the confidence of those who are struggling. CC's knowledge in apologetics has helped them share the Gospel and minister to fellow believers who are struggling with doubt. The CC recognizes the need for the Gospel to be spread through clarity and conviction, and apologetics can help with these things.

When the interviewee was asked about how the church has prepared them to enter the secular world, they stated that Sunday school was great because of all the Bible stories they learned. However, looking back, there were several things they wish they had learned beforehand about life in the secular world as a believer. Firstly, the CC learned from the church that sex was taboo and never discussed, but instead, they heard distorted information regarding sex from school and peers in the secular world. The church only stressed the importance of purity and discussed sex within the confines of marriage. There was no explanation of the blessing of biblical sex and how to combat against others who support pre-marital sex. Secondly, the CC proposed that in addition to not being prepared for the secular world, students are probably leaving the church because they are not or have not been properly disciplined. In their opinion, the church does not push people to share the Gospel, and too many Christians are content with

having a lukewarm relationship with God. They continued that the majority just wanted to attend church and pray. The church seems to be hesitant of discipleship or uncomfortable in teaching others to disciple. Either way, a vast majority of believers are suffering from a lack of discipleship which, in turn, weakens the kingdom of God. Instead, church members regularly attend church while having no desire to share the faith or teach others. The student also explained that they have continued to remain active in the church since graduation because they have a desire to worship and help lead others in their walk with Jesus.

#### College and Career Interview Five

In this interview, the CC began by clarifying one of their survey responses by explaining that, in their opinion, theology is slightly more important than apologetics. This is because one needs to know what they believe before one can share or defend their faith. The CC explained that they have attended church their whole life and participated in mission trips, been a counselor for children's camps, as well as several other ministry opportunities. They enjoy learning about theology with other believers and creating lasting relationships that have shaped their Christian walk.

The interviewee went on to say that theology is of utmost importance because if one does not realize that Jesus is the only way to eternal life with God, then nothing else a person does matters. According to the CC, the Bible is the authority on theology; therefore, it must be used with reverence. However, like theology, apologetics is crucial because it helps defend and share one's faith. In life, there may be unforeseen challenges that apologetics can help counter as those issues arise. Apologetics also has a role in discipleship because if someone has questions, the mentor needs to be prepared to answer or have the training on how to find the answer.

They continued by talking about the church and how it prepares young Christians to enter the secular world. In the CC's opinion, they have received good church education in the past but have also faced some strong challenges. While they feel the church has prepared them to serve, they were not ready for some conversations regarding their faith with non-believers because they were never challenged in that way in the church. A topic would be brought up, but there was little opportunity to experience or practice what was taught. The church prepared them with knowledge but not experience. For example, the interviewee was taught how to lead someone to Christ, but they have never had the opportunity to do so.

They went on to say that young adults leave the church after graduation because finding a new church can be intimidating, and it can be difficult to find a church with an established college ministry. The transition from youth ministry to adult ministry can be very drastic. Going The CC feels there needs to be a transition period for newly graduated students rather than throwing them straight into adult ministry. It is difficult to feel like a part of an adult ministry while still learning how to lead an adult life. Furthermore, college and career students have different struggles than those outside of that season of life. For example, college life has many distractions that take one's focus off of Christ. Many high schoolers are warned that college will take up more of their time, making it challenging to maintain a relationship with Christ; however, very few believe that.

The CC ended the interview by explaining that they had thought about visiting other churches to try something new because the previous year had been very tumultuous at Sunnyside. There has been a group of people that have brought a lot of hurt and dissension to the church. They could feel their heart was becoming bitter and knew they had to overcome that with Jesus. The CC has been working on their heart and now has a better mindset about the church.

While there are still things that bother the CC, they feel that they have done a good job giving their frustrations to the Lord.

#### College and Career Interview Six

In the interview with CC six, they wanted to elaborate their survey responses on theology and apologetics. They explained that theology is important and that there are primary and secondary theologies. The CC feels that primary theologies take precedence over secondary theologies. A secondary theological issue would be premillennialism, for example. While a believer can agree or disagree with this, being wrong will not hinder their faith or keep them from heaven. Primary theologies are the foundation of the faith that is required to be a Christian.

On the other hand, the CC explained that, in their opinion, apologetics is more important. The CC feels this way because believers today are frequently challenged, so having training in apologetics has become necessary. The CC explained that it would be beneficial for students to learn apologetics by experience because more questions tend to surface as one experiences the world. They went on to describe their view on theology and apologetics. The CC recognized that theology could be distorted by sin or pride. For example, suppose someone is struggling with a particular issue. In that case, they may read a passage on this issue and view it through their perspective rather than hermeneutically walking through the scripture. An aspect of learning theology is gaining a deeper understanding of sin and the fallen world. Believers need to understand the brokenness of the world in order to appreciate the work that God does in their life. In addition, apologetics is essential because Christians are commanded to make disciples and teach all that Jesus has taught them. While apologetics is not the same as evangelism, there are concepts of apologetics that can be useful in explaining certain aspects of Christianity.

CC six, who has not been a part of the intervention plan, expressed that the church has successfully prepared students for the secular world. They felt that the previous youth pastor and Sunday School teachers were honest about their challenges after high school graduation. They continued, explaining the church has taught them the importance of consistently reading the Bible. They recalled noticing how worn some church members' Bibles were from constant usage and claimed that they wanted their Bible to look like that one day because that is how a Bible should look if it is being read and studied. The church also focused on some difficult topics like homosexuality and pre-marital sex; having a basis on these topics has helped them tremendously in discussing their beliefs with non-believers. However, the CC noted that if the teachers would use more personal examples' it would be helpful for the students, so they learn life application and how it will affect others and help engage the students.

