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THRIVING: BEST STUDENT MINISTRY PRACTICES FOR REACHING GENERATION Z EFFECTIVELY

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Seth Conner Peterson

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

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APPROVED BY:

[redacted]

Rusty Small, Ph.D., Dissertation Supervisor

[redacted]

Joseph Butler, Ed.D., Second Reader

ABSTRACT

In 1972, the Jesus movement's proliferation brought on the professionalization of student ministry into Southern Baptist churches. Over the last 50 years, the U.S. population has increased by 110 million, yet student ministry baptisms in the Southern Baptist Convention continue to decline. Despite recent efforts by The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee to reverse the downward trend of student ministry baptisms (ages 12–17), the phenomenon persists. The public profession of baptism remains as a strong indicator that an individual has been effectively reached with the Gospel. Operating under this premise that increased baptisms indicate effectiveness in student ministry, the researcher used the 2019 – 2020 Annual Church Profile to interview Thriving student ministries in the Southeast Region of the Southern Baptist Convention of Virginia. Thriving was identified as a student ministry with a top ten baptizing ratio. The researcher conducted nine in depth semistructured interviews with other thriving student ministers in the Southeast Region of the SBCV and discovered perceived best practices thriving student ministries are implementing to reach students more effectively. Common obstacles for connecting with Generation Z included: biblical illiteracy, technological distraction, and inauthentic examples. Effective strategies for reaching Generation Z included: teaching biblical truth, authentic connection, discipleship groups, and family partnership. Best practices for increasing Generation Z student baptisms included: gospel clarity, creating opportunities, intentional environments, diligent follow-up, and public celebration.

Keywords: student ministry, Southern Baptist Convention, baptism, Annual Church Profile, Generation Z, thriving, phenomenological, best practices.

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my loving wife, best friend, and closest companion, Cassie Jo Peterson. You are the love of my life. I treasure you dearly. Without your sacrifice and steady encouragement, this work would not be in its present form. To my firstborn, Selah Joy Peterson, I pray you will grow to know the heart of The Heavenly Father and how much you are loved by your earthly daddy. To my incredible parents: you blazed a path for me, taught me how to follow Jesus and pointed me to my calling in my life as a minister of the gospel; thank you for all you have done for me. To every student pastor I had the privilege of interviewing, the practical insight presented in these pages is because of your wisdom. This study is written with church leaders and student pastors in mind for Generation Z. My sincere hope is that whoever reads this will be encouraged, uplifted, and helped immensely by the strategies contained herein. May this dissertation be stewarded, and all put into practice soli Deo gloria!

Acknowledgments

Thank you to the faithful Liberty University professors that have encouraged and inspired me to finish strong. This research work could never have been possible without the guidance and support of my distinguished professors. Particular thanks to Dr. Rusty Small, my dissertation supervisor, who knew all the right words to say when I needed encouragement to push me across the finish line. A special thanks to Dr. Joe Butler for your expertise and being such an important member of my dissertation committee. I appreciate you. Thank you Dr. Laura Hamlett Schlater, for your editing assistance. With humble gratitude, I acknowledge the pastors who took part in this research study, thank you for your time and participation.

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List of Abbreviations

Annual Church Profile (ACP)

Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA)

Generation Z (Gen Z)

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Southern Baptist Convention (SBC)

Southern Baptist Convention of Virginia (SBCV)

Youth for Christ (YFC)

Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)

CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Introduction

Like the generations before, teenagers in Generation Z (Gen Z) have unique traits and tendencies regarding who they are and who they are becoming (McKnight, 2021). The generation lives in an everchanging world (Meola, 2023). With more than 65 million members, Gen Z is the largest age demographic population in the United States, with one-third of this population, from 12 to 24, unreached (Larsen, 2017, p. 3). Thus, Gen Z is the largest unreached group in the world (Zylstra, 2022, p. 18). In recent years, missiologists have identified Gen Z as part of the "10/30 window," which Pace and Newton (2019) defined as unreached people between 10 and 30 years of age worldwide:

> Over half of the world's population, 53 percent, is under the age of thirty, and 70 percent of those people are between the ages of ten and thirty. This global demographic is a massive mission field that we as the church have the responsibility to engage. This 10/30 window now constitutes the largest unreached people group in the world, outnumbering the top 100 geographical unreached people groups combined. (p. 46)

Gen Z has more members than any generation prior and continues to increase (Meola, 2023, p. 2). Church leaders can invest in the future by reaching Gen Z effectively with the gospel and assimilating them into the church through baptism (Barna, 2018; Kauffman, 2019; Saxton, 2017).

This chapter presents the foundation of this study on the best practices of student ministries with a high baptism ratio. The high baptism ratio showed the number of students responding to the gospel through public professions of faith. In this study, *thriving* student ministries effectively reached Gen Z teenagers in their context (Seversen, 2017). Thriving churches have an Annual Church Profile (ACP) in the Southern Baptist Convention of Virginia (SBCV). Baptism is the most effective tool for measuring gospel effectiveness in Baptist life, as it indicates a student has experienced a sincere conversion and wants to display faith through a

public believer's baptism (Cassidy, 2022). This chapter presents the problems Gen Z face and the principles for reaching Gen Z effectively.

Background of the Problem

According to the ACP, baptisms in the Southern Baptist Church have consistently declined since 1972 (Hawkins, 2020), an unsettling finding from a numbers standpoint (Cassidy, 2022). The year 2019 was a historic low for the SBC, with 246,000 baptisms, a number close to baptisms in the 1940s, when the denomination was less than half its current size (Earls, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, baptisms fell to 123,160 in 2020 but increased in 2022, with 154,701 total baptisms (Shellnutt, 2020). J. D. Greear, former SBC president, grieved the denomination's baptism numbers, referring to the situation as a "50-year decline" (Greear, 2020, p. 31).

Another measure of effectiveness in evangelism is the baptisms-to-membership ratio (Finn, 2017). Tharp (2005) reiterated the importance of the overall number of baptisms in the baptism ratio: "The baptism ratio is based on total membership and is one of the statistical items reported to the Convention each year and shows the number of members it 'takes' to have one baptism" (p. 92). Cassidy (2022) referred to the ratio as "the golden ratio" because it indicates effectiveness, further stating, "A century ago, the SBC's baptism ratio looked really good. In the 1946 Annual Report (p. 466 in the PDF), for example, we see that they scored 256,699 new members the previous year against a total membership of 5,865,554." A list of the annual reports showed that the baptisms-to-members ratio remained around 1:22 and increased to 1:30 as The Jesus movement began to wane. The ratio continued to increase and fall through the 30s and 40s throughout the 1980 and 2000s. In 2013, the ratio was 1:50 for the first time. The SBC has not had a baptism ratio below 50 since then. By 2019, the ratio was 1:62 (Cassidy, 2022). The latest

2022 ACP was a full year after the COVID-19 pandemic but showed an increase of 31,541 baptisms, an improvement from 1:114 to 1:88 in baptism ratio.

Despite baptisms being a priority in the SBC and the booming of the nation's population, the baptism ratio has continued to decrease with church membership, including teenage baptisms (Shellnutt, 2020). This finding aligns with student ministries, as Gen Z baptisms have not increased (Root, 2022, p. 39). The number of church-wide baptisms (123,000) is lower than the number of students (12- to 17-year-olds) baptized in 1972, with baptisms in this age group in the SBC totaling 137,667 (Hawkins, 2020). The 2025 vision proposed by Ronnie Floyd to the SBC Executive Committee focuses on student ministries to address the ongoing decline in reaching, baptizing, and discipling 12- to 17-year-olds in the prime of their adolescence (Howe & Whitfield, 2020). Youth ministers assume much of the responsibility for evangelizing young people and reaching Gen Z (Roach, 2021). Therefore, pastors and youth ministers should remain informed of the challenges and realities of Gen Z students and the practices to reach them effectively (Cloherty, 2020).

Statement of the Problem

Many local church ministries have strategic programs for reaching adolescents with the gospel and developing them into fully devoted followers of Christ (Cox, 2022). Unfortunately, many student ministers struggle to remain relevant and reach Gen Z adolescents effectively (Weihrauch, 2022). Adolescents are part of an everchanging, increasingly hostile culture against Christianity and the cause of Christ in this world. The battle to reach adolescents with the gospel has intensified (Trueblood, 2016, p. 34). The phenomenon of declining baptisms in student ministry is an issue of effectiveness (Hawkins, 2020). With the emergence of Gen Z, there is a need to examine the most effective student ministry practices (Jones 2022; Kelly, 2022;

McKnight, 2021, 2022; Pace, 2022). This dissertation focused on the perceived best practices of thriving student ministries in the most populous SBCV region, the Southeast. The study addressed the gap in understanding Gen Z and the barriers to effectively reach teenagers in contemporary student ministry. The research included interviews with student ministers in the top ten baptizing student ministers in the area, to determine the extent that student ministry practices contributed to reaching with the gospel, baptizing, and discipling teenagers effectively (White & Erlacher, 2022).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the best practices for reaching Gen Z effectively with leaders of thriving SBCV student ministries in the Southeast Region. The best practices included methods for reaching students effectively with the gospel for ongoing discipleship and increasing student ministry baptisms. *Student ministry* is a "specific and intentional ministry to adolescents in middle and high school as part of the overall work of the local church" (Buchanan, 2015, p. 28). Thriving student ministries had baptism ratios of 0.010 or higher from March 2019 to March 2020. *Gen Z* includes individuals born between 1999 and 2015 (McKnight, 2021). Student ministry baptisms focus on students ranging from 12 to 17 years of age. Southern Baptist Church is affiliated with the Southern Baptist denomination and the Baptist faith and message (Blount & Wooddell, 2007).

The interpretive theory was the study's guiding theory. This sociological lens asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social situation is essential to decoding the meaning of emerging themes from the collected data (Tracy, 2013, p. 314) The theory originated with the philosophy of Edmund Husserl's and Wilhelm Dilthey's study of hermeneutics (Madondo, 2021). It seeks to understand actual human interactions,

meanings and processes that constitute real-life organizational settings (Merriam, 2002). The researcher relies upon, "participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2014, p. 57). Gubrium et al. (2012) asserts, "researchers should attempt to interpret the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (p. 118).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

RQ1. What are some challenges or obstacles thriving SBCV student ministries encounter with Gen Z?

RQ2. What are some strategies implemented in thriving student ministries to reach Gen Z effectively?

RQ3. What are some best practices being implemented by thriving student ministries that contribute to more students being baptized?

Assumptions and Delimitations

Research Assumptions

This research included several assumptions:

1. Church leaders and members involved in the SBCV consider the Bible authoritative and apply it to ministry practice to seek obedience to Christ's commands.
2. Church leaders and members who consider the Bible authoritative apply it in its totality. Specifically, the churches in the study had active discipleship as instructed through Christ's Great Commission.
3. Individuals baptized in the church follow an established procedure that shows that they have been reached with the gospel and have experienced the salvation available through the gospel of Jesus Christ.
4. Baptism is a reliable method for tracking the effectiveness of reaching Gen Z since it is an important next step in a discipleship process.

5. SBCV church leaders accurately complete and submit the ACP annually. The submitted ACP data are entered into the SBC database with minimal error.
6. Student ministry baptisms include individuals from ages 12 to 17 in the SBC. The ACP indicated the local churches that provided the numbers to the SBCV.
7. The SBC has a distinct perspective of what constitutes evangelistic churches, which can be applied to the microcosm of SBCV student ministries.

Delimitations of the Research Design

As in any study, this research had delimitations. First, this research was delimited to churches voluntarily affiliated with the SBCV. The churches provided data to the SBCV for record-keeping with the ACP. The ACP provided objective information crucial to the research, including church attendance, total membership, and total baptisms by age demographic (Denton, 2008). The study did not include churches that were not SBCV members. Also, the study did not include any church without an established student ministry that consistently provided figures for student ministry baptisms. Consequently, if student ministry members met less frequently than weekly, they may not have been part of this study if they lacked student ministry data.

Another delimitation was SBCV churches in the Southeast that did not provide baptism data for 2019. The researcher followed up on the student ministries to verify the number of baptisms but mostly relied on the diligence of the SBCV representatives to collect the data provided by the churches. A limitation is the exclusion of many essential aspects of youth ministry in circles outside the Southern Baptist denomination. This study did not include the study outside the local church, parachurch, or nonprofits. This study focused on the perceptions and experiences that student ministers had in their respective student ministry. The perceptions and experiences of parents, volunteers, and other church members were outside the purview of

this study. An assumption was that the findings reflected the best practices to reach students more effectively in Southern Baptist churches.

Definitions of Terms

This study included common terms. The following presents the definitions for Gen Z, phenomenological, Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), student, student ministry, thriving student ministry, ACP, salvation, baptism, evangelism, discipleship, best practices, and reaching.

1. *Annual Church Profile*: Statistical data recorded for SBC churches. Church clerks compile data on membership, Sunday school (or small-group Bible study), missions, finances, baptisms, and attendance for ministry events and church programs. The churches provide information to the denomination for historical purposes and to monitor growth. These records were available for research and were the source of most statistical data.

2. *Baptism*: Baptism can mean different things in different religious traditions. For this research, baptism is a believer's baptism by immersion, as indicated in the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message. Per "the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message":

   > Baptism is the immersion of a believer in water in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is an act of obedience symbolizing the believer's faith in a crucified, buried, and risen Savior, the believer's death to sin, the burial of the old life, and the resurrection to walk in newness of life in Christ Jesus.

3. *Best practices*: The methods to reach students effectively with the gospel for ongoing discipleship.

4. *Discipleship*: Sharing life with the intention of passing on values, beliefs, character, and integrity while passionately pursuing Jesus (Newton & Pace, 2019).

5. *Effectively*: To practice in such a way that produces the intended result.

6. *Evangelism*: The overt or indirect efforts of individual Christians and the church, more generally, to present the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world through words, actions, lifestyle, and Spirit-empowered ways that enable non-Christians to hear, understand, experience, and respond to the gospel (Kauffman, 2019).

7. *Generation Z*: "Generation Z can generally be described as those born between 1999 and 2015" (McKnight, 2021, p. 40).

8. *Salvation*: The process of responding to the gospel by repenting and receiving forgiveness of sins by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

9. *Southern Baptist Convention*: "A voluntary association of Baptist churches across America that was formed in the nineteenth century" (Shields, 2008, p. 32). These churches focus on the local church's autonomy, salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the importance of baptism by immersion, congregational church government, and the authority and inerrancy of the Bible.

10. *Student*: Any person between 12 and 17. This age range corresponds with the range in the ACP. Synonymous terms include "youth," "young person," "adolescent," and "teenager."

11. *Student ministry*: "Specific and intentional ministry to adolescents in middle and high school as part of the overall work of the local church" (Buchanan, 2015, p. 28).

12. *Thriving student ministries*: For this study, thriving student ministries have a high student baptism ratio (.10 or higher).

Significance of the Study

This phenomenological study addressed a perplexing phenomenon in the SBC. Despite frequent "brainstorming" sessions, round-table discussions, committees, and initiatives, Baptisms continue to decline nationwide (Hawkins, 2020). This trend may continue for Gen Z unless there is a better understanding and application of reaching teenagers effectively (Barna, 2019). Pruitt (2020) stated most individuals come to faith during their teenage years; therefore, church leaders should consider student ministry the "front line" to reach individuals with the gospel when they are the likeliest to come to faith. Pruitt (2020), the national next-generation director of the North American Mission Board stated in a podcast, "77% of Christians surrender to Jesus before the age of 18, and 95% before the age of 30." Effective outreach to Gen Z requires understanding the obstacles to showing them how to live out their faith (White, 2017, p. 78). Over the last several decades, experts or panels on baptisms have not focused on Gen Z, teenagers, or students but on the church at large (Dimock, 2019, p. 18). However, Gen Z has different values from those before them (Thompson, 2017). Mannheim (1927), the father of sociology, stated,

> At particular points in time, young people will face conditions different enough from those that faced the previous generation in their youth that many of the rules for making a

> life uncertain and in substantive ways have to be rewritten in ways that will have consequences in youth and across the life course (p. 294).

Empirically, this study filled the gap by addressing Gen Z teenagers in student ministry. The purpose of this study was to reach more Gen Z students effectively through the student ministry best practices. Conferences, books, and workshops often present thriving student ministries as a way to reach more people; however, there are few means for church leaders to gauge student ministry effectiveness (Trueblood, 2016, p. 8). The metric of total student baptisms in the SBCV in the ACP report provides data useful for investigating how to reach Gen Z teens more effectively (Cassidy, 2022). The ultimate value of empirical work and theory development is practical significance. “Knowledge leads to useful action, and action sets problems to be thought about, resolved, and then converted into new applied knowledge” (Lewis & Smith, p. 29).

Several church leaders have noted the lack of research on reaching Gen Z effectively (Crossman, 2018; Earls, 2019; Hawkins, 2020; Moon, 2021). Thus, there is a need to fill the gap in the research on Gen Z teenagers and best practices for reaching them (Zylstra, 2022, p. 111). Abundant secular research has focused on Gen Z, but little has indicated how to reach Gen Z within the church, specifically with student ministry (Kinnaman, 2018, p. 21). The purpose of this study was to explore ways to “more effectively bridge that gap that divides theory, research, and practice” (Deckman, 2020). The study provided information beneficial for teenagers (Powell, 2021) and contributed to the emerging research on Gen Z teenagers in student ministry (Outerbridge, 2019). Student ministers can navigate challenges by understanding the best practices for ministering to those who belong to the unique Gen Z subpopulation (McKnight, 2022).

Summary of the Design

This phenomenological study included interviews with the student pastors of thriving student ministries. A phenomenological study is a way to understand the participants' subjective lived experiences and perspectives (D'Ardenne, 2015, p. 121). In this study, the ACP provided the data used to understand the perceived best practices of the top student ministries of Hampton Roads. The ACP was an effective prescreening mechanism for identifying which student pastors had baptized the most students in the Southeast Region of the SBCV. In-person interviews with SBCV student ministers occurred to determine the best practices. The in-person interviews enabled the in-depth exploration of ideas, insight, and common themes related to thriving student ministries.

This study had an interview protocol (Gubrium et al., 2012) with an exploratory approach and questions focused on the phenomenon's what, why, and how. The exploratory approach does not involve testing a predetermined hypothesis. Rather, the goal is to explore and answer open-ended questions flexibly with the participants. This phenomenological study involved making connections, identifying emergent themes across the participants, interpreting data through repeated transcript review, and comparing ideas and quotes from each interview (Given, 2008). The ideas and quotes were also categorized and compared across the participants (Loftin & Dimsdale, 2018). Ultimately, the study's significant findings, which emerged from careful examination of the interview recordings, showed the perceived best practices for reaching Gen Z effectively (Finn, 2017).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter presents the study's theological and theoretical foundations. Modern student ministry emerged in the prior two centuries, and the Bible has no clear delineation of "teenager." Theological foundations have been cemented from creation despite the fall of humankind and are readily seen throughout redemption and the restoration of all things through the Great Commission. The Old and New Testaments contain many examples of how God uses young people. This chapter presents the historical foundations of student ministry and the student ministry best practices to provide a valuable vantage point for understanding modern student ministry. An effective reach to the unique Gen Z culture requires looking at the changes in student ministry practices and methods.

Theological Framework for the Study

Any basis for thriving must stem from a thorough understanding of the gospel and God's Word and a rich understanding of how God has used young people throughout the Scripture (McKnight, 2016). The Bible is a foundational praxis for discerning how to reach Gen Z students more effectively (Batchelder, 2020). The framework for this study included a theological backdrop of "young people." There is no way to determine the exact ages of those biblically referenced in Scripture with 100% certainty (Grudem, 1994). However, each example of God using a young person was included only after considering the contextual clues, commentaries, and circumstances. Every instance referenced indicates the youthfulness of the men and women in the Old and New Testaments. In this section, "young people" was a term used interchangeably with "youth," "youthfulness," "teenagers," and "adolescence" to show how God used young people in the overarching metanarrative of Scripture (Sierra, 2019). The church's mission

involves young people. Young people are a part of the church "right now" and are commissioned to "be the church" and advance the church's mission, regardless of their youth, as evidenced in Scripture (Powell, 2021).

How God uses young people in numerous biblical accounts shows His heart for teenagers and desire to use them to further His Kingdom (Gallaty, 2013, p. 9). Concerning "the church," there is "no theological limitation" or "ministerial segmenting" regarding using young people for the glory of God (Basie, 2021, p. 78). As the following examples indicate, teenagers are just as significant to the church's mission as adults (Miller, 2011). Gen Z is not merely the "next generation" but also the church "right now" (Pruitt, 2020). Moreover, just as God has used young people in prior generations, He will continue to use willing young people for His glory as He sees fit (Oestreicher, 2008). God has a clear zeal to use young people. The Old and New Testaments provide sound theological foundations relevant to 'student ministers who want to reach Gen Z more effectively (McKnight, 2021, p. 110).

Biblical Foundations

The mission to carry the gospel to future generations is part of the Christian faith and the Great Commission (Kelley et al., 2007). Former President of the SBC and Summit Church Pastor J. D. Greear (2015) said, "Evangelism is not limited to a few but is a mandate to us all" (p. 15). The Great Commission in Matthew 28:20-22 is to

> Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. Amen. (New King James Version)

Scripture indicates each believer must fulfill the Great Commission. Each believer is commanded in Scripture to "do the work of" God. However, God desires to do unique work in the church's life now, not just in one generation but in the emerging generation. God uses all

generations to carry out the church's unique mission (Dean, 2010). The Judeo-Christian faith is a way to pass the Scripture and Christian' way of life and message from generation to generation (Allen, 2016). The great commission requires believers to "teach them to observe all things" (Wright, 2006, p. 115).

The Bible indicates the need to carry out this mission of the gospel through the metanarrative of the church (Copan, 2020). The story of Scripture began at creation and continued throughout the Bible (Valentine, 2020). Scripture is the story of God, humanity, and the history of Eden to the New Creation. Scripture includes the following: creation (Gen. 1:1-2, John. 1:1-3, Rom. 1:20, Col. 1:16, Heb. 11:3, Rev. 4:11), the fall (Gen. 2:17; Gen. 3, Isa. 53:6, Rom. 15:22, 1 Cor. 15:22), redemption (Gen. 17, Luke 15:31-33, John 3:16, Act.10:38, Gal. 3:13 Eph. 1:7, Col. 1:20 – 22), restoration (Matt. 28:18-20, John. 14:3, Rom. 14:11, Rev. 21:3-4), and young people (Wright, 2006).

Gen Z students who understand the story of the Bible can find purpose and meaning in their lives (Jenson, 2010, p. 35). The use of stories to form Gen Z students' identities has critical implications for Christians and the Christian faith (McKnight, 2021). There is a need to appreciate the narrative nature of and communicate the faith via the Bible and the metanarrative of Scripture (Weihrauch, 2022). Therefore, a theological foundation should be the filter for applying student ministry practices to Gen Z more effectively.

Theology of Best Practices

The premise of "practices" as theological is founded and reiterated throughout Scripture (Taylor, 2017). Per the Book of Daniel, Danial regularly prayed, as it was his custom (Dan. 6:10, NKJV). Other places in Scripture show how Jesus modeled Christian life (MacArthur, 2020, p. 74). Jesus often withdrew from people, daily life, and ministerial demands to spend time alone

with the Father in prayer (Mark 1:35; Luke 5:15-16; Matthew 14:23; Mark 6:31-32). The Bible contains over 20 mentions of Jesus withdrawing for prayer (Fay, 1999). Practices are a major theme throughout the New Testament and in the early church context (Mermilliod, 2021).

The Bible indicates the need to not merely hear Scripture but also live and practice its teachings daily (Luke 11:28). Apostle Paul said to the church of Philippi, "The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you" (Phil. 4:9). In Romans 12:13, "Practice hospitality." In 2 Peter 1:10, "For as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble." In 1 Timothy 4:7-8, "Discipline yourself for godliness…for practicing godliness is profitable for all things since it holds promise for the present life and for the life to come."

For clarity, "practices" in student ministry are akin to disciplines (Branum, 2016). Robby Gallaty (2013), the senior pastor of Long Hollow Baptist Church, stated, "It's been said practice makes perfect, but it's better put, practice makes permanent" (p. 81). Practices are means of establishing the right ways of doing things. Jesus has indicated the "right thing to do" in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20). Thus, the directive of thriving student ministries is descriptive in practice but prescriptive in methodology (Goheen & Bartholomew, 2008). The Great Commission and the impetus to share the gospel directly connect to increasing baptisms (Earls, 2019).

While one cannot assume the state of another person's soul, baptism is one of the most accurate measures of effective evangelism in the church (Saxton, 2017, p. 136). Southern Baptists bear the name of the practice of baptism (Hawkins, 2020). Ross (2017) stated, "Baptism figures provide insight into denominational development, and churches who establish a high regard toward baptism are more likely involved in reaching people effectively through

evangelism" (p. 27). Rainer (1996), president of LifeWay Christian Resources, used measurable criteria such as baptismal ratio, number of baptisms, top percentage of baptisms, and successive years of baptisms to determine gospel effectiveness for reaching adolescents. MacArthur (2020) suggested that leaders measure how well they reach the world around them and fulfill the Great Commission by looking at the following indicators: the number of new converts and baptisms. Saxton (2017) stated, "Baptism is not the only way to measure if a church is evangelistic, [but] it is the best indicator we have as Baptists to check our pulse on whether or not we are sharing the gospel as we should" (p. 95).

Young People Being Used in the Bible

Above was a summary of the Great Commission's biblical foundations within the grander metanarrative of Scripture. This section presents how God used young people to bring forth the gospel (Woolley, 2018). There is a biblical precedent for how God furthered His mission through young people. If evangelism is one of the primary ways God fulfills the mission of the great commission, it is vital to see the gospel's mission throughout Scripture (Weihrauch, 2022). While Scripture contains no clear delineation of a "teenager", there are numerous examples of how God used young people to accomplish His mission in the Old Testament and New Testament (Klick, 2009, p. 68). This section shows, in the Scripture, how God placed His presence on and prioritized young generations to fulfill the mission of the gospel (Wright, 2006).

Young People in the Old Testament

One of the first examples of God using a young person in the Old Testament is Joseph, beginning in Genesis 37 (Wenham, 2014, p. 118). God began using Joseph when he was only 17 (Rainer & Lawless, 2005). Favored by his father, Jacob, but hated by his brothers, Joseph bore the wrath of his siblings, who plotted to kill him. However, instead of killing Joseph, his brothers

chose to sell him into enslavement. Taken to Egypt for enslavement, Joseph rose to power in the house of Potiphar but was imprisoned after false accusations of sexual assault by his master's wife.

Through many other difficulties and over several years, Joseph again rose to power as the second in command in Egypt under the pharaoh. God sovereignly placed Joseph in a role of power (Gen 50:20) to perform a great work of saving his father's household during the great famine. God preserved Jacob's household and lineage due to His covenant and promise of a redeemer through the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Boice, 1998). God preserved His people and unfolded His redemptive plan by using Joseph as a teenager. When Joseph came to power in Egypt after roughly 13 years, Joseph was a young 30 years of age (Getz, 1996).

David is another prominent example of God reaching out and using a young person for His mission. David was anointed as the king of Israel while only a teenager. One of David's most famous feats was his valiant battle with the giant Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. David volunteered when no other Israelite soldier desired to fight the Philistine warrior Goliath. God used David to defeat Goliath, giving Israel victory over the Philistines and exalting His glory and majesty among the nations. In 1 Sam 17:33, Saul, then the king, sought to deter David from going into battle because of his youth, and Goliath was a great warrior from his youth. Smith (2009) commented on God's work through David, saying, "God is in the business of using ordinary young people to do extraordinary things" (p. 12). The story of David indicates that God calls people and uses them to fulfill His purposes and mission, regardless of age.

Additionally, the Old Testament includes the story of God using young Josiah, a king. At age 8, Josiah took the throne and led reforms among God's people, restoring righteousness before God as a teenager (Jones & Stinson, 2011). Invading Babylonians took Daniel, Hananiah,

Azariah, and Mishael from their homeland when they were young men. All four, especially Daniel, were around 15 when taken as captives (Getz, 1998). God worked mightily through these young men to display His glory and power when they refused to eat the food of a pagan king and received meager sustenance (Kaiser, 2017). In their obedience, God caused them to be better than the other captives who failed to stand firm in adversity (Dan 1:15). As these young men grew older, God continued to use them as they faithfully followed Him and allowed themselves to be instruments in His hands.

God also used young women like Esther, an orphan raised by her cousin, Mordecai. In God's sovereignty, Esther was chosen to replace Queen Vashti, who had lost favor with her husband, King Ahasuerus (Esth 1:19). While serving as queen, Esther learned of a plot to kill all Jews, her people. Esther risked her life approaching the king to intercede to save her people (Esth 4:16). God used Esther to preserve His people. Smith (2009) said, "God is in the business of taking a foster girl and developing her into a queen of destiny" (p. 101). Esther's destiny was for God to use her to protect His people from a sinister plot, although she was young and vulnerable.

Young People in the New Testament

The New Testament opens with God calling on the young woman Mary to be the mother of His only Son, Jesus Christ. Mary would be the woman to fulfill the age-old promise of redemption declared in the Garden of Eden. The angel Gabriel sounded God's favor upon her to give birth to the Messiah (Luke 1:31-33). MacArthur (2005) asserted that Mary was a teenager when Gabriel appeared to deliver God's message. God initiated His work with Mary by sending His angel to deliver the news. In God's infinite wisdom, He called on a teenager to take a critical role in fulfilling His mission of redemption. Though God had His choice from among all the women of human history, He chose Mary, a young, unmarried, inexperienced teenager, to be the

mother to the Son of God. Mary was not the only young person God used in the unfolding of God's redemption. As seed in Scripture, God using teenagers was the norm rather than the exception.

Timothy, the protégé of the Apostle Paul, was a young man used by God in the early Church to plant many new churches in the ancient world under Paul's tutelage (Lea & Griffin, 1992). Although the Bible does not indicate Timothy's age, Paul's charge to Timothy in his letter suggests that those in the culture and the church viewed him as a young man (Lea & Griffin, 1992). Köstenberger (2006) noted that Timothy was about sixteen when he and his mother converted to Christianity during Paul's first missionary journey. Timothy grew in faith from his conversion. Paul heard of and began investing in Timothy, seeing his leadership potential as an adolescent (p. 512).

Shortly after, Timothy accompanied Paul and Silas on a second missionary journey through Asia Minor (Plummer, 2006). From his youth, Timothy led, hence Paul's instruction to Timothy in 1 Tim 4:12, saying, "Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, conduct, love, faith, and purity." Paul knew the potential for his youthfulness to impact his leadership ability in the culture and the church. Paul believed and expected God would use Timothy for necessary and fruitful work in Ephesus. Timothy exemplifies how God's work through young people in their culture and the world (Plummer, 2006).

Jesus Christ is another example of God using young people. Joseph and Mary inadvertently left Jesus behind in Jerusalem after a family' pilgrimage to celebrate the Passover, returning to Jerusalem to frantically search for their young son. After 3 days, Mary and Joseph saw Jesus in the temple listening to and asking questions of the Jewish teachers. In Luke 2:47, the people there, including Joseph and Mary, were amazed at Jesus's understanding and answers.

Mary asked Jesus why He had treated them in this manner, as they had anxiously searched for Him for three days. Luke 2:49 contains the first recorded words of Jesus when He speaks to His mother: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” Jesus was found teaching the people God’s truth and wisdom. Thus, Jesus began teaching to make disciples at twelve.

At the beginning of ’His public ministry, Jesus gathered men to follow Him in carrying out God’s redemptive mission. The men chosen are referred to in Scripture as The Twelve. In the ministry at Dare 2 Share, Stier (2022) stated, “Jesus was a youth leader; this seems to shock people, but the reality is that Jesus changed the world through a group of twelve made up mostly of teenagers” (p. 21). Stier said, “Before you shake your head in disagreement, think about this. Most rabbis at his time engaged their disciples to follow them when they were in their teenage years” (p. 54). Jesus could have used anyone He wanted but chose to spend His public ministry rooted in community, living, and teaching the disciples how to work in the Kingdom. Stewart (2000) also indicated the youth of the disciples and said, “Christianity began as a young people’s movement, and most of the apostles were probably still in their teens when they went out after Jesus” (p. 97). Further insight emerges from Matthew 17:24-27:

> After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?” “Yes, he does,” he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. “What do you think, Simon?” he asked. “From whom do the king of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?” “From others,” Peter answered. “Then the children are exempt,” Jesus said to him. “But so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth, and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.

McGarry (2019) stated, “The temple tax was required for Jewish adults 20 years old and older” (p. 212). Only Peter had to pay the tax, indicating the other disciples were teenagers in alignment with rabbinical tradition. Typically, rabbis selected pupils twelve or thirteen years of

age. That Jesus was 30 when he began his ministry (Luke 3:23) is further evidence of the disciples' youth.

While Peter was the senior disciple, no disciples were renowned for scholarship or erudition (MacArthur, 2005). Peter often blurted out words at inopportune times and sometimes appeared brash (John 18:10, Matthew 16, Luke 9:33, etc.). Despite his blunders, Peter was the oldest disciple, the leader, pairing his brash moments with several bold moments (Matthew 14:22-23, Acts 2, John 13:9). MacArthur (2005) said, "None of them had a track record as orators or theologians. They were outsiders as far as the religious establishment of Jesus's day was concerned" (p. 196). Nonetheless, their youth is an often-overlooked characteristic of the disciples (Stevick, 2011).

Evidence in the New Testament aligns with the notion of the disciples' youth. The Apostle John, the author of the Book of Revelation, is an example. The generally accepted date for John's writing of Revelation is the end of Domitian's reign, from A.D. 81 to 96. For John to have authored the work as much as 66 years after Jesus's death, he must have been only a teenager, at most, in his late teenage years (Stevick, 2011).