Finally, the interviewer asked the CC's opinion on students leaving the church after high school graduation. CC six explained that it is easy to fall into a new routine during major life changes. Furthermore, upon moving away, one in a sense is starting over as far as becoming involved in the community, finding a new church home, establishing and developing accountability relationships with a new church. There is also a difference between being involved in a church versus being invested. When someone is involved, they are considered to belong through their attendance. However, someone who is invested in the church and maintains a healthy relationship with Christ is more likely to weather the difficult seasons that every church goes through from time to time. In addition, the CC pointed out that it would help greatly if other churches had college ministries or a ministry just for the young adult age group for others to relate to.

## College and Career Interview Seven

In the interview with CC seven, they explained that theology is also slightly more important than apologetics because theology involves the core beliefs of the Christian faith. While Christians are not required to know everything, they must have a basic knowledge of the doctrines of faith and continue to further their knowledge. The CC expressed that they feel drawn to the church, have a desire to be around other believers, and thirst for insightful sermons from a pastor. The CC also understands the importance of worshipping corporately and maintaining relationships with fellow believers. While friends are not the primary reason they attend church, these relationships are a healthy by-product beneficial for accountability and discipleship.

During the interview, the CC further explained their view on theology by stating that theology shapes one's view of God. Moreover, making learning and understanding theology a priority will deepen a believer's ability to understand God's character and glorify Him. Theology also explains the liberties a believer has as a Christian. While Christians should exercise their liberties, they also should not abuse them. Regarding apologetics, the CC explained it is important because Peter states the need for Christians to be prepared to defend their faith in the Bible. In addition, they added that they personally love apologetics because, in their opinion, everything needs to be backed up by evidence or reasoning. The CC recognizes that many do not seem to care much about rationality but, that helps them because they know rationality and truth are on the side of God and Christianity.

On how well the church taught and prepared them for life in the secular world, they stated that they were overall satisfied with the education they received from the church. They claimed they were taught to stand up for what they believe and be bold in their obedience to

God. However, they underestimated the pressure they would receive from the secular world to be distracted from focusing on Christ and keeping Him as a priority in their lives. They were warned that it would be challenging but did not imagine it would be as difficult as it has been. The CC explained that the pressure is more subtle than expected, but there is recognizable pressure from the secular world. The church seems to intentionally or unintentionally strike fear into young believers regarding the secular world. The CC stated that while they do not feel the secular world is anything to fear, Christians should be aware of the different worldviews and be prepared to handle being confronted with a different view than theirs maturely.

The CC also speculated why such a large number of graduated students leave the church. In the CC's experience, they have witnessed some young adults become lazy or are intimidated about meeting new people and visiting a new church. It is much easier to be a Christian when one is in their comfort zone, in a familiar setting, and surrounded by people one already knows. They proposed that people who left the church were never actually a part of the church. CC seven recognized that the church is the body of Christ. While it is not perfect, the body should aspire to be as Christ-like as possible.

#### College and Career Interview Eight

The next CC student interviewed was only a part of the intervention plan for six months before graduating and being promoted from the youth ministry. However, they agree that a firm foundation in theology is essential. The act of making disciples is paramount in growing the Kingdom of God and Christians need to know why that is and how to make disciples. The danger of not understanding theology is that a believer could easily and unknowingly be easily confused or led in the wrong direction. Christians need to be prepared to study the Word accurately and effectively to develop their relationship with Jesus and continue to deepen their faith.

The CC explained that while apologetics is also crucial, it does not carry the same importance as theology. However, the CC admits that apologetics helps with overcoming doubt and evangelism. CC eight said, "...when witnessing, people are not going to just listen to everything. They are going to have questions, and we should be able to give a good answer." Evangelism is a two-way conversation meaning the believer needs to be prepared to clarify misconceptions and explain doctrine. This does not mean a believer needs to be intimidated of evangelizing but instead be prepared for it.

In their survey, CC eight ranked the church as a seven out of ten in preparing students for the secular world. The CC recalled that the church offered several different examples of how believers can be led astray and warned about the struggles they will face within the secular world. While recognizing these warnings can be helpful, the church was vague and needed to be more clear and direct, according to the CC. In the CC's opinion, most teachers in the church avoid challenging or controversial topics. For example, the church did not teach the CC about pre-marital sex and the importance of only engaging in sex within the confines of a marriage. The fact these topics were avoided or hushed within the church caused the CC to be unaware that their peers were also struggling with similar issues. The CC student felt as if they were the only one who struggled with a particular sin at times.

As far as students leaving the church after graduating high school, the CC proposed that those graduates lack awareness about the real world. They may not have known what to expect and then became overwhelmed by all the distractions of the world. In addition, many students wonder why something is prohibited; however, if the church explained why to the students, maybe they would be less curious offered the CC. In addition, the CC explained that some go

against the church because they were shocked by the differences and were unprepared to fight against the secular world's distractions.

Finally, CC eight expressed the importance of feeling at home with their church. Making connections and relationships with people in the church is an important aspect of having a relationship with Jesus. The student has recently found comfort in a church where they can lead and support others and be supported themselves. When the CC was younger, they saw the church as a routine but wished they had a deeper understanding of the faith earlier on. A good Christian education would have been helpful, considering what they know today. The CC student also realizes that the church is more than a collection of people in a building; it is the body of Christ, here to do the work of whatever Jesus commands.

#### College and Career Interview Nine

The next interviewee is currently a pastor, but they are still within this study's college and career age range. Clearly, CC nine now has a different perspective but had the same experience in youth ministry as the other participants. It is important to note that CC nine has not been a part of the intervention plan.

The interview with CC nine began by discussing scripture. They stressed the value of believers understanding scripture and the nature of God; they added that these were not concepts that they understood themselves while growing up. They also added how it is important for students to have the ability to defend their faith in a non-aggressive way. This CC explained that they did not truly understand their relationship with God until they began working in the ministry. When CC nine was in youth ministry, they were used to playing a lot of games and having fun rather than digging into the Word. They also remember being frustrated with some

Sunday School teachers because the CC would ask questions, and the teachers would almost ignore the question because it was too difficult to answer. The CC claimed they found rest at church during their high school years. Church was a way to refresh or recharge their Spirit for the upcoming week.