Stewart (2000) noted Paul's words in 1 Cor. 15:6, in which he argued for the resurrection of Jesus, saying several hundred people witnessed the resurrected Jesus alive. Paul wrote a generation later and could still point to several followers of Jesus. These individuals saw the resurrection and were still alive when Paul wrote the letter, indicating they were young people during the resurrection (Stewart, 2000). Senter (2010) articulated that the New Testament provides much evidence of their youth: "A careful study of the New Testament will show that all the apostles whom Jesus called in His earthly ministry were young men, not even middle-aged" (p. 122). Without specific ages cited in Scripture, there is no way to discern the apostles' age

with certainty. However, Jesus entrusted the disciples to lead the church after his death, resurrection, and ascension (Garland, 2006, p. 191). God came upon these young men in power with His Spirit and worked through them to advance the gospel and build His kingdom. These men are examples of God's work in and through young people.

Summary of Theological Framework

The story of the Bible provides the basis for student ministry. This brief overview showed how God has used young men and women throughout Scripture. Considering there are various practices that can be implemented to reach a specific population, it should be noted that the gospel metanarrative is the theological foundation and justification for the utilization of young people to accomplish God's will (Klick, 2009, p. 94). Thus, young people matter to God and have great value in the kingdom. Reid (2007) said, "The Bible teaches and clarifies what we've overlooked—God uses youth" (p. 67). God uses young people and has used them throughout history. History has shown that young people start revivals. God uses young people mightily to fulfill His mission and accomplish His purposes (Dunn & Senter, 1997). From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible and the genesis of modern-day student ministry show how God has, is, and continues to use young people to make disciples for His glory (Mathews, 2005, p. 71). These theological insights provide a basis by which perceived best practices to reach Generation Z teenagers can be examined.

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The study had a theoretical foundation for reaching Gen Z and answering the research question of how thriving student ministers engage Gen Z teenagers in student ministry. Research of Gen Z teenagers in Southern Baptist Churches requires understanding of their general

characteristics. This section presents literature on the characteristics of Gen Z, the lens in which this paper is evaluated, and its relevance to perceived best practices with Generation Z.

Interpretive Theory

The interpretive theory was the study's guiding theory. This sociological lens asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social situation is essential to decoding the meaning of emerging themes from the collected data (Tracy, 2013, p. 314) The theory originated with the philosophy of Edmund Husserl's and Wilhelm Dilthey's study of hermeneutics (Madondo, 2021). It seeks to understand actual human interactions, meanings and processes that constitute real-life organizational settings (Merriam, 2002). The researcher relies upon, "participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2014, p. 57). Gubrium et al. (2012) asserts, "researchers should attempt to interpret the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (p. 118).

Characteristics of Generation Z

This section presents the characteristics and tendencies of Gen Z students. Covey (1997) stated, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" (p. 239). However, there is little written about Gen Z, individuals born between 1998 and 2015 (McKnight, 2021, p. 40) and little research indicating how to reach them effectively (Cheung, 2017, p. 91). Thus, it is imperative to understanding how student ministries can better reach Gen Z (Callison, 2022). An understanding of who the people in Gen Z are and how they see the world could indicate how to work with, teach, and lead them into personal relationships with Jesus (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

Technology

There is a need for a grassroots, incarnational way of reaching Gen Z effectively, as they are the largest connected audience in the world (Cheung, 2017). Gen Z teens are at the precipice

of using technology for unprecedented reach or lostness (Barna, 2022). Teenagers in Gen Z are particular about where they give their attention in an age of distraction and information. It takes Gen Z students about eight seconds to focus, and screens do not make the need to connect with others easier (Powell & Argue, 2019, p. 67). In a world where multiple screens are the norm, Gen Z do multiple tasks simultaneously (Meola, 2023). Regarding technology and relationships, Gen Z has found a way to cut through the clutter and focus on specific interests better than prior generations (Scholz & Rennig, 2019, p. 105). However, Gen Z needs to connect better interpersonally (Twenge, 2017b). Every major social network provides tailored information; if not interested in a particular topic, those in Gen Z check out and look elsewhere.

Knowing Gen Z's tendencies is a step in the right direction, but it does not stop where technology begins. Crossman (2020) said, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" (p. 12). With the advent of the internet and the rapid development of technology and social media, Gen Z has formed many habits that are not gospel focused (Wallace, 2013). Still, technology can be a way to spread the gospel. Gen Z are digital natives, practically born with electronic devices (Barbosa, 2021). According to Cheung (2017), 98% of Gen Z Americans have smartphones (p. 21). Moreover, Sparks & Honey (2022) predicted that 22 million more Gen Z would obtain a smartphone in 2022 (p. 16). Gen Z young people grow up with and use technology frequently. Fifty-five percent of Gen Z use smartphones for five or more hours daily (Barna, 2022, para. 3), more than a quarter (26%) use their mobile devices for over ten hours a day, and 59% text daily (Georgiev, 2023, para. 2). Prior generations lacked the means to contact others electronically to conduct daily affairs and adult responsibilities (Esqueda, 2018). In contrast, Dorsey (2018) at the Center for Generational Kinetics said, "Today's young people do not recall a time before the

Internet, and mobile devices were not in use, in contrast to other generations who have pioneered these things or been given a choice to adopt them later in life" (p. 101).

Many Gen Z teens received smartphones before the age of 12. Nine out of ten Gen Z teenagers do not go to bed without smartphones (Lenhart, 2015, para. 7). Technological habits affect Gen Z significantly. Two-thirds of Gen Z spend more than half of their waking hours connected to devices (Sparks & Honey, 2022, p. 18). Many Gen Z teenagers want to collaborate with others (Kherlopian, 2019) and share their opinions, perspectives, and values in real-time. Screens and connections are natural extensions of these adolescents' being, unrestrained by the boundaries of time. For Gen Z, there is no such thing as an appointment; every moment is prime for interaction and free of time zones. Additionally, 91% of Gen Z have devices in bed (Barna, 2017, para. 5). Often toggling across five screens and always connected, Gen Z navigate in and out of work priorities across their netweave of collaborators (Sparks & Honey, 2022, p. 27). However, Gen Z has a shorter attention span than previous generations due to constant stimulation from multiple devices (Sparks & Honey, 2022).

High technological use has affected Gen Z. As a result, low self-image, depression, isolation, and loneliness are Gen Z characteristics due to immersion in a world of constant comparison (Powell & Argue, 2019, p. 77). Social media tends to heighten feelings of loneliness, isolation, and depression (Barna, 2018). Gen Z does find ways to use social media positively, as they can discover, learn, and develop new skills all by using the tool of technology at their fingertips (Moench, 2022). However, an unhealthy attachment and addiction to technology can stunt the development and growth of students' social, personal, and relational skills (Zirschky, 2015, p. 45). Young people in Gen Z prefer face-to-face interaction over technological interaction (Barna, 2020a). Still, 15% of Gen Z prefer interfacing with friends online (Barna,

2018c, para. 9). Additionally, too much focus on online relationships can adversely impact genuine relationships (Sparks & Honey, 2022). Ironically, it is easier to use technology to interact, and many in Gen Z feel more comfortable using technology to communicate (Zylstra, 2022).

Regarding engagement, it seems that young people learn best by collaborating online through digital media (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Internet-connected mobile devices enable Gen Z to stay in touch with what happens around them more than any previous generation (Mitchell, 2020). Gen Z young people often use three to five screens simultaneously (Cheung, 2017, p. 75), a phenomenon known as multiscreening. Multiscreening is the primary way young people in Gen Z consume content (Twenge, 2017b). Additionally, the expectation of immediacy is supported by an on-demand economy that ranges from web services; media streaming platforms, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime; and delivery apps that enable users to get almost any item instantly (Weinswig, 2016, p. 139). Technology also provides new opportunities. With the ability to source alternative means of entertainment and learning, resources, and interests outside what they are taught by teachers, parents, peers, or coaches. Gen Z has had an early start on Gladwell's (2008) 10,000 hours of intentional practice to become highly proficient in an area of focus (p. 41) as forty-seven percent of teens consider themselves experts at something (Sparks & Honey, 2022, p.16).

Education and Career

Integrating technology into daily life affects how teenagers in Gen Z learn and what they expect to earn career-wise. Digital media is Gen Z's primary means of engaging content (Twenge, 2017a). Therefore, Gen Z want and take advantage of readily accessible and on-demand content (Agnor, 2018). Specifically, Gen Z has learned that some niches make them

unique and use “outside-of-the-box” opportunities through technological mediums. Therefore, Gen Z practices contrast with a saturated industrial economy focused on keeping and holding a job for a long time. Lewis and Smith (2022) indicated that 70% of teens work entrepreneurial jobs like teaching piano lessons or selling items on Amazon (p. 178). Therefore, Gen Z think outside the box as tomorrow’s innovators. The freelance economy will enable this generation to explore their professional passions. Most teens (60%) expect to have multiple careers by age 30 (Sparks & Honey, 2022, p. 13); thus, Gen Z will radically shift ideas of the working world when they enter the workforce. Many Gen Z value formal education, as 66% plan to attend college (Sparks & Honey, 2022, p. 14). Traditional educational structures define their learning paths as more diminutive than a desire to learn in new ways. Gen Z want to be participants, not just recipients, in the learning experience.

Educators should use updated pedagogy to connect with Gen Z effectively (Boholano, 2017, p. 21 - 29). Updated pedagogy should include digital and in-person communicative strategies because Gen Z values and needs both learning methods (Rospigliosi, 2019). Those engaging with Gen Z must leverage social networking strategies to integrate current events with learning content (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). Moreover, Gen Z have an increased need for discussion-based education since they research, evaluate, and opine with few impediments in other spheres of life. Wiedmer (2015) described the Gen Z world as increasingly collaborative and suggested adjusting school projects to reflect this (p. 51 - 58). Teachers can teach Gen Z learners to discover, curate, and manage information, as these skills are required in the modern idea-and-knowledge era.

Religious education should occur similarly. As experiential learning in education rises among Generation Z, so should experiential spiritual learning. Elshof (2017) asserted that

religious pedagogy should be mystagogical. *Mystagogy* is "acquiring religious experiences, stimulating their sensibility for mystery" (p. 143). Gen Z students learn collaboratively; therefore, they can benefit from collaborative religious education. Students can learn with others and co-work with God on their spiritual journeys (McGaha, 2018).

Concurrently, for Generation Z to create paradigms for religious expression, they need space to learn fundamental doctrines because they have little religious literacy (Hoover, 2015). The modern world focuses on the inclusion and elevation of the self over truth. While there is more access to information than ever, learning environments need a space for students to learn spirituality and establish robust belief systems (Cordasco et al., 2018, p. 348). Learners in Gen Z are technologically knowledgeable and immersed in a technological world; however, they struggle to think critically about the world and their place in it (White, 2017). Thus, there is a unique opportunity to interface religious education with technology to reach Gen Z students in the 21st century.

Religion

Most research has shown a decrease in religious affiliation. A growing percentage of the population (21%) has grown up in interfaith homes or homes where one parent was religious, and the other was not (Kinnaman, 2019, p. 56). Fewer than one in four parents consider a youth group a good place for teens to ask serious questions about the Bible or foundational Christian beliefs (McCrindle, 2018). Most Gen Z churchgoers find church relevant and meaningful, but more than a third (36%) consider the people at church hypocritical (Barna, 2018b). More than half (58%) of U.S. teens self-identify as Christian, but this percentage is lower than in any previous generation (Barna, 2018a). According to Kinnaman (2019), "Most Generation Z people still believe in God's existence (78%). But less than half attend weekly religious services (41%),

and only 8% would cite a religious leader as a role model" (p. 87). Even among American teens who claim to be Christian, less than half (43%) have recently attended church, and 16% are "unchurched" (Kinnaman, 2019, p. 89). Of those teens who attend church, 82% consider it relevant and an excellent place to find answers for living meaningfully (Barna, 2018a).

Many in Gen Z lack spiritual literacy (Barna, 2018b). Although 58% of American teens self-identify as Christian, just 4% have a biblical worldview compared to 6% of millennials, 7% of Gen X, and 10% of boomers (Barna, 2018b). Young people in Gen Z lack "even a memory of the gospel" and struggle to distinguish what is and is not in the Bible (Barna, 2022). Ferris (2017) called Gen Z "lost" and "leaderless," raised by a self-directed model of parenting in a hyper-sexualized world. However, many in Gen Z are disenchanted with objectifying people in culture (Sparks & Honey, 2022). Gen Z has had to grow up faster, taking jobs and dealing with real-life issues earlier than prior generations. Gen Z 'face a dynamic world hopelessly confused about God, church, morality, and faith. White (2017) described Gen Z in the following way, "They are recession-marked (growing up in a post-9/11 world), Wi-Fi-enabled, multiracial, sexually fluid, and post-Christian" (p. 48).

Many Gen Z feel uncertain about religion and confused about the world around them. Only 30% of Gen Z perceive faith as essential to their lives and are aware of the world beyond themselves (Barna, 2022). Previous generations were preoccupied with themselves, but Gen Z is globally connected, polycultural, gender equal, and not entitlement-driven. Gen Z see themselves as part of a greater whole (Sparks & Honey, 2022).

Kinnaman (2018) of the Barna Group said, "Generation Z sees religion as irrelevant to their lives, and that young person simply thinks a life with Jesus is not worth their time." Gen Z teens constantly evaluate whether religion holds meaning for life or if spirituality is one possible

decision among many (Scholz & Rennig, 2019). In a global survey with more than 24,557 respondents ages 13–17 across 26 countries, Barna (2023) found a widespread curiosity about Jesus among Gen Z (para. 12). According to Moon (2021), "Teens in the United States are more intrigued than their global peers, with 77% being at least somewhat motivated to keep learning about Jesus throughout their lives" (p. 14).

Many in Gen Z are seeking; however, the individuals seeking to reach them may need to be patient with Gen Z. Gen Z leads with, "What's good for me is good for me"; Gen Z focuses on tolerance and inclusivity, perhaps due to being the most diverse generation in the world (Jones, 2019). The gospel is exclusive and inclusive, something Gen Z does not understand naturally. Therefore, the seeker requires formation in the presence of God through the admonition of Scripture and community (Valentine, 2020). Tens of thousands of Gen Z ask questions about faith every day online. Search terms related to the word *Jesus* had 3.8 million queries in a single month in the United States (Barna, 2018b). Gen Z disproportionately looks to Google and YouTube for answers before consulting with people (Barna, 2021). Barna (2023) referred to Gen Z the "Open Generation": open for discussion and hungry for knowledge and engagement.

Social Media

The word "social" has different dimensions of meaning with the widespread use of social media (Barna, 2018c). Around half of U.S. teens use social media "almost constantly" (Bryant & Finklea, 2022, p. 364). Gen Z experiences incessant social media pings distracting their attention. According to the British Psychological Society (2021), Gen Z "feel compelled to answer texts or direct messages almost immediately." Gen Z feel drained by but value the constant demand on their time. Most Gen Z (81%) agree that technology improves their lives, with almost as many

(77%) saying that social media has more benefits than drawbacks (Georgiev, 2023, para. 10). Gen Z feel that social media positively impacts their friendships (71%) and makes it easier to connect with people (Holiday, 2018, para. 1). Gen Z communicate in the short term with messages that disappear within 24 hours (Twenge, 2017b).

Gen Z use various social platforms, and 71% use more than one (Barna, 2022). TikTok and Instagram are the preferred platforms. Dretsch (2021) found that 37% of users preferred Instagram, 34% preferred TikTok, 14% preferred Twitter, 12% preferred other social platforms (LinkedIn and Snapchat), and 3% preferred Facebook (p. 467). However, Gen Z also use Periscope for virtual reality (Moench, 2022). Deckman (2020) found that "90% of Generation Z use Instagram daily, and 68% use TikTok daily" (p. 52). YouTube significantly influences Gen Z and is the most prevalent place where they look for answers and entertainment (Sparks & Honey, 2022). YouTube has a 94% monthly usage rate among 16- to 19-year-olds (Moench, 2022, p. 32). Thus, most young people in Gen Z look to sites like YouTube instead of God for answers to life from their peers, the internet, culture, or friends (Barna, 2018c).

The highest satisfaction rates with social media correlate with teens who use their platform for others rather than themselves. Eighty-five percent of Gen Z consider living a self-fulfilled life very important (Barna, 2020a). The church can show young people their purpose and how the cross leads to a fulfilled life. Gen Z may think they will find fulfillment in promoting themselves, but a fulfilled life comes from submitting to the Holy Spirit and surrendering to the call to follow Jesus with their life (Pruitt & Pace, 2022). Individuals with a purpose other than self-promotion on their platforms have better well-being than those who squander productive time on technological devices (Barna, 2017). Otherwise, social media can be detrimental. A Barna (2022) study of U.S. teens showed that nearly identical (68%) reported

that social media sometimes or often made them sad, anxious, or depressed. Additionally, 22% percent of teens said social media made them feel like they were missing out, and 29% said it hurt their self-esteem or made them feel insecure (para. 14).

There is an increasingly popular phenomenon referred to as *rinsta* and *finsta*. Rinsta is an Instagram account focused on image and others' perceptions of the person represented in the account. The rinsta presents a crafted and refined appearance that shows a desired idea. Finsta is a fake Instagram account where an individual invites a smaller circle of people (fewer than 100) into the space. People use finstas to present their "true selves via" unedited photos and honest and raw reactions to current events without worrying about what future employers might think (Sparks & Honey, 2022). Fifty-five percent of Gen Z have multiple Instagram accounts (Moench, 2022, para. 21).

This development indicates that Gen Z wrestle with who they are, their identities, and cultural pressures, constantly feeling like they must be or act a certain way and have an opinion about everything (Meola, 2023). Gen Z's expansive access and high adaptability causes them to experience a tidal wave of information regularly. Thus, many Gen Z students feel confused due to the numerous opinions around them daily. Gen Z may experience digital stress and high stress levels (Marshall & Wolanskyj-Spinner, 2021). Social media lacks something fundamental to human existence. Gen Z face numerous online options, which they find psychologically and physiologically exhausting. Marshall and Wolanskyj-Spinner (2021) observed, "There's a whole world of physical interaction that's missing. "Generation Z has been wired from the moment they came out of the womb, and the wired space of infinite next connections is all they know" (p. 1136). Cox (2022) noted, "What's potentially scary is that disconnecting is a completely unknown entity to them" (p. 201). The fear of missing out (FOMO) is a common experience for

Gen Z. Young people want to be “in the know” with everything (seemiller & Grace, 2019) but do not know how to cultivate authentic connections (Moon, 2021).

Less than two-thirds of U.S. teens say social media enables them to truly express themselves (58%; Dimock, 2019). Some Gen Z have grown tired of the never-ending social media loop, recognizing its harmful effects on their lives. Wasting time on a platform is a motivation to quit social media. Young people feel that social media presents too much negativity and pressure to get attention. Additionally, young people may feel bad about themselves due to social media (Sparks & Honey, 2022). Social media itself does not cause depression, but it can exacerbate unaddressed ’feelings of loneliness, depression, or anxiety (Barna, 2020). Some researchers link Gen Z’s always-connected, always-on lifestyle to a rise in depression, anxiety, and suicide (Barna, 2021). Nearly two-thirds (64%) of U.S. teens say they are taking a break from social media or have done so in the past (Holiday, 2018). With Gen Z spending nearly 9 hours online daily, reaching this generation will likely involve social media (Twenge, 2017).

Reaching Generation Z

Gen Z is the most significant mission opportunity in the history of the United States (White, 2017). Eighty-five percent of Christians convert before the age of 35 (Pruitt, 2020). Thus, Gen Z will either be a generation where more people come to Christ than any prior generation (an estimated 16 million American teens) or a lost generation (Crossman, 2018, p. 70). Whether they are a reached or lost generation, Gen Z may be the last generation of the world (White, 2017). After Gen Z, it may be impossible to categorize a generation with homogeneous characteristics due to the rapid sociocultural changes and the heterogenization of societal groups (Glenn, 2013). It will be the country’s most significant and fastest numerical shift in religious

affiliation (Moon, 2021). The 2021 Religious Landscape Study focused on motivations for disaffiliation. The study showed a minority of the recently disaffiliated cited a change in their beliefs. Most individuals disaffiliated did not go through a crisis of faith or abandon the church's teachings; instead, they lost interest and drifted away. According to Mitchell (2020), the most significant gains for Gen Z occur in the "nothing in particular" category, those who are most likely spiritual and sometimes religious but have stopped practicing. Other data sources aligned with this insight. McClure (2016) noted, "Only 20 percent of youth who 'became less religious' did so because of a change of intellectual belief. Yet, a full 42 percent cited 'disinterested or just stopped attending' or 'no specific reason' for their decrease in religious practice" (p. 822).

Barna (2018b) found a decline in biblical worldview in each successive generation: 10% of boomers, 7% of Gen X, 6% of millennials, and 4% of Gen Z have a biblical worldview. Given the prevalence of social media and screens, there has been an acceleration of ideas, beliefs, and practices out of step with what God has revealed in the Bible (Kinnaman, 2018, p. 37). There are more "nones," those who profess no religious affiliation, in America than before (Bergler, 2020). Gen Z discipleship must focus on evangelizing the nones and moving young people in the "squishy center" (White, 2017, p. 28) toward mature discipleship. Roughly one-third of Gen Z claim no religious affiliation, a larger percentage than millennials (Glenn, 2013). Notwithstanding, the nation's great spiritual awakening has yet to occur with the rise and advent of technology. However, the awakening can occur by leveraging technology to reach Gen Z with the gospel (Pinetops Foundation, 2018).

A mission to share the good news has motivated Christians to embrace and pioneer new means to reach people throughout history. Moreover, Christians have leveraged technology and spearheaded innovation. In the 16th century, Martin Luther pioneered nascent printing

technologies to create pamphlets, woodcuts, and tracts to spread the gospel to millions across Europe, fueling the Reformation (Pinetops Foundation, 2018). In 18th-century America, prolific preacher George Whitefield leveraged Benjamin Franklin's media empire to organize revival meetings and disseminate sermon copies to millions worldwide, sparking the First Great Awakening (Pinetops Foundation, 2015). In the 20th century, Billy Graham revolutionized television and radio programming to reach a live audience of over 200 million people and hundreds of millions more worldwide, launching the evangelistic crusade model (Hafiz, 2015, p. 88).

To reach students with the gospel through technology, church leaders may need to prioritize meeting Gen Z where they are on social media. Historically, church leaders have led society to adopt new media models for outreach; however, there is a need to seek opportunities to engage individuals early in their faith journeys (Pruitt, 2020). There seems to be a perceived need to return to the retention and evangelism of 20 years ago. A revival in this era could be a means of saving more people than both Great Awakenings, the Black church's growth after the Civil War, the Azusa revivals, and every Billy Graham crusade conversion combined (Pinetops Foundation, 2018).

The goal of reaching students with the gospel to increase student baptisms will be challenging without understanding Gen Z's theological, historical, and theoretical context (Barna, 2018c). More than ever, there is a need to share the gospel's good news so more teens develop personal relationships with Jesus. The identification and application of the best practices to reach Gen Z could be a way to reverse the downward baptism trends (Outerbridge, 2019). Whether church leaders will take the necessary measures to meet Gen Z where they are remains unknown (Allen, 2016). There has been a thorough exploration of student ministers' challenges

as they endeavor to reach Gen Z where they are. There is great potential and a greater need for student ministers to adapt to reach students by understanding where they are in their development. Erikson used the analogy of a trapeze artist to describe the developmental process of young adolescents (Anderson, 2004, pp. 60-61).

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

Moreover, understanding Gen Z's views on technology, education, diversity, the church, and social media could provide a greater effectiveness in reaching Gen Z (Lowe & Lowe, 2018). By taking under consideration the unique challenges Generation Z face, Student ministers are better able to reach and connect with Gen Z. Anchored in the Great commission are five purposes of the church, which serve as theoretical underpinnings for this study.

Student Ministry Purposes

The five functions of the church are identified by (Pace & Newton) evangelism, discipleship, fellowship, service, and worship (2019, p. 46). These purposes are based on two primary passages, the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20) and the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:37-40). They are intended to guide the activities and priorities of the church in accordance with the gospel (DeVries, 2010, p. 27). Worship is a common purpose and function, emphasizing the importance of praising and sensing the presence of God. Fellowship and discipleship are also common, highlighting the importance of building relationships and growing in faith together (Fields, 1998, p. 117). Evangelism and service are also included in this. Each of the five purposes serve as a guiding mandate in the context of student ministry (Ross, 2017, p. 98).

Evangelism

Student ministries dedicated to reaching Generation Z will likely prioritize evangelism as a biblically sound strategy to reach teens with the gospel effectively (Pace & Newton, 2019, p. 77–79). Jesus commanded his disciples to "go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). We must follow in His footsteps, being witnesses, preaching the gospel, and proclaiming repentance and forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). Instilling a culture of evangelism is key to getting others connected (Fields, 1998, p. 40). By proclaiming the Gospel with the intention of spreading the message and teachings of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19-20). This focus on biblical evangelism announces Jesus as Lord and Savior to reach Generation Z and to save sinners from the world. Newton and Pace (2019) believe that "perhaps the greatest indicator of our student's spiritual maturity, and thereby the greatest testament to our efforts to disciple them, will be their commitment to share their faith" (p. 103).

Discipleship

Pace and Newton (2019) argue that evangelism finds its fulfillment in the process of discipleship (p. 68). Barna (2016) notes that the two priorities among youth pastors are "discipleship and spiritual instruction" (75%), and "building relationships" (48%) when it comes to the purpose of youth ministry. This highlights the importance of not only attracting young people to the church but also nurturing their faith and helping them connect it to the world they live in. As Christians, it is crucial to build relational connections with others (White, 2017, p. 134). Accordingly, Ross (2017) notes that disciple-making "is intentionally equipping believers with the Word of God through accountable relationships empowered by the Holy Spirit in order to replicate faithful followers of Christ" (p. 181). Considering Generation Z characteristics to evolve, adapting approaches to discipleship may lead to reaching them more effectively.

Worship

Worship services designed specifically for students is an important part of student ministry (DeVries, 2010, p. 34). Corporate worship brings together God's word, prayer, and fellowship, making it the greatest means of God's ongoing grace in the Christian life. DeVries relates that “although worship can be intensely personal, students best express worship in the midst of community” (p. 56). Worship services designed specifically for students can help them experience authentic and meaningful worship that can lead to transformed lives (Ross, 2009, p. 67). Worship allows the students to seek God amid community with others who are pursuing God too (Ross, 2017, p. 204). Kinnaman (2018) found that worship is mostly viewed in student ministries as an activity offered to students (p. 147). However, worship also encompasses an everyday practice for students to emulate what following Jesus looks like as a lifestyle (Newton & Pace, p. 75).

Service

Students seem to thrive in ministries with a purpose. Service is a great way for this purpose to be facilitated (Pace & Newton, 2019, p. 76). Service in the church and student ministry commonly involves the usage of spiritual giftedness as one contributes to the body (of the church) through their personal contribution (Fields, 1998, p. 22). In service to not only to the student ministry, but the church at large, giftedness of teenagers can be nurtured and should be cultivated (DeVries, 2010, p. 195). In this sense, the student ministry gets to serve as a laboratory of sorts, where students learn what following Jesus looks like by being the hands and the feet of the church (1 Cor. 12:27). According to Fields (1998), “Students shouldn’t have to wait until they are adults to minister. A healthy youth ministry will constantly encourage students to discover their gifts and put them into practice through service opportunities” (p. 61).

Fellowship

The term "fellowship" in the context of student ministry, refers to practices that encourage students to connect with other believers in the body of Christ (Pace & Newton, 2019, p. 70). Fellowship is often seen as a way to build community and strengthen relationships, but it is also an essential practice in student ministry that encourages believers to connect with other believers through loving and caring relationships (Fields, 1998, p. 70). It also helps Christians grow together, be transformed into Christ's image, and to grow as a Christ follower (Ross, 2017, p. 104). Fellowship can take many forms, including in-depth Bible study, small-group ministries, and social gatherings (DeVries, 2010).

True fellowship happens when students are known, cared for, held accountable, and encouraged to live on mission (Fields, 1998, p. 59). According to Cannister (2018), “When fellowship is not an explicit core value, the importance of connecting and contributing to the community can be lost, and people quickly become mere consumers of the community” (p. 18). Student pastors are tasked with creating environments where fellowship flourishes and encouraging community among students (Ross, 2017, p. 215).

Theoretical Perspectives Summary

The theoretical underpinnings of this study make Gen Z the target of focus. Specifically, their characteristics, tendencies, and the world they live in today. Each are helpful for understanding potential obstacles, strategies, and practices to apply to connect with Generation Z today. The five-fold purposes of the church do not change, rather, they are adapted. By knowing what Gen cares about, may help to address skepticism, account for any differences, and allow teenagers to be reached effectively in the context of student ministry. The prior section reveals that Gen Z is hungry for purpose, searching for answers, and the church has the tools to create a

thriving student ministry environment. This study seeks to identify perceived best practices for reaching Generation Z effectively.

Related Literature

After the theological and theoretical foundations of student ministry, this section presents the literature related to the best practices for reaching Gen Z in the context of student ministry. Three topics are relevant to the topic: student ministry history, prevailing student ministry models, and the overall effectiveness in applying best student ministry practices. Further, this study addressed the gap in the research with this approach.

Introduction

The following literature review includes the ministry experts used to develop this = study's strategy and design. The section presents the individual variables in the RQs. The works in this section provided insight into the study's formation. The literature in this section includes the scope of the research. The following literature was the means of analyzing the qualitative data in this phenomenological study.

Student Ministry History

While the idea of God using young people is well-founded in Scripture, the notion of student ministry did not emerge until the 19th century (Stetzer & Im, 2017). Still, early church movements influenced modern student ministry (Senter, 2010). There is a need to understand the historic efforts to reach teenagers to reach Gen Z more effectively in the present day and age. Senter (2010) saw the value of using a historical foundation to reach and said, "There is a significance of a historical framework for youth ministry as it provides insight into the dynamic nature of youth ministry perspectives" (p. 23). The following presents the history of modern-day

student ministry and the practices useful for meeting Gen Z teenagers where they are to reach them effectively.

Early Student Ministry in the United States

Before the 18th century, dedicated ministry to students was the exception, not the norm. Senter (2010) delinated, “Until the introduction of the Sunday School, young people expected no special programming for their age group, and nothing was provided” (p. 54). Sunday school was a counter-cultural movement at the time, as church leaders ministered to young people as part of their respective families and viewed them as either children or adults. Despite its momentum, the movement focused on reading and social skills more than spiritual formation. Over time, the need for youth-age classes was accepted, resulting in the widespread acceptance of youth ministry.

Agnor (2018) said, “It is evident that the 18th-century educational innovation of Sunday School became the tool that cemented the way for the evolution of youth ministry as we know it today” (p. 51). Although the church did not have an intentional ministry for young people other than Sunday school until much later, men such as Cotton Mather began forming societies in the early 1700s to strengthen the faith of young people (Strommen & Hardel, 2001). The Lyceum was a segment of churches with a monthly evening meeting for young people (Henry, 1906, p. 197). Students used personal devotional materials at this gathering and engaged in a Bible study delivered via a sermon or reading. Mather used these societies to instill Christian character into young people, primarily by studying Scripture and other devotional works (Boyd, 1928).

Jonathan Edwards also increased adolescents’ interest in spiritual things in his Northampton ministry. Reid quoted Edwards, saying,

> God made it, I suppose, the greatest occasion of awakening to others, of anything that ever came to pass in the town. News of it seemed to be almost like a flash of lightning, upon the hearts of young people, all over town, and upon many others. (Reid, 2007, p. 9)

As Edwards indicated, the First Great Awakening began through a prayer revival of teenagers that swelled into a movement that swept New England. The movement was unlike anything before, and the young people led the revival of an entire nation (Reid & Wheeler, 2014, p. 74).

The Period of Associations (1824–1875)

Many young people struggled to find their proper place in society in the United States during the early to mid-19th century. Numerous associations emerged during this period to appeal to young people and keep them from engaging in societal evils, providing the foundation for formalized youth groups in the following years (Garces-Foley & Jeung, 2013, p. 199). This period had three major agencies: Sunday school, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and the juvenile temperance movement.

Sunday school in America was a British innovation developed by Raikes and other British evangelicals during the 1780s (Hemphill, 1996). More akin to a school, Raikes' model eventually declined, replaced with a more evangelistic model. In response to changing societal challenges, church leaders created or recreated Sunday School to design environments conducive to reaching young people (Faust et al., 2009). From its inception in the United States, "Sunday school was a strategic attempt to reach young people effectively" (Senter, 2010, p. 92).

The Americanized model focused on reaching students with reading, singing, and character development (Hemphill, 1996). Young people were strongly attracted to Sunday schools, as "Sunday school and church services may have been the only place in town where Christian young people could socialize in an acceptable manner" (Senter, 2010). Soon after, The SBC was founded in May 1845. During this time, The SBC had significant momentum in student ministry as Sunday School attendance for young people boomed (Willard, 2007, p. 33).

The YMCA also emerged in the United States during the mid-19th century. Like Sunday school, the goal of the YMCA was to reach young people with the gospel and develop them into devoted followers of Christ. With an easy-to-reproduce model, the YMCA quickly spread nationwide, with 205 YMCAs by 1860 (Senter, 2010). Much of this growth occurred because of the revival of 1857–1859. During this time, "Churches and YMCAs became places where men would gather during their noon hours for prayer, and the Spirit of God would drive them to repentance and public confession of sin" (Senter, 2010, p. 167). The young men took a significant role in the revival, spreading it throughout the country in various YMCAs. After the Civil War, the YMCA continued to have a lasting impact, with groups on college campuses. The YMCA was the foundation for the Student Volunteer Movement (Faust et al., 2009).

Unlike Sunday school and the YMCA, the juvenile temperance movement focused on students without direct spiritual motives (Yoder, 2020, p. 88). Comprised chiefly of evangelical laypeople, the goal of the juvenile temperance movement was to keep young people from the dangers of alcohol. Pledges against hard drinking liquor were a common campaign and a strategy incorporated into many other student organizations in the future (Senter, 2010). Active in the temperance movement for years, Theodore Cuyler later used the same strategies to develop one of the first church-based student ministries at Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, New York (Senter, 2010).

In the 1860s, Cuyler established The Young People's Association and set the stage for the next period of student ministry. Senter (2004) argued that Cuyler had an underestimated influence on early youth ministry (p. 31). Cuyler's ideas "prevail today in most young people's meetings in Protestant churches across the nation" (Sholund, 1968, p. 62). Contemporary student ministry still resembles Cuyler's ministering form to reach young people (Senter, 2010).

The Period of Youth Societies (1881–1925)

In the 1980's Sunday school and the YMCA began to decline due to the Industrial Revolution hindering their church-life engagement. However, the juvenile temperance movement and Cuyler's innovations produced many church-based student ministries as the formal emergence of Protestant youth groups in America occurred during this time. This second cycle of youth ministry emerged in response to changing cultural needs. After the Civil War, many adolescents worked in brutal and grueling conditions. The Industrial Revolution involved transforming the land of farms into a technological society, causing several problems that people could not solve (Willis, 1979, p. 148).

While Sunday school continued to have a strong appeal, it had become marginalized in its effectiveness due to the strict demands of factories for children to work ten hours a day and adults fifteen hours a day, six days a week (Willis, 1979, p. 90). As a result, individuals had little opportunity for education and moral training. The young people needed an encouraging and growth-producing spiritual community. In 1881, a Congregational minister, Dr. Francis E. Clark, observed that many girls and boys from his congregation had converted. Clark saw the need to reach the young people caught in vicious factory work life. Thus, Clark obtained the commitment of 58 young people and established the Christian Endeavour Society (Henry, 1906, p. 203).

Clark improved the conditions youth faced and inspired students to put their faith into action as a Christian community and transformed youth ministry in the process (Senter, 2010, p. 156). One of the reasons for the success of the Christian Endeavour Society was that it provided the opportunity for genuine discipleship among young people (Henry, 1906, pp. 197 – 198). Clark frequently gathered young people at his house for fellowship and noted their increased

receptivity to spiritual things. Clark believed that “the life of Christ and His teachings appeal especially to the young: how natural, almost inevitable, it is for a young person to be drawn to Christ and accept Him as pattern and guide when He is winsomely presented” (Henry, 1906, p. 201).

Francis Clark borrowed from the principles of Cotton Mather and Theodore Cuyler and penned the Six Essential Characteristics of the International Christian Endeavor Society. The characteristics had a similar format and content to prior Christian societies dedicated to reaching young people. The Christian Endeavor Society included the best aspects of each association with a spirit of prayer and revival. The society impacted the trajectory of Protestant student ministry in the United States. Within a few decades, Christian Endeavor groups spread throughout numerous denominations. The development occurred so rapidly that Clark developed an organizational manual to help the assemblies function. Clark set 80 as the highest number of young persons in a society (Henry, 1906, p. 195). Administratively, every team had three committees. First, a prayer conference committee to design the weekly program. Second, a lookout committee to welcome new members. Third, a social committee to plan the group’s social life for increased fellowship. The Christian Endeavor and Clark significantly impacted modern youth ministry. Thus, Clark is regarded as the father of contemporary youth ministry (Senter, 2010, p.223).

Ultimately, the church addressed oppressive conditions after the Industrial Revolution during the Progressive Era. The Progressive Era was a period of widespread social activism and political reform across the United States that spanned the 1890s to the 1920s. The main objective of the progressive movement was to address problems caused by industrialization, urbanization, and political corruption (Senter, 2010, p. 245). From 1902 to 1915, child labor committees

focused on reform through state legislatures. Many laws restricting child labor were passed as part of the progressive reform. As a result, adolescents could spend more time in the church-life community. Legislators passed additional laws against students working in egregious factory conditions at the expense of obtaining an education.

The Period of the Relational Outreach (1933–1969)

The period of relational outreach was a shift toward relational fellowship groups and parachurch outreach strategies brought on by the emergence of American terminology, which put youth ministry on the map (Wright & Graves, 2007). In addition, the increasing scarcity of jobs during the Great Depression and the passage of more child labor laws caused the public high school scene to become the norm. High school enrollment increased by about 50% during the Great Depression, from 4.3 million students to 6.5 million. However, high school became a universal experience for teenagers only after World War II (Musgrove, 1964, p. 117). These events had dramatic implications for the rise of youth culture. The functional need resulted in a gap in modern societies for mass schooling and the concurrent cultural dysfunction of separating young people from the rest of the community (Parsons, 1942).

Hine (2000) stated, “Without high school, there are no teenagers” (p. 49). For the first time in U.S. history, adolescents were segregated from adults for much of their day; as a result, they established a culture of their own. The youth culture was new and unfamiliar to adults and resulted in the term teenager. Hine cited a 1941 article in *Popular Science* as the first place the term “teenager” appeared in print. The shift affected the development of student ministry. Bergler (2012) described how many adults feared how the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War would affect the coming generation. Bergler said, “Concerned Christians launched dozens of new youth organizations in this period in the hopes of protecting young people from

the evil effects of these crises and sought to mobilize teens to make a difference in a dangerous world" (p. 42).

In response, a new wave of ministry and an evangelistic spirit began to reach the youth. One movement was "The Young People's Church of the Air" in Philadelphia in 1931. This ministry had rapid growth and was the first of its time. Whereas youth societies had previously focused on Christian youth, Percy Crawford sought to evangelize to those lost in the unknown world of youth culture with the technological innovation of the day, the radio. Senter (2004) said the following about Crawford: "Percy came to be described as the 'master of the seven-minute sermon' and insisted on a fast-moving lively service. Every rally was entertaining. Even the quartet traveling with the evangelist knew to laugh on cue to stimulate audience response" (p. 51). Crawford's platform increased, and he received numerous invitations to speak at evangelistic rallies. Crawford influenced many youth ministry leaders, as they shared his passionate commitment to evangelism and mirrored his style in their preaching.

Miracle Book Club

While Crawford began an evangelistic movement using media on the East Coast, another move occurred on the West Coast. In 1933, McCluskey was a divorcee in her 40s living in Portland, Oregon, teaching a Bible class to high school students in her home. The course was so well received that several schools had chapters. By 1938, there were over 1,000 clubs nationwide (Cannister, 2001, p. 125). According to Mathis (2022), McCluskey's club had four goals:

- Invite high school students to salvation in Christ
- Help converts realize and understand the true meaning of Christ living in them
- Help converts successfully implement a new Christian lifestyle
- Teach students to become Christian conversationalists in witnessing to their peers

McCluskey's organization was the first parachurch organization in the United States targeted at high school youth (Cannister, 2001, p. 36). Christian Endeavor focused on people aged 13–30. McCluskey's response to the new subculture had a ripple effect in youth ministry (Mathis, 2022).

The Rise of The Parachurch Organization

Several other parachurch movements occurred in the 1940s. Young Life, Youth for Christ, Word of Life, and Campus Crusade for Christ emerged during this period. These ministries and others like them successfully reached students, showing the most remarkable evangelistic effectiveness of the period. Below are a few significant parachurch movements foundational to the development of student ministry (Bristow, 2016).

Young Life

Jim Rayburn sought to introduce adolescents to the idea that faith in God could be fun, exhilarating, and life-changing. Rayburn developed the Young Life strategy to address the demands of youth culture by taking the message of salvation to students. Instead of inviting teenagers to church or youth groups, Rayburn called on men and women to enter the students' culture. Founded in 1941, Young Life differed from the Miracle Book Club because it was highly relational and not focused on Bible Study. Senter (2001) commented on Rayburn:

> As much as any, he wanted young hearts to hear the gospel, but more than most, he was willing to go to any extreme so that the opportune time and situation might be provided. He wanted each young person in America to be met and experience Jesus in their life. (p. 69)

True to the technical knowledge approach of the day, Rayburn committed to evangelism and winning converts. Past pioneers in youth ministry called for young people to make outstanding Christian commitments and dedicate themselves to a creed (Vukich & Vandegriff, 2008). However, Rayburn differed from the other experts during this time because he emphasized relational evangelism. Instead of banging his fist on a pulpit, waving a Bible, and

shouting at scores of young people to “turn or burn,” Rayburn “prioritized relationships to lead them to Christ” (Senter, 2010, p. 150). Rayburn’s approach was a drastic change in youth ministry evangelism. Like previous movements, Young Life spread rapidly with clubs established throughout the country. Rayburn and others sought to provide environments to introduce people to Christ. Rayburn was a visionary leader who responded to the church’s inadequacy and reached youth by taking the gospel to them (Senter, 2010, p. 354).

Youth for Christ

Youth for Christ (YFC) emerged in the 1940s with large youth evangelistic rallies. Like the other movements of this era, YFC had a commitment to evangelism and purity. Although there were already Saturday night rallies and YFC closed in the early 1940s, ’YFC International began in 1945. A Chicago preacher named Tory Johnson was the first president. Johnson was no stranger to YFC before serving this post. Eight men led by Johnson formed the initial leadership team and appointed Billy Graham their first full-time staff person. Borgman (1987) said, “Skeptics labeled it a fad, and critics found its excess and mistakes, but Youth for Christ became and continues to be a mighty force for youth evangelism worldwide” (p. 40). YFC quickly spread around the country, resulting in the need to organize and centralize the movement. YFC rallies included lively gospel music; personal testimonies from athletes, civic leaders, or military heroes; a brief sermon; and a gospel invitation to receive Jesus Christ as one’s personal Lord and savior (Pahl, 2001). The rally speakers were youth ministry celebrities of the day who created an entertaining religious experience every Saturday night.

In the early 1960s, YFC’s leaders boldly shifted to intentional and small relational groups on campuses. The leader called the shift campus life. Instead of YFC staff members ministering to 25 campuses, they led two or three campus ministries. Campus-life gatherings addressed three

questions: “Who am I in relationship with God?” “Why should I communicate my faith to others?” “How can I best carry out my responsibility for Christian witness?” (Senter, 2010). This purposeful shift contributed to relational ministry.

Word of Life

Evangelist Jack Wyrtzen started the Word of Life ministry in the 1940s. For years, Wyrtzen shared his faith wherever and with whomever he could. However, Wyrtzen quit his job selling insurance to devote himself full time to his ministry only after receiving airtime at a New York City radio station. Word of Life was a branch of YFC that became independent. The radio show that presented Word of Life became the longest-running series of radio rallies 10 years after Crawford originated his broadcasts. Word of Life was a new wave of evangelical preaching to youth, a blend of dynamic music, powerful testimonies from converted teenagers, and concise preaching. Crawford influenced Wyrtzen and mentored him as he expanded Word of Life. In more than 50 years of leadership, Wyrtzen established Bible clubs, camps, and conference. Wyrtzen’s Bible Institutes and Christian camps are in nearly 70 countries, and the camps and local church youth training organizations attract multitudes to Christ.

Fellowship of Christian Athletes

While the above movements stagnated or declined, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) continues gaining momentum. Don McMlanen established FCA in 1954 (Senter, 2010), with groups in 62 countries. The FCA provides many opportunities for young people in different age groups, including college students, to grow their faith, develop leadership skills, and learn teamwork and camaraderie through athletics. The FCA has a simple strategy to form “huddle groups” of high school athletes, coaches, teachers, and parents to share the gospel and encourage young Christian people. A coach or another adult interested in sports leads the huddle group,

which includes singing, announcements, and a Bible study. FCA also has conferences and events to leverage the influence of professional athletes to evangelize student-athletes. The genius of the huddle groups strategy was that the leaders had a built-in point of contact with students, whereas Young Life and YFC leaders had to find a way to engage high school students. FCA has continued to expand. In 2019, the ministry had a 3% growth in membership over the previous years (McKnight, 2022, p. 375).

Conclusions From the Relational Outreach Period

Two ministries' factors for young people emerged from the relational outreach period. First, the evangelistic youth event became a common theme among parachurch ministries. YFC provided time, money, and effort to large groups of teenagers with the intent of sharing the gospel with them. Second, evangelistic campus ministry emerged as Rayburn made Young Life a bridge between the local high school and the church. Instead of waiting for students to come to the church, Rayburn developed a strategy to connect with young people in their familiar environment.

Moreover, the parachurch revolution showed that the main thrust of youth evangelism came from outside the local church. Rayburn and Wyrtzen were parachurch ministers who grew their ministries to see young people come to the faith in Christ. The large evangelistic youth rallies of the mid-1900s were conducted by the leaders of large-scale youth organizations, such as Word of Life, YFC, and Young Life. There is very little mentioned in the history of youth ministry of the role of the local church in evangelizing youth (Dunn & Senter, 1997). Jones (2011) echoed this point and said,

> In the middle of the twentieth century, parachurch outreach ministries like Youth for Christ and Young Life blossomed because the church shirked its duty. In some ways, the boom of professional, church-based youth ministry grew as an embarrassing reaction to

> the success of those ministries. Is it heresy to say that Youth for Christ and Young Life would be put out of business if the church did its job? (p. 116)

In short, a failure to reach students through Sunday school caused the development of student ministries for young people led by individuals in the newly created "youth minister" position (Jones, 2011). The youth minister role became more prominent, and a noticeable shift occurred in the student ministry landscape.

The Period of Youth Professionalization (1970–Present Day)

Early student ministers arose without many examples as church leaders employed laypersons to work with groups of high school students. Due to a lack of training, many youth leaders imitated what they had seen happening in parachurch club programs (Strommen & Hardel, 2000). The first documented full-time Southern Baptist youth minister worked at The Third Baptist Church in 1927 in St. Louis, Missouri; however, full-time youth ministers were not commonplace until decades later (Senter, 2010, p. 335). Laypeople led the initial church-based student ministries. Wright & Graves (2007) said, "Churches did not routinely hire youth ministers until the early 1960s, and it would be well into the '70s before youth ministers were being regularly hired full-time" (p. 17).

The Jesus movement

As parachurch ministries plateaued, a new era known as the "youth professionalization era" or the "era of entrepreneurial youth" began. This era of youth ministry began during the Jesus movement sparked by Lonnie Frisbee and Chuck Smith. The revival influenced young people and youth ministry as it is known today. Tomczak (2014) reflected on the movement: "Amid a very turbulent and discouraging time in our nation's history, God intervened supernaturally for 5 years, from 1968 to 1973. A grassroots spiritual movement burst forth on the scene with a soft explosion that revolutionized millions of lives. The Jesus movement gained

momentum throughout the 1970s and the 1980s, with many new churches and student ministries established for the ’influx of young people. While some church leaders did not know what to do with this new radical group, those who embraced it benefited greatly.

Wheeler and Reid (2014) observed how the movement contributed to the increased professionalization of youth ministry:

> With the explosion of megachurches that grew out of the Jesus movement came the need for effective ministers to deal with various groups within the church. Thus, the Jesus movement of the late 1960s and ‘70s helped perpetuate the rise of full-time youth ministers (p. 93).

Reid (2014), who wrote a dissertation on the Jesus movement, noted the movement’s impact, specifically on Southern Baptists’ evangelism, institutions, leadership, and worship. Reid stated,

> The Jesus People movement became the expression of an evangelical youth subculture and, to some degree, the general youth subculture. Through the influence of this movement, Christian contemporary music also began to form. With this move of God among young people that swept across the United States, more and more churches began developing ministries for young people, propelling the rise of modem student ministry in the local church context. (p. 111)

The movement impacted the nation and its youth. Reid explained, “The movement sparked a fire among the youth subculture that burdened young people to hunger for The Word, and each reaches their generation through evangelism and genuine community” (p. 97).

Eskridge (2013), like other scholars, pointed to the Jesus movement in the 1970s as a pivotal point on the timeline of student ministry. “As the Jesus movement boomed, the era of professionalized youth ministry was ushered in, student ministers joined the church staff in a paid role with an ever-increasing area of responsibility” (Eskridge, 2013 p. 140). Further, the stagnation and decline of parachurch youth ministries resulted in the collapse of denominational support (Senter, 2010, p. 439). The rise of youth ministry publishing was a noticeable and apparent shift in youth ministry. In response, religious leaders decentralized the ministry in the local church, leading to the rise of youth pastors.

Senter (2010) suggested that up until the movement, “The idea of having someone employed at the church to work primarily with young people was foreign to the vast majority of churches” (p. 337). Ministry professionals in medium to large congregations could access the latest youth ministry innovations and develop unique youth ministries. Bustraan (2014) stated, “Although the Jesus People movement had ceased to be a major cultural force within American evangelicalism by the late 1970s, its impact continued to be felt for decades” (p. 153).

Consequently, many student ministers assembled volunteer teams and executed strategies to reach students in their context. For example, Youth Specialties and Group Publishing in the early 70s provided resources for youth leaders in churches. Youth Specialties founders Mike Yaconelli and Wayne Rice, who also founded YouthWorker Journal, used the resources they developed with YFC to bring relationally driven, Christ-centered, biblically based student ministry to their churches (Cannister, 2001).

However, as ministry strategies and practices became the focus, there was little attention pm the personal lives of those leading the ministries and whether they reached teenagers effectively. The overemphasis on skills and abilities did not address the comprehensive spiritual development student ministers needed to ensure long-term spiritual health and ministerial effectiveness (Bergler, 2012). For the first time, scholars began assessing the programmatic side of student ministry and developing theories for reaching teenagers.

The Rise of the Youth Professionalization Period

Cromer (1972) identified the critical need to rethink the youth minister as the *minister with youth*. “The youth ministry should not be reserved exclusively for the young, energetic, and theologically unsophisticated leader because the minister with youth must have a way with youth and adults” (Cromer, 1972, p. 88). Cromer focused on adult leaders. Instead of working with

young people, the minister with youth should be a mature, theologically trained minister who builds a team of adult leaders to work with children in ministry and mission. This goal requires salaries and compensation sufficient to attract competent and lifelong male and female ministers. The minister with youth is a lifelong vocation that eliminates the assumption that his development task is to grow up and out of the youth ministry.

In 1973, Bob Taylor was the first national youth ministry consultant of the SBC Sunday School Board (presently named LifeWay Christian Resources). The expansion of the SBC youth ministry included forming a student ministry department at LifeWay, developing consultant positions at many state conventions, establishing professional organizations, and employing thousands of local church youth ministers (Taylor, 2001). Southern Baptist church leaders continued to develop youth programs. Church leaders developed youth choirs in the 1970s. Youth groups began to change as publishing houses produced musicals for church youth choirs (Strommen, 2000). Also, church leaders transitioned youth camps from leadership retreats to weeklong spiritual journeys, even for non-Christians. The rise of Centrifuge camps in the 1970s was part of this transition. Throughout the 1970s, the number of churches with ministers whose primary job was to work with young people increased dramatically. The exact numbers to support this are difficult to come by and rarely align, but scholars have not disputed the increased emphasis on youth ministry at this time. Christian colleges began providing programs to prepare people for youth ministry. Also, more parachurch agencies, such as InterVarsity and the Navigators, began to present marketing for student ministries due to a significant youth subculture.

The Boom of the Youth Professionalization Period

By the 1980s, MTV and a media-driven generation resulted in mainstream youth culture. Consequently, youth ministry focused on entertainment. Youth pastors featured live bands, video production, and elaborate sound and lighting to reach young people. No longer could burgers or pizzas draw a crowd. Youth pastors designed group meetings inspired by MTV and Nickelodeon game shows by the decade's end. By the 1980s and into the 1990s, the Christian music industry, large youth conferences, and Christian camps became increasingly popular. The rise in entertainment throughout the 1990s caused youth pastors to shorten and simplify the message to reach students and fit the entertainment-saturated youth culture.

The lament of the 1990s was the ineffectiveness of programmatic models for youth ministry and the need for new models. Early youth ministry models did not resonate with the next generation, indicating the need for more practical models. DeVries (1994), a proponent of the family-based ministry model and author of *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (2010), said,

> These are years for bold experimentation in youth ministry. Churches should not be afraid to step back from some of the sacred structures of Sunday school and youth group to develop a ministry to teenagers designed to build long-term faith maturity. (p. 147)

Fields (1998) promoted purpose-driven youth ministry and presented a "comprehensive view of student ministry." Fields published a book 3 years after Rick Warren, Fields' senior pastor, published *The Purpose Driven Church*. By that time, many youth ministers served in churches with the purpose-driven youth ministry model (Cannister, 2018). Fields enhanced youth ministry health with a purpose-driven model, with the youth ministry's programs and structures reflecting the church's five purposes of evangelism, worship, fellowship, discipleship, and ministry (Fields, 1998).

Toward the end of the 1990s, Senter evaluated the dominant youth ministry models in the 1980s and 1990s. Many changes occurred in youth ministry during the last decade of the 20th

century (Dunn & Senter, 1997, p. 23). The community, gift development, and youth society models were not a significant part of youth ministry in the United States. Instead, four new models gained prominence: family-based, high school subpopulation, meta, and youth church. Dunn and Senter (1997) said,

> There have essentially been three cycles/revolutions of youth ministry, and the fourth began in 1990 when he was writing his book. He further breaks these fifty-year cycles down: the first 20–30 years of a youth movement are permeated with excitement and innovation. The next 20–30 years would be characterized by stagnation until a crisis occurs, rendering the movement ineffective and bankrupt. This struggling period of stagnation would continue until entrepreneurial innovations for working with young people would launch a new cycle of youth ministry (p. 108).

Dunn and Senter (1997) also recognized six steps in every youth ministry cycle in each era in the following order:

1. The cycle started during a period of rapid social change.
2. Grassroots youth ministry movements started under the direction of the Holy Spirit.
3. An acknowledged leader emerged in the form of a nationally recognized youth ministry organization.
4. Imitators began using the essential strategy without the original, well-focused purpose.
5. There was a period of stagnation.
6. An event outside youth ministry impacted the environment, providing the foundation for the next cycle.

Senter (2010) argued that the current cycle of youth ministry is a period of stagnation in need of a revolution (p. 145). If Senter is correct about a new process occurring every 20 to 30 years, then student ministry may be on the brink of a new era with Gen Z, the first post-Christian generation (p. 162).

The Aftermath of the Youth Professionalization Period

Dunn and Senter (1997) observed the development of student ministry throughout the 20th century and said, “Youth ministry has come of age” (p. 83). As evidence for this conclusion, Senter (2010) observed the rapid increase in Christian colleges and seminaries providing majors and concentrations in student ministry over the last half of the twentieth century.” Likewise, Reid (2014) said,

> For the past three decades, youth ministry has exploded across America, accompanied by a rise in the number of degrees in youth ministry granted by colleges and seminaries, an abundance of books and other resources, and a network of cottage industries devoted solely to youth ministry (p. 51).

This boom in student ministry included an increased number of individuals serving as local church staff in student ministry positions and in parachurch student ministry organizations (Senter, 2010, p. 90). Stanley and Hall (2011) noted the increasing number of individuals in student ministry positions and said, “Youth ministry has slowly evolved into a profession of professionals. What was once considered the lowest rung on the ladder in most churches has now become a job that demands respect” (p. 16). Despite the unparalleled growth in local church ministry for young people and the increased respect for student ministers, Reid (2014) indicated that student ministry requires significant reflection and evaluation (p. 201). As White and Erlacher (2022) asserted, “People in youth ministry continue to age out without a firm identity and need a reprise and refresh in its approach to reach Generation Z more effectively” (p. 28).

Summary of Youth Professionalization Period

In many ways, the development of student ministry was an exercise in navigating uncharted waters. The concept of “teenage” and youth culture was an innovation for Americans, especially in churches (Senter, 2014, p. 176). The Sunday school movement of the 19th century impacted the formation of modern student ministry, as youth pastors began to minister directly to

adolescents as an age group in the context of the local church. Additionally, compulsory high school after World War II produced a full-fledged youth subculture (Reid, 2014, p. 169). Christian revivals, like the Jesus revolution, and the rise of parachurch organizations also contributed to the professionalization of student ministry. The professionalism of student ministry included local church leaders imitating the exciting music, creative skits, and dynamic young speakers pioneered at parachurch groups (Senter, 2010, p. 96). Thus, many student ministries in modern churches have structural and programmatic similarities to parachurch student ministries. Ultimately, the 19th and 20th centuries were the context for the modern student ministry climate. Over the course of the history of student ministry, different strategies have been employed to address the unique developmental needs of students. The history of student ministry demonstrates the need to identify the best practices to reach a generation effectively.

Prevailing Literature of Student Ministry Best Practices

While there are numerous popular models, strategies, and student ministry practices, not all should be adopted (Fields, 1998). A thriving student ministry ’requires understanding the difference between efficiency and effectiveness. Business leadership guru Drucker (1978) stated, “Efficiency is doing things right, effectiveness is doing right things” (p. 34). The subtle shift from efficiency to effectiveness can have far-reaching implications for meeting Gen Z students where they are (Aguas, 2019, p. 11). For clarity, the best practices are not “independent silver bullets” (Im, 2017, p. 15); they are collective student ministry practices to further the Great Commission (Ross, 2017).

Despite an individual’s best efforts, thriving student ministry cannot occur without forethought, prayerful consideration, and careful strategy implementation (Fields, 1998). Student

ministry in a modern-day context requires practicing the right things. However, the status quo is the default without the wherewithal to cast vision and the intentionality stay the course. Many student ministers do not consider the models they use or the practices they should implement to reach students with the gospel (Broyles, 2009). DeVries (2010) described this lack of practice, citing experience with Youth Ministry Architects:

> The more churches we have worked with, the more we have discovered patterns. By far the most startling is this: most American churches have, often without recognizing it, embraced a clear model for youth ministry, a model more popular than purpose–driven, family based or one that is congregational—inclusive. Most churches have chosen to do youth ministry with a model best described as gambling (p. 9).

DeVries noted that "sustainable youth ministry…comes not from gambling but predictably from a strategic, sacrificial, and annoyingly inconvenient investment of time and resources. Thus, the implementation of best practices is tantamount to a thriving student ministry" (p. 114).

The biblical models of youth ministry can vary. There is no singular, sacred, and efficient youth ministry model (Clark, 2015, p. 35). Further, the execution and expression of practices can differ based on the context. Gen Z is a complex generation. The prevailing literature has influenced current student ministry practices. However, there is a need to explore the principles used in student ministries to reach Gen Z effectively. The next section presents those sources and where they fit in the prevailing three models in student ministry.

Models of Student Ministry

There are multiple models of student ministry. As Clark (2015) noted, "There are dozens if not hundreds of models of youth ministry actively functioning around the world" (p. 112). Further, student ministry literature shows variation on the different student ministry models. However, Jones (2019) defines the most prevalent student ministry models as the following:

- Programmatic ministry model: Ministries organized into "silos," with little consistent generational interaction. Family ministry is an additional program. The program may

provide training, intervention, or activities for families. In scheduling programs, church leaders remain sensitive to families' needs and schedules.

- Family-focused ministry model: Although there are age-organized programs and events, the leaders of each separate ministry plan and program to intentionally draw generations together and encourage parents to participate in the discipleship of children and youth.

- Inclusive-congregational ministry model: The church leader eliminates age-segregated programs and events. All or nearly all programs and events are multigenerational, with a focus on parents' responsibility to evangelize and disciple their children (p. 48).

These models were the framework and foundation for the prevailing student ministry best practices. Each model has proponents and dissenters. As such, the goal was to share some of the best and most popular student ministry sources and literature, those which are espoused will be assessed in the respective model they pertain to. Some resources impacted the student ministry landscape more than others, and, on this basis, were included in favor of only more recent resources. As previously indicated, the primary mode for the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century has been largely programmatic. However, there has been a strong push toward involving the family in student ministry. The most noncontemporary model is the inclusive congregational model; however, this chapter addressed the model due to its contribution to the conversation and overall student ministry landscape. Nonetheless, those resources are significant to the best practices. The three following models indicate the need for this research and include the suggested values in SBC student ministries. The goal of this study was not to communicate one approach above another or to describe a comprehensive list of all models present in the practice of student ministry.

Programmatic Ministry Model

In 1987, Duffy Robbins provided a funnel concept for programmatically organizing youth ministries that continues to impact student ministry (Broyles, 2009). This helpful and

popular concept was a launching pad for several youth ministry programmatic models. From the least to the greatest commitment, the five levels, known as "Warren's circles of commitment," are community, crowd, congregation, committed, and core. In 1991, Robbins provided a funnel concept for programmatically organizing youth ministries. Robbins described five levels to categorize the eight programmatic priorities of youth ministry strategically. Robbins added a sixth level and changed the primary illustration to a funnel. The pyramid and funnel enabled a youth ministry team to "pick and choose the best of historical and current models in a comprehensive and holistic way" (Clark, 2015, pp. 112–113). Robbins (1991) stated,

> For a youth program to be well rounded, accomplishing the purpose for which it was designed, there must be some type of formal or informal programming that will meet the needs of kids at each of these levels of commitment. There needs to be Come Level programs, geared to the student who is not into religion at all, and there needs to be programs that will motivate the forward progress and growth of those at the Grow, Disciple, and Develop Levels. (p. 79)

The pyramid and funnel provided those in youth ministry the conceptual tools to create, adapt, and add to the larger program while ensuring a strategic balance of values (Broyles, 2009).

Seven years later, in 1998, Fields operationalized this concept for youth leaders in the best-selling student ministry book *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*. Fields' purpose-driven youth ministry model increased in popularity, as indicated by book sales and recognition in the youth ministry literature. Youth ministers used the five purposes to make their mission statements, sometimes copying and pasting directly from Fields' book. The intentional programming of this popular pyramid model focuses on attracting teenagers with big, flashy events.

Like Robbins, Fields (1987) challenged youth ministries to focus their programmatic methodology around five biblical purposes: worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship. Fields considered these purposes sufficient for the biblical demands of youth ministry (Broyles, 2009). Proposed models, such as Robbins' (1991) funnel of programming and

Fields' (1998) purpose-driven model, focus on strategic, intentional ministry and core values. Robbins (2004) noted Fields' adaptation of the principles of the pyramid:

> There are numerous variations of this way of conceptualizing a youth ministry program. In Fields' design, he makes the same distinctions between various levels of commitment and demonstrates the same clear intention of moving students to deeper places of involvement and spiritual maturity. (p. 505)

Dunn and Senter (1997) explained the flexibility and size of the model and said, "Youth ministers most frequently take programs from a variety of possibilities and form them into a ministry package" (p. 189). The programmatic model includes numerous programs that student ministers provide to students to get them engaged, connected, and committed (Cannister, 2001). Senter also noted the benefits of the programmatic model (p. 80). The programmatic axis has two functions, attracting and retaining/training programs, as vehicles for bringing people to experience the gospel with comfort and integrity. Senter stated,

> Attracting young people to attend an event where the Christian gospel would be presented was the main feature of the programmatic model. By creating seeker friendly skate parks, or gymnasiums, an environment is created where it's easy to invite friends to come and consider the claims of Christ. (p. 82)

Although some have typified this model as "surfacy," it has undeniable reach. Whether whacky and tacky competitions or high-end resort camps, this model provides a socially acceptable place to introduce students to Jesus (Dunn & Senter, 1997). Clark vouched for the programmatic model and clarified a common misnomer about the model:

> The aspect of programmatic youth ministry that I believe is so often mislabeled as merely superficial "entertainment," where it remains a vital component of ministry to and for our young in today's atomized church and society. It is a powerful way to build bridges.

Some church leaders succeed in building relational bridges through events, while others create silos (Powell & Clark, 2011). The intentional programs, events, and opportunities of programmatic ministry can be a good beginning or gateway to connecting students to the church

(Fields, 2002). Stier (2022), founder of Dare 2 Share and author of *Gospelize,* addressed the programmatic model and said,

> Yes, we can and should have meetings. Let's keep having dodgeball tournaments, pizza parties, and lock-ins. Let's worship loud and play hard. Let's exegete, teach, and ask hard questions. But let's keep the mission to reach students with the gospel at the forefront. (p. 15)

Youth ministers using the programmatic model can lean into entertainment while focusing on the good and adapting it to their churches' unique context, ministry, and setting. Most youth ministry programs focus on Christ and do not provide programs other than Bible study and worship (Clark, 2015). Still, even with the popularity and success of the programmatic model at several levels, church-based youth ministers should continue to evaluate their missional programmatic commitments and strategies.

> The church is not primarily called to programs and events in order to build a vital community of believers. It is, rather, called to connect people to people. In order to do this successfully, every youth ministry must constantly ask itself, who are our targets? How do we best reach out to them? Where do we want these students to end up when they leave our program? (Black, 1999, pp. 123–124)

Programmatic values are present tense; they do not reflect past or future values (Tichy, 2002, p. 80). The programmatic methodology itself is created and sustained by the ministry's programmatic values (Anthony & Anthony, 2011). Hence, the programmatic values are the ministry's applied core values. Programmatic values are the influencing, driving values behind the organization's actions (Kouzes & Posner 2002).

Neufeld (2002) said, "We should be able to look at any program event and explain why we do it in light of our vision, mission, and strategy" (p. 195). Regardless of whether a youth pastor can explain the program or whether it parallels the mission statement, the program presents the core values. DeJong (1969) used a ladder to denote the elements of educational philosophy. The six rungs indicate progression from the lower and most foundational to the

highest: the basis of authority, nature or persons, purpose and goals, structural organization, implementation, and evaluation. Robbins (2004) noted,

> DeJong's ladder reminds us that every ministry activity (whether it be a Sunday night program, a Tuesday afternoon small group, a game of Chubby Bunny, a skit, a Bible study, a retreat, a leadership recruitment effort) is a reflection of a youth ministry program. Every programming model is rooted in a ministry purpose (or lack of purpose). (p. 429)

Robbins (2004) and Fields (1998) were the most significant contributors to the programmatic model. Although Robbins and Fields have influenced millions through their contributions to programmatic ministry, neither shared their core values nor cited research on whether and the extent to which they practiced the values. The closest description is an anecdotal offering by Fields, who graded youth ministries on each purpose. According to Cannister (2018), *"*Even though scores of youth ministers have embraced the programmatic approach described above, many have struggle how to fully implement it." Pace and Newton (2019) also discussed the programmatic model:

> On a more specific level, all of our ministry programs, from ongoing efforts like small groups and worship encounters to specialized trips and events, should be designed and evaluated based on the particular areas of growth they are intended to promote. Based on their effectiveness, they should be adjusted or abandoned accordingly. Ultimately, we must let our spiritual goal of producing young disciples determine the ministerial philosophy and practical approach we adopt and implement (pp. 58 - 59).