CC nine discussed the importance of theology and apologetics. They said, "As Christians, we are taught Bible stories growing up, but we do not understand why the stories are important. I never knew about the characteristics of God. However, we should not get obsessed with deep theology if it distracts us from the Great Commission." Theology is important because it helps to be more equipped to study God's Word. Regarding apologetics, the CC explained that they did not learn much about it until they were in college but commented that some training in apologetics would have been useful earlier on in life. Apologetics helps prepare people for the challenges of the secular world; being prepared to explain and defend one's faith is paramount in building a relationship with Jesus and others.

As far as CC nine's opinion on the church preparing them for the secular world, they claimed they were not impressed and thought the church should have done more for them. They expressed that they learned more about what not to do rather than live an adult Christian life. After graduation, the CC witnessed fellow believers that were more concerned about themselves and their desires/preferences than worshiping God with an open heart and mind. In addition, they felt that while the church loved them, they did not feel respected by the church. There was never any discipleship or someone CC nine could talk to. According to the interviewee, they wanted to open up and share their struggles with fellow believers, but their efforts and questions were often dismissed.

Therefore, after considering CC nine's experience in the church as a youth, it is no

wonder why students leave the church upon graduation. Young adults generally do not see the value in church because it was never taught to them. Unfortunately, many young believers that grew up in the church witnessed the sinful side of older adult members and got turned off by it. Furthermore, a lot of judgment exists within the church that deters people from attending, and this is used as a reason to either stop attending church or attend inconsistently. CC nine also said that “too much pushing creates resentment.” While they believe parents should make their children be involved in church, they also believe that it should be acceptable to not be involved in all of the church’s programs and ministries.

#### College and Career Interview Ten

The next interview was conducted with a CC student who was only a part of the intervention plan for six months. Regarding their survey, it is their opinion that if one’s theology is shallow or incorrect, they are going to church for themselves and their friends rather than for God. The CC recognizes that God should be the top priority for the reason one attends church. Furthermore, friends within the church family are great to have and are required for relational discipleship rather than primarily being superficial relationships. The CC realizes how important their relationship with God is, and consistently attending church is essential in growing closer to God and developing accountability and discipleship relationships with fellow believers.

On the topic of theology and apologetics, CC ten explained that theology is required because it is vital to learn the truth about God so one can teach others. One of the dangers of incorrect theology is that it could distort one’s worldview and how one perceives life’s obstacles. While the CC recalled that they did not need apologetics in high school, it quickly became apparent that it was needed in college. They continued that if one believes in something, they should be able to defend it and prove its truth. Apologetics can be for both believers and

unbelievers alike but in different capacities, of course. The study of apologetics is necessary for preparing Christians to give a reasonable answer for their faith.

CC 10's survey rated the church at a seven out of ten in preparing youth for the secular world. They further explained that while the church did a great job teaching that evolution was wrong, they did not explain why it was wrong. In addition, there was not a lot of life application taught in Sunday School, but the teachers did make the Bible real rather than just being stories on a page. But as stated previously, discussing why one believes what one does would work to strengthen the church body as a whole. In the current skeptical world, it is very challenging for Christians to stay strong in their relationship with Christ without this knowledge.

Regarding students leaving the faith after high school graduation, CC ten explained that after they move out of their parent's house, they now have the freedom not to attend. Furthermore, many graduates feel misplaced because most churches only have a youth ministry and adult ministry without a college or young adult ministry. There is no transitional ministry for those walking through a very challenging and defining season of life. The interviewee claimed that one big difference that made them remain active in the church was their relationships with other church members.

#### College and Career Interview Eleven

This interviewee had a slightly different background than the majority of participants. CC eleven came from a broken home and stopped attending church when they were very young. However, when the CC was a sophomore in high school, some undisclosed life-changing events caused the student and their mother to resume attending church again. Both of them were broken when they came to church and knew it. CC eleven stated that they are currently unable to attend

Sunday services due to their work schedule. The CC recognizes that they do not have the same foundation or biblical knowledge that many other young adults that grew up in the church have. CC eleven confessed that they continue to attend church because it helps with their depression and it gives them encouragement and a positive outlook on life. They state that they love to worship the Lord and realize that everything else is meaningless without God.

The concept of apologetics is new to this individual. However, they believe that theology is more important because one cannot use apologetics if there is no foundation in theology. A believer has to know what they believe in before they can defend it. CC eleven explained that it is impossible to love God if one does not know Him. Christians need to know who God is and what He has done for His people. Furthermore, the world continues to stray away from God and is actively trying to bring Christianity down; without apologetics, it would be impossible to combat these things. A knowledge of apologetics is also helpful when sharing the Gospel, the CC added.

Despite not attending church regularly as a child, CC eleven still feels the church has prepared them for the secular world. The church taught them to love others unconditionally and not to judge others. They also learned to pray when life is both easy and hard. Many only pray during the hard seasons of life and forget to praise God in the good seasons. They also proposed that many high school graduates leave the church because they may be tired of it. There is the perception that the church is a waste of time or fake. In addition, claiming one has a genuine relationship with Christ will not withstand the obstacles of the secular world without regularly studying the Bible.

### College and Career Interview Twelve

The interview with CC twelve began with them explaining their thoughts on theology and apologetics. They feel that theology is important because it helps Christians know why they believe what they believe; without theology, there is no foundation for apologetics to defend. CC twelve expressed that they desire to attend church because they want to grow in their faith and continue to have community with fellow believers. They need people in their life that will hold them accountable and fellowship and worship God together. The student claimed that they enjoy meeting new people and discipling them.