Robbin's commitment and strategically balanced program model was the first balanced youth ministry model communicated to a national audience. The model remains formally taught and practiced. Almost all modern models contain the insight and impact of Robbins and Fields. Clark (2008) credited Robbins as the greatest youth ministry influencer of the 1980s and 1990s. Robbins' funnel enables a youth ministry team to pick and choose the best historical and current models. It is also a comprehensive and holistic way to practice student ministry" (Clark, 2015, pp. 112–113). Programmatic values are the principles of conviction discovered by investigating

the organization's actions and practices (Broyles, 2009). The ministry's aim or focus differentiates one model from the next.

Robbins and Fields also influenced the development of healthy, creative, and workable youth ministry by offering a way of thinking about youth ministry's task, especially from the perspective of the local church. As a prominent example of programmatic ministry, Fields (1998) challenged youth ministries to focus their programmatic methodology on five biblical purposes. Robbins and Fields addressed the biblical demands of youth ministry and provided a potential template for reaching students effectively.

Family Focused Ministry-Model

The "family-focused" model emerged out of a disdain for the programmatic model. DeVries (1994), the "father of modern family ministry," stated, "The crisis in youth ministry is, simply put, that the ways we have been doing youth ministry have not been effective in leading our young people to mature Christian adulthood." Ross (2017) wrote extensively on the family's role in student ministry and said, "Nothing is more vital for the health of student ministry than the establishment of discipleship in the place of the home parents cannot abdicate to the church the final responsibility for ensuring this is done" (p. 102).

Jones (2019) defined family ministry as "the process of intentionally and persistently coordinating a ministry's proclamation and practices so that parents are acknowledged, trained, and held accountable as primary disciple-makers in their children's lives" (p. 40). Garland (2006) provided a general definition of family ministry:

> Family ministry is any activity that directory or indirectly (1) forms families in the congregational community; (2) increases the Christlikeness of the family relationships of Christians; or (3) equips and supports families for the work to which they are called together. (p. 24)

This definition includes anything impacting a family's formation, development, and ministry. Garland said, "Much more broadly, however, a congregation engages in family ministry indirectly and sometimes unintentionally, as leaders and members worship, conduct their business, pursue their missions and live as a community with one another" (p. 27). In summary, family ministry occurs as members carry out church functions.

Defining the family provides nuance to the definition of family ministry. Not all families consist of a biological mother, father, and children. Garland (2007) found four implications of Jesus's teaching regarding family: "1. The Christian family is one of adoption. 2. Living faithfully as family is a Christian vocation. 3. Family relationships are not our first loyalty. 4. A congregation is community" (p. 43). These four principles indicate that those in family ministry should also strive to reach individuals without families. Jones (2019) stated,

> Recognizing that Christian parents are not present in every household, family-equipping ministries develop comprehensive plans for mentoring and discipling students whose fathers and mothers are not believers while simultaneously seeking the salvation and spiritual growth of those parents. (p. 11)

While emphasizing discipleship through parents, family ministry in the local church provides the context for reaching children whose parents do not follow Christ (Pate, 2021).

Jones (2019), a leader in family ministry and a professor at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, argued that local church leaders should think differently about programming ministry for families. Jones suggested using the family equipping model to equip parents to be the primary disciple-makers of their children. Jones stated, "Family-equipping ministry is all about reorienting activities that are already happening so that parents are equipped to become primary disciple-makers in their children's lives" (p. 12). Jones indicated the need to prioritize family ministry, stating, "Parents in your ministry don't have time to disciple their children—or, at least, that's the way many of them feel when they look at their weekly to-do

lists" (p. 88). Local church leaders should step in and assist the rise of family ministry by equipping parents.

> Parents need training, to make the time, and to be told that God has called them to play a crucial role in their children's spiritual development. This will require churches to rethink and rework their age-organized ministries in radical ways. (Root, 2022, p. 26)

Jones provided the core values of a family-equipping ministry:

> Coordination around a strategic question ('How will this event equip parents to view themselves as the primary disciple-makers in their children's lives?)' parenting with an eternal goal, parenting with a lifelong plan, appreciation for the generations, faith-training in the home, high expectations for Christian husbands and fathers, and an active compassion for spiritual orphans. (Ross, 2017, p. 45)

The family ministry equipping model provides a basis for parents to lead their children in discipleship with the recognition that some children may not have families to lead them in discipleship.

Jones' (2019) seminal work *Three Views* has been an instrumental tool in family-focused student ministry. Family ministry models have changed and will continue to change based on the culture. Jones shared how the programmatic model is a means of isolating age groups from the rest of the church, resulting in minimal intergenerational interaction and competition with other church programming (Jones, 2019). A silo for students has limited usefulness and produces a false dichotomy in the church (Newton & Pace, 2019). Jones also articulated a nuance in the family-focused theory and preferred the latter in the local church due to more family involvement:

- Family-based ministry model: The church's programmatic structure remains unchanged, but the leaders of each ministry plan and program to intentionally draw generations together and encourage parents to participate in the discipleship of their children and youth.
- Family-equipping ministry model: Although there are age-organized programs and events, the church is restructured to draw the generations together to equip parents, champion their role as primary disciple-makers, and hold them accountable to this role.

The family-focused model includes both models, and its usage in this section is due to the significant overlap in praxis between the two, especially in the literature. However, there is a noticeable difference in two major contributors to this movement, D6 (Family-Based and Orange Curriculum [Family Equipping]).

D6

D6 originated in 2004 as a curriculum for parents and families in the local church. Hunter (2015) defined the D6 movement as "generational discipleship, the new cultural term for churches who care deeply about every age and who use family ministry to accomplish new norms for their church." D6 is based on Deut 6:5–7 (NKJV):

> You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

The D6 movement focuses on equipping parents to be the primary discipling agents for their children. A week contains 168 hours, and D6 addresses the time:

> If a child receives on average only one hour of spiritual influence per week, how does your church acquire more opportunities to provide coaching or instruction? The primary way is to multiply your ministry by getting parents involved during the family's time at home. It is to change the numerator and make it a bigger number! (DeVries, 1994, p. 33)

D6 provides a curriculum, but D6 is more of a ministry philosophy for parents.

D6 indicates that parents should raise and disciple their children. However, D6 leaders remain aware of the changing landscape of modern families. Figure 1 presents family ministry in Scripture juxtaposed with modern family today. Staffing for a D6 structure involves the senior pastor taking the lead in casting vision. Hunter (2016) said, "Transformation cannot happen without the senior pastor leading the charge" (p. 92). Regardless of church size, D6 has a recommended structure. For churches with staff, the organizational chart flows from the senior pastor to the D6 coordinator to the rest of the staff. Hunter explained,

> The lead pastor champions family ministry regularly from the pulpit, and the family pastor coordinates efforts among all ages to ensure church and home connectivity. The culture of the church creates weekly opportunities for parents and grandparents to connect and then become the coaches at home for the kids and grandkids. With the two key leaders working together, the staff understands how to develop an intentional church and home strategy.

Volunteer-led churches also have the senior pastor casting the vision. Hunter continued,

> But the principle of avoiding the creation of silos will create one D6 champion, and that person may be the coordinator. If you have one staff member, he or she should be trained to be the coordinator, but not the champion. The senior pastor should always take the role of champion. (p. 23)

Think Orange

Think Orange originated in North Point Church in Atlanta, Georgia, under the leadership of Reggie Joiner, the executive pastor. The program's name came from combining two opposite colors, red and yellow. Joiner summarized the reason for the color orange: "Orange is what red and yellow can do when they combine efforts." (Young, 2017, p. 39). Joiner (2009) shared that red and yellow represent the church and home, advocating for their combination:

> But what if the solution for the next generation is neither yellow nor red? What if the answer is both, blended in a new and radical way? What if the church and the home combined their efforts and began to work off the same page for the sake of the children? We propose that the answer is Orange, seeing the potentially revolutionary effect that a true merger between the church and the home could have on the lives of children. (p. 58)

Think Orange focuses on the church and the family in the discipleship efforts for the next generation. In this approach, the leaders of the age-group ministries agree on the importance of family ministry and meet regularly to strategize opportunities for making family connections. Joiner (2009) advocated for systems in the church that put-on families and work together for the benefit of the child's discipleship.

Think Orange presents family ministry as "an effort to synchronize church leaders and parents around a master plan to build faith and character in their sons and daughters" (Cannister, 2018, p. 45). The harmony between the church and the family produces a healthy tension. Think

Orange has “Five Orange Essentials”: integrate strategy, refine the message, reactivate the family, elevate community, and leverage influence (Joiner & Shefchunas, 2012). The goal of the essentials is to “design a strategy that combines the family with the faith community to demonstrate the message of God’s story, to influence the next generation” (McKnight, 2022, p. 162). Each essential contributes to the integration of church and family.

Assessment of the Family-Focused Ministry Model

Popular trends and models in the local church are means of making lifelong disciples through a focus on family ministry (Young, 2017). Family models and facilitated groups, such as Think Orange and D6, suggest that parents are the most important social influence on adolescents’ religious and spiritual lives (Joiner & Ivy, 2015). The family ministry movement, which continues to expand, indicates that evangelizing those outside the family should be a priority (Joiner & Shefchunas, 2012). Pace and Newton (2019) described the responsibility of engaging the home in the church:

> Every student represents a family unit of some kind that is intended to be a foundational part of the student’s spiritual journey and formation. Therefore, we have the obligation to leverage our ministry with the students to support, strengthen, and/or supplement their natural families in order to fulfill God’s intended design for their spiritual growth. (p. 42)

Despite the need to emphasize the importance and supremacy of the home, church leaders should think through and ensure they have comprehensive student ministry philosophies to reach more Gen Z students (Ross, 2009).

Cannister (2018) advocated for church leaders to think through what works best for them in their context of reaching people. People are not a means to an end; they are the mission and the sustaining work of the gospel. McKnight (2021) said, “Though we rightly have shifted away from event-driven youth ministries to focus more on family-equipping youth ministry strategies,

half of the students in our youth groups still leave church" (p. 22). According to Trueblood (2019):

> About a decade after youth ministry improved by focusing more on parents and the family, the situation has not changed a great deal. We have failed to produce a generation of young people who leave youth groups ready to change the world for Christ. (p. 12)

Those are strong words, but perhaps merited. Ross (2017) also lamented adolescents leaving the church without becoming disciples, emphasizing the need to regroup and refocus on equipping families more effectively in student ministry. McKnight (2022) considered the family the appropriate context for discipleship and elaborated on how youth ministers can support and supplement the family's role in discipleship.

Summary of Family-Focused Ministry Model

Family-focused ministry is not new, but its implementation as a model is rising in the local church (Saxton, 2017). Joiner (2009) said, "Participation by parents in faith community relationships is necessary for effective ministry to students in the family setting. It need not be considered insufficient" (p. 195). Similarly, Hill (2009) stated,

> Because the home is a place where God's people dwell and prepare to serve in the large world, it is a place worthy of the attention and support of local congregations as part of the renewal of the life of the larger church. (p. 17)

According to Jones (2019), "Youth ministry must be youth and family ministry where Churches can inspire new visions of this noble calling and enrich the quality of the ethos and mythos that nurture faith, shape values, and make disciples of the next generation" (p. 114). DeVries (1994), the father of family-based student ministry, said,

> When I talk about implementing a family-based principles, it's important to understand that I am talking less about establishing specific programs and more about creating an ongoing ethos…strictly speaking, not just a "model" but rather a foundation that every youth ministry needs to ensure its long-term impact. (p. 78)

Inclusive-Congregational Ministry Model

Nel (2001) developed the "inclusive congregational approach" (p. 32). According to the approach, the goal of youth ministry should not be to find a place for another ministry but to find a place for young people in every ministry. This approach is the easiest to identify on the surface because it involves the abolition of age-segmented ministries in the church. In this model, pastors minister to families together. Jones & Stinson (2011) stated,

> The family-integrated approach represented a complete break from 'neo-traditional' segmented programmatic church. Proponents of family integration contend that the modern American practice of age segregation goes beyond biblical mandate—and may even obstruct parents' obedience in discipling their children. As a result, in a family-integrated church, all or nearly all age-organized classes and events are eliminated, including youth group, children's church, and even age-graded Sunday School classes.

The approach is similar to Black's (1999) "big happy family approach" (p. 112), as the inclusive congregational model focuses on the unity of the church. In other words, young people are not the church of tomorrow; they are the church of today. Consequently, young people should be present, sharing in the whole church's programs and being an integral part of the congregation. Jones (2019) stated, "Family-integrated ministries remove every hint of generational segmentation. Finding insufficient biblical foundations for age-organized ministries, proponents of family integration make every activity and event intergenerational."

Bauchman (2007), a major proponent of the inclusive-congregational ministry model, stated, "Youth ministry an unbiblical ministry of the local church and should be abandoned in lieu of integrating youth" (p. 179). Brown (2011), another prominent author in the family-integrated church movement, authored, *A Weed in the Church: How a Culture of Age Segregation is Destroying the Younger Generation, Fragmenting the Family, and Dividing the Church*. Brown wrote a boisterous recanting of any mode, model, or method that is not the inclusive-congregational model. Brown believed that age-segregated youth ministry could

"negatively influence the lives of youth in the church and family and subvert biblical discipleship if not done in the context of the family" (p. 30).

The inclusive congregational model is based on integration, an ecclesiological principle in Scripture (Bauchman, 2007). Bauchman (2007) cited three reasons church leaders should abandon programmatic student ministry and embrace this approach: "First, there is no clear biblical mandate for the current approach. Second, the current approach may actually work against the biblical model. Third, the current approach is not working" (p. 179). Jones (2019) considered Buchman's stance dramatic but included it as one of the three contemporary family ministry models, referring to it as the family-integrated model.

Another author of family-integrated ministry. Renfro (2009) contributed to *Perspectives on Family Ministry: 3 Views on Behalf of the Family-Integrated Position*. Like Baucham (2007) and Brown (2011), Renfro believed that although the family should be the primary leaders in discipling children and teenagers, there is a difference between the church and the family, and each has a role. The family is not the church, and the church is not the family. Members of both institutions should work together within clearly defined jurisdictions to bless each other and expand Christ's kingdom (Renfro, 2016). In the family-integrated model, "The church eliminates age-segregated programs and events. All or nearly all programs and events are multigenerational, with a strong focus on parents' responsibility to evangelize and disciple their own children" (Jones, 2019).

Historically, organized youth work in the church did not occur before the Industrial Revolution in the mid-19th century (Senter, 2001). In the rural context up to and during the Industrial Revolution, children and young people were part of the family. McKnight (2022) shared how natural family rhythms before the Industrial Revolution contributed to family

discipleship. However, “The rise of factories turned parents—and fathers in particular—into wage-earners whose spheres of labor shifted away from their homes” (p. 207). During the Industrial Revolution, “To a large extent, the family lost the father” (Cope, 2012, pp. 32–33). Anthony and Anthony (2011) noted, “By the waning years of the eighteenth century, paternal involvement in children’s spiritual formation seems to have grown increasingly rare” (p. 159). The result was an outsourcing of discipleship with additional church programs and parachurch organizations (Young, 2017).

Biblically, the inclusive congregational model is the most backed by Scripture (Deut. 6:4-9; Eph. 6:4; 1 Tim. 3:4-5). Bauchman (2007) stated, “The Bible does not give any mention to the explicit use of ‘teenager’ or any age segregation in the family-integrated church” (p. 195). Culturally, one was either a “child” (Matt. 19:14; Col. 3:21) or an “adult” (1 Cor. 13:11; Prov. 6:20-23). There is a clear distinction between childhood and adulthood. Beyond that, there is an emphasis on the importance of the families raising their children in the way they should go (Prov. 22:6; Josh. 24:15; Titus 2:4-8). This ministry paradigm, cited in biblical passages such as Deuteronomy 12:6-12; 29:10-11; and 31:12, is the biblical basis for intergenerational worship. The verses also indicate the need to avoid breaking away from this type of worship (Jones, 2019). These passages contain accounts of families gathering before the Lord in worship. The Bible indicates that families should worship together. Therefore, the functional description of a “family of families” is a way to understand the family-integrated process for evangelism and discipleship (Nelson & Jones, 2014).

The inclusive congregational model focuses on the unity of the whole church. Young people are not the church of tomorrow; they are the church of today. Consequently, young people should attend and share in the whole church’s programs and opportunities. The inclusive

model includes the following practices: preaching, worship service, teaching, pastoral care, mutuality, service, witness, and administration. The practices form a comprehensive congregational ministry. God comes through all forms of ministry, with special regard to parents or their substitutes. The model has a differentiated focus for young people as integral to the congregation, and with and through the youths in the congregation to the world (Senter, 2001). The model presents the "family as church" and the "church as family." According to McKnight (2022),

> The first theological dynamic—church as family—transforms student ministry by moving multigenerational relationships from an option to a necessity. The second dynamic—family as church—is a dynamic of nurture in the context of earthly families. This second theological dynamic reshapes student ministry by prioritizing the role of Christian parents as disciple-makers in their children's lives. (p. 207)

The dynamic of church-as-family could attract young people, children, and adults together in a multicultural and multigenerational family, filled with God's Spirit and formed by God's Word (McKnight, 2022). The family and the church have distinct roles and purposes in God's plan (Köstenberger & Jones, 2010).

Summary of Prevailing Literature on Student Ministry Best Practices

The literature on youth ministry in this chapter included three major models: programmatic (Fields, 1998; Robbins, 1991), family-focused (DeVries, 2010; Jones, 2019), and inclusive congregational (Bauchman, 2007). Each model can be a driving force for the student ministry best practices. Whether the focus is on young people (programmatic), families (family-focused), or students without age-specific programming (congregational-inclusive), youth ministry affects how students are ministered to because values are guides to action. A focus on doing the "right things" instead of more or all things contributes to effectiveness (Drucker, 1998). According to Fields (2002), the right things are based on determined priorities and are the values deemed the most pressing and worthy of the youth pastor's time. There is no perfect

model, but the right model and practices can produce thriving student ministries with a purposeful reach to Gen Z (White, 2017, p. 164).

Churches Effectively Engaging Emerging Adults

In *Thriving: Effective Strategies for the Evangelism and Discipleship of Emerging Adults*, Kauffman (2019) used quantitative screening, purposive sampling, and in-person interviews to determine the best practices of Mennonite churches in a specific region. The study had a descriptive and exploratory approach. Kauffman stated, "Despite the declines of young people coming to the Lord, ministries are experiencing an increase in student baptisms" (p. 91). Kauffman focused on reaching young adults effectively. This study focused on Gen Z in student ministry and, like Kauffman, included an annual report from a faith tradition. Prescreening was the means of identifying the top baptizing student ministries in Hampton Roads in Southeast Virginia. Kauffman found that thriving young adult ministries had the following practices: discipling relationships; intergenerational interaction; challenging, relevant biblical preaching; and spiritual disciplines.

Kauffman (2019) examined the records (i.e., written notes and audio recordings) and observation of each data collection session. Ideas about possible concepts and generalizations emerged and were recorded as memos. Kauffman codified the memos and used the comparative method to communicate the data. This study had a similar approach to analyzing thriving student ministries.

Baptism Ratios in the Southern Baptist Convention

In *Family Ministry and Evangelism: An Empirical Study of Family Ministry Engagement and Baptism Ratios in the Southern Baptist Convention*, Saxton (2017) used a methodological example for preintervention research to screen and determine effective strategies for the study

group. Saxton's study utilized mixed methods research and included data from the SBC's ACP to discern the ACP's effectiveness in ministry settings. The utilization of these numbers indicates the author's approach to use pre-existing data to determine if a correlation existed between the level of family ministry engagement by individual churches and their effectiveness at reaching other non-believers for Christ.

Saxton (2017) finds there is a great need for SBC churches to engage in family ministry at a deeper level and strengthen families for evangelism to increase baptism (p. 167). However, he does not provide an explanation of the reason for any of the data (p. 155). Thus, Saxton's study falls short in determining what best practices lead to a high baptism ratio. He admits in his own dissertation, "While it is helpful to know that variables may either increase or decrease the baptism ratio of the churches in the SBC, it would be tremendously more helpful to know what the practices or beliefs are" (p. 156).

Measuring Effectiveness of Student Ministry

In *An Assessment of Dropout Rates of Former Student Ministry Participants in Self-Identified Evangelical Churches With 500–2000 in Weekly Attendance*, Idol (2022) investigated the widely accepted phenomenon that emerging adults leave the church after high school graduation at a rate of 70–90% (Barna, 1991; Dudley, 1999; Kinnaman, 2018; Trueblood, 2016). Idol argued that if the statistics are faulty, youth ministry has been targeted under this pretense, and the call for a shift in ministry theory and practice is unfounded.

With over 3,000,000 references in blogs, articles, and websites attesting to the phenomenon, Idol (2022) sought to ensure that the study did not contribute to the unfounded notion of church dropouts. Idol identified four levels of commitment and found that enthusiastic attendees remained in the church at a rate of 96%. Even the casual attendee had a better than

72% retention rate (p. 145). Though helpful, Idol's study does not investigate what allows a student ministry to thrive but does use 502 responses to conclude student ministry is effective in retaining emerging adults (p. 77).

Modeling Youth Ministry

Dunn and Senter (1997) contributed to the understanding of youth ministry models for over three decades by analyzing student ministry practices. Their seminal work, *Reaching a Generation for Christ*, included many examples of youth ministry models and showed the driving power of core values to determine best practices. Dunn and Senter described two core issues for youth ministry and the church in the 21st century: the relationship between fellowship and missiology and adolescent developmental issues. The authors discussed the continuum between fellowship (come) and mission (go) and the present (now) and the church of the future (later) (p. 118). Concerning other models, Dunn and Senter cautioned against implementing a youth ministry model without evaluating the church ministry philosophy, facilities, leadership, resources, and culture. Ultimately, Dunn and Senter shared youth ministry philosophies to break down the barriers to progress; have a vibrant youth ministry, even in uncertain times; and reach a generation for Christ (p. 82).

Impacting Generation Z

In *The Impact of the Alpha Course on Generation Z Christians,* Outerbridge (2019) indicated the need aware of the pedagogical differences of Generation Z and their worldviews will be essential to effectively engage them with content and environments that will lead to greater commitment (p. 91). Outerbridge focused on young adults instead of teenagers, which included the eldest of Gen Z at the time. The Alpha course seemed to be an effective tool to reach graduating senior through authentic community. Outerbridge notes, Generation Z tends to

connect and find belonging where there is authenticity and an openness to discover and learn together (Sparks & Honey, 2014; Twenge, 2017; White, 2017). The results suggest there have been little conclusive data or research on the most effective courses, classes, or tools for reaching Gen Z effectively. While some research has shown the value of relevancy and relationships to engaging teenagers, few studies have focused on the environments and methods for creating connections. Outerbridge analyzed the effectiveness of reaching Gen Z with the gospel and identified the traits thriving ministries exert. This study was a helpful starting point for developing an understanding of how Gen Z views the world.

Leveraging Technology to Reach Generation Z Students

In *A Study of Technology and Social Media Use among SBC Youth Ministries and Its Perceived Impact on Community and Discipleship,* Agnor (2018) used qualitative methods in a descriptive study to explore how technology affected discipleship opportunities and community in evangelical youth ministries. The author explored technology and social media in youth ministry by surveying SBC church associations and camps in North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. Two conclusions focused on youth ministry practices, while the third addressed how youth pastors use technology and social media. The three conclusions emerged from the data: (a) Facebook and Instagram reign, but differently; (b) social media strengthens community and indirectly enhances discipleship opportunities; (c) education and location matter.

Agnor (2018) hoped the conclusions from the data would contribute to sharing the gospel effectively through technology in SBC student ministries. Agnor (2018) said,

> Technology and social media are definitely being used to create stronger community within youth groups. Discipleship opportunities at this point do not seem to be prevalent. However, youth pastors are optimistic that the potential for more in-depth discipleship

> opportunities will present themselves through the use of social media at some point in the near future (p. 166).

This source was selected because it included one of the most heavily integrated factors typifying a Gen Z student: technology. Agnor suggested student ministers try diverse technology strategies to reach Gen Z. Student ministers can try to find if effective strategies in other churches work in their churches. However, Agnor (2018) also included the downsides of technology if not used appropriately.

Rationale for Study and Gap in the Literature

After presenting the relevant theological and theoretical literature, this section presents the rationale for the study. There is a need to address the gap in the literature and show the study's relevance. Although many studies have focused on Gen Z, little research has indicated how to best reach Gen Z students in student ministry (McKnight, 2022). Buchanan (2015) stated,

> There is no lack of advocates calling for change, no lack of proposals for what type of change, but there is a real gap in understanding both what is influencing the practice in this broken area of ministry and the influencers that could be utilized to effect change. (p. 91)

Over the last decade, Baptist evangelists, pastors, researchers, and scholars have discussed the decline of baptisms convention-wide and collective efforts to increase teen baptisms (Banks, 2014; Hawkins, 2020; Reed, 2017; Shellnutt, 2022; Tang, 2011). Despite urgency and resolve, baptisms continue to decline convention-wide (Shellnutt, 2022, para. 3). Cox (2022) stated, "There is an inherent need for change. It is time to not merely theorize but practically apply best practices and principles to see baptisms increase once more" (p. 12).

Before much of the research about Gen Z, Buchanan (2015) surveyed the landscape of student ministry and concluded that, "The research on the best student ministry practices remains still largely untapped" (p. 146). Few studies have focused on reaching Gen Z despite recent

publications. There is a need for more discovery on this topic. The following presents notable Gen Z resources and prior studies similar to this research that did not fill the literature gap.

Bauman (2010) sought to study whether Southern Baptist churches had evangelistic or nonevangelistic characteristics for student ministry. Bauman contributed to the literature on student ministry. However, the author did not provide research on the current influences in student ministry.

Temple (2008) sought to evaluate the character traits and leadership abilities that student ministers deemed essential to effective youth ministry. Temple also explored the leadership flaws that were obstacles to effective student ministry. The author used social science principles to research 1,300 full-time student ministers across the United States. Temple provided insight into the leadership factors affecting the implementation of student ministry. However, although the research included effective youth ministries, it did not indicate the number of students baptized or how to apply specific practices to reach Gen Z.

Branum (2016) researched emerging Gen Z students and their characteristics, focusing on the best evangelism and student ministry practices. The author concentrated on evangelism instead of practices for increasing baptisms (p. 111). No data have shown the best practices of the top ten baptizing student ministries in a specific area. Like Temple, Branum examined leaders and health as a conduit for effectiveness and unhealth as a conduit for ineffectiveness. Branum showed the influence of character on student ministry practices. However, both Temple and Branum addressed the influence of character without considering additional factors in effective student ministry.

Few studies have indicated how to reach Gen Z and apply the best student ministry practices. Yet, the extant literature has shown common Gen Z characteristics. Pandit (2015) was

among the first authors to differentiate Gen Z from millennials. Barna (2018a) conducted the first major national study of Gen Z. Barna found that Gen Z was still forming but had distinct priorities, experiences, values, assumptions, and allegiances. At that time, even the oldest members of Gen Z were barely 17, and the youngest had just been born. Stillman & Stillman (2017) were some of the first scholars to conduct a national survey on Gen Z in the workplace.

White (2017) was one of the first to write about Gen Z through the lens of the church and spirituality. As more books about Gen Z were published before the pandemic, more studies began addressing the generation's faith or lack of faith (Barna, 2021). Seemiller and Grace's (2019) *Generation Z: A Century in the Making* is considered notable. Barna (2020a) published *Gen Z: The Culture, Beliefs and Motivations Shaping the Next Generation* in partnership with Impact 360 Institute to help church leaders understand and reach the next generation more effectively. Kinnaman (2018), Barna's president, presented five practices for effectively reaching Generation Z.

McKnight (2021) addresses the current culture of student ministry and how to reach young people effectively by understanding and meeting their needs. Barna (2022) conducted the largest study in its 38-year history, with more than 25,000 teens ages 13 to 17 from 26 countries (para. 1). The research was the first global study to focus on Gen Z, Jesus, the Bible, and justice. The purpose of that study was to show church leaders how to best come alongside and reach Gen Z by understanding their emotional lives, relationships with technology, and faith-related feelings and practices. The researcher of this study identified a gap in research regarding the identification of thriving student ministries and what best practices are being applied to reach Generation Z effectively in the context of student ministry.

Profile of the Current Study

This phenomenological study had a qualitative design, with the interpretive theory as its guiding sociological framework (Allen, 2017). The ACP's baptism ratio enabled the researcher to know whom to interview. The researcher, who was the primary instrument, conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews of thriving student ministries in the SBCV's Southeast Region. Themes emerged from the data on increasing the number of baptisms among Gen Z.

This chapter provided an overview of the theological and theoretical literature on reaching Gen Z effectively. Each source presented a different aspect but did not fill the gap in the literature on the best student ministry practices. The literature review presented past studies on Gen Z's culture and characteristics, strategies for ongoing discipleship and increasing student ministry baptisms. None of the studies included the best practices for reaching Gen Z effectively in student ministry. Therefore, this study filled the gap in the literature.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the study's methodology. The chapter provides a step-by-step analysis of the research methodology selected for the study. The explanation enabled the researcher to walk with the reader without losing the study's meaning and importance (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research had a qualitative design. The factors attributed to Gen Z are "intertwined and involve a complex interplay of factors" (Flick, 2018, p. 124). In a phenomenological study, the researcher is the main instrument. The researcher uses the senses to engage the interviewee with questions, paying attention to mannerisms and tone to discern whether to ask a deeper question (Allen, 2017). For this reason and more, the researcher is influential in the chosen research methodology of this study. A qualitative inquiry is essential for analyzing and coding the data which comes from semistructured interviews (Creswell, 2014).

The use of the ACP was not quantitative in this study. Rather, the ACP indicated thriving student ministries. The ACP provided prescreening data on whom to interview from SBCV student ministries based on baptism ratios. Baptism is the best metric of a changed life. Later sections present the ACP numbers and their meaning. Thus, the ACP was a screening mechanism for determining thriving student ministries with the best practices. Also, the method of validating the tools for data collection and coding themes from the interviews aligned with the interpretive theory and its ethical considerations (Sanjari et al., 2014).

Research Design Synopsis

The Problem

Over the past five decades, many churches ministries have produced strategic programs for reaching teens with the gospel (Moon, 2021). Although student ministers have reached teenagers with the gospel, there appears to be a lapse in effectiveness in graduating dedicated and

fully devoted followers of Christ (Platt, 2013). If students graduate from student ministry unprepared for adulthood, how can student ministers better prepare students? Better yet, what culture should student ministers cultivate by applying the best practices? Said more plainly, what practices produce thriving student ministries that reach students and produce fully devoted followers of Christ? Student ministries can differ based on size, setting, or scope. Sometimes, the assumption is that the biggest is best. Many conference leaders chase the newest trends. Yet, student ministry remains a prominent subculture dedicated to reaching students.

The ever-growing need for reform in student ministry (Root, 2022) has contributed to the nationwide problem of declining baptisms. According to Outerbridge (2019), "Gen Z is the fourth successive generation to have a lower biblical view" (p. 18). There is a temptation to give up on the current mode of student ministry and join the masses searching for an easy solution to increase numbers quickly (Im, 2017). The rallying cry for student ministry reform persist. However, most research has been anecdotal and has not focused on the best practices (Idol, 2022, p. 14). By design or by default, student ministry practices either improve or worsen student ministry (Outerbridge, 2019). Kauffman (2019) stated, "Recent studies have attempted to identify the qualities and practices of churches that are effectively engaging Generation" (p. 15). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to conduct personal in-depth interviews to explore how thriving student ministries are reaching students effectively. There is a gap in the research on the student ministry baptism ratio. Thus, this study contributed to the research.

Most churches and student ministries are declining (DeVries, 2010). However, this research was a means of finding the exceptions and anomalies in a subset of data of student ministries of different sizes, settings, and scopes. The goal of the research was to find the best practices of thriving student ministries. The ACP provided the opportunity to formulate a

baptism ratio to rank and identify the top ten baptizing student ministries per capita. This dissertation presented the best practices of thriving student ministries in the most populous region of the SBCV, the Southeast. The research showed how student ministry practices contributed to baptizing and reaching more Gen Z students.

There is a need to address various models of student ministry because Gen Z has unique characteristics and attributes that merit further consideration. Many student ministers lack success with outdated strategies for competing with the world for teenagers' attention with fun and entertainment in the church (Cannister, 2018, p. 36). There has been a widespread decline in church attendance and baptisms in the SBC (Shellnutt, 2022). This is not to say that ministry is completely ineffective; but rather there is a need to identify the best practices for reaching students with more effectiveness (Dortch, 2014). This study addressed that need. Theology, the history of student ministry, and the literature on student ministry provided a macro and a micro view of student ministries so readers could understand how the student pastors in this study sought to reach Gen Z effectively in their local contexts.

Youth ministers play a vital role in reaching Gen Z with the gospel. Therefore, pastors and youth ministers should know the challenges and realities of Gen Z students and the cumulative best practices of thriving student ministries. Youth ministry leaders who understand Gen Z and how to reach them can increase their baptisms by using the best practices.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the best practices for reaching Gen Z effectively with leaders of thriving SBCV student ministries in the Southeast Region. The best practices included methods for reaching students effectively with the gospel for ongoing discipleship. *Student ministry* is a "specific and intentional ministry to adolescents in

middle and high school as part of the overall work of the local church" (Buchanan, 2015, p. 28). Thriving student ministries had baptism ratios of 0.010 or higher from March 2019 to March 2020. *Gen Z* includes individuals born between 1999 and 2015 (McKnight, 2021). Student ministry baptisms focus on students ranging from 12 to 17 years of age. Southern Baptist Church is affiliated with the Southern Baptist denomination and the Baptist faith and message (Blount & Wooddell, 2007).