Theology is essential to a believer because it explains what Christians believe. Some youth go to church simply because their parents do, and it is part of their family routine and lifestyle. However, they have little understanding of the concept of picking up one's cross daily, following Christ, and having a personal relationship with Him (Matthew 16:24). The absence of theological knowledge means the presence of only a shallow, superficial knowledge of God. Apologetics is also important because it helps people defend and explain what they believe and why they believe it.

CC twelve went on to explain that, in their opinion, the church does a decent job in preparing youth for the secular world. When the CC was younger, they recall learning basic biblical information, but there was a gap between elementary and high schools. The biblical education they received in middle school was not very insightful or challenging. Although the CC did note a few times where the group would dig into the Word, it was only milk and not solid food (1 Corinthians 3:2).

Furthermore, their opinion on why students leave the church after graduating high school is that the younger generations in the church are pushed down and out having different viewpoints than the older generations. These viewpoints are not unbiblical but broader than the current viewpoint of the majority of the church. For example, the church's structure may work now, but it may not in the next few years. While the church should not change its foundation, it may become necessary for it to grow with the changing culture as far as need the style of worship music and even the preaching style to continue to grow. According to CC twelve, the younger generations feel left out because the older generation does not respect nor listen to them. They also proposed that students leave because they have never been shown how deep Christianity is; therefore, they feel the faith is fake and unrelated.

#### College and Career Interview Thirteen

Interview thirteen was conducted with a CC student who did not attend church until high school, mainly because their parents would not take them. However, after they got their driver's license, they began attending church regularly. The student currently comes to church for personal growth. This CC confessed that the COVID-19 pandemic had affected their church attendance because of the shutdowns, but they have been working hard to get back their normal routine. The CC states that they enjoy attending church physically because they can go to the altar for prayer. They know that is not required, but they expressed that the physical representation helps them understand the faith's spiritual side. They also appreciate the accountability that comes along with the church community. CC twelve claims that they always attend church with the mindset of leaving being changed somehow.

CC thirteen explained that theology is crucial and necessary. They explained that theology is a good basis for having community with other Christians; believers need to surround

themselves with others who share the same theological beliefs. CC thirteen has a Methodist background and learns that the Baptist beliefs are quite different. From the CC's perspective, Baptist theology is much more sound than Methodist theology. However, it is important to know the difference between primary and secondary theologies. Secondary theologies can cause dissension and distractions from the Christian's biblical mandate. However, secondary theologies are great for deeper conversations glorifying God and sharpening other believers. On the other hand, apologetics is more important because defending the faith and explaining concepts in the Bible can be difficult, the CC states. However, having one's faith challenged has the potential to strengthen a believer's faith.

CC thirteen offered an insightful perception of the church and the secular world. Since they did not attend church until high school, the student already had skepticism about the faith before they started attending church. They remember wanting to know why bad things happen and what the Bible says about it, and why. They explained that those who grow up in church often ignore questions that someone who is unchurched may have. CC thirteen did not have any opinions or comments on students leaving the church after graduating high school.

#### College and Career Interview Fourteen

CC fourteen was a part of the intervention plan for a year and a half before graduating from the youth ministry. Their interview began with the CC expressing that they do not like how they feel when they do not attend church. They find themselves fighting depression. When the CC was in elementary school, they only came to church because of their family. However, at the age of thirteen, their heart changed, and they started to have a desire to attend church. The CC acknowledged that many things happened throughout their time in the youth ministry, but their experience during their junior year made a huge difference. A new youth pastor came to whom

the CC could relate. The student felt condemned rather than encouraged by the youth ministry in the past. The CC clarified that it was not that the previous youth pastor was bad, but there was a personality conflict between them.

On the topic of theology and apologetics, CC fourteen expressed that having a foundation of what one believes is vital because it is essential for discipleship and evangelism. However, theology alone is just knowledge; one must also possess a personal relationship with God. In addition, the CC explained that apologetics is about taking action. Apologetics teaches believers how to defend their faith and overcome self-doubt, which can encourage other believers who may have the same struggles. If someone knows about God but does not pursue a relationship with Him, the knowledge is worthless.

CC fourteen stated that they did not feel prepared for the secular world until they started learning from the new youth pastor. The CC stated that they learned more in one year than they have learned in their entire Christian walk. Now, there is a college ministry at Sunnyside, and it has helped the CC transition into being an adult Christian. However, the CC did note that the church taught them the importance of staying connected with a church and a church family. They claimed that they knew that if they drifted away, it would be easier to lose their focus on Christ. As far as students leaving the church upon high school graduation, the CC claimed that graduates leave because they move away for college. Finding a new church and making new relationships can be intimidating. In addition, their priorities shift to college and their future rather than Jesus.

#### College and Career Interview Fifteen

CC fifteen started attending church in the tenth grade. This individual has not been a part of the intervention plan but has learned quite a bit about the intervention plan from discipling

those in the intervention plan. They are aware of the importance of attending church and making relationships for accountability and discipleship. The CC confesses that they have stumbled in their walk with Christ, but they know that is normal. They desire to be a part of the church to grow their relationship with Christ and other Christians in the community.

The CC believes that both theology and apologetics are important. They explained that theology is important because it is an attempt to understand who God is and His character. Theology teaches how to interpret things in the Bible correctly and learn about the context of scripture. As far as apologetics, CC fifteen feels that it is an absolute necessity; Christians can look foolish when challenged without knowledge of apologetics. The CC acknowledged that some think that Christians have blind faith, but in reality, there is reasonable proof of why Christians believe what they believe which is why it is so important that Christians know how to explain this. Apologetics is also standing up for God and defending the faith wherever possible, the CC added.