The interpretive theory was the study's guiding theory. This sociological lens asserts that understanding the beliefs, motivations, and reasoning of individuals in a social situation is essential to decoding the meaning of emerging themes from the collected data (Tracy, 2013, p. 314) The theory originated with the philosophy of Edmund Husserl's and Wilhelm Dilthey's study of hermeneutics (Madondo, 2021). It seeks to understand actual human interactions, meanings and processes that constitute real-life organizational settings (Merriam, 2002). The researcher relies upon, "participants' views of the situation being studied" (Creswell, 2014, p. 57). Gubrium et al. (2012) asserts, "researchers should attempt to interpret the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (p. 118).

Research Questions

The study had the following research questions:

RQ1. What are some challenges or obstacles thriving SBCV student ministries encounter with Generation Z?

RQ2. What are some strategies being implemented in thriving student ministries to reach Generation Z effectively?

RQ3. What are some best practices being implemented by thriving student ministries that seem to contribute to more students being baptized?

Research Design and Methodology

This qualitative study had a phenomenological approach. Phenomenologists focus on individuals' experiences from their perspectives (Creswell & Creswell, 2017) to analyze and code the data in an immersive way. Qualitative scholars study issues in-depth and with detail (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Approaching fieldwork without predetermined analysis categories provides depth, openness, and detail in a qualitative design inquiry (Taylor & Woodhams, 2022). Creswell (2014) stated, "Qualitative research methods are employed when a researcher seeks to understand a phenomenon more deeply, exploring how and what instead of establishing the presence of an essential correlation or relationship between variables" (p. 78). The factors attributed to Generation Z are "intertwined and involve a complex interplay of factors" (Given, 2008, p. 115). Therefore, a qualitative inquiry was appropriate (Creswell, 2014).

The study had an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. Smith (2015) developed the IPA and explained,

> IPA is an attempt to unravel the meanings contained in accounts through a process of interpretative engagement with the text and transcripts. It involves the task of immersing oneself in the reading, freely exploring semantic content through notetaking, developing emergent themes through analysis, searching for connections across themes, exercising bracketing methods, and looking for patterns across the data to interpret deeper levels of analysis (p. 39).

The qualitative research method "involves emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant's setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations of the meaning of the data" (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 4). IPA is one of the least restrictive and more dialogic, open, and conversational methods. The method included developing open-ended questions to elicit rich data. This study provided an explanation of the practices of thriving student ministries to reach

Gen Z effectively. Constructivist research occurred to understand the best student ministry practices for reaching Gen Z and increasing baptisms in a denomination with a downward turn.

The semistructured interviews consisted of "open-ended questions based on the study's central focus developed before data collection to obtain specific information, which enabled them to emerge" (Knox & Burkard, 2017, p. 572). The open-ended questions provided the opportunity to "remain open and flexible to probe individual participants' stories in more detail" (Cresswell, 2014, p. 43). The study had a small sample. However, focusing on the research population's experience filled a gap in the research on a specific denomination, the SBC. Small samples provide rich data (Patton, 2018). Patton (2018) said, "The validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the depth of the data and the observational or the analytical capabilities of the researcher" (p. 89).

Additionally, the study addressed cause-and-effect relationships and similarities and differences among the interviewees to determine the best practices for reaching Gen Z (Creswell, 2014). The participants had various backgrounds and experiences in student ministry. Phenomenological research is a qualitative approach to understanding and describing the universal essence of a phenomenon. Therefore, this research was a means of exploring the participants' lived experiences to gain insight into how they understood those experiences (van Manen, 2016). The IPA approach enables the close examination of participants' experience draws on philosophical principles in establishing a set of procedures and techniques to enable that examination and analysis of accounts of experience provided (Leedy et al., 2019). Ultimately, the researcher was the primary instrument for developing a more in-depth understanding through the research (Flick, 2018).

Phenomenology originated in the first half of the 20th century, developed by Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre with the publication of Logical Investigations (Vagle, 2016, p. 106). In that movement, the discipline of phenomenology was prized as, "the proper foundation of all philosophy emphasizing subjectivity and discovery of the essences of experience and provides a systematic and disciplined methodology for derivation of knowledge" (van Manen, 2017, pp. 1–12). Smith (2015) discussed classical Husserlian phenomenology and said, "Experience is directed toward—represents or 'intends'—things only *through* concepts, thoughts, ideas, images, etc. These make up the meaning or content of a given experience and are distinct from the things they present or mean" (p. 255).

Phenomenological researchers explore subjective experiences by interviewing participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Vagle (2018) said, "Phenomenological methodologies are plural—meaning there is no one way to design and carry out phenomenological research" (pp. 333–334). Thus, before conducting phenomenological interviews, researchers, "seek to rid themselves of any personal prejudices, viewpoints, and assumptions in order to examine dimensions of the interviews without bias" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 254). Scholars can address bias through bracketing. *Bracketing* involves holding in abeyance ideas, preconceptions, and personal knowledge when listening to and reflecting on the participants' lived experiences (Chan et al., 2013, p. 1–9). The goal of this research was to explore the best practices of student ministries in the Southeast Region of the SBCV, share themes that emerged from the data, and describe the practices used to produce thriving ministries. After exploring personal experiences, the researcher practiced bracketing by temporarily setting aside biases and assumptions about the research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

The phenomenological method was appropriate for the study. The study's goal was to understand and interpret the experiences of thriving student ministers instead of the causes of decreasing baptisms. The phenomenological method was the means of collecting, analyzing, and coding the data for emergent themes. The immersive interviews with thriving student ministers showed how the participants overcame obstacles, connected with Gen Z students, and increased student ministry baptisms.

Setting

The setting for this study was Hampton Roads, which includes the major cities of Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Virginia Beach, Williamsburg, and Yorktown. Virginia Beach is the largest city in the area, with more than 500,000 residents, followed by Chesapeake and Norfolk (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Collectively, these major cities of Hampton Roads constitute the 32nd-largest metropolitan area in the United States. As a growing metropolitan within the Bible Belt, Hampton Roads is fertile ground for churches of all sizes and settings (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2014).

Hampton Roads contains several strong churches (2014). The region's large military family population has contributed to the success of churches in Hampton Roads. Many churches provide services for military members stationed. Hampton Roads megachurches also attract numerous unchurched individuals new to the area. Multisite expansion seems suited to Hampton Roads, and online services are popular due to the region's decentralized population and geographic sprawl.

Baptisms in the SBC have consistently declined since 2000, the SBCV has had significant growth. Since 1996, SBCV has had additional churches yearly, with over 800 Southern Baptist Churches in the state (Hawkins, 2020). The Southeast Region has had more

SBCV churches than the other five areas (Central, Central-West, North, Southwest, and Valley). Gen Z is the largest generation. Hampton Roads is an ideal setting for the study because of its diversity. As one of the largest metropolitans in the United States, including nearly 200,000 12- to 17-year-olds, The Southeast Region of Virginia was an appropriate geographic location for this study (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Finally, the 116 churches in Southeast Region of Virginia are among the most diverse and robust anywhere (Pickett & LaBiosa, 2022). If Gen Z can be reached in this region, they can be called almost anywhere, especially when considering the large military population in Hampton Roads. Hampton Roads contains the most extensive military base globally, with people continuously coming and going. The study could have a significant ripple effect on Gen Z across the globe for the glory of God (Taylor, 2017).

Participants

The sample size for a phenomenological study ranges from three to ten participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The objective was to recruit nine participants to enhance the data credibility. The goal was to form a baptism ratio and draw conclusions on the best practices used in student ministries to reach Gen Z more effectively. The primary tool for data collection was through semistructured interviews conducted either in person or via Zoom. The participants consisted of full-time or part-time student ministers serving in Southern Baptist churches in the Southeast Region of the SBCV. Only sixteen of the 116 churches in the area were eligible to be participants in the study.

The ACP provided the data used to determine which churches qualified for this study. All the churches in the research were part of the Southeast Region of the SBCV in Hampton Roads. To identify the best practices for reaching Gen Z, the researcher gathered the following from the

2019 ACP for the SBCV: average weekly church attendance and student ministry baptisms. The ACP provided two indicators: the varied size of churches in the Southeast and the churches effectively reaching Gen Z with the gospel through conversion and baptism. The ACP was a helpful starting point, but the interviews provided integral data on the obstacles, connection points, and ways to increase Generation Z baptism.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher as the primary instrument is to avoid bias in the interviews (Frey, 2018). Researchers should clearly understand their positionality and ethics when conducting the interviews (D'Ardenne, 2015, p. 102). Creswell and Creswell (2017) noted, "In qualitative research, inquirers reflect about how their role in the study and their personal background, culture, and experiences hold potential for shaping their interpretations, such as the themes they advance and the meaning they ascribe to the data" (p. 182). Reflection closely relates to bracketing, a popular practice in phenomenological research (Smith, 2015).

Positionality is an important aspect of research and the role of the researcher throughout the data analysis and collection. Positionality is a way to preserve the validity of the data collected during the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Positionality is the researcher's stance or position in relation to the study's social and political context, including the community, the organization, or the participant group (Israel & Hay, 2006). By defining positionality, researchers acknowledge that their personal, educational, and professional experiences can influence their viewpoints on different issues, including the phenomena under study (Johnson, 2016). Researchers can preserve neutrality by reflecting on background characteristics, class, gender, religious affiliation, age, education, and experience, as each could affect the research (Schwandt,

2014). Any one of the factors can affect an individual's identity and orientation toward the community where the research occurs (Johnson, 2016).

This researcher's background, education, and ministry experience were integral in this research. The researcher had served in ministry for eight years in multiple roles (i.e., staff intern, youth intern, senior pastor, and student pastor). Even before this doctoral research, the researcher studied current trends in student ministry extensively. The researcher has been a spokesperson for the SBCV's Southeast Region, coordinated support groups and fellowships with other student pastors, and has been interviewed on how to thrive in student ministry by convention members. Also, the researcher has led multiple group sessions with other youth pastors in student ministries. The researcher did not allow bias to affect the study despite having multiple personal connections with the participants. Initially, there was concern about how prior relationships could affect the research.

All questions in the pastoral interview guide were developed with forethought to elicit relevant responses and avoid bias. Social desirability bias can occur when respondents answer questions based on what they think the researcher wants to hear (Nikolopoulou, 2023). The researcher addressed social desirability by informing the participants upfront that the purpose of this study was to learn their insights, not someone else's (George, 2022). In addition, having a guide for the interviews, maintaining a distraction-free environment, asking simpler questions before moving to more complex ones, and building rapport were means of preventing bias (Bhandari, 2023). Finally, sampling bias was not an issue because the ACP indicated the eligible churches; statistically speaking, no one had a greater probability than those not admitted. Also, the participants signed a consent form for the researcher to publish what they shared. All the interviewees knew they could withdraw or not sign the consent form.

Bracketing

Bracketing involves reflecting on one's background and positionality with reflexivity. Rubin and Rubin (2012) defined reflexivity as "disciplined subjectivity" (p. 219). Through reflexivity, bracketing occurs as the researcher identifies and brackets potential biases to minimize their influence on the research process. Vagle (2018) said, "Abstaining from or 'bracketing' prior knowledge of the subject matter is difficult but necessary because it allows the researcher to reflect on concrete examples of the phenomena that are under investigation" (p. 125). Allen (2017) stated, "Researchers are to take every effort to put aside their personal set of knowledge, beliefs, values and experiences in order to accurately describe participants' life experiences as they are" (p. 222). Based on the literature, the researcher assumed that a lack of relational intentionality, a diminished emphasis on family connection, and the separation of the student ministry from the overall church were major barriers to effective student ministry (Ross, 2017). Bracketing provided the opportunity to set aside preconceived assumptions, personal opinions, and emotions to conduct the research without observer bias (Simmons, 2017).

The role of bracketing in the research process is active because the qualitative researcher is the primary instrument (Salkind, 2010). Qualitative researchers build rapport with participants, conduct interviews to elicit participants' distinct experiences and narratives, and interpret the data (Johnson, 2016). This researcher took on this role during this study as an active student pastor at a megachurch. Strategies to uphold positionality and conduct the research included checklists of assumptions, reflective logs, and journals (Tracy, 2013, p. 65). Moreover, the semistructured interviews occurred with open-mindedness, curiosity, and mindfulness (Seidman, 1998, p. 98). The researcher accepted that obstacles, insights, and themes emerged from the data collected in the interviews (Bhandari, 2023).

Data collection occurred from interviews with the student ministers in neutral settings. The researcher avoided leading the interviewees or unnecessarily influencing the data (Johnson, 2016). The data collection and thematic organization involved making accurate calculations unaffected by preconceived notions (Frey, 2018). The researcher asked open-ended questions to avoid bias and allow the data to naturally emerge. The participants provided data for the themes. The researcher did not determine whether the data supported preconceived themes or ideas. The data spoke for itself regardless of negative or positive findings regarding a practice, organization, or perception (Eatough & Smith, 2008). The researcher's role was to analyze information and present the research to enhance understanding (Gubrium et al., 2012). The research remained neutral through positionality, bracketing, and reflective logs and journals (Israel & Hay, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, the interaction between researchers and participants can be ethically challenging because of personal involvement in the interviews as the primary instrument. In this study, each participant signed a release before the recorded interview, giving the researcher permission to use the data shared during the interview. The research did not require pseudonyms because the participants signed an IRB-approved waiver allowing this. The inclusion of the participants' names and churches provided greater insight and removed a barrier of fiduciary information pertinent to the study (Yanow, 2015). The researcher had more freedom to share the wisdom gathered from coded data (Xu et al., 2020). The release indicated that the researcher records each interview and can use it without hindrance (see Appendix A). The participants only engaged in the interviews after completing the consent form. Therefore, the study required both ethical guidelines for the research and voluntary participation.

The study occurred in compliance with Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the John W. Rawlings School of Divinity. The researcher passed the mandatory social and behavioral research training course (CITI). Per ethical research considerations, no data collection occurred before official IRB and site approval. All potential risks to the participants in this study, as well as assurances by the researcher of good-faith measures, were communicated to the participants and mitigate any risks to preserve the study's integrity. The researcher accepted that obstacles, insights, and themes emerged from the data analyzed accordingly in the interviews (Bhandari, 2023).

This study presented no more risk to the participants than everyday life, and the only anticipated concern was the potential for lost or stolen data. The participants' well-being was the highest priority in this study, and the researcher communicated this pledge in the consent form and personally. The research occurred with the IRB guidelines (see Appendix B). The guidelines indicated the purpose of the study. The participants could opt not to answer questions during the interviews. Since the study was voluntary, participants had the opportunity to withdraw at any time without any consequences. Data collection occurred through in-person or Zoom interviews. The audio and video data were saved on a password-protected Mac computer. The files were uploaded to Otter and backed up to iCloud for safe storage. The participants could opt out of participating before or after their interviews. Observation and supervision were used to extract reliable information throughout the duration of the study.

Data Collection Methods and Instruments

This study investigated perceived best practices to reach Generation Z most effectively through conducting phenomenological interviews. The interviews were the primary data collection method for discovering thriving student ministry practices for ongoing discipleship

and increasing student ministry baptisms. This section presents how the interviews were the means of collecting data to answer the research questions. The researcher collected data via interviews with nine participants who met the criteria for the study.

Collection Methods

The qualitative data included the respondents' perceptions of the best practices to reach generations in student ministry. The findings provided an understanding of Gen Z and the practices for increasing baptisms (Outerbridge, 2019). Student ministers can use the practices to create community, enhance opportunities for discipleship, and evangelize to reach Gen Z with the gospel (White, 2017). The data collection included semistructured interviews, which allowed room to ask probing questions based on the respondent's answers and follow the participant's interest (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). The researcher meticulously reviewed data from each participant. The researcher recorded and each interview was transcribed.

The interviews provided extensive data (Salkind, 2010). Direct means were utilized to determine the interviewees' thoughts, feelings, and actions about reaching Gen Z with the gospel in their student ministries. The data collection included personal analysis, in-depth interviews, participant observation, oral histories, multimedia, observational field notes, transcripts of conversations, objects, and situation analysis (Tracy, 2013). The qualitative data collection methods provided rich, detailed, and in-depth information (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The March 2019–March 2020 ACP indicated the highest baptism-producing student ministers in Hampton Roads. The top ten list was developed in 2021. Once gaining IRB approval, the pastoral interviews occurred over six months, between April 4, 2022, and October 5, 2022. After the interviews, the researcher compared themes and coded transcripts. The analysis contributed to the formation of follow-up questions from the emerging themes.

Instruments and Protocols

The semistructured interview protocol was a researcher-designed instrument entitled Pastoral Interview (see Appendix C). The protocol involved asking questions with a predetermined thematic framework in which the questions were not set in a predetermined manner or fashion (George, 2022). In this study, the researcher was the primary instrument. The 60- to 90-minute semistructured interviews were the means of discovering best perceived practices to reach Gen Z more effectively in the context of student ministry (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Nine student pastors were selected from the ACP from the SBCV from the official database office in Glen Allen, Virginia. The headquarters stored the official data of the churches from the regions associated with the convention.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the church's natural order and flow. Therefore, this study included only pre-epidemic data. The research included census data from churches convention-wide from March 2019 to March 2020, as COVID-19 began affecting church attendance in late March 202. Ninety-two of the 116 SBCV Southeast Region churches provided data on active church members, average weekly attendance, average student ministry attendance, and students baptized. The researcher verified the numbers reported for baptism by calling the churches to confirm the report's accuracy. Once confirmed, the numbers were used to identify which student ministries reached Gen Z most effectively.

Baptisms remain the most effective way to measure gospel effectiveness in the SBC. The baptism ratio was tabulated by dividing the number of students baptized in the last year by the average weekly attendance. For churches that did not provide a weekly attendance number, the equation occurred with the number of active members. For example, if an average church had 140 people baptized, including 20 students, the baptism ratio was 0.014. The calculation

consisted of dividing the number of students baptized by weekly attendees or active members. A church with 2,500 weekly attendees and 36 student baptisms in the calendar year would have the same ratio. This ratio enabled the inclusion of smaller churches in the study.

Table 1

Correlation Between Research Questions and Interview Questions

RQ1: Obstacles to connecting with Generation Z	RQ2: Effective strategies for reaching Generation Z	RQ3: Best practices to increasing Generation Z student baptisms
IQ1-1. How long have you been serving in student ministry?	IQ2-1. When does your student ministry meet during the week?	IQ3-1. What do you love about student ministry?
IQ1-2. What in your opinion makes Generation Z unique?	IQ2-2. How many volunteer leaders do you have serving in your student ministry?	IQ3-2. Why did you become a student minister?
IQ1-3. What in your opinion is the greatest need of Generation Z?	IQ2-3. Where do you see God consistently showing up and showing out in your student ministry?	IQ3-3. What does your student ministry do to reach students with the gospel?
IQ1-4. What is your greatest concern when it comes to the church not reaching Generation Z effectively?	IQ2-4. In your opinion, what is the best way to grow a student ministry?	IQ3-4. Is there something specific your student ministry does that leads to a high number of baptisms?
IQ1-5. What specifically encourages you about what you see in Generation Z?	IQ2-5. What has your student ministry found as the best way to engage Generation Z with discipleship?	IQ3-5. How do you structure your student ministry in such a way that effectively reaches Generation Z with the gospel?
IQ1-6. What do you see as the biggest obstacle in connecting with Generation Z effectively?	IQ2-6. Is discipleship structured into the culture of your student ministry, or would you say it happens organically/naturally?	IQ3-6. What strategies or approaches would you identify as significant in leading to the evangelism of Generation Z?
IQ1-7. What is the message Generation Z desperately needs to hear most?	IQ2-7. How should a student ministry gauge success in ministry?	

The baptism ratio included the likelihood that a smaller church could reach Gen Z as effectively as a larger church. The baptism ratio showed the most effective student ministries in the SBCV's

Southeast Region. The interviews occurred with a semistructured interview protocol (see Appendix C).

The interview questions related to a research question (see Appendix C). Each research question had six to seven corresponding interview questions to address the topic appropriately during the interview (Vagle, 2018). The interviews enabled the participants to reflect on their experiences as student ministers and the best practices. The flexible format enabled the emergence of additional questions during the interview. Follow-up questions were sometimes formulated on the spot to explore something the participants said in greater depth. The open-ended questions were not necessarily asked sequentially. This framework provided time and flexibility to follow the interview guide and ask additional follow-up questions.

Procedures

The data collection occurred after IRB approval. The participant selection occurred to recruit student ministers in the top-baptizing student ministries in the SBCV's Southeast Region. The researcher observed in an informal capacity before the formal interviews. A prestudy of a church's website, publications, and social media posts provided a better understanding of thriving student ministries and their practices. The researcher viewed the ministry setting in person or discussed student ministry with a participant before officially collecting data through the interviews. The prestudy provided "a good sense" (Vagle, 2018, p. 18) of how it may manifest in the contexts observed. The prestudy involved viewing church websites and recent social media posts and visiting a few Southern Baptist churches with thriving student ministries.

The researcher contacted the participants verbally (see Appendix D) and scheduled an in-person or Zoom call with the recording feature. The participants received a consent document (see Appendix A) 1 week before and during their interviews. The consent document provided an

overview of the study and the potential risks and benefits. The participants could express concerns or questions about the study. Participation required reviewing, signing, and returning the consent form via email before the interview or in person at the time of the interview.

The study occurred in the following order:

1. The researcher obtained permission from the IRB (see Appendix B) and confirmed the accuracy of the 2019–2020 ACP for the study.
2. After examining the ACP and calculating the baptism ratio, the student ministries with a baptism ratio of .010 or higher were selected for the pastoral interview via verbal recruitment (see Appendix D).
3. The participants who confirmed their interest in the study received an informed consent form (see Appendix A). The participants had ample time to review the protocol and procedures and address concerns before their interviews.
4. Upon receiving the signed consent form from the participant, the interviews occurred with the pastoral interview protocol (see Appendix C). The in-depth semistructured interviews provided data on the best student ministry practices.

Data Analysis

After collecting the phenomenological research data, the interviews were transcribed with "the methods and procedures of…IPA can be time consuming and cyclical" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 318). IPA is a way to increase trustworthiness in the analytic and discussion portions of studies (Larkin et al., 2019, p. 196). This section presents the interviews and methods for identifying the themes that emerged from the data. IPA is repetitive and systematic and addresses the content and the context. This type of analysis has multiple steps, including transcribing interviews, typing notes, repeatedly reading material, organizing the data, coding the data, and deriving themes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Yet, this process results in a well-developed system and saturation. Saturation occurs when the data becomes repetitive, clear themes are identified, and there is no further data collection needed. Thus, the IPA approach is a rigorous but effective strategy for finding essential meanings in the data relevant to practice (Flowers et al., 2009, p.

178). The findings of this study addressed the factors of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability.

Analysis Methods

This phenomenological study included three analysis types: (a) analysis based on inquiry and scrupulous examination, (b) analysis of emerging data, and (c) analysis based on rich details from the interview responses (Merriam, 2002). The analysis occurred to increase validity, comprehend the complexity, and enhance the richness and in-depth understanding of the topic under study. Vagle (2018) stated,

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

Crunching the qualitative data for the thematic analysis required rereading each interview transcript multiple times (Flick, 2018). Engagement was the focus of the analysis to determine the emergent themes of the best practices for reaching Gen Z more effectively (Johnson, 2016).

Additionally, there are two strategies unique to phenomenology: phenomenological reduction and horizontalization (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

- Phenomenological reduction involves repeatedly returning to the experience's essence throughout the research process to understand the phenomenon's inner structure or meaning. The researcher isolates the phenomenon under study to comprehend its essence.
- Horizontalization is examining and treating all the data as having equal value. The data undergo organization into clusters or themes. These themes are compared with

> the underlying research questions to see if any themes in the data provide useful information on the overall research questions. (p. 27)

The following subsection presents the study's data analysis.

Transcription

The data interpretation in a phenomenological design occurs in several stages of addressing the phenomenon through immersive data collection (Leedy et al., 2019). Otter was the application used to transcribe the interview audio. The Otter also provided timestamps for the recording, providing the opportunity to focus on the participants' responses. All the data underwent careful examination and organization into a comprehensive description before inclusion in this study (Flick, 2018). The information was systematically dissected, rearranged, organized, and interpreted (Mack et al., 2005).

Qualitative research involves analyzing the data from interview transcripts; field notes; conversational analysis; and visual data also (Flick, 2018). This study involved coding, grouping, and tallying the open-ended responses to the interviews to determine their meaning (Madondo, 2021). The transcripts provided raw data which were combed over, scrupulously coded and applied to the thematic categories that emerged from the interviews (Leedy et al., 2019).

Coding

The analysis included categorizing and comparing the ideas and quotes across research participants. The predominant themes were identified and reported with summary statements and firsthand participant quotes (Vagle, 2018). Direct participant quotes and paraphrases supported the descriptions and interpretations from the data analysis. The researcher committed to crafting a text about the data on the best thriving student ministry practices for reversing the phenomenon of declining baptisms in the SBC. This analysis included the following coding types.

- Open coding: Open coding involves turning data into "small, discrete components" and coding data pieces descriptively (Simmons, 2017).

- Axial coding: Axial coding consists of finding "connections and relationships between code" and condensing "codes into broader categories" (Simmons, 2017).
- Selective Coding: Selective coding enables the researcher to "select one core category that captures the essence" of the research and identify "connections between this overarching category and the rest of [the] codes and data" (Simmons, 2017).

Data analysis and coding consist of reducing and reconstructing the data continuously (Ritchie et al., 2013). The coded data reflected the methodologies, principles, and theoretical perspectives gleaned from the study (Merriam, 2002). Each interview was audio-recorded, and some were video-recorded to capture reactions and emotions during the interviews. This included line-by-line text coding to capture each line's empirical and conceptual occurrence (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The personal, conversational analysis also consisted of measuring and coding the duration of pauses, assessing multiple groups of sentences for data (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness begins with the primary researcher (Yanow, 2015). The interviewer should establish contact, recruit participants, maintain consistent interview dynamics and techniques, implement informed consent, foster a professional interviewer–participant relationship, and present the meaning obtained from the interviews. Interviewers should accomplish each task "well and rightly" (Seidman, 1998, p. 108). Qualitative research involves subjective meaning-making from nonnumerical data, and the researcher is an integral actor in the data collection and analysis. Therefore, scholars should establish the trustworthiness or rigor of their findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In phenomenological studies, decisions made by the researcher are susceptible to researcher bias, requiring strict adherence to precautions to strengthen the final product's integrity (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). This researcher addressed potential biases and preconceptions that could have impacted decision-making at the study's outset (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Credibility

This research occurred with credibility, dependability, and objectivity. Researchers should remain objective to avoid echoing their opinions in the research. Skilled researchers can perform their roles by using self-monitoring practices to prevent research oversights. In-depth interviewing enables the researcher and the reader to comprehend the interviewees' experiences from their points of view (Yanow, 2015). This research had credibility (internally valid) and transferability (externally valid). The research occurred with validity strategies to accurately represent the participants' experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

The validity strategies in this study were the researcher as the primary instrument and semistructured interviews. In phenomenological studies, findings have validity via the careful recording and continual verification of the data during the investigative practice (Madondo, 2021). Researchers should limit bias by setting aside strong perceptions, preconceptions, and opinions to listen to the participants and learn their stories and experiences (Johnson, 2016). Creswell and Creswell (2017) asserted, "the interpretive lens provides thick, rich descriptions; has an emergent design; includes uncertainty; and has flexibility for increased validity" (p. 112).

Credibility is the researcher's ability to articulate the data collection decisions, demonstrate prolonged engagement and persistent observation, provide verbatim transcription, and achieve data saturation to the satisfaction of the study (Frey, 2018). The observation, recordings, and detailed notes in this study, were means of collecting evidence to show the validity of the data. The human instrument operating in an indeterminate situation falls back on techniques such as interviews, observations, unobtrusive measures, document and record analyses, and nonverbal cues. Validity can occur with open-ended, unstructured interviews with strategically chosen participants (Given, 2008). Therefore, this study provided a thorough

description of the entire research process for unconditional intersubjectivity, credibility, and validity and a better data analysis (Merriam, 2002).

Dependability

Dependability is, "focused on the inquiry process and the inquirer's responsibility for ensuring that the process was logical, traceable, and documented" (Schwandt, 2014, p. 309). This study produced credible, dependable, and transferable research by accurately reflecting the findings with detail. Flick (2018) said, "Dependability in qualitative research closely corresponds to the notion of 'reliability' in quantitative research" (p. 218). The research in this study aligned with phenomenological research and ethical standards of dependability by clearly documenting each step (Schwandt, 2014). Documenting the informed consent process showed that the participants willingly engaged in sharing their experiences about the research topic. Themes and descriptors were also acknowledged and considered before proceeding. The research questions were answered through the open-ended questions elicited from the data.

Confirmability

For confirmability, the researcher carefully considered the intricacies of qualitative interviews while reporting the data as presented. The researcher avoided the temptation to sanitize the data through oversimplification or predefined categories (Seidman, 1998). First, the data collection and transcription occurred as accurately as possible for descriptive validity (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Second, interpretive validity involved ensuring the congruence between the participants' descriptions of their lived experiences and the meaning ascribed to them by allowing the interviewees to evaluate the researcher's interpretation (Flynn, 2021). Third, the researcher sought to understand and describe the data objectively without being evaluative or judgmental for evaluative validity (Flynn, 2021). Evaluative validity included considering

descriptive words to avoid providing a preferred or biased conclusion (Israel & Hay, 2006). Fourth, a journal was the tool used to notate for further clarification (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

For confirmability, the researcher compared the handwritten field notes to the digitally recorded interviews (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Confirmability required the researcher to demonstrate objectivity in remaining neutral in the study. The researcher "linked assertions, findings, and interpretations to the data in readily discernable ways" (Schwandt, 2014, p. 309). This study showed confirmability by including direct participant quotes throughout the findings to support conclusions. Data collection occurred only after IRB approval and with thorough consideration of trustworthiness, dependability, credibility, and confirmability.

Transferability

Transferability is "the ability to transfer research findings or methods from one group to another" (Johnson, 2016, p. 33). Leedy et al. (2019) defined transferability as, "the extent to which a research study's findings might be similar or applicable to other individuals, settings, and contexts" (p. 239). Transferability in this study consisted of presenting the participants' demographics and the research setting. Thus, the reader can ascertain and appreciate the diversity of various rural, suburban, and urban churches in the study. Hampton Roads 2.5 million people could legitimize the study's transferability in other metropolitan areas. Nearly every major city in the area had a thriving student ministry. This suggests that the effectiveness of a church in reaching Gen Z is not limited to a particular city. While this study included churches in rural, suburban, and metropolitan settings, some places in the United States do not have great diversity or enough churches in similar proximity. The study's findings regarding baptism could be transferrable in like faith denominations also. Overall, this study included rich and thick descriptions of the research so readers or future researchers can make well-informed judgments

on the transferability of the findings to other Christian ministry settings where Gen Z members lead and engage in ongoing leadership development.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the practices of thriving student ministries in the Southeast Region of the SBCV to reach Gen Z effectively for ongoing discipleship and increased student ministry baptisms. The ACP assisted the researcher in identifying potential participants. A baptism ratio was formulated to determine who qualified for the study. Once obtaining approval from the IRB (Appendix B), the researcher verbally recruited participants (Appendix D) and received consent (Appendix A), to perform the pastoral interview (Appendix C). The IPA approach was utilized and semistructured interviews were held over the course of six months (April 4, 2022 – October 5, 2022) with nine student ministers.

The interviews elicited rich data from the participants and themes emerged. To maintain reflexivity, the researcher employed bracketing as an effective means to protect the integrity of the data. The trustworthiness of this study including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were ensured. This section provided a thorough description of the entire research process for unconditional intersubjectivity, and internal validity of the research. Validating the tools for data collection and coding themes utilizing the horizontalization method aligned with the interpretive theory and overall ethical considerations of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Overview

The prevailing narrative in Southern Baptist Church is that many student ministers do not retain and reach students effectively (Cassidy, 2022). Despite the decline in church engagement in the SBCV, some churches in Hampton Roads have thriving student ministries (see Table 2, p. 127). The purpose of this study was to identify the effective evangelism and ongoing discipleship strategies of student ministries in the SBCV's Southeast Region. The study included in-depth interviews with the student ministers of the top ten baptizing student ministries. The participants shared their pastoral perspectives on thriving student ministries. This chapter presents the interview results.

First, this chapter presents the participants and their demographic makeup based on the ACP. Second, the chapter presents how the qualitative data from the SBCV Pastoral Questionnaire about student ministry addressed Research Questions 1–3. Third, the chapter presents the qualitative data from the pastoral interviews. Fourth, the chapter closes with the significant findings on the effective strategies for reaching students.

Compilation Protocol and Measures

Recruitment of the student minster participants occurred after identifying the thriving student ministries. The ACP indicated the eligible student ministries for the study. Of the 116 churches, sixteen had baptism ratios of 0.010 or greater. However, only twelve had baptism ratios of 0.010 or greater and at least seven baptisms. Although twelve student ministries were identified as thriving, the study included only nine student ministries in Hampton Roads, due to the researcher's personal exclusion from the study. The participants who completed the consent form scheduled in-person or Zoom interviews. Despite reaching out on numerous occasions, the

researcher lacked success in scheduling interviews with Waters Edge Church of Yorktown and Essential Church in Virginia Beach. Thus, two of the top ten churches did not indicate interest. Therefore, the study included two other thriving churches, Hickory Ridge of Chesapeake and London Bridge Baptist of Virginia Beach. Apple's voice memo and Zoom's video recording feature were the application used to record the three long-distance interviews. The recording feature was the means of capturing both audio and video files of the interviews. The ability to view mannerisms during the online or in-person interviews provided the opportunity to narrow in on a question or probe based on the participant's body language. For example, if the participant appeared excited about a specific aspect of student ministry, the researcher inquired further into the subject to gain greater insight.

The recording process required attentive listening and minimal multitasking. As the main instrument, the researcher established rapport with the participants by starting with easier questions and moving to more advanced ones. Eventually, the researcher decided to answer the research questions as the interview progressed, to reverb, or ask the participants to clarify their answer before proceeding to the next question. The Otter software provided the opportunity to focus on the participants' responses.