During the interview with CC fifteen, they shared how the church prepared them for the secular world. They explained that the previous youth pastor helped prepare them for the future. The Youth Pastor would look up the Greek and Hebrew in a concordance for accurate definitions. In the CC's opinion, the previous Youth Pastor would study the Word deeply and instill that into them as well. They also said that the previous youth pastor really knew about the Bible and did a great job mentoring.

On students leaving the church after high school graduation, the CC pointed out that adult service is not as fun as youth service. Adult ministry is a very different environment. The CC now concluded that while youth ministry was great, it did not prepare for adulthood. Students are

not prepared to leave the youth; the CC knew of some peers that decided not to continue to attend church before they even graduated because they desired freedom free of judgment.

The interview ended with the CC revealing that they had stopped attending church after their high school graduation. However, they have since started attending again because a family at the church never gave up on them. This family continued to pursue them and genuinely wanted them back at church. However, several people gave up on them. The CC commented that they felt like a stranger in the church they grew up in. They felt some church members viewed them as a sinner and labeled them as such.

#### College and Career Interview Sixteen

CC sixteen has not been a part of the intervention plan. They did not know anything about theology or apologetics when taking the survey. However, the interviewer explained each concept to them, making them want to change their survey answer. The CC now rates the importance of both theology and apologetics as a ten out of ten. The CC states that they attend church because the Bible commands to and feels God is leading them to attend. Prior to coming to Sunnyside, they attended a Pentecostal church where they recall having some uncomfortable experiences as a child. The CC claimed that they felt comfortable joining Sunnyside because the church family was very welcoming and showed them a lot of love.

Once understanding the definition of theology, they commented that it has everything to do with having a relationship with God; without theology, people can believe false things. Incorrect theology can also lead others astray, resulting in them not attending church anymore, the CC added. Moreover, apologetics is equally important in the CC's opinion because it can remedy the self-doubt that every believer struggles with from time to time. Everyone struggles

with doubt at some point. The CC also added that apologetics could be helpful in explaining scripture rather than just quoting scripture. While there is nothing wrong with quoting scripture, it is important to know how to defend it when talking to unbelievers.

According to CC sixteen, biblical education was lacking in the previous churches. The CC recalled that a few pastors over the years would teach a little, but it was simple concepts they could learn on their own. They expressed that they want to be a partaker in the church instead of a participant. They desire a relationship with God and other believers. They continued discussing the reasons as to why graduates leave the church; in their opinion, part of the issue is that there is nothing specifically for their age group after they promote out of the youth ministry. Students graduate high school and are expected to immediately change to an adult ministry setting which is very different than what they are used to. CC sixteen stated that they have observed that the youth seem to be the most active servants in the church; however, they stop participating and serving once they graduate. Young believers need the church, and when students avoid the church, they will find somewhere else to plug into.

#### College and Career Interview Seventeen

During the interview with CC seventeen, they wanted to explain some of their survey answers. They clarified that, in their opinion, apologetics is slightly more important than theology. They feel this way because one cannot spread the Gospel just by stating Christian beliefs; instead, they need to explain why they have their beliefs in a way that makes sense to unbelievers. CC seventeen was a part of the intervention plan for about a year and a half. They have continued to attend church because they actively pursue a relationship with Christ. The CC recognized the importance of worshipping God and listening to different interpretations and views regarding the Bible.

CC seventeen expressed that both theology and apologetics are very important. They have noticed how some Christians try to explain everything in the Bible in broad terms and leave a lot of depth and pivotal details out of their conversations. The details of Christianity are important; simply having a basic knowledge of God is not enough to grow a relationship with Him. The CC went on to explain that in their opinion, apologetics seems to be the reason one believes. This does not mean that one needs to study apologetics fervently; however, it does mean that an understanding of basic apologetics is important for a believer to have. CC seventeen explained that Christians should do their best to know what they believe and why they believe it and should seek out the evidence supporting their belief.

The interviewee said they felt like Sunnyside did a decent job preparing young adults for the difficult questions they may encounter in the secular world. The CC explained that they learned this skill from the new youth pastor. However, the previous youth pastor would also ask hot topic questions and play devil's advocate with the students so they could practice arguing back. Moreover, the church as a whole did very little educating and practicing apologetics, but the new youth pastor does a lot in apologetics to help students feel more prepared.

The interviewee continued to say that students leave the church after graduating high school for several reasons. Firstly, they just want to do whatever they want and enjoy their freedom. Secondly, some students haven't learned any spiritual disciplines, which weakens their faith and eventually falls away. Thirdly, others leave because they have had negative experiences involving judgment and/or leadership abusing their power in the church. Finally, some struggle hearing an atheists' point of view and have been ill-equipped to explain and defend their faith. While there are several reasons why students leave the church, one thing is certain: people leave the church because they are not invested and do not have any discipleship

or accountability relationships. Being involved in a church is not the same as being invested; those involved, their lives are unchanged by the church.

#### College and Career Interview Eighteen

The final interview for this study is with CC eighteen, who was only a part of the intervention plan for six months. However, they stated that theology and apologetics were something they had never learned much about prior. The intervention plan was very beneficial to them because it helped them recognize the importance of theology and how it fits into the Christian belief system. In addition, learning apologetics allowed them to defend what they believed. They claimed that while they do a personal Bible study individually, they also understand the importance of corporate worship and fellowship with a community of believers. CC eighteen desires to grow closer with God and strengthen their relationship with Him.

The interviewee explained how important theology is because one cannot believe something they know nothing about or do not understand its foundation. How can one claim to love God without attempting to know Him? In addition, in the CC's opinion, apologetics is for non-believers more than it is for believers. Apologetics can help those who did not grow up in the church learn about the faith and explain it. The CC realizes that defending the faith needs to be done respectfully and that some are more on the offense than the defense when it comes to apologetics.