Outward processing often occurred during the interviews. Therefore, the participants were encouraged to explore their thoughts but to arrive at one-word answers or short phrases. This strategy was the means of framing the interview while gathering data and enabling the participants to provide more concise responses. The researcher often said, "If you had to sum up your answer in one word, what would it be?" Also, "I hear you saying that X is the reason why X happens, is that correct?" These questions enabled the participants to gather their thoughts and confirm their answers before moving on to the next question. This study involved listening to all

the recordings multiple times to ensure proper coding. Only three interviews occurred virtually; therefore, internet connection was not an issue in collecting the responses. If an internet connection buffered during an interview, the participant repeated the statement on record. The in-person interviews provided the opportunity to see the participants' settings and venues for student ministry.

The semistructured interviews occurred with the protocol (see Appendix C). The interviews included asked follow-up questions. Most participants answered another question by expounding on another. Open-ended questions contributed to the flow of the conversation. All interviewees brought different experiences, backgrounds, skill sets, and perspectives to the study. Therefore, the researcher emphasized certain points based on a participant's passion or strength. For instance, one interviewee expressed a passion for family ministry. Other questions were set aside to expound on the fruit seen in the student ministry by focusing on family ministry. The best or most in-depth responses emerged from a free-flowing dialogue. Each participant provided something profound and refined a particular aspect of student ministry.

The audio and video data were saved on a password-protected Mac computer, and the files were uploaded to Otter and backed up to iCloud for safe storage. The transcripts underwent review. Otter provided speaker labels to the transcripts. Open coding involved reading the transcript while listening to the recording, editing the transcript for correct wording, and highlighting phrases in open coding. This process included notes about the transcripts for insight.

This research required reporting the data accurately. Therefore, the researcher meticulously listened to every audio recording, edited the transcripts thoroughly, and edited out utterances distracting to the raw data. Lewis (2022) found that Otter had 83% accuracy in transcribing audio to text (para. 12). Thus, the interview audio recordings were listened to

multiple times for accuracy when entering the data into the codebook, particularly for word-for-word quotes. The coding enabled the researcher to immerse in the data, glean additional insight, and ensure a high level of accuracy.

Coding commenced after placing the interview audio files into the Otter transcription software. Data were broken into "discrete parts" in the initial analysis and labeled with codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 212). "All the data [were] divided into segments and then scrutinized for commonalities that reflect general categories or themes" (Leedy et al., 2019, p. 57). This researcher's codebook included 470 discrete parts. The analysis included reading and reviewing the interview transcripts multiple times for themes and categorizing the data (Leedy et al., 2019). The coded themes were "an axis around which certain other themes appear to revolve in the same way" (Yanow, 2015, p. 76). From this, key themes can be explained to properly interpret the data (Flowers et al., 2009).

Demographic and Sample Data

The 2019 ACP was the means of identifying the participants. All the participants were student ministers at thriving student ministries with a baptism ratio of 0.010 and at least seven baptisms. The ten student pastors selected for the in-depth pastoral interview ministered in the Southeast Region of the SBCV. Each participant voluntarily accepted the invitation to participate. The criteria for the participants were to be student ministers in a congregation with a thriving student ministry. The thriving ratio (student ministries with baptism ratios of 0.010 or higher) was tabulated by dividing the number of baptized students in a year (March 2019–March 2020) by the average weekly attendance reported in the ACP. A total of seven baptisms was the minimum for inclusion in the study because a number less than this resulted in a low baptism

ratio, indicating the lack of a thriving student ministry. Thus, the student ministries in the study had seven or more baptisms.

There were 116 SBCV churches in the Southeast Region of Tidewater, an area with diverse rural, suburban, and city dwellers and a population of 2.5 million. Of the 116 churches, only 87 had viable student ministries with weekly programming, only 43 (less than half of all student ministries) had at least one baptism, 21 had at least three baptisms, and only eight had ten or more baptisms. Only twelve student ministries had a baptism ratio of 0.010 or more and at least seven baptisms. Two other churches qualified for the study. Wave Church of Yorktown had 74 youth baptisms, and Essential Church of Virginia Beach had ten youth baptisms. However, the researcher could not reach these churches after multiple attempts. Therefore, the study did not include these churches by default. Table 2 presents the churches in the study, the youth pastor of each church, the average weekly church attendance, total youth baptisms from March 2019–March 2020, and the baptism ratio that indicated the top ten student ministries. Once the researcher's student ministry was identified as a top ten baptizing student ministry, this church, First Baptist Norfolk was excluded from the study.

Table 2

Top Ten Baptizing Youth Ministries

Rank	Church	Youth pastor	Attendance	Youth baptisms	Baptism ratio
1	LifePoint – Chesapeake	Carlton Farmer	96	8	0.083
2	Smith Memorial – Williamsburg	Greg Dowell, Jr.	220	11	0.050
3	Liberty Live – Hampton	Chip Dean	6,656	189	0.028
4	Hickory Ridge – Chesapeake	Jimmy Foster	265	7	0.026
5	First Baptist Church – Norfolk	Seth Peterson	2,317	34	0.01467415
6	River Oak Church – Chesapeake	Caleb Waldrop	2,250	33	0.01466667
7	Deep Creek –Chesapeake	Jim Limbach	887	13	0.01465614
8	First Baptist – Suffolk	Wilson Caldwell	524	7	0.013
9	Coastal – Yorktown	Andrew Wilson	759	9	0.012
10	London Bridge –Virginia Beach	John Walker	1,118	12	0.011

Data Analysis and Findings

The 407 pieces of data collected yielded 147 open codes. After the coding process was finalized, five principles emerged from the data set: truth, authenticity, identity, community, and intentionality. One theme reflected the overall phenomenon: engagement. Engagement involved meeting Gen Z where they were, engaging them with the truth of God's Word, and pointing them to who they are in Christ.

Data collection occurred with the implementation of the semistructured pastoral interview guide (see Appendix C). An interview guide is a credible research instrument for interviews. As

the primary instrument for this research, the researcher utilized the guide to elicit rich data. Each question helped produce key analytical insight in the study.

Obstacles to Connecting With Generation Z

RQ1. What are some challenges or obstacles thriving SBCV student ministries encounter with Generation Z?

Research question one addresses the challenges or obstacles in ministering to Gen Z. As the evidence emerged from the pastoral interviews, six interview questions corresponded with this question, three themes were discovered: Biblical illiteracy, technological distraction, and inauthentic examples**.**

Biblical Illiteracy

A common thread throughout this study was concern for Gen Z's lack of knowledge and familiarity with the Bible. During the interviews, a two-thirds majority of the participants cited a "lack of biblical worldview" as a major obstacle for Gen Z. Prior generations have struggled with obtaining a Biblical worldview, and the trend of biblical illiteracy persists with Gen Z (Morrow, 2018). When asked about the biggest obstacle in reaching Gen Z, Greg Dowell, Jr., of Smith Memorial Baptist Church in Williamsburg stated, "Biblical illiteracy." Jim Limbach, student pastor at Deep Creek Baptist Church in Chesapeake, identified that "biblical illiteracy" made Gen Z unique. Chip Dean of Liberty Live in Hampton identified "Biblical worldview" as the greatest need of Generation Z. Dean also mentioned a Barna (2022) study that indicated, "Less than 4% of Generation Z have a Biblical worldview" (para. 6). Limbach stated, "A lack of intentionality and modeling to Gen Z what prioritizing God's Word doesn't help combat what is already a statistically low biblical worldview ratio."

Andrew Wilson from Coastal Community Church considered biblical illiteracy an opportunity more than a dilemma. While there is a need for concern, Wilson stated, “It’s our responsibility to train them in truth and point them to Jesus.” John Walker, a former student pastor of London Bridge Baptist church who has served in student ministry for decades, discussed ministering to Gen Z:

> After COVID, I saw a lot of students who had not grown up with biblical literacy discovering things for the first time. Like, “Wow, I didn't know that!” So, there is a freshness and newness with Gen Z, which is encouraging, but it also reveals where Generation Z is with their understanding of Scripture.

Walker described moral and political issues as contributing to the rise of biblical illiteracy. Walker said, “With a growing secularization of society, political issues are becoming more rampant, and agendas being proposed which are contrary to what the Bible teaches.” Jimmy Foster, Hickory Baptist Church student pastor in Chesapeake, emphasized the urgency to help students see with “Bible eyes.” Foster said, “A lack of intentionality in modeling to Gen Z what prioritizing God’s Word looks like only hinders students from seeing with Bible eyes, too.”

When asked to comment on what is unique about Gen Z, Limbach smiled and said, “There’s nothing new under the sun.” However, Limbach’s expression quickly changed to exasperation. Limbach stated, “But recent years suggest a culture [that] has transitioned from struggling with sin to celebrating it and demanding that others conform with it.” Limbach, Dowell, Walker, Caldwell, and Dean identified LGBTQ policies, gender fluidity, and degenderizing as cultural obstacles faced by Gen Z. Dowell who also served on the educational board for Williamsburg Public Schools in Virginia, discussed the topics of debate on the board concerning Title 9 and other polices introduced under the Joe Biden administration. Dowell stated,

> It is all a version of process philosophy, a straying from the word of truth. It falls right in line with developmentalism and environmentalism, which has nothing to do with a

> biblical worldview. It is more of a secular worldview than a biblical worldview, a worldview where anything goes and there are no absolutes causes. Gen Z grow up confused and unsure how to interpret the world around them.

Dean appeared consternated and said, "We cannot compromise the truth of Scripture, and with the rapid deterioration of society, we can no longer assume that Generation Z knows stories and concepts found in the pages of The Bible." Dean focused on a "student ministry first" after a decade of serving in student ministry. Dean said, "In one of our first student ministries being back after COVID, a young lady stood up in the middle of the service and began to scream loudly at the top of her lungs, 'Fire the oppressors!'" This 14-year-old had been influenced by the riots she had watched over the last year and wanted to have the youth pastors fired for encouraging women to dress modestly:

> She had a few friends who were rioting with her, too, and it was a real distraction. We found out later that this young girl had been watching YouTube videos almost nonstop over the last year, and they had influenced her to the point where she was endeavoring to lead a riot of her own right there in the middle of service.

Limbach shared an instance when a girl new to the church volunteered to participate in an icebreaker game on a student ministry night. When asked her name, the girl said, "It's Warren but call me Leo because I'm converting to a guy." Limbach was shocked but shared how this worldview polarization of "my truth" versus "God's truth" has become more common. Dean provided further insight into the condition of Gen Z and unbiblical views:

> You have this voice Gen Z is hearing. We know that Jesus says in John 8 that Satan [has been] a liar and a murderer from the beginning. And so, [Gen Z] believe the lies they are hearing about conservative Christianity and evangelicalism, which only perpetuates and furthers an unbiblical worldview.

Limbach expressed conviction and concern, stating, "Holding to a 'my truth' view of things has a way of bleeding into everything else. Saying anything contrary to cultural views makes one very unpopular, but we can't compromise God's Word for a false narrative." Walker said, "When people don't stand up for what the Bible teaches, society begins to slip, Scripture

becomes watered down, and more perverse agendas get put forward." Walker emphasized the need for Gen Z to know and apply the Bible to their lives. At the close of each interview, each participant answered the question, "What does Generation Z desperately need to hear?" Jimmy Foster stated,

> A largely biblically illiterate Generation Z needs to hear that there is absolute truth. You can know the way [and] the truth. His name is Jesus, and the Bible is still relevant. Embrace it and it will impact your life for the better today.

Technological Distraction

The participants discussed the question, "What do you see as the biggest obstacle in connecting with Generation Z effectively?" A 78% majority of participants stated either technology, distraction, or technological distraction as an obstacle to reaching Gen Z effectively. Walker stated, "In a world that is becoming increasingly postmodern, the technology and social media prowess only intensifies the noise and distraction they experience." Wilson said, "Technology *is* the obstacle" even before the researcher could finish asking the question.

Jimmy Foster from Hickory Ridge identified social media and technological addiction as something that, for better or worse, marked Gen Z. Carlton Farmer described the dichotomy faced by this generation:

> Generation Z wrestle with identity and self-esteem. They aren't comfortable in their skin but want to express themselves under the false security net of technology. At the same time, they're hungry for connection and want to express themselves, but they'd rather be able to express themselves in a more sheltered way, which is where technology comes in.

Dowell said, "Technological addiction fuels anxiety and the craving to be accepted by their peers on social media platforms." Dean questioned the 5% of people nationwide who regularly post on Twitter:

> The question is, who is the 5%, and what is their voice? We know that the 5% often are the extremes. So, you have the extreme conservative voice, which Gen Z do not gravitate towards, and the extreme liberal voice, which Gen Z tend to gravitate towards.

Similarly, Farmer stated, “Living in a technological world and the information overload is something that Generation Z readily struggles with.” Foster also expressed concern, saying,

> To think that students could elevate a YouTube procurer or a social media influencer over the Word of God is alarming. To filter through the noise and find the truth does not come easy to them, and it has developed a culture of people that struggles just to be still.

Walker also expressed concern over what Gen Z are exposed to on social media and stated, “The constant subjection to technology can easily discombobulate and overwhelm Generation Z as they try to navigate the very complex cultural terrain and decide what they believe about important issues for themselves.”

Farmer expressed concern for students who do not know how to have in-person conversations: “Technology has stunted the ability of Generation Z to have an actual face-to-face conversation.” Wilson also addressed the disconnect by saying, “With just a push of a button, they can get content, but they can’t necessarily get connection.” Carlton expressed an upside of technology: “Technology allows me to know what is important to [Gen Z and] helps me stay connected throughout the week.” Despite the frustration and negative effects, technology can be a tool for ministry used to engage with and hold Gen Z accountable.

Wilson Caldwell of Suffolk Baptist Church said, “[Gen Z] are able to be reached on their cell phones, but they are also overstimulated. All it takes is a click of a button, and Generation Z can be anywhere, and that’s dangerous.” At the same time, Caldwell saw the potential of using technology to reach Gen Z where they are. Caldwell noted that Suffolk Baptist Church had four “parent connect meetings” for families to discuss becoming better parents and combatting issues in raising teens. One meeting was on “managing technology with your teenager.” Caldwell said, “[The meeting] went really well. Parents loved having the opportunity to share something they are all facing raising their Gen Z teenagers.” Many participants considered technology a double-

edged sword. However, technology "was largely being won out by a distracted mass of teenagers who are overstimulated, lacking real connection and constantly distracted." Dean said,

> It is hard to just sit and wait without being entertained for Generation Z. The prevalence and pervasiveness of technology is a self-perpetuating cycle of distraction with myriad voices telling them what they should think, say, or do. This noise is something Gen Z finds difficult to quiet, especially on social media.

Youth pastors like Farmer and Caldwell sought to educate parents on how to combat the effects of technology. However, many participants did not know how to best navigate technological distractions.

Inauthentic Examples

All the ministers described at least one person who significantly impacted their call to the ministry. The participants had authentic examples of impactful people who modeled how to live out the faith. When asked, "Did you have anyone who impacted your call to the ministry," Dean said,

> Steve Greenwood was that guy for me. He challenged me, believed in me, and saw something in me that I didn't see. He continues to mentor me. [He] had a great deal to do with the call on my life to ministry.

Farmer also discussed someone who provided guidance and encouragement in serving as a student pastor. This individual told Farmer, "You have been pouring into these students already and doing a great job. I want you to pray about serving as our youth pastor." Carlton credited this person for encouragement and investment into the ministry at Lifepoint. Authentic people who provide support and encouragement can make all the difference. Dean expressed how there is no substitute for a quality mentor who can set an example. Gen Z may crave authentic examples to emulate but often blindly follow people they do not know personally. Dean challenged teenagers to consider the people whom they allow to influence them:

> Do you know how they live their life? Do you know what their family thinks about them? Do you know their level of happiness or joy? All you're seeing is a video, reading an

> article, or a blog, [but] what do you know about this person? The beauty of the gospel is we know the person of Jesus Christ, [and] we know his character and nature. Therefore, He can write, He can speak, [and] He has the authority over life. [But] you are giving what is most precious about your life, the authority of your life, into the hands of someone else you know nothing about.

Wilson said,

> No website or Google search will ever be able to provide the real wisdom and discernment only people can discern in difficult issues. [Gen Z] are overloaded with all this information, but they don't have the guidance they need. Generation Z desperately need individuals whom they can have face-to-face interaction with. [They need] someone who can genuinely care for them and share [the] truth. They don't need a BuzzFeed article. [They need] a real person to go to as a mentor, a friend [who] can give quality advice [and] cares.

Dean stated,

> [Gen Z] need to think from the Scripture. Right now, while they have a lot of questions in life a mentor could help with, sadly, they're not asking questions—they're questioning everything. As a result, there's a lot of accusation rather than asking from Generation Z.

There is no substitute for authentic examples who can provide thought-provoking, gut-wrenching answers. Intergenerational relationships cultivated in the church can provide mentors. However, few participants had a culture where this type of relationship could occur. While there was a cumulative desire, the authentic examples for students appeared mostly to be adult small group leaders who volunteered in the student ministry. Dowell sought to pinpoint why Gen Z lacked positive examples, saying, "Not having real examples often stems from parents punting on their responsibility to disciple their student in the home." Farmer advocated for "taking the time to be intentional, show patience, and investing in students." Gen Z need attention but have few mentors who provide the soul-enriching, deep, meaningful interaction they need. Foster said, "We need people who will stand in the gaps and be examples worth emulating."

Summary of Research Question 1

This research question showed that biblical illiteracy, technological distraction, and inauthentic examples were major obstacles to reaching Gen Z in student ministries. The three

themes emerged in response to the question, “What makes Generation Z unique?” Most participants cited biblical illiteracy, the prevalence of technology and its distractions for Gen Z students who want to connect. In an increasingly postmodern world, technology and social media only magnify noise and distraction, contributing to biblical illiteracy and the low percentage of Gen Z with a biblical worldview.

The participants reported that technology was a barrier to Gen Z’s search for truth; however, it could also be a ministry tool. The subthemes were social media consumption, online identity, cultural pressures, shallow relationships, and misplaced priorities. Several participants reported that Gen Z struggle knowing whom to emulate and crave face-to-face interaction with people who genuinely care and can share the truth. However, without mentors, Gen Z students look everywhere but the word of God for guidance, resorting to whatever or whomever is trending. As Caleb Waldrop said, “Just because it trends, doesn’t make it true.”

Effective Strategies for Reaching Generation Z

RQ2. What are some strategies being implemented in thriving student ministries to reach Generation Z effectively?

Research question two addresses the strategies thriving student ministries are implementing to reach Gen Z effectively. This research question had seven corresponding interview questions in total and four themes were discovered: Teaching biblical truth, authentic connection, discipleship groups, and family partnerships.

Teaching Biblical Truth

The responses elicited from the question, “What is your greatest concern when it comes to the church not reaching Generation Z effectively?”, revealed a deep conviction of Biblical truth as a key strategy to reaching Gen Z effectively. The coded data also revealed that sharing

the truth with love was a key to a healthy discipleship relationship by the participants interviewed. Limbach reiterated "The church [is] compromising the truth for Generation Z at the expense of offending them." Walker expressed a similar concern and said, "Culture becoming more secular and moral issues that have perpetuated society." Foster shared challenges in the battle for truth:

> I think we have so many problems because parents don't share enough truth with [Gen Z] at the home. [Parents] don't lead them in truth because they aren't being led in truth themselves, and I think our teenagers see the hypocrisy in this.

Foster recounted a time when he asked his students if their parents prayed with them. After no one raised their hand, Foster thought, "Man, that explains a lot." Foster said,

> When parents never read the Bible with you or pray with you, it shouldn't be a surprise why we have so many problems or why students go away from the faith. They aren't regularly getting enough truth shared with them.

Wilson Caldwell said,

> *Truth* is Generation Z's greatest need. Unfortunately, they often experience people telling them what they want to hear. They can have someone tickle their ears anywhere. What they really need to hear is sin has consequences; God's Word is truth; and He is the way, the truth, the life.

Farmer shared the responsibility to confront students with "truth in love:"

> Through relationships and a care for their soul, hard conversations come. I try to consider my thoughts and pray through what I am going to say to them. The reality is their personality weighs into it, too. To know who you can kind of call out and who you kind of have to have a softer touch with is crucial. You learn how to speak the truth by having relationships with them first.

Wilson stressed the need for Gen Z to understand the gospel, expressing a disdain for student ministries heavy on entertainment and light on biblical truth:

> Generation Z can hear self-help messages, positive reaffirmations, and agreement about their personal life choices any time on social media. The church is not meant to blend in with culture. [The church] should confront [and] conflict with popular opinion, and it should call [Gen Z] to a higher standard, one which is guided by God's Word, love, and truth and not bogged down by the media-driven narratives of the world.

Dean (2010) said, “We call them to truth and help students understand that they play a part in the metanarrative of the gospel. They are created in the image of God and meant to have a relationship with Him.”

Carlton sought to tell the truth to students whose posts did not match what they said in person:

> We can train students up in the truth, or we can lower the bar of expectation. The latter is not an option. Our students are studying trigonometry and all these different and difficult complex things, [and] they can handle [the truth]. Let them wrestle with the tough stuff of Scripture. They're not going to get that from a Google search; they're not going to get that from Siri or Alexa. They're going to need to have flesh-and-bone persons in front of them [who] can help them walk their Christian walk.

The participants felt responsible holding Gen Z to the truth. Caldwell said, “Loving Gen Z well means being caring enough to tell them the truth. Jesus is the way, the truth, the life. The Holy Spirit still speaks today.” Similarly, Dean said, “The gospel is the gospel to all people, and we don’t need to water down its truth.”

Limbach noted that the “culture war” in a post-modern world can seem tiring. However, Limbach was encouraged by the number of students who responded when presented with the truth in a loving way. Limbach said,

> Gen Z are sponge-like in their desire for knowledge. They will soak up the information you share with them because they really do desire to know what is true. The best way to reach them is to consistently bring the Word of God and preach the gospel in a way that is relevant to them so they know there is absolute truth in God’s Word.

Farmer stated, “The world will say there are many ways. The truth will be blurred constantly as Generation Z can easily find themselves pursuing a lie that’s been perpetuated in a culture of ‘my truth.’” Walker appeared optimistic, saying,

> When Generation Z come to realize that Jesus is enough and the timeless truth of the gospel, their view about life can change in a moment. As a result, they can ignore the noise, know the truth for themselves, and live it out.

When asked what Gen Z need to hear most, Dowell said, “Their lives do have purpose and meaning. They don’t have to create that purpose or meaning. The truth is, if we don't reach them with the truth, then they're going to form their own opinions, and those will likely be contrary to the truth of God's Word.” Like Dowell, other participants considered truth intertwined with purposeful living. Farmer stated,

> Pointing it back to the Great Commission, sharing hard truths with students and not shrinking back is what it’s all about. We do not need more cool youth pastors—we need more people who are keeping eternity in perspective [to] reach students in whatever way they can.

Wilson said, “When it comes to teaching biblical truth, [Gen Z] need someone to take them by the hand and walk them through how to apply what they know is true to what everyone else is saying to them.” Jesus can be known through the Word. Gen Z can have thriving relationships with God, themselves, and others.

Authentic Connection

All of the participants reported seeing God moving in their student ministries through relationships. Authentic relationships had an impact in the community in accountability conversations, family connections, or small groups. Caleb Waldrop from River Oak Church emphasized creating an environment where leaders can build relationships and invest in students:

> It takes a team to reach students effectively. I get to invite the leaders in and let them know, “Hey, you get to be one of those people who are pouring into the life of these students.” Maybe it's their parents, their grandparents, a coach or a family friend, but [they] get to be one of those people who are speaking life into them. I like to remind them of the role they get to play.

Students can respond when leaders take the time to invest in them. Relationships take time to build but have significant dividends. Waldrop said, “Having relationships and people who care about them can make all the difference in their long-term growth.” Caldwell noted that authentic people who invest relationally in students do “raise the bar in the lives of students so students are

genuinely equipped to live out their faith." Therefore, Gen Z students can benefit from meaningful intergenerational relationships.

When asked what makes Gen Z unique, Wilson said, "[Gen Z] wants authentic connection, which is cool because you can be more real with them. But, on the other hand, you can lose any kind of traction with them quickly if they sense you're being ingenuine." The participants noted that Gen Z have an unwavering desire for truth and little to no tolerance for fluff. Walker said, "[Gen Z] are good at detecting what is phony or fake, and if they think [you're] placating [them] or telling them what they want to hear, they disengage and tune you out indefinitely." Many teenagers long for authenticity in the adults ministering to them. Adolescents can sense the adults who treat them authentically (Clark, 2015). Gen Z have an "attitude barometer" and want authenticity. Wilson said, "In a world where they've seen a bunch of inauthentic examples early on, they are asking, 'Why should I listen to you?'"

Student ministers should do everything possible to reach students where they are, regardless where they may be on their spiritual journeys. Ministers can earn the right to be heard by cultivating authentic connections. Caldwell reminded church leaders, "You are not perfect, so don't try to be, but do point people to the perfect one, [Jesus], who is making you perfect." Waldrop encouraged leaders to meet students where they are by answering five questions for authentic connection: "What's your name? Where do you live? What is interesting to you? What have you done? What are you capable of?" Church leaders should invest relationally in students and communicate their importance to students. All the participants indicated the need to be intentional and relational. Relational intentionality matters in everything, from reading the Bible, sharing the hard truth, or pointing teenagers back to their purpose.

Dean noted that Gen Z crave authentic connection. Wilson cited Gen Z's greatest need as "putting down technology and connecting with others." Dean stated, "This constant bombardment of devices and noise makes authentic connection even more difficult to come by but even more valuable. Once distractions are intentionally removed, relationships can be formed [to] cultivate authentic connection." Wilson stated that student ministers should seek to help Gen Z build relationships: "Gen Z want real conversation and real heart-to-heart connections through face-to-face interactions. Yet, Gen Z students are more likely to distract themselves than connect with someone else." Foster did not leave relationships to chance, seeking to engage students the moment they walked into the room. Foster said,

> When a kid walks through that door, I acknowledge that I saw them. I get a lot of kids from other youth groups, and when they walk through the door, they said that some of them said their youth pastor never even knew their name or [had never] met their youth pastor. I get the challenge because some youth groups are big. But no matter if I had 20 or 50 [students], if I see a kid, I make sure I say hi. When you acknowledge every single kid, they feel valued [and] important and want to be there, and I think that's what they're looking for.

Farmer recognized that earning the right to be heard was the key to reaching Gen Z, especially new students. Student minsters have an "in" to be heard; however, they must earn the right to be heard. Gen Z are skeptical and ask, "Why should I listen to you?" Foster said, "How well [Gen Z] listen mostly has to do with relationship. You can't speak into their lives if you don't have a good relationship with them."

Caldwell also noted the need to earn the right to be heard by taking an interest in students and acting intentionally: "A lot of what we do has to do with creating an intentionally relational environment. We do this by making sure they are noticed and find ways to invest in their lives spiritually." Leaders should proactively seek conversations with students. Waldrop challenged leaders to carve out space for leaders to connect with students during the week:

> When you make the effort to go outside of Sunday morning, it becomes a part of your relationship with them, not part of your commitment as a leader. The goal for our leaders is to relationally invest in the lives of students throughout the week. When our leaders are intentional about meeting with them outside of Sunday morning, our ministry format works really well. Continuing to invest relationally is so important.

Wilson considered student ministers successful in connecting with students when they met with students outside of church: "When students are were meeting with their group leader outside of church because they wanted to and I had no idea about it, then I knew we were doing something right." Walker perceived "authentic connection" as the best way to grow a student ministry and said, "There's a lot to say about the intentionality and the relationship, but also the accountability that comes through authentic connection. Relationships are key, and they are the avenue for effective discipleship."

Discipleship Groups

Two-thirds of the participants expressed discipleship as an effective strategy to reach Generation Z effectively. Limbach summed up how to engage Gen Z effectively in discipleship: "Take the time —take your time — and model for them how to follow Jesus over time!" Dowell suggested engaging students and discipleship by offering practical training and defined discipleship, saying, "Discipleship is all about investment and instruction through personal relationship." In a relationship, an individual can learn, grow, and draw closer to God. Caldwell witnessed the excitement of students multiplying their faith among their peers:

> [I said], "I've been investing in you guys for a while, now who are you going to invite into this?" And they did! Just last week, we baptized the friends of the students I have been discipling, and their friend has now invited another friend to be a part of discipleship groups.

The hope of discipleship groups is that what is taught, others will catch and multiply. This researcher holds discipleship groups weekly to see disciples make disciples. Caldwell described

the purpose of discipleship groups: “This biblical model of investment allows us to connect with teens and make disciples who will make disciples.”

Several participants described discipleship as messy and difficult. However, Walker said, “Discipleship doesn’t have to be complicated. While discipleship isn’t easy, I think Jesus got it right by investing in the few.” Jesus saw exponential growth. by focusing on and growing a few people intimately and individually. Caldwell stressed the value of simplicity in discipleship, saying, “Keeping it simple means focusing less on addition and more on multiplication.” When asked to differentiate between addition and multiplication, Caldwell said,

> I think of a duck park where people go and throw bread to the ducks. The ducks are fed and are filled. They always come and expect to be hand-fed by you. This is addition. Multiplication, on the other hand, is not just meeting with a discipleship leader but learning how to feed yourself and others.

The participants pointed to discipleship as contributing to growth in students. Walker said, “By modeling for them what being a disciple looks like and helping them walk through the storms of life, that person is able to see up close, how to passionately pursue Jesus.”

Dean said that life-on-life relationships impact student engagement in discipleship. Four out of the nine participants mentioned discipleship groups. The rest of the participants mentioned discipleship relationships. Farmer shared that engaging Gen Z students requires equipping them with faith and meeting them where they are: “As the leader, you're not only setting the expectation, but you're inspecting it and checking in with them to see how they are growing.” Farmer checked on students’ progress in his group by asking, “What did you read in your Bible this week?”

Open-ended question were effective means of starting actual conversations. Wilson led discipleship groups with his wife on Sunday nights. The largely friend-based groups enabled the students to go deeper. Wilson supported multiplication by asking students at the end of the

semester, “Who else would you like to invite into these groups?” Walker described the purpose of discipleship groups as “meeting [students] where they are and taking them to where God wants them to be.” Farmer expressed that Gen Z respond positively to student ministers and student ministry volunteers who take the time to care about their growth and hold them to a higher standard. Farmer said,

> To do life alongside of them is what it’s all about. Man, my favorite thing to talk about and to go to is the Great Commission. It’s really trying to live that out and teach them to be disciples. One way you can do that is to truly demonstrate [you’re] doing life with them.

Farmer, whose student ministry had the most per capita baptisms, credited the number of baptisms to discipleship groups: “You can see the health of that discipleship group. Those guys [were] feeling that connection with each other, being transparent, sharing their struggles, [and] studying the word together, [and] it led to an environment where growth happens.” Dowell also reported a positive shift in student ministry after programmatically applying discipleship groups to the student ministry. After inheriting a student ministry focused on games with little time for bible study, Dowell changed the schedule to focus on discipleship. While initially unpopular, the change significantly increased the group’s spiritual maturity and fervor.

Farmer met weekly with discipleship groups and encouraged students to spend at least seven minutes with God’s word daily. Also, Farmer encouraged students at least every other day to share what they read with someone else. Accountability partners also showed effectiveness. The researcher beta-tested a 12-week discipleship group and found a correlation between biblical accountability and decreased porn usage. As students built relational capital in the group, they began practicing spiritual disciplines and multiplying the word in a way not easily accomplished outside discipleship groups. Students who spend time in the Bible and hold each other accountable can diminish toxic behaviors and habits corrosive to spiritual growth. Caldwell said,

"Spending that time with the Lord is key. It also helps them to crave it and want to go deeper in the Word." Limbach noted that the most exciting time of the week was Tuesday nights, when 20–25 students came to study the Bible:

> There's no game, lights, or anything else drawing them but hunger for God's Word, and that's refreshing. It's awesome. We just open our Bibles and see what God has to say. We have deep discussions, and the students who are there are there because they want to be.

Caldwell said, "If we're not making disciples, we have missed the point. If students think it's about the event or something cool, we've lost them."

Caldwell suggested that student minsters ask themselves, "If we aren't making disciples, then how can we expect them to make disciples?" Disciple groups require that, individually and collectively, followers practice what they preach by being disciple-makers. Farmer said, "[Discipleship] is messy and if it were easy then we would see a lot more people doing it. Jesus said, 'Take up your cross and follow me.' When he said that, he didn't mean it lightly."

Jesus paid a cost for discipleship and expects His followers to demonstrate wholehearted devotion. Farmer said, "Jesus spent 9/10th of his ministry in a small group discipling 12 people." Discipleship takes time, but it is not a suggestion; it is a directive of the Great Commission. Caldwell said there is no such thing as "microwave discipleship:"

> In our culture today. We want it, and we want it now. Discipleship just doesn't work like that. I mean, just like with the disciples, those dudes were with Jesus and had no clue what was going on. But to think about the patience of Jesus with them and the confidence he had to empower them, not with what they brought to the table, but how he had equipped them. I think it's helping people understand you can't get locked in on timeframes. Discipleship is a long obedience in the same direction with small gains over time.

Farmer witnessed the blessing of baptism while walking with students from sixth to 12th grade. While reflecting on discipleship, Farmer said, "It's the time and patience that's needed. It's an investment that takes time." Carlton stated,

> When the whole congregation doesn't realize that they too are a part of making disciples, it greatly increases discipleship in the church. When both the church family and the students' families are working together to see the student discipleship, it is a beautiful thing.

Dean described the "family-equipping" model and noted its difficulties without engaged relationships:

> The average family attends church 1 in 6 weeks. This means we can no longer gauge success of discipleship on attendance but engagement. Is that person engaged in the body of Christ? Are they equipped? Are they serving? When it comes to discipleship, it has got to come through engagement.

Discipleship groups indicate a healthy ministry if they show signs of multiplication and. Walker said, "What Jesus does with the 12 disciples and the three [Peter, James, and John] is with great purpose and intentionality." John said:

> Small groups are where students connect in a group of 12 or less. They meet on Sunday mornings. These groups require responsibility, engagement, and participation. Wednesday nights is when we have what we call D groups. These discipleship groups consist of three and are more immersive, intimate, and personal. Ultimately, I think it's a model Jesus set up in ministry that is proven to be beneficial for us to follow.

Discipleship involves meeting people where they are. Farmer said,

> We are in this world. We're not of this world, but at the same time, we have to know how to survive in this world. It's not being countercultural. It's actually assimilating into the culture without losing your foundation.

Discipleship groups are powerful tool for engaging students in a relational setting to maximize personal growth. The application and implementation of these groups varied among the participants. Caldwell considered discipleship groups to consist of at least three individuals who meet for a year or more. Walker led friend-driven discipleship groups and allowed the students to pick the material. Limbach considered the weekly Wednesday Bible study to be the primary discipleship time. Wilson suggested developing groups of three to five with clear expectations for meetings, a plan for developing spiritual disciplines, and encouragement for students to apply and share what they have learned to others multiply the group.

Family Partnership

Family partnership was the most common theme throughout the interview was family partnership. This theme was clearly interwoven throughout the interviews. Collectively, the participants mentioned “family” or “parents” 311 times when describing how to reach Gen Z effectively. This datum suggests that partnering with families is one of the most important foci of thriving student ministries.

The household can impact a student’s growth and development. Walker said, “Parents get 168 hours; 24 times seven, right? But we, on the contrary, get maybe 2 or 3 hours a week. So, partnering with parents to help them disciple their students [is] where we can see a cumulative impact.” All participants acknowledged the parent as the primary discipler of the household, but few student ministries had a ministry for parents. Therefore, there seemed to be a disconnect between beliefs and practices. However, some participants actively partnered with parents to reach students more effectively.

Church ministers should do everything possible to resource parents and set up the home for ongoing discipleship. While not every household has Christian parents, student ministries can evangelize with plans for mentoring and discipling students, even when parents are not believers. Wilson suggested being upfront with parents about discipleship:

> With the parents, it's monumental to let them know what you're doing so they know that student ministry is more than just a place to have fun and make friends. It’s important to be upfront. I let them know we are building something together. We want to see their student grows, and we’re on the same team.

The researcher once had a father, who was an atheist, say, “I just wanted to let you know, I don’t agree with the God stuff, but I do see a change in [my daughter] and appreciate you investing in the life of my daughter.” Sometimes, partnering with parents involves small wins. Waldrop note

the importance of parents for spiritual maturity: “To me, it’s the relationship you get to have with these students and their parents, and the impact you get to have on them for their spiritual walk.”

Pastors can make a difference by checking in or letting students and parents know what they have observed, whether good or bad. Limbach shared an instance of a student who wanted to get baptized:

> A parent asked me what my opinion was about the readiness of their student to be baptized. I told her that I don’t think he is ready based on some of the behavior I had observed and suggested we get together to discuss.

Limbach noted that open dialogue with the parent enabled discussion of care and diligence in a serious spiritual matter. Students tend to spend more time with their families; therefore, intentionally partnering with families is a way to multiply the impact and influence of God in the home. Farmer said,

> I have this urgent burden. How can we reach [parents]? We're not only reaching the students but seeking to reach families because parents have way more influence than we have. We only get a [short] time with your child. We need the whole family.

Farmer sought to bridge the home-to-church gap by being the first in the parking lot and the last to leave every Sunday night: “I noticed early on that one of the most fertile grounds for student ministry was the church parking lot. That is prime for me because many students rely on their parents to be dropped off.” While connecting with the parents, Farmer soon realized that many did not have relationships with God. Therefore, Farmer sought to introduce himself to new parents and make connections. Farmer said, “Some [parent] came to faith, and others got involved with some of the parent workshops we offered as a church.”

Dowell wanted to provide families with resources and said, “We want to provide practical tools for their child to grow in the knowledge and admonition of the Lord to respect their parental leadership as they follow the Lord and lead their students well.” Dowell identified parents as having the ultimate responsibility and considered his role as equipping families to

shepherd students' spiritual growth. Dean also stated parents should disciple teenagers and considered their involvement an asset to the student ministry. However, Dean had a different viewpoint about parent ministry:

> I think that parent ministry is wrongfully relegated to student ministry when it needs to be done by the church. I think student ministry needs to reach teenagers. I think that adult ministry needs to disciple parents. If the adult groups ministry isn't raising up godly parenting, then why not? As a campus pastor now, I encourage all my group leaders who have parents in their groups to have at least one group series on marriage and one group series on parenting. That is so extremely important. Parenting does not necessarily get better over time, but it must happen by adults prioritizing the family unit in their ministry.

Despite efforts to connect families, some do not get involved with the church or disciple their students. Wilson said,

> One of the biggest challenges with Gen Z is not having the support of parents. Parents sometimes have this mindset that the student is driving the agenda, and when students are driving it, parents aren't being parents. When this is the case, there needs to be a surrogate that's going to step in.

Foster said,

> When I was in high school, I did not have a good relationship with my dad. The person who stepped into that role was my basketball coach. Ever since then, I realized a lot of these teenagers may not have a good role model at home. Being a youth pastor in youth ministry, you or the volunteers you partner with get to fill in that role for a lot of these kids, not only giving spiritual guidance but [also] being a father figure.

Dean said,

> You got teenagers in there who don't have godly parents who need godly parents. Someone has to step up, and parents are often the best ones to do it. We recruit parents to serve because first, God called parents to disciple teenagers. We see this in the book of Deuteronomy and throughout the Scriptures. Being a parent has always been an intended role to maximize discipleship by God. Second, [parents are] already in that rhythm and routine of the teenage life. They don't have to add it to their life. That's what they're already doing. Third they care the most.

Most participants observed that many parents did not take the initiative to disciple their children. Dowell appreciated proactive parents but felt frustrated about those "punting" on their

responsibility. Dowell said, “When it comes to reaching Generation Z, the challenge begins at home [with parents] taking personal responsibility to raise their children in a godly way.” Dean said, “There's been a lot of church superficiality [or] playing the church game [by] well-intentioned parents. [The parents] have [students] go through the motions, come to church, and then are shocked out of their minds when students aren’t following Jesus as adults.”

Similarly, Foster said, “I think all [parents] try to raise good kids. I don't think parents set out to raise bad kids. But just because you’re raising a good kid does not mean you're raising a godly kid.” Dean noted that ignoring, avoiding, or neglecting discipleship in the home causes students to compartmentalize and avoid living their faith. Walker, who dedicated his life to student ministry, stated, “Unfortunately, no matter how hard a church tries, it is incapable of bringing a child to complete spiritual maturity. That is the job of the family.”

Caldwell considered family partnerships a necessity for church-wide ministry. Caldwell said, “We don’t want to be a place parents just drop their kids off at. We want to be proactive to involve the parent in our ministry and prep parents to handle that responsibility of raising their child wisely.” Caldwell described building bridges to parents in student ministry by:

> I didn’t spend a lot of time with parents starting out. My first I’d say 8 of my 12 years, I did not do a good job of spending time with parents. But I’ve seen in that year eight through 12, really the time I’ve been here at Suffolk, there’s been an increase in time spent with parents and investment there. That has led to, I truly believe, more fruit within the student ministry.

Wilson saw more professions of faith, more baptisms, and deeper relationships due to focusing on the family in student ministry. A focus on the family resulted in more engaged parents who bought into the ministry’s vision. Wilson said, “When the parents were more bought in, the kids get more bought in. We started seeing kids who are inviting friends more.” The intentionality to partner with parents resulted in buy-in from the senior pastor for “Team Parent.” Wilson described Team Parent:

> We do a roundtable environment on a Sunday afternoon where parents get to have a meal together and discuss topics pertinent to training teenagers in godliness with other parents. We've tackled discipleship within the home, communication within the home, and prioritizing faith in the home. A pastor on staff will get up and share a little ten minute blurb on the subject matter, and then it will be discussed. I've learned that with families, sometimes they just need other people to talk with and work through things with and be challenged by.

Wilson's church also has a parent Facebook page called Team Parent with "50 or 60 of parents" where parents update each other on events. Wilson noticed that creating a space enabled parents to get involved and meet other parents in the student ministry. Wilson said, "At the end of the day, we want parents to be the ultimate disciplers of their children."

Dean said, "A lack of discipleship in the home perpetuates compartmentalized lives and a disingenuous lifestyle." Dowell stated, "Some parents get that [they are] the ultimate person responsible for their spiritual upbringing, and others simply don't." Student ministries focused on parents ministry had higher attendance and engagement. When parents get involved, so do students. Partnerships with families contribute to more salvations, baptisms, and growth through discipleship in the home and student ministries.

Summary of Research Question 2

This research question focused on effective strategies for reaching Gen Z effectively with the gospel. The four primary strategies were teaching biblical truth, authentic connection, discipleship groups, and family partnership. The strategies were means of combatting biblical illiteracy, technological distraction, and inauthentic examples. The findings showed the importance of relationships for thriving student ministries. Diverse relationships impact student ministries when parents and students engage. Student pastors, small group leaders, discipleship group mentors, parents, and other staff can help in reaching Gen Z effectively. The participants emphasized the value of having examples to emulate and cited relationships as critical for each

strategy. The participants mentioned relationships before the researcher, indicating their importance for student ministry.

Best Practices for Increasing Gen Z Student Baptisms

RQ3. What are some best practices being implemented by thriving student ministries that seem to contribute to more students being baptized?

Research question three focuses on the practices used in thriving student ministries to increase Gen Z baptisms. This research question had six related interview questions and six themes were discovered: gospel clarity, creating opportunities, intentional environment, personal invitation, diligent follow-up, and public celebration.

Gospel Clarity

Two-thirds of the participants discussed how clarity with the gospel contributes to increased baptisms. Dean stated,

> The gospel is massive in more students being baptized. How can they hear unless someone preaches to them? And how can they be baptized unless they have responded to the gospel by faith first? Preaching, teaching, and modeling baptism all lead to a higher number of baptisms.

Wilson clarified how baptism is rooted in the gospel:

> When someone goes into the water for baptism, it is a proclamation of the gospel. It commemorates the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and demonstrates that a person has turned from their sin and put their faith in Christ.

Waldrop sought to help students understand the gospel through an annual baptism series. Waldrop said, “It sounds almost too easy, but if you want to see more baptisms, have a baptism series that clarifies the gospel and why it is significant!” Before baptizing, he makes sure the student understands that biblical salvation is to always precede baptism. Limbach also sought to clarify the gospel and explains to students:

> It doesn't save you – it's a symbol! You know, I love talking about my wedding ring. This ring doesn't make me married, right? But it's a symbol of my marriage and the love for my wife. And that's what baptism is.

Limbach discussed how marriages and rings are similar to believers and baptisms, saying, "In essence, a baptism is an outward profession of faith indicating that the inward transformation has already happened." Waldrop shared how a student described baptism in a testimony: "The Lord was calling me out of my old identity, to be immersed in my new identity, to show physically what has happened spiritually for eternity."

The participants shared that when students come to the faith, other students often feel excited and want to get baptized as well. However, the participants did not want students to rush into baptism. "I make sure they understand what they're doing. We take our time walking them through all the questions, so we and they are confident about what they believe before going forward with baptism." Dean ensured students understood the gospel before getting baptized:

> We ask the questions! Have you given your life to Jesus? Have you followed Jesus with your life? Man, are you repenting of your sin? Right, are you— Do you believe in His death for the forgiveness of your sins? Do you believe in His resurrection?"

If the baptism candidate understands Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection and what they mean for salvation, Wilson's team records a testimony in video form to share on baptism day with the congregation. The videos were no longer than three minutes and covered the following questions: "What was your life like before Christ? How did you come to know Christ? What was your life like after you came to Christ? What's the gospel?" The church presents the video at the main service. Wilson stated the testimonial videos contributed to the congregants' faith and provided different perspectives on the gospel:

> Baptism was good for everyone as it allowed everyone to hear the gospel in different ways from a variety of people. So, like, there's this one guy, an engineer that my wife always remembered. The way this guy described the gospel basically opened a new brainstem for her because what that guy shared was so piercingly palpable to her.

The researcher shared an example of the power of people expressing the gospel in their own words: “Being saved by God’s grace feels like a flock of doves flying up from the top of da’ trees. Hunters shoot at ’em and every single one of ’em misses.” Wilson identified testimonials as contributing to more baptisms in the student ministry, saying, “The more reps or times the gospel is shared, the greater the yield. Additionally, it is a powerful demonstration and refreshing for the believer to again hear the gospel uniquely expressed through another person.”

Wilson said that gospel clarity caused him to accept the call to be a minister: “When I was a kid, clarity on the gospel wasn't there. I wanted to preach, basically, the cost of discipleship, the free grace that comes with a call to obey God by following Him with your life.” Wilson remembered being a student in student ministry and wanted to ensure that Gen Z students understood the gospel:

> God didn’t give us a ticket to heaven; He drafted us onto a team to advance the Kingdom of God. And so that was always the verbiage. We’re not just hopping on an airplane and sitting on the way to the destination. We’re on the team that God is moving— He’s bringing the destination to us through us kind of thing and baptism is really only a beginning of a young person’s faith journey.

Similarly, Waldrop stated, “If you want to see more students reached effectively with the gospel, share it and share it with gospel clarity.”

Creating Opportunities

The findings showed that thriving ministries provided many opportunities for students to get baptized throughout the year. Two-thirds of the participants said creating opportunities increases baptisms. Waldrop said,

> Creating opportunities is a part of our culture. We did a recent baptism night, and a big part of the students getting baptized is that they filled out a form online and share their testimony. Many testimonies from students were from outside our ministry, which tells me that students were hungry for an opportunity that perhaps wasn’t being presented elsewhere.

The researcher shared, “We create a space for an opportunity with baptisms but also kind of prompt them or say, ‘Hey, baptism is the next step, and we're here to help you do that!’” He did not wait until someone came forward to be baptized and put dates on the calendar:

> We schedule baptism in advance. I’ll make sure for a couple of weeks going up to that I’m like, hey, look, if you’ve if you’ve already made this decision to follow Jesus, but never been baptized, let’s do it. Right? We’ve already got a date on the calendar, so let’s go forward with baptism!

Dean said, “We are big on creating opportunities for baptisms and do them frequently. We do them as a church on Wednesday nights and offer a major night of baptism at camp to encourage students toward baptism.” Waldrop stated, “We capitalize on what the Lord does through times at camp and our summertime stuff, when we are giving students a lot of opportunity.” Waldrop had multiple baptism opportunities: on a Sunday morning, in the midweek, and at a block party at the end of summer:

> At the end of summer, we try to explain what baptism is, make sure we’re all on the same page, and then offer opportunities to be baptized. This positions us well to be able to celebrate what God is doing in our church family and to create opportunities for the students who have made decisions, which seems to be effective.

Walker summed up the importance of scheduling baptism by saying, “If it isn’t on the calendar then it is not a priority. If it is not a priority, then it’s not a part of the culture.”

The interviews showed that thriving student ministries regularly have baptisms scheduled. Summer seems to be a prime time to schedule baptisms, particularly after summer camp. Chip said, “We offer a major night of baptism at summer camp because we believe that camp is when they are most out of the world and into the Word. At camp, everything moves toward a pinnacle of baptism.” Dowell described camp as invaluable for students:

> Camp is an opportunity to leave everything else behind and just focus on you and your relationship with the Lord. In fact, your relationship the Lord and his relationship with you. You know, we hype that up a lot because, you know, that break from reality to focus on growing spiritually is vitally important.

Foster also described camp as an ideal place for engaging in ministry and taking advantage of opportunities: “Camp is such an influential time in the lives of students because when you're at camp, you're with them 24/7, and you get a chance to ask them all kinds of questions.” Time with students in camp is valuable and valued because of the rare opportunity camp for student minsters to reach students.

While interviewing Limbach, the researcher recalled a night when he felt prompted to do something different by creating “the four corners.” The four corners was a new take on the traditional altar call by leading students to a specific corner:

> If you want to hear about what the gospel really means and what God wants you to do with it, Corner #1; if you are interested in what it really looks like to grow deeper in discipleship, go to Corner #2; if you’re interested in what it means to be called into ministry, Corner #3; if you want to know more about why baptism is significant and why that’s important, Corner #4.

Limbach had a similar strategy: student ministry volunteers received students directed to a leader to discuss the message they had just heard. In both instances, the students engaged because they received an opportunity (MacInnis, 2022). Limbach said, “Just providing that space and allowing them to ask questions goes a long way.”

Intentional Environment

An intentional environment enables students to break away from their routines and minimize outside distractions. 45% of participants identified intentional environments as a practice which leads to an increased number of student baptisms. Waldrop said,

> God seemed to honor it when students got quiet before the Lord and spent some time dedicated to knowing who Jesus is, which is not surprising when you think about it. Many the students were spending time in God’s word at our retreat or at the camp, but not from an individual person speaking to them, but were spending time in God’s word when The Spirit of the Lord spoke to them and led them to salvation.

Several time, Waldrop said, “Change of pace, change of place, change of perspective.” Walker also indicated the value of creating opportunities for students to connect personally with God:

"Obviously, all combined, people spoke the gospel, and they heard it and knew it. On the other hand, it was clear God did something through His Word as they quieted their minds in an intentional environment."

Caldwell also shared how retreats and camps are a space and a place for God to move into students' lives. All the participants created an intentional environment retreats or camps to foster spiritual growth. Two of the top ten thriving student ministries (First Baptist Norfolk and Liberty Live) had custom summer camps. River Oak Church (Waldrop) and Coastal Community Church in Yorktown (Wilson) had separate middle school and high school camps for student life. Deep Creek (Limbach), London Bridge (Walker), Hickory Ridge (Foster), LifePoint Church (Farmer), First Baptist Suffolk (Caldwell), Smith Memorial of Williamsburg (Dowell) had preprogrammed summer camps (e.g., Student Life, Centrifuge, or Crossroads Camps). Therefore, the intentional environment in summer camps is a necessity for thriving student ministries.

Waldrop mentioned how weekly programming provides an environment where students can connect. Students do not tend to go where they do not feel welcome, safe, or valued. Therefore, Waldrop sought to capture students' attention by providing fun and exciting environments so students want to invite other students. This insight emerged after Waldrop answered the question, "What is your favorite part of being a student ministry?" Aside from impacting people's lives, Waldrop said his favorite part of student ministry was, "hands down, the epic things we get to do as a student ministry!" Waldrop described activities such as creating the world's largest milkshake, hosting a Nerf night, or throwing a paint party. Waldrop's goal was for students to walk away thinking, "That was so much fun, I can't wait to invite my friends

to this." Waldrop expanded the student ministry by connecting with students and taking them deeper with their faith after introducing them to Jesus.

Wilson mentioned how weekly programming provides an environment where students can connect with God:

> We recognized that students need to have time to reflect and be still. They have ample time to do this at retreats and camp, and so we wanted to be intentional with building this into our typical weekly meetings. Simply putting in the program a moment of prayer or reflection made a big difference.

The researcher was reminded in the interview about how the Holy Spirit precedes an intentional environment through the power of prayer. When senior pastor, Eric Thomas, told the student minister to encourage students to pray for one person for 1 minute each day, the number of baptisms increased. As a result, there were more baptisms that year in the church than in a long time. The difference was that students drove the mission to reach and encourage their friends toward baptism, precipitating a movement within the student ministry.

Waldrop also reflected on a movement of the Spirit in the student ministry:

> Where intentional environments are present, there is an overflow of The Spirit where God draws students to salvation. God showed me that His power is so much greater than any convincing words that I could offer. It was the work of the Lord in them, The Spirit of The Lord through The Word, that led them to salvation, which was awesome and humbling for me to see.

The participants reflected on times when students responded to the gospel and were led to salvation. All the participants indicated the need for intentional environments for students to be heard and understand salvation. Salvation was also a response cultivated through the work of prayer. Waldrop reflected with gratitude on seeing God move through an intentional student ministry:

> Seeing God move is a great reminder that it's not about me. It takes a lot of pressure off me when I think about it. It's like, okay, God, I'm going to be faithful to do what you've called me to do, but you're going to save them. Right, you can, and you will reach them.

Personal Invitation

Caldwell said, “People go where they are invited.” Two-thirds of the participants recognized that personal invitations were a great marker of reaching students with the gospel and encouraging them toward baptism. Dean said:

> The willingness of students to go and invite other students to our events is a good indicator of how well we are helping students to feel a part of the community. If they do, then this is something that they see value in and genuinely want to be a part of. If they want to be a part of it, you know they’re going to invite somebody else.

For Limbach, the goal of the personal invitation was to spread the gospel and invite students to the ministry. Limbach stated,

> We do a personal gospel invitation every student ministry gathering. It’s not about having to close your eyes, but it’s like, hey, this is this is your time to respond to what you just heard, you know, whatever you need to do, if you want to talk to us, we’re here. If you just want to sit in your chair quietly, if you want to stand up and lift your hands and worship, whatever you need to do – this is just a time for you to respond.

Limbach described the aim of student ministry, saying, “The goal is to kind of cast this wide net. For kids, this is something they can invite their friends to. They can have a good time [and] can be invited to hear about Jesus.” Limbach described how the ministry expanded through word of mouth and students’ invitations to friends. According to Limbach, students in the neighborhood came on Wednesday nights for the fun. Limbach referred to Wednesday nights as “the wide net:”

> We’re constantly requesting our regulars to bring their friends. By creating a wide net and casting a wide net, we create smaller channels to get them plugged in and to grow in a way that’s a little more personal versus just, you know, a roomful of students.

The participants mentioned that the importance of extending an invitation as an introduction to the gospel. Walker discussed the importance of the personal invitation in the interview, saying, “We've got to keep putting that invitation in front of [students]. Constantly the constant invitation to follow Jesus.” Several participants expressed disdain for apathy in the church that caused people to lack urgency in sharing the gospel. Dowell said,

> My fervor for students to invite students to experience Christ steam from a reality that is present in student ministry and the church in general. It is the assumption that if you've been here, or if you've grown up in the church, you've at some point given your life to Christ, which is not the case; that presumption is flawed and such a trick of the enemy.

Limbach said, "I guess the desire to see more students baptized comes from a strategy to see students invite students, a strategy of personal invitation for the gospel."

The participants reported cultivating invitations by fostering a focus on discipleship amongst the students. Caldwell shared an example of students inviting other students. According to Caldwell, student invitations resulted in two students not previously connected to the church accepting the gospel and getting baptized. Caldwell told the students he discipled, "Clearly, this discipleship thing works. You've got lost friends at your school. Who are you going to do the same thing with?" The students prayed for a few months to determine who to invite. Caldwell said, "Let's invite those two friends of yours. They are not in Christ, and we want to see them be in Christ. We need to invite him into this." The friends took a year to make a profession of faith. In the end, it all started with a personal invitation.

Other participants shared multiple stories. The participants expressed excitement about multiplication and that the students realized they could make a difference and impact others by inviting friends to follow Jesus. Ministry for increased baptisms does not have to be complicated. Dean said, "Make it easy for people to say yes. Invite them to come. Most people will go where they are invited." Dowell said, "When people hear what Christ has done for them and realize the responsibility, they will respond. It's just about being personable and accessible and inviting them to receive Jesus."

Diligent Follow-Up

The findings showed that diligent follow-up correlated with a high number of baptisms. Two-thirds of the participants said that follow-up is crucial to achieving more baptisms. When

asked to identify what caused the student ministry to have the most per capita baptisms, Farmer said, “The baptisms we had were a direct result of being intentional in those relationships and seeing the fruit of diligently following up with these students’ over time.” Many ministers expressed a trend in churches where students do not get baptized or plugged into the church even after indicating desire.

Limbach said, “When there is no diligent follow-up present, people get left on base.” Similarly, Dean said, “We’ve got to be intentional not only in sharing the gospel but intentional in adding people to the community of the church through baptism and then diligent to walk alongside them on their faith journey.” It is not only, “Great you got saved, let’s get you baptized.” But also, “How can I help you take the next step?” Or, “Let’s get you connected and start discipling you.” Waldrop described diligently following up on students:

> When a student makes a decision, we take the initiative to make sure they are plugged into a small group. We don’t assume they are plugged or that they’re already being discipled. Right? We have an intentional conversation with the student and try to engage the parents as well. We will ask them how they are walking this out with their students and remind them that baptism is just the beginning of their walk. Like, it is an important step of obedience, but it isn’t the last step.

The participants emphasized the need to get students connected. Thus, the participants had systems and processes for connecting students with the church. Limbach had multiple people on a team to help students take the next step:

> My wife coordinates baptisms for the entire church, so if there is a family with a girl in the student ministry, then she will follow up, but also, we have a high school girls leader does a great job of following up. Out of relationship, she’ll have those conversations with the girls in her group together and let me know when they’re ready for baptism.

The participants considered diligent follow-up necessary for student ministry. Foster said,

> We encourage them when they're ready to sit down and have conversations about it. And it's not just something we have people just do on a whim; it’s something we've had a conversation over the weeks leading up to it.

Dowell said, “Being diligent in leading people to baptism and connecting them to community afterward and thriving student ministries do this well.” Caldwell described diligence with students and parents as vital for student ministry:

> So much good comes from the follow-up conversation we have after a student makes a decision to follow Jesus. …Concerning baptism, we’re going to sit down, not just me with the student, but I am going to sit down in the room with me and the parents, and we’re going to walk through that.

Limbach encouraged using discernment and strategy in this process to follow-up tactfully:

> Some of the factors we consider in doing so depends on 1) the age of the student, 2) whether we know the family, if their families a part of the church already, and that’s going to be different versus a kid that just showed up off the street. In all situations, we want to make sure we are doing our diligence and going the extra mile to make sure we’re connected with the family.

Walker said, “There is a window of time when most people accept Christ, and it’s before the time they graduate from high school.” Walker indicated the need to remain diligent in sharing the message of Christ with students. The participants described following up with students after they get saved as crucial for helping them take the next step in baptism.

Public Celebration

All the participants identified baptism as public. Sometimes, the practice of baptism can be routine. However, a baptism should be a celebration of God making what was once old brand new. 56% of the participants specifically mentioned celebration as a practice which leads to an increased number of Gen Z student baptisms. The researcher’s church, First Baptist Norfolk, has a culture of celebration for baptism. The church has “beach baptisms” annually in August and baptism parties every quarter. Each person baptized wears “Made New” shirts and invites friends and family to join in their public declaration to follow Jesus. Similarly, Dean said,

> We believe that the purpose of baptism is for someone who has been made new in Christ to make a public expression of faith. Being around your peers is your biggest public confession of faith, right? So, we look to set up baptisms in the most public way possible.

LifePoint and Coastal also had baptism celebrations on the beach. Wilson discussed baptism celebrations, saying, “It’s a big deal for the people in our church. They will send invites to neighbors, friends, and family, bring noisemakers, foghorns, confetti poppers, and party hats to celebrate a new brother or sister who has been made new.”

Farmer shared that all the congregants look forward to baptism day. Wilson noted that many family members who attend baptism days hear the gospel and get saved. The baptism day is a public celebration with good fellowship. “It’s awesome because the baptisms happen right out in public. Whosoever happens to be at the beach witnesses celebrates too.” Farmer said, “The celebration of baptism as a public profession is the essence of baptism, and I think that the Holy Spirit truly moves in a big way when we model baptism through celebration.”

Wilson shared how witnessing baptisms among peers is a way to reinforce the gospel and focus on He who makes baptism possible. Wilson said, “Just like Jesus went forward with a public baptism, we know from Scripture that He calls all believers to go forward in baptism, too.” Dean discussed the public nature of baptism:

> Technically speaking, it is harder to get baptized in front of students than it is in front of the whole church. I think that’s because you are holding your life accountable and in front of your peers who are around you. The church doesn’t know you, but your peers do.

Dean described baptism at camp:

> Leading up to the final night of camp where we offer a major night of baptism. …In the camp paperwork, we ask the parent right, if your student wants to get baptized, do we have your permission to baptize. So, we don’t have to call all the parents beforehand, they’ve already given permission. And if the Holy Spirit moves in a student’s life, and they get saved, or they’ve been saved, they’ve not been baptized, or they believe their baptism was unbiblical, or whatever man, then we move in baptism.

The parents made a decision ahead of time to permit the student pastors to move in baptism when the students indicate their readiness. While filling out camp paperwork, the parents can

pause and assess whether their students have been baptized and whether they think they are ready to be baptized.

Each year, the researcher has noticed that students show baptism readiness in different ways. Dean found an effective way to connect with and ask parents for permission before conducting a public baptism celebration. This praxis and belief in baptisms as public sometimes resulted in the baptisms of over 100 students after camp. Chip said, “It's happened twice. It's because we got to see the Holy Spirit move in such a way that what God was doing in one, the other wanted God to move in them in the same way.”

Other churches had public baptism sessions after camp. Waldrop said, “We have a block party at the end of the summer. It typically happens after summer camp and really positions us to celebrate well what God is doing in our church family.” Walker also discussed the public nature of baptism: “In baptism, we celebrate as a church family and are sure to show the excitement in it as much as possible.” Waldrop shared the need to publicly celebrate, saying, “Ultimately, baptisms are our greatest quantifier. [Baptism] indicates an inward transformation [has] happened. A student who is willing to go forward [and] says, ‘I belong to Jesus’ is worth every bit of celebration!”

Summary of Research Question 3

This research question presented strategies for increasing Gen Z student baptisms. Six best practices emerged from the data: gospel clarity, creating opportunities, intentional environments, personal invitation, diligent follow-up, and public celebration. The thriving student ministry practices were means of overcoming obstacles, connecting with Gen Z, and increasing student baptisms. The participants had different ways of conducting these practices in their student ministries. Student ministries with intentional environments and limited distraction

had more baptisms. Disciple groups, purposeful questions, and time to clarify the gospel and have intentional conversations with parents contributed to increased baptisms. Preaching, teaching, and modeling baptism through a series or celebrations were also significant practices. The relational investment was a byproduct of intentional conversations that enabled students going forward with baptism. The practices of scheduling baptisms and following up with correlated with increased baptisms. Student ministries with all or most of the practices had more baptisms per capita, indicating that the more practices a student ministry has, the greater the effectiveness in reaching Gen Z effectively with the gospel.

Evaluation of the Research Design

The semistructured interviews were means of identifying best perceived practices for ongoing discipleship and increasing baptisms in the context of student ministry. The participants provided insight into their student ministry practices for reaching Gen Z more effectively. The semistructured interview questions provided the insight needed to establish the themes that emerged from the data. The predetermined questions provided a guide for spending time on subjects, insights, or queries that intrigued the participants. Thus, the questions were means of going deeper into the participants' experiences to find the essence of the most effective student ministry practices for engagement. The researcher asked exploratory questions to probe a subject. Some participants elaborated, while others answered concisely. The researcher sought to understand the responses and avoid losing meaning by asking, "What did you mean by that? Why do you think that is?" The follow-up questions provided more insight into the participants' experiences.

The first seven questions focused on the participants' demographics and enabled easy conversation. Questions 1, 2, and 3 were, how long have you been in student ministry? What do

you love about student ministry? Why did you become a student minister? These few questions were the most open-ended in the interviews and were means of getting to know the participants. Many participants shared their call to and reason for engaging in ministry. Questions 4 and 5 were introductory questions about Gen Z. Questions 6 and 7 were structural questions about student ministry meetings and volunteers.

The goal of each question was to build momentum. Questions 8–20 focused on the best practices, methods, convictions, and insights related to reaching Gen Z effectively. The researcher structured the questions as shown in Table 1. Each question had a purpose. Questions 1, 4, 5, 9, 11, 12, and 20 addressed the obstacles student ministers face with Gen Z. Questions 6, 7, 8, 10, 13, and 14 focused on the strategies for reaching Gen Z effectively. Questions 2, 3, 15, 16, 17, and 18 addressed the best practices for increasing student ministry baptisms. The questions provided valuable insight into how the participants overcame obstacles, connected effectively, and generated a high number of student baptisms.

Additionally, the flexibility of the semistructured interviews provided the opportunity for candidness and openness in the participant answers. The participants were transparent and excited to share their student ministry experiences. The participants knew the study focused on the best practices for reaching Gen Z effectively to increase student ministry baptisms. Limbach felt comfortable enough to say, “I became a minister because I wanted to offer to students what I never got: a good student ministry.” Limbach was motivated to reach Gen Z because he felt he could have avoided hardships and headaches if he had come to faith as a teenager. This honest, open, and transparent conversation showed that the participants felt they could share their experiences without feeling they had to defend their student ministries.

Considering the research methodology, there could have been more questions about increasing baptisms and how certain practices correlate with more baptisms. A weakness was that the questions sometimes overlapped or that certain responses addressed multiple questions. In retrospect, the researcher could have ordered the questions more purposefully to facilitate grouping, collecting, and coding the data. Also, there could have been more implicit questions about evangelism and discipleship and their role in effectively reaching students. Several factors could contribute to better student ministry.

While a high number of baptisms indicates a life change, it may not indicate ministry health. Therefore, the interviews could have included a question about how the participants incorporated new believers into their student ministries after baptism. Another question could have shown whether the participants had discipleship plans for students they had reached with the gospel. Additional questions about relationships could have provided insight into how the participants sought to connect with families and reach the home, partnered with others to form intergenerational relationships, and challenged students to be light wherever they go. Such questions could have indicated whether these relationships emerged due to participation in the student ministry or the overall church. Different research and interview questions could have enabled the analysis of each category of relationships and shown whether relationship dynamics impede or support student ministers' ability to reach Gen Z effectively.

Moreover, this study could have included asking students the interview questions to find if their answers matched with those of the student pastors. The participant selection found only tweleve student ministries with the minimum baptism ratio threshold. This element could have provided a clearer picture of what it takes to reach Generation Z effectively. Although the participants brought up this information naturally in the semistructured interviews, collecting

such data would have been helpful for this study. A focus group or survey could have produced data on the low baptism phenomenon and what it takes to reach Generation Z where they are. However, the flexibility of the semistructured interview questions enabled the participants to reflect and respond based on their personal experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

This final chapter presents the study and the important conclusions drawn from the data. The chapter includes concluding inferences and their connection with the literature. This chapter presents the purpose of the study, conclusions, implications, applications, and limitations. Chapter 5 concludes by addressing the limitations and presenting recommendations for future research.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the best practices for reaching Gen Z effectively with leaders of thriving SBCV student ministries in the Southeast Region. The best practices included methods for reaching students effectively with the gospel for ongoing discipleship and increasing student ministry baptisms.