Lastly, CC eighteen discussed the church's ability to prepare students for the secular world. The CC expressed that they wish they would have been told how tough the adult secular world is before entering it. In truth, there is no real way to know the challenges of the secular world until it is experienced. However, the church could still do a better job when it comes to

training and preparing young Christians. The CC acknowledges that the basic Bible stories are great, but there is a need for depth and more genuine lessons that have some life application. For example, they could teach the inerrancy of the Word in youth Sunday School or teach how it can be known that the Bible is real, true, and authentic. Furthermore, CC eighteen also shared their opinion on graduates leaving the church, explaining that many churches do not have a college ministry or even a decent group of college-aged members, and due to that, they tend to get forgotten or overlooked. In addition, the aspect of having to find a new church family and make new relationships can be very intimidating for some.

### **Results Conclusion**

There was a total of forty-seven surveys completed for this research project combined. The surveys held some similarities as well as differences in the responses. Furthermore, thirty interviews were conducted: twelve from high school and middle school students and eighteen from college and career students. The results were very insightful and encouraging. This project has revealed several interesting perspectives discussed in the final chapter. The major theme discussed in the majority of interviews with the college and career participants is the need for a transitional ministry for those moving from youth ministry to adult ministry. An obvious disconnect exists between these two ministries that students have noticed and experienced. The church's attention to this issue would greatly benefit the participants of this study as well as future graduates that will soon experience the same struggles.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

After attentive and diligent observation, evaluation, and reflection of results from this research project, prominent themes have been echoed throughout the students' answers. That theme is a deep yearning to be embraced by the older generation, unquenched thirst for theological knowledge, and a principal need for life-applicable lessons that relate to the social climate of the present time. In short, it has become very transparent to the author that the common and current youth ministry model is not meeting the spiritual or social needs of the students. Therefore, it is unknowingly and unintentionally contributing to the mass exodus of young adults witnessed nationwide. There is an urgent need for churches to observe and evaluate their current youth ministry model and be prepared to adopt and implement a new model if necessary.

### **Deep Relationships**

The desire to have relationships with fellow believers from all generations within the church as well as Christ must be instilled and cultivated in students early on. More importantly, these relationships must be rooted in the Christian faith, which embraces accountability and discipleship rather than remaining a superficial friendship. Students that have established accountability and discipleship relationships and study the Word together increase the likelihood that those relationships will continue beyond high school graduation and contribute to a student's continued service and growth within the church.

In addition, using theology and apologetics as the base of a student's education provides a foundation rooted in the fundamentals of studying scripture, understanding it, and applying it to

daily life to grow their faith, evangelize, and make disciples. When students feel prepared and comfortable sharing, explaining, and defending their faith, they are more likely to remain active in the church after graduation. At some point in their lives, people look for a purpose, and Christians find that purpose in the Bible. For this reason, learning a Bible story with a simple explanation absent of life application that applies to the current social climate has been proven to fail in keeping adolescents engaged. Therefore, incorporating theology and apologetics as the center of the curriculum and practicing evangelism and apologetics on their peers creates the opportunity for deeper fellowship and the development of healthy accountability and discipleship relationships.

In the first chapter of Ecclesiastes, the author states that everything is meaningless without God. Ecclesiastes was written towards the end of the author's life and seemed to be examining atheism; this was most likely a major point of redemption in his life.<sup>110</sup> This is a perfect illustration that emphasizes the need to learn these concepts and skills early in life rather than waiting until the end. In addition, there is a noticeable difference in the walks of Christians that learn theology and apologetics early in life versus those that do not. Those who know theology and apologetics have stronger faith and a deeper understanding of God than those who do not.

Students, like most adults, often get distracted by various things of the secular world. Some examples of the common distractions students face are their social media accounts, TikTok videos, Pinterest, social gatherings, and their usual extracurricular activities, including football, baseball, basketball, volleyball, soccer, band, choir, swimming, and dance. In today's society,

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<sup>110</sup> Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Ecclesiastes, Book Of," *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 652.

middle and high school students keep busier schedules than the older generations did when they were students. Moreover, the present culture has drastically changed its view of the church. About a couple of decades ago, extracurricular activities schedules were designed not to interfere with church services. Unfortunately, that is no longer the case; sports practices and games are scheduled on Sundays and Wednesdays during the same time as the church. Students are becoming regularly absent from church services and events due to extracurricular activities that are slowly beginning to take priority in their lives over their relationship with both Christ and the church. In addition, it is already challenging for young believers to be expected to grasp deep lessons of the faith by attending just two days a week, but extracurricular activities drawing them away from church increases that challenge even more. It should be noted that the consequences of a demanding extracurricular schedule will not only affect a student's church attendance but will increase their exposure to the secular world and its influence during a very delicate and impressionable phase of life.

Furthermore, many students have grown accustomed to playing games during youth services rather than studying the Word of God. In the author's experience, most youth groups do a brief fifteen-minute discussion and spend the rest of the time playing games and fellowship. While this does not describe all youth ministries, it does seem that a majority follow this model. Pastors and youth leaders alike have become preoccupied with being favored by the students or by growing the size of their ministry than focusing on the quality of believers within the ministry and helping them cultivate a strong relationship with God.

### **The Need for Youth Ministry**

Youth ministry plays a vital role in a young believer's walk of faith and their relationship with Jesus Christ. Moreover, adolescence is known for being a very impressionable period in a

student's life, which in and of itself explains the importance of modeling the adult church for them. The church should also include worship songs and sermons that meet the students on their level and are life applicable to the challenges they specifically face as a youth. It is a disservice to expect students to be able to transition from service that includes brief lessons and playing games all through their elementary, middle, and high school years to going straight to an adult prayer meeting with the older generations in the church. There is so much that students need to know in order to be adequately prepared for life after they graduate that it is impossible to cover all of it in brief fifteen-minute lessons once or twice a week. For the many reasons stated above, it is encouraged for churches to evaluate the education they provide and its effectiveness in the spiritual lives of their youth, or there will continue to be a mass exodus of young adults from the church.

While evaluating the results of this research project, the researcher recalled a relevant example of an accountability and discipleship relationship that developed due to the intervention plan. Six students in the youth group were previously friends, although not very close until participating in the intervention plan. These six students participated in all three years of the intervention plan discussed in chapter three and participated in the surveys and interviews for this research project. Throughout the course of the intervention plan, these students grew closer together as they learned how to study the Bible, evangelizing techniques, and apologetics skills. Each of these students has shared with this author how after the past year and a half, they have gotten together over various social media platforms to discuss what they are reading and learning in the Bible. They all attribute their close bond and deeper relationship with Christ to how this intervention plan has challenged them and given an opportunity for friendship such as this to develop. This strengthened the bond between them and thus strengthened their relationship with

Christ. These students became leaders in the youth group and are now leaders on their college campus.

Now that three of them have graduated and moved away, they have begun investing in their fellow college students and being a witness for Christ to their unbelieving peers. They have shared that they regularly invite their peers to attend church once they find a new church in their area to join. They have also discussed strategies amongst themselves to combat peer pressure behavior they are experiencing now that they are in the secular world. They have continued to be a disciple and hold each other accountable.

Each of these students has worked consistently in building their relationship with each other and Jesus. These graduates have recently come back to speak to their old youth group at Sunnyside. They explained how the intervention plan had changed them and their walks with Christ to the youth group. They continued by sharing how studying the Word together has been important in growing deeper in their faith. By learning how to study the Word together and strengthen their relationship with Christ and each other.

Therefore, it is paramount for young Christians to have more than a basic understanding and relationship but a deep understanding of God's relationship and the dangers that exist when they allow their spiritual walk to become lukewarm. Unfortunately, many adult Christians cannot model this type of spiritual walk because they only possess a basic relationship with God and have made shallow and superficial friendships with fellow believers, having received similar education when they were students. In addition, it cannot be assumed that all of the adults within a church grew up in church. Many people are saved later in life. Therefore, it is crucial to remember that every church member has a different spiritual age separate from their biological age. Many factors affect a believer's spiritual age other than the amount of time that they have

been saved; how active they pursue the Lord, their prayer life, and service to the church are some things that matter. Sadly, many older church members attend church out of routine rather than a desire or a thirst for the Lord. This poses another challenge for students; how can they be expected to grow in their relationship with Jesus and stay on fire for Him if they are surrounded by lukewarm Christians? In order to establish, develop and grow a life-changing and defining relationship with Christ, a believer needs to spend more time than just twice a week in the Word.

Furthermore, because today's youth are very busy with extracurricular activities, it is even more imperative for church leaders to make the most of the time spent with youth because it is so brief in comparison. The stark reality that pastors face is that school and extracurricular activities have become a priority before church in the lives of many students now. In addition, it is very common for students to believe that the only time they need to work on their relationship with Christ is when they are physically at church. In an effort to give students an understanding of the importance of spiritually feeding themselves, this author would challenge youth to avoid eating any food or drink unless they are at church. While this is completely unreasonable, it is an excellent illustration to demonstrate the importance of spiritually feeding oneself more than one or two times a week. There needs to be a daily feeding of the Word of God; without that feeding, Christians are spiritually starved and become lukewarm.

### **The Curriculum**

The majority of modern church members fit into one of three categories, the first being those who only attend church and are minimally involved with the church's ministries. These members usually only attend out of routine and obligation or at their convenience. The second category is those who attend and are involved in the church. These members enjoy belonging and serving a church family but expect the worship/church experience to match their personal

preferences. For example, they may complain if the music or the preaching is not to their liking and allow that to hinder their worship and education rather than realizing that all worship and preaching styles are for God's glory. The third category is those who attend regularly, are invested in their church, and pursue an active relationship with Christ. These members genuinely love Jesus and His church; they actively pursue unbelievers and disciple the younger generations.

The intervention plan discussed in this thesis can easily be replicated in other churches. In this researcher's opinion, the Sunnyside youth are common to many other youth ministries across the country. Sunnyside experiences the same struggles and obstacles that every other church experiences across the country. Students continue to leave the church after graduation at an alarming rate, yet the issue continues to go unaddressed by many churches. However, this can be easily reversed by making minor yet crucial adjustments to the current structure of youth ministry.

As stated previously, some within the church are anti-intellectual.<sup>111</sup> These members do not see the value of having knowledge in apologetics and, therefore, do not recognize its need in the church. In the past at other churches, deacons have chastised this author for encouraging students to think critically when it comes to scripture, allowing them to ask challenging questions and then answer those questions. The consensus of this deacon body was that it was not necessary for students to go so deep into scripture. However, the youth did not share this same ideology and enjoyed learning and studying on this level. Unfortunately, many churches and church members share the same outmoded opinion of the author's deacon body. Suppose the church does not change this attitude toward students' education. In that case, it will be

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<sup>111</sup> Tim Barnett, "Anti-Intellectualism in the Church," Anti-Intellectualism in the Church, November 18, 2019, <http://www.str.org/w/anti-intellectualism-in-the-church>.

impossible to reverse the mass exodus witnessed across the country in so many churches regardless of size.

In support of this, the literature reviewed in Chapter two seems to be surprisingly accurate on this topic. Most of the literature claim similar reasons for the exodus of youth from the church, from parental involvement to the spiritual education of the youth. While these are all accurate, what makes this study different from previous studies on this topic is that it emphasizes the combination of developing strong relationships with peers and education in theology and apologetics. While the reviewed literature was very encouraging and insightful, no church or ministry is perfect, and each has its own struggles. With that being said, it is challenging to develop an ideal and perfect plan to keep students from leaving the church after they graduate that takes into account limitations and obstacles that pertain to each church. Jesus' last command to the disciples was, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:19-20) This verse has come to be known as the Great Commission. However, it is also the most overlooked commandment in the Bible compared to Moses' Ten Commandments. The Great Commission can be an intimidating command to follow but the fact that it is intimidating echoes the need and relevance for a curriculum that includes both theology and apologetics.