Research Questions

RQ1. What are some challenges or obstacles thriving SBCV student ministries encounter with Generation Z?

RQ2. What are some strategies being implemented in thriving student ministries to reach Generation Z effectively?

RQ3. What are some best practices being implemented by thriving student ministries that seem to contribute to more students being baptized?

Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications

This section includes the conclusions for each research question. The section includes theological and theoretical implications, research limitations, suggestions for further research, and a summary of the findings.

Research Conclusions

This study found that the best practices of thriving student ministries increased student ministry baptisms. The participants' responses showed that each student ministry had similar obstacles, such as biblical illiteracy, technological distraction, and inauthentic examples. The study found that the best practices for reaching Gen Z effectively were gospel clarity, opportunities, intentional environments, diligent follow-up, and public celebration. The resolution section presents strategies and solutions for reaching Gen Z more effectively.

The participants provided vivid and detailed insight into their collective more than 100 years of student ministry experience. All the participants offered many practical insights into overcoming obstacles, engaging Gen Z, and increasing student ministry baptisms. The subsequent section presents the conclusions that emerged from the three research questions.

Research Question 1 Conclusion

What are some challenges or obstacles thriving SBCV student ministries encounter with Generation Z?

This research question focused on the obstacles and challenges of reaching Gen Z in thriving student ministries. A common thread throughout this study was concern about Gen Z's lack of knowledge and familiarity with Scripture, also known as *biblical illiteracy*. Barna (2018b) indicated, "Less than 4% of Generation Z has a biblical worldview." Barna presented worldview as "a web of habit-forming beliefs about the biggest questions of life that help you make sense of all your experiences." In this study, Waldrop stated, "We don't assume [students] know Scripture just because they are here. That's why we constantly put the gospel at the forefront and give them opportunities to have deeper discussions through small groups." A strategy was to provide students with a comprehensive Biblical worldview by graduation. Thus,

a priority for thriving student ministries should be to foster Biblical worldview to reach Gen Z more effectively. Gen Z students are not likely to know important Bible stories. However, student ministers can present the gospel to Gen Z anew and afresh. Walker said,

> I saw a lot of students who had not grown up with biblical literacy were discovering things for the first time. Like wow, I didn't know that! So, there is a freshness and newness with Gen Z, which is encouraging, but it also reveals where Generation Z is with their understanding of Scripture.

The participants indicated that Gen Z lack a biblical worldview for numerous different reasons, including moral issues, heightened political issues, the increased secularization of society, counter-biblical legislation, technological pervasiveness, rising sexual impropriety, and a lack of intentionality to model and prioritize biblical values. All these issues are circulated in news feeds, social media, and peers who do not understand the Bible. Dowell said the secular worldview "leads to the secularization of Gen Z and the non-assimilation of a Biblical worldview."

In an increasingly postmodern world, the pervasiveness of technology can distract and shield Gen Z from the truth. Regarding student ministry, technology and social media have contributed to biblical illiteracy and a low percentage of Gen Z with a Biblical worldview. Biblical literacy should have primacy over digital literacy. The Word of God should always have precedence over technology. Knowledge and wisdom and knowing *how* to use technology is more important than using technology. However, digital literacy can support efforts to develop biblical literacy (McKnight, 2022).

Another important variable in biblical illiteracy is *technological distraction*. This study found that technological distraction was a significant obstacle in reaching Gen Z. This finding did not align with Agnor (2008), who considered technology a hindrance unless tightly managed and directed by the student minister. Also, this study's findings suggest that technology is a

distraction; however, social media can be a tool for strengthening the community and enhancing discipleship (Agnor, 2018, p. 133). Hyperconnectivity with technology aligned with Barna (2021), which indicated, “Research shows that three in five (60%) said their generation spends too much time on screens, and over half (53%) felt bad about their own personal screen usage” (para. 6).

In this study, Wilson said,

> Information overload is a major side effect of technology. [Gen Z have] pretty much grown up with the internet man. They need help discerning all the information. Like there’s so much, it’s information overload at times. So, they just need to be able to process it. They’re smart and hungry for truth, but they lack common sense sometimes and don’t always know how to apply certain things.

Farmer stated, “Overstimulation is something we have been experiencing well before the pandemic. I mean, really, for the last 6 or 7 years, you've seen the byproduct of the overstimulation of our society.” A joint survey from the IBM Institute for Business Value and the National Retail Federation (2017) showed that 66% of the Gen Z respondents often used two or more devices simultaneously (p. 15). Multitasking or constant distraction is the norm for Gen Z. Technological saturation and distraction can cause disconnectedness, FOMO, anxiety, and depression.

As digital natives, early exposure to technology has impacted many Gen Z students’ worldviews and lifestyles (Lenhart, 2015). There is little oversight for Gen Z regarding technology. Additionally, many Gen Z feel overwhelmed by the noise, expectations, and cultural pressure of social media. Barna (2020) indicated, “Seven out of ten agree tech offers increased access to information, and better connection with friends and family” (para. 7). While technology provides the opportunity to stay connected, over half of the Gen Z students (52%) who said technology improved their life felt unsure how to use technology effectively without hampering their productivity (Seemiller & Grace, 2017, p. 41).

The distraction of technology could outweigh the benefits of social media. Caldwell said, "Technology is a hard obstacle to traverse in connecting with Generation Z. They are not used to connecting in person as a primary means of communication." Constant technology use may cause Gen Z to disengage from the world around them. Rideout & Robb (2018) found that compared to 44% of teen social media users in a prior census, 54% of teen social media users agreed they were distracted by technology when they should have been paying attention to people (p. 67). Technology remains a constant part of life and will not have a less significant role in Gen Z students' lives in the future.

This study also found that some participants supported using technology to reach Gen Z, while others staunchly opposed technology. Zirschky (2015) warned that much of the discussion on technology integration has focused on whether technology is good or bad, without addressing the church's responsibility and influence in a technological society (p. 187). McKnight (2022) said, "Neither cultural acceptance nor the pursuit of relevance should determine one's acceptance of technology into ministry. Instead, that decision should be grounded in one's biblical calling to change lives" (p. 172). Thus, student ministers can engage Gen Z more effectively by avoiding too much emphasis on technology and finding ways to reach them where they are (Barna, 2019b).

Caldwell saw the opportunity to reach students where they were and involved the parents. Additionally, Waldrop and Farmer used video games, messaging apps, and the You Version Bible App to connect with students. The findings suggest that technology is a double-edged sword, as it enables connectedness and distractedness. Technology's effectiveness as a tool to reach teenagers is based on how it is used.

Lenhart (2015) said, “Technology should either be adapted or passed on” (p. 25). One cannot safely assume that adopting technology will not affect the environment (Postman, 1998). Also, before adopting a technology, one should consider, “Will this help further the vision or not?” (Lenhart, 2015, p. 35). Postman (1998) proposed asking two questions before adapting a technological medium: “What will a new technology do? What will a new technology undo?” (McKnight, 2021, p. 267). Students can benefit from abstaining from media by media fasting and learning how to limit smartphone and social media use. However, student ministers can teach students how to use apps like Life in 6 Words and You Version Bible App to make disciples of Jesus using technology (Agnor, 2018, p. 134).

Many participants appeared unsure how to best address technological distraction. Youth pastors should find new ways to engage students; otherwise, they might find themselves competing against a virtual space of endless amusement and distraction. Thus, merely taking away or turning off phones might be insufficient strategies for engaging adolescent minds. There is a need to develop new strategies to address these challenges (McKnight, 2022). Youth ministers should assess whether certain tools contribute to their visions and approach popular applications with open but discerning minds. Student ministers should not reject technology based on fear of the unknown but on its ability to fulfill purpose or add value. Efforts to overcome challenges may lack direction if student ministers or church leaders lack a clearly defined purpose (McKnight, 2022).

Technological distraction can cause Gen Z to follow inauthentic examples in the pursuit of truth. Students need authentic relationships with mature believers who encourage them and hold them accountable in pursuing spiritual disciplines (McKnight, 2022). In their desire for truth, Gen Z may turn to disreputable online resources or people. In an era of superficial and fake

media accounts, Dean encouraged Gen Z to remain cautious regarding their relationships online and consider who they follow.

With one click of a button, Gen Z can be almost anywhere on the internet. Therefore, social media and trends can impact Gen Z students' beliefs. Gen Z students may consider YouTube or Instagram influencers to be authorities without looking to the authoritative truth of God's word. As a result, students may find themselves influenced by their peers and celebrities. In this study, Waldrop said, "Just because it trends doesn't make it true." Gen Z may feel confused due to numerous opinions.

Gen Z can find themselves pulled in many directions. Many Gen Z students are unsure of how to interpret what they see and uncertain about key issues, values, and beliefs. The participants in this study noted the lack of authentic examples for Gen Z. Inauthentic examples were a significant obstacle to reaching Gen Z effectively. Gen Z students crave authentic examples but may follow people they do not personally know. Caldwell said,

> Google cannot provide the personal touch that is needed for hard to discern issues of life. Generation Z desperately needs individuals who they can have face-to-face interaction with and have someone who can genuinely care for them and share with them truth. They don't need a BuzzFeed article, like a real person to go to as a mentor, as a friend that can give quality advice that cares about them.

Foster said, "We need people who will stand in the gaps and be examples worth emulating."

Due to curiosity, individuals may sacrifice or compromise truth. Thus, connectivity has drawbacks and upsides. Several participants chose not to see technology as a threat but an opportunity to fill the void in most teenagers' life and be examples. Gen Z students may follow inauthentic examples due to a lack of human connection and mentors. Many churches have an increasing number of broken and blended families. God's design for the home includes mentorship through personal investment and instruction (McKnight, 2022).

There is a great need for Christ followers to meet face-to-face weekly to challenge each other in their personal faith. Twenge (2017), a secular source, also saw teenagers' need for mentors, saying, "Teenagers need positive personal relationships and individuals who will help answer their many questions about what to do with their life" (p. 36). Personal connection is the antidote to technological distraction and inauthentic examples. Technology can be a barrier to Gen Z connecting with others. In this study, Foster said,

> Generation Z wrestles with identity and self-esteem. They aren't comfortable in their own skin, but they want to express themselves. Without authentic examples to emulate, Generation Z will often take to the false security net of technology, which allows them to express themselves in more of a sheltered way. Here they can paint whatever picture they want of themselves, without having to truly engage others.

Gen Z can learn and practice the biblical worldview by observing and modeling adults who love God. Thus, authentic relationships can be a strategy for reaching Gen Z more effectively.

Research Question 2 Conclusion

What strategies or best practices are being implemented in student ministries that are thriving?

This research question showed the practices that contributed to thriving student ministries. The data showed the best practices in thriving student ministries for reaching Gen Z more effectively. The four themes that emerged from the data were biblical truth, authentic connection, discipleship groups, and family partnership. The strategies addressed biblical illiteracy, technological distraction, and inauthentic examples. The findings showed the importance of implementing the best practices for thriving student ministries (Powell & Argue, 2019).

Teaching biblical truth was a major factor in reaching Gen Z effectively. Three participants indicated the need for students to handle and teach the truth boldly. The researcher interjected in one of the interviews, "If [students are] doing trigonometry and all this other stuff,

they can handle theology, not just for the sake of knowledge but for the truth." Similarly, Caldwell stated, "These kids are studying all these different and difficult complex things. They can handle [the truth]. Let them wrestle with the tough stuff of Scripture." Students can wrestle with Scripture and consider its hard truths. When teaching biblical truth to Gen Z, youth pastors should meet students where they are and lovingly show them how to apply the truth to what everyone says to them (McKnight, 2022).

White (2017) said,

> Whatever it is we are attempting to convey, much less explain, will need to be communicated more frequently in shorter bursts of snackable content. Why? Because members of Generation Z are the ultimate consumers of snack media. We need to communicate with Generation Z in mind and seek to meet them where they are at (p. 124).

The lack of biblical worldview among teenagers is a significant obstacle to thriving student ministries. However, student ministers cannot overcome this obstacle by doing nothing (DeVries, 2010). Gen Z can grow in maturity by learning the basics of the faith and using them to shape their daily lives (Bergler, 2020, p. 81). The data suggest that student ministers should identify the core beliefs they want all church members to master. Student ministers can creatively teach core content to students. In this study, Dowell had a key bible focus for each grade: creation (sixth), the gospels (seventh), God's attributes (eighth), identity (ninth), redemption (10th), sanctification (11th), and living a mission (12th). The sequential study enabled Dowell's students to thrive.

Gen Z should learn biblical truth. Limbach said, "If Generation Z is not taught biblical truth, then we will be unintentionally misleading them to conclude that God's church and his Word are irrelevant." Most student ministers do not want to mislead or misguide. However, without a predetermined proactiveness to reach Gen Z in relevant ways, student ministry may focus more on programs instead of on Jesus (Dunn & Senter, 1997). In contrast, when student ministers educate and equip students with theological tenets, they inspire teens to grow deeper in

personal intimacy with Christ (Pace & Newton, 2019). Sound, biblical truths enable students to commit to God's church, unite with His mission, and continue Christ's legacy for generations (Powell & Clark, 2011). In this study, Dowell said, "If we don't reach [students] with the truth, then they're going to form their own opinions, and those will likely be contrary to the truth of God's Word."

One of the prevailing opinions of Gen Z is scientism, which indicates that people cannot know something unless they prove it scientifically. Gen Z need a mature and rich worldview to explain the reasons for faith and why they believe what they believe (Moon, 2021). Teachers should spend time on apologetics and learning activities that involve the affective and volitional domains so young people take ownership of their beliefs (Powell et al., 2016). Young people can benefit from moral instruction, including clear and convincing reasons for accepting biblical moral teachings. Student ministers telling Gen Z about Christ need sensitivity to distinguish between ontological norms and epistemological considerations (McKnight, 2022).

In this study, authentic connection was another major component of reaching Gen Z effectively. Pace and Newton (2019) said,

> Students will listen to our teaching more readily when they have a personal relationship with us. They will share their struggles and trust our counsel when we have a relationship with them. They will also embrace our vision and follow our leadership more readily when our relationship with them is authentic. (p. 56)

The participants in this study saw God move in their student ministries through relationships with authentic connection. According to Moon (2021), "Genuine relationship matters in seeking to engage Gen Z in conversation about Christ and it takes authentic relationship-building based on trust and empathy, because this generation hungers for real relationships" (p. 23). DeVries (2010) focused on ministry with a long-range lens, saying, "Without relationships it is nearly impossible to build a culture of discipleship" (p. 78).

The best relationships and deepest connections take time (Hughes, 2022). Students need authentic relationships with mature believers who encourage and hold them accountable in pursuing spiritual disciplines (McKnight, 2022) A long-term focus on growth and development enables individuals to form natural partnerships and foster authentic connections. Gen Z can cultivate authentic connections in relationships. Several participants in this study emphasized intergenerational relationships and the importance of authentic connections with multiple generations in the life of the church. Intergenerational relationships contribute to greater spiritual maturity, healthier relationships, and sustainable growth for thriving student ministries (Pace & Newton, 2019, p. 53).

Intergenerational relationships are not easy to cultivate and require intentionality. On an elementary level, these relationships require taking a vested interest in Gen Z. Gen Z are experts in spotting duplicity. Thus, if Gen Z students perceive someone as ingenuine or insincere, they may not cultivate authentic connections. Gen Z constantly ask, “Why should I listen to you?” Student ministers need to earn the right to be heard. Authentic connections, which Gen Z crave, can occur by being intentional and relational. Surrey (2005) considered authentic connection essential for growth and healing. Authentic connections enable people to escape the bonds of isolation and develop communal resilience (pp. 91–110). Individuals can build authentic connections in groups of all sizes, from small to large networks. Therefore, ministers can foster authentic connections to reach students more effectively.

Discipleship groups were another relational factor crucial to reaching Gen Z effectively. Dowell suggested engaging students in discipleship by providing practical training. Dean said, “Life-on-life relationships make the difference in engaging students in discipleship.” Walker suggested “meeting [students] where they are and taking them to where God wants them to be.”

Gen Z respond well to leaders who care about students' growth and hold them to a higher standard. Adults are a key part of the ministry (Clark, 2015).

In this study, Farmer said, “Living out discipleship by truly demonstrating what doing life looks like makes all the difference.” Healthy discipleship groups enable students to forge authentic connections, be transparent, share struggles, and study the word for increased growth. Pace and Newton (2019) said,

> This transparency and authenticity within community created a dynamic that is missing in many of our churches and, more specifically, our student ministries today. Therefore, it is vitally important to teach our students that every disciple is called to share life with other believers; and we, as leaders, must work to provide a context that allows them to experience true community (p. 63).

There is no “microwave discipleship.” Modeling and putting the gospel continuously before students is a way to make disciples through discipleship groups. There is a need to challenge people to multiply, as this is the purpose of discipleship and a major signifier of a thriving student ministry. Ultimately, discipleship groups are powerful means of engaging students in a relational setting to maximize growth.

Family partnership had the most mentions in the research (311 times) on reaching Gen Z effectively. This finding suggests that partnering with families is one of the most important foci of thriving student ministries. Furthermore, the household can impact a student’s growth and development, as parents spend more time with students than youth pastors (Norwood, 2022, p. 217). However, many parents do not use family time is purposefully.

Trueblood (2016) found that parents were disengaged regarding technology and did not discuss spiritual matters with students. Barna (2018b) said, “Gen Z Teenagers today are increasingly growing up in homes in which they rarely experience intentional, uninterrupted conversations” (para. 5). In another study by Trueblood (2019), of the students who actively attended church youth groups, “only 27 percent of Gen Z said their family regularly discussed

spiritual things or prayed together" (p. 74). Thus, student ministers should focus on the family; however, many student ministries do not have a strategy for families (Jones, 2019).

Student pastors can partner with families to multiply and reach students effectively. Student ministers should acknowledge that parents are the primary disciplers by partnering with and resourcing families (Hunter, 2017). Youth ministers should be upfront with parents and tell them of their intentions to partner with them to foster growth in students. The home and family partnerships are the key to reaching Gen Z effectively (Watkins, 2021). In contrast, ignoring, avoiding, or neglecting the home may cause has students to compartmentalize and avoid living out the faith. Student ministers who understand and develop relationships with families can find avenues to invest in parents intentionally. Parents and student ministry leaders can fill the gap and provide authentic personal relationships that Gen Z cannot find virtually.

Partnerships between families and student ministry leaders result in more professions of faith, more baptisms, deeper relationships, and more people plugged in and bought into the ministry (McKnight, 2021). "Nothing is more vital for student ministries than discipleship in the place of the home parents cannot abdicate to the church the final responsibility for ensuring this is done." (Ross, 2013, p. 64). The literature aligned with this research, as it showed that student ministries focused on parents had higher attendance and engagement in student ministries.

Research Question 3 Conclusion

What are some best practices being implemented by thriving student ministries that seem to contribute to more students being baptized?

This research question presented the practices that increased Gen Z student baptisms. Six practices emerged from the data: gospel clarity, opportunities, intentional environments, personal invitation, diligent follow-up, and public celebration. These practices enabled the youth pastors

of thriving student ministries to overcome obstacles, connect with Gen Z, and increase student baptisms. The participants conducted these practices differently in their student ministries.

Gospel clarity was critical to the scope of this study, especially since salvation biblically precedes baptism. Salvation is not dependent on baptism but the biblical next step of obedience after the supernatural filling of the Holy Spirit at salvation (Trueman, 2017). Clarity regarding the gospel can result in a higher number of baptisms. In this study, Dean said, “Preaching, teaching, and modeling baptism all lead to a higher number of baptisms.” Waldrop found that having a baptism series to expound on the gospel weekly increased student baptisms through gospel clarity.

Several participants shared how they ensured their students understood the gospel and the significance of baptism in demonstrating Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. Gospel clarity is a way to ensure the people getting baptized know what they are doing and why. Dean asked students questions before baptism. Wilson recorded testimony videos anchored around these three questions: “What was your life like before Christ? How did you come to know Christ? What was your life like after you came to Christ? What's the gospel?” The videos enabled the students to share their testimonies with the church, and the congregants benefited from hearing a reiteration, resulting in greater gospel receptivity.

Opportunities are a way to increase student ministry baptisms. Simply putting a date on the calendar provides an opportunity, resulting in heightened expectation and anticipation. Limbach said, “We create a space for an opportunity with baptisms and but also help kind of prompt them or say, hey, baptism is the next step, and we're here to help you do that!” Limbach did not wait for someone to come forward before putting a date on the calendar. Dean encouraged baptisms at nontraditional times and considered baptizing students in front of their

peers more difficult during the main service. Some of the opportunities provided by the participants included Sunday mornings, block parties, end-of-the-summer parties, Wednesday nights, and a baptism night at camp.

Intentional environments were a practice for limiting distractions to increase baptisms and create intentional environments. The participants considered camp crucial for increasing the number of student baptisms. Intentional environments like student camps and fall retreats were key in increasing student ministry baptisms at the thriving student ministries. Caldwell shared how retreats provided a space and a place for God to move into students' lives.

Intentional environments included weekly programing. The participants maximized connection by designing appropriate and effective experiences for Gen Z students. Moon (2021) advocated for situating Gen Z in the middle of the learning process as a participant and not just an observer. Finally, student ministers should focus on the environmental setting and create intentional moments in student ministry services. Wilson said,

> We recognized that students need to have time to reflect and be still. They have ample time to do this at retreats and camp, and so we wanted to be intentional with building this into our typical weekly meetings. Simply putting in the program a moment of prayer or reflection made a big difference.

The researcher shared how the student minister encouraged students to pray for one person for 1 minute each day. As a result, there were more baptisms in the church that year than seen in a long time. The students drove the mission to reach and encourage their friends toward baptism. Waldrop said, "Where intentional environments are present, there is an overflow of The Spirit where God draws students to salvation."

There is a need to critically contextualize student ministry programs, messages, and environments to make them relevant to Gen Z students. Foster stated,

> The kind of connection they're longing is the kind that creates a sense of belonging within us, a sense that we are 'safe, cared for, protected, and loved. In other words, we

> feel most at home—most ourselves—around people with whom we experience that deep and authentic connection.

To reach this generation Chip Dean says, “We must create an atmosphere of comfort, friendliness, and warmth adapted to their preferences.” In this study, Waldrop said, “Students do not tend to go in places where they do not feel welcome, safe, or valued.” Waldrop sought to capture students’ attention by creating an environment where students want to invite other students. The participants reflected on times when students responded to the gospel and accepted salvation due to intentional environments.

Personal invitation is a way to reach students with the gospel and encourage others toward baptism in thriving student ministries. People go where they are invited; therefore, student pastors should not underestimate the power of a simple invitation. The willingness of students to invite other students to events indicates they value the community and want to be part of it. At the same time, a personal invitation also entails a personal gospel invitation. Thriving student ministries provide a regular gospel invitation. Student ministers can cast a wide net and give students and their friends an opportunity to respond to the gospel. Additionally, student ministers can challenge students to share the gospel; in turn, students can disciple their peers. a fervor to share the gospel and invite others is a simple but effective way to increase student ministry baptisms.

Diligent follow-up is crucial to achieving more baptisms. Farmer said, “The number of baptisms we saw was a direct result of diligent follow-up over time.” Limbach emphasized the importance of diligent follow-up with a sports analogy: “When there is no diligent follow-up present, people get left on base.” The participants focused on being intentional in getting students plugged into the community. While some follow-up strategies differed, each participant demonstrated a quick responsiveness to connect with new visitors or followers (Powell et al.,

2016). Dowell said, “Being diligent in leading people to baptism and to connect them to community afterward and thriving student ministries do this well.” Waldrop stated, “It is our duty to have those intentional conversations and to be diligent about how vitally important baptism truly is.”

Public celebration is the very nature of baptism: a public profession of faith. The participants considered baptism a public celebration of new life. Jesus went forward with a public baptism, and He calls all believers to go forward in baptism. Dean said,

> We believe that the purpose of baptism is for someone who has been made new in Christ to make a public expression of faith. Being around your peers is your biggest public confession of faith, right? So, we look to set up baptisms in the most public way possible.

Caldwell said, “If people can get excited in public at a football game or anywhere else, then there’s no reason why people can’t celebrate others.” Waldrop noted the need to publicly celebrate, “Ultimately, baptisms are our greatest quantifier that we have [that] indicates an inward transformation, and a student who is willing to go forward and say, “I belong to Jesus” is worth every bit of celebration.” The hope is that students who get baptized honor God publicly with their lives.

Research Limitations

This study’s participants included thriving student ministers from the Southeast Region of the SBCV. This region, known as Tidewater or Hampton Roads, is the largest metropolitan area in Virginia. The area’s major cities include Chesapeake, Hampton, Newport News, Norfolk, Portsmouth, Suffolk, Virginia Beach, Yorktown, and Williamsburg. The research included churches voluntarily affiliated with the SBCV. A potential weakness of this study is that the participants may not have reflected the experiences of pastors of different denominations. The study did not include churches with the same setting and size. Additionally, this study included

churches of all sizes and settings. However, the study had a small sample. The emergent themes could have differed if the study included a different sample size or research setting.

This study addressed subjectivity. However, the researcher, who was the primary instrument, serves in student ministry. The researcher's student ministry experience was a considerable factor in gathering data. The study provided the flexibility to pursue the participants' passion about a particular subject and establish rapport. Some but not all participants discussed how they changed student ministry methods over time or how their pastors' outlook changed with new positions. Additionally, the researcher did not ask every question the same way to each participant due to the nature of this study. At the completion of the study, all the participants were still serving in ministry. The sample size of the population was impacted and affected ministerially by COVID-19, but this impact was only lightly assessed in the study. Between March 2019 and March 2020, some participants moved, changed positions, or both. Still, at the time of publication, every student minister had actively led student ministries during the March 2019–March 2020 time frame. All the participants provided valuable insight as they continued to serve in ministry.

Finally, this study included churches of all sizes based on the baptism ratio. The baptism ratio showed the smaller churches with comparatively more baptisms per capita than some larger churches. The baptism ratio was a means of leveling the playing field and interview churches with a culture of celebrating baptism. While some were more intentional than others, all the participants had strategies for reaching students and proactively helping students take the next steps toward baptism. The top ten list was balanced and contained churches of various sizes. While the baptism ratio resulted in the ranking of smaller churches higher on the list, nearly all the smaller student ministries would have made the list based on the volume of students baptized.

The research did not include churches with less than five baptisms. The churches with at least five baptisms had a significant enough number for inclusion in this study on the best practices for reaching Gen Z students.

Further Research

There is a need for further research to develop a richer understanding of the decreased baptisms phenomenon. This study included churches ranging in size from 100 to 15,000 congregants. Further research could focus on thriving student ministries with a narrower scope for church size. Further qualitative studies should occur on churches with attendance ranging from 100–500, 500–1,000, 1,000–2,000, and 2,000 or more. Various-sized churches in different settings may be intentional in other ways. Future studies could include multiple denominations instead of just SBC churches. Saxton (2017) focused on Southern Baptist student ministry programming and included churches with attendance from 0–399, 400–699, 799–999, 1,000–1,999, and 2,000 and more. The variation in church size and ministry could be a topic for further study. Further, scholars could compare a sample of diverse denominations to examine the similar factors in the best practices for increasing student baptisms. Future researchers could sample participants from different church types (e.g., attractional, hybrid, or house churches) to discern retention themes (Dempsey & Early, 2013).

Additionally, further research could focus on Gen Z who are teenagers attending public or private universities. This study focused on student ministers of thriving student ministries. Future studies could include students or other church staff. Further research could include students from different parts of the country to find whether this study's results align with different settings. Scholars could study a region outside of Hampton Roads since the area is part of the Bible belt.

Parents' influence on students' lives was outside of the purview of this research. Researchers could explore how parental involvement in teenagers' lives contributes to a youth group's vitality. Therefore, there is a need for further research on parents' collective role in increasing baptisms. Such research could show a link between parental influence and student ministry. Scholars could explore this link with mixed methods research to identify statistical and qualitative correlations. Another area of research is the link between intergenerational relationships and thriving student ministries. A qualitative ethnographic approach could provide an understanding of these two dynamics in relation to people's experiences.

Two participants worked at churches of 200 or less. There is a need for further research on smaller churches with large youth groups and high student ministry baptisms. Statistically, a high number of baptisms (ten or more) for a church or youth group of 200 is an anomaly. Thus, scholars should explore how thriving student ministers at smaller churches reach Gen Z effectively. Abundant literature has indicated that teens zealous for the faith start revivals. Scholars could study leaders or interview teens to determine the best practices of thriving student ministries in small country churches. Researchers could examine churches with declining church attendance but growing youth ministry. Perhaps there is a correlation, but with nationwide inclusion, these churches could be first located and then studied.

Additionally, scholars could replicate this study with other denominations that indicate that baptism is an outward expression of inward faith. The members of some denominations believe in baptism regeneration. Research on the belief of baptism as a means of salvation could have different results. Baptism may still be a public display of faith, however misguided. Future studies could include elementary or young adult students. There is a phenomenon of rebaptism that occurs when someone is baptized with ulterior motives. There is little to no research on

rebaptism (Grant, 2019) its presence in the church, and how to prevent it. The research has presented certain strategies for preventing rebaptism (Briggs, 2016), but the pressure of other believing family members sometimes results in a premature baptism.

Baptism is a namesake practice of Baptist churches. Therefore, scholars can study why rebaptism occurs and what is evident in people's lives when they choose to get baptized for the right reasons. Also, future research could address the follow-up church leaders do with those who are baptized and the discipleship or lack of discipleship after baptism. Every church has worship, but not every church has an effective follow-up process. Scholars could study churches with a high discipleship rate to understand how pastors get people connected and plugged into the community. Researchers could also define discipleship and how to measure it effectively, since church attendance alone does not produce discipleship.

Future scholars could also study the retention rates of thriving student ministries to find if their practices result in a carryover of students who continue in their faith after high school graduation. Most participants in this study made professions of faith before they became teenagers. A few participants made their profession of faith after their teenage years. Further research could indicate whether the age one comes to faith correlates with continuing in church as an adult.

Most people are saved before age 20 (Pruitt, 2020). Therefore, future scholars should examine how church leaders reach individuals who were baptized and came to the faith later in life. Further research could also show the importance of relationships. Intentionality in relationships was a consistent theme in this research. This study focused on reaching Gen Z effectively. Relationships were a common thread for overcoming obstacles to connect with Gen Z and increasing student ministry baptisms. Further qualitative research could seek to understand

how relationships in student ministry are formed over time. Additionally, further research could indicate why relationships matter in the context of this phenomenon in Baptist life.

The participants in this study indicated that increased student ministry baptisms occurred with intentionality and relational investment. Moreover, increased baptisms are a direct result of synergistic relationships and multiple people investing in students. Broyles (2009) focused on SBC student ministries and found that 90% of the 414 student ministry mission statements included "proclaimed discipleship/spiritual growth as a driving value of the ministry" (p. 135).

Baptism is the first step in obedience and a valuable part of discipleship. Baptism is a priority for many Southern Baptist student ministries. DeVries (2010) outlined five "normal" indicators of youth ministry:

1. A youth ministry will settle at 10% of the worshiping congregation.
2. The youth ministry budget should be $1,000–1,500 per young person.
3. There should be one full time staff person for every 50 youth.
4. There should be one adult volunteer leader for every five youth.
5. Even with significant investment, a youth ministry has a ceiling of 20% of the congregation.

This list came from a reputable author who shaped much of the student ministry landscape, especially regarding family-focused ministry.

A quantitative or mixed methods study could indicate the accuracy of DeVries' (2010) and Morgan's (2022) data and benchmarks of church health. Like DeVries found that "the average number of students is 10% of the overall church attendance" (p. 29). In other words, for every nine adults and kids in attendance, there's typically one student between sixth and twelfth grade" (Morgan, 2022, para. 2). Both authors provided practical insight, but their findings remain unsubstantiated.

Future researchers could collect the following information from participants: average weekly church attendance, average weekly attendance of student ministry, amount of church baptisms in the calendar year, and amount of student ministry baptisms in the calendar year. Further research could show the discipleship, spiritual growth, and relationships of thriving student ministries. Furthermore, future research could indicate the best student ministry practices for reaching Gen Z effectively and increasing student ministry baptisms.

Summary

This research showed the best practices of thriving student ministries in the Southeast Region of the SBCV for reaching Gen Z students effectively. The study presented the findings through a trifold lens: overcoming obstacles to connect with Gen Z, effective strategies for reaching Gen Z, and best practices for increasing Gen Z student ministry baptisms. The in-depth semistructured interview responses showed that biblical illiteracy, technological distraction, and inauthentic examples were the primary obstacles to connecting with Gen Z. Effective strategies for combatting these obstacles include teaching biblical truth, making authentic connections, having intentional discipleship groups, and strengthening family partnerships. Finally, the best practices for increasing Gen Z student baptisms included gospel clarity, opportunities, intentional environment, diligent follow-up, and public celebration. Student ministers can apply these strategies to raise their expectations of students. Moreover, these strategies are means of establishing thriving student ministries, increasing baptisms, and reaching Gen Z effectively in the Southeast Region of the SBCV.

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APPENDIX A

CONSENT LETTER – PASTORAL INTERVIEW

Title of the Project: *Thriving: Student Ministry Best Practices for Reaching Generation Z Effectively*
Principal Investigator: Seth Peterson, EdD Candidate, Liberty University School of Divinity

Invitation to be part of a research study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a current student minister in the Southern Baptist Conservative of Virginia (SBCV) from the Southeast Region with a top-baptizing student ministry. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of this study is to identify the specific methods, strategies, and approaches in top-baptizing student ministries that lead to an increase in overall student baptisms.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to participate in an in-person interview. It should take approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete and will be audio and video recorded.

How could you or others benefit from being in this study?

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

Benefits to society include contributions to knowledge of Generation Z and how to reach teenagers more effectively with the gospel in general.

What risks might you experience from being in the study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms unless permission has been given to name participants and their respective