Lastly, this research project revealed some issues that require attention. This project magnified the need for either a college ministry or a transitional ministry for newly graduated students. Moving graduated students immediately from youth to adult ministry is challenging and intimidating for the young adult. This can also be a shock to those graduates that grew up attending children and youth services that include snacks and playing games with a brief Bible

lesson. When they transition to the adult worship service, they often feel overwhelmed and struggle to relate to the older generations and the sermons, which only hinders their growth in their walk with Christ. Youth and children's ministry seems to be more about entertaining and occupying the students separately from the adults rather than discipling and cultivating them in the Lord.

### **Encouraging Words**

In Paul's letter to the Roman church, he concludes the eleventh chapter by saying, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Romans 11:33) Contextually, this verse is speaking about why God has chosen Israel. Israel is comprised of those who are natural olive branches meaning the Jewish people, and those who are grafted in, meaning the Gentiles that have been saved since Christ's death on the cross. The analogy Paul uses in this text has to do with being a part of the kingdom of God.<sup>112</sup> Paul is basically saying that the reason why God chose Israel is a mystery that even he (Paul) does not fully understand. One explanation is that God is sovereign over all living things, and His ways are not always understood by His children. God saves people regardless of their personal and individual understanding of Him. Leaders and teachers in the church need to keep this in mind when working with inquisitive students. Not all questions can be answered, and some answers are based on the theories of biblical scholars or not clear at all, but that should never stop anyone from trying to examine the mysteries of God. Choosing to serve in children and youth ministries does not mean a leader has to know all the answers. God can use anyone for an honorable vessel, but Christians have to be willing. "For by grace you

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<sup>112</sup> John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 442.

have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8-9)

In conclusion, to clarify, any change made to a ministry should be done through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He is the one who will change the hearts of the church leaders and members. No doubt, the ability to have a logical argument, have had a Christ-centered upbringing, and active discipleship are helpful; it is necessary to follow and surrender to the Holy Spirit for the church. There is no amount of strategizing nor educating that will change hearts other than Jesus. It is God who calls, enables, and equips people to His calling. However, the church is one of the instruments God chooses to speak, reach and change His people.

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**Appendix A****Liberty University**

## Institutional Review Board

June 8, 2021

John Sales

Reginald Weems

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY20-21-986 Connecting Youth to the Gospel: The Role of Theology and Apologetics

Dear John Sales and Reginald Weems,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study does not classify as human subjects research. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

**Decision: No Human Subjects Research**

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

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

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

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

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP

Administrative Chair of Institutional Research

Research Ethics Office

**Appendix B**

**Survey Questions - Student**

1. How old are you?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
2. What grade or college year?
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Which best describes how often you attended church on Sundays from grades 6-8?
  - a. A few times a year
  - b. Maybe 1 time a month
  - c. 1-2 times month
  - d. 3-4 times month
4. Which best describes how often you attended church on Wednesdays from grades 6-8?
  - a. A few times a year
  - b. Maybe 1 time a month
  - c. 1-2 times month
  - d. 3-4 times month
5. Which best describes how often you attended church on Sundays from grades 9-12?
  - a. A few times a year
  - b. Maybe 1 time a month
  - c. 1-2 times month
  - d. 3-4 times month
6. Which best describes how often you attended church on Wednesdays from grades 9-12?
  - a. A few times a year

- b. Maybe 1 time a month
  - c. 1-2 times month
  - d. 3-4 times month
7. Which best describes how often you currently attend church on Sundays?
- a. A few times a year
  - b. Maybe 1 time a month
  - c. 1-2 times month
  - d. 3-4 times month
8. Which best describes how often you currently attend church on Wednesdays?
- a. A few times a year
  - b. Maybe 1 time a month
  - c. 1-2 times month
  - d. 3-4 times month
9. How important is theology to you on a scale of 1-10?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_
10. How important is Apologetics to you on a scale of 1-10?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_
11. Do you feel the church has prepared you for the challenges you may face in adulthood?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_
12. Did you move out of your parents' house for college?

**Survey Questions - Parent**

1. First Name, Last Name

a. \_\_\_\_\_

2. What age are your children?

a. \_\_\_\_\_

3. What do you feel your role is in your student going to church?

a. Encouragement

b. Making them go (It is not a choice)

c. Nothing

4. How important do you feel your role is, in the development of your children's relationship with Jesus? (On a scale of 1-10)

a. \_\_\_\_\_

5. Does your student enjoy going to church? Why or why not?

a. \_\_\_\_\_

6. Which best describes how often you currently attend church on Sundays?

a. None

b. A few times a year

c. Maybe 1 time a month

d. 1-2 times per month

e. 3-4 times per month

7. Which best describes how often you currently attend church on Wednesdays?

a. None

b. A few times a year

- c. Maybe 1 time a month
  - d. 1-2 times per month
  - e. 3-4 times per month
8. How important is theology to you on a scale of 1-10?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_
9. How important is apologetics to you on a scale of 1-10?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_
10. How confident do you feel the church has prepared you for the challenges you may face in the secular world on a scale of 1-10?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_
11. How confident do you feel the church has prepared your child for the challenges they may face in the secular world on a scale of 1-10?
- a. \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C**

### **Interview Questions**

1. Why do you attend church?
2. What are some of your best memories from church?
3. Describe why good theology is important.
4. Describe why good apologetics is essential.
5. In what ways has the church prepared you to enter the secular world?
6. Why do you feel so many students leave the church after they graduate high school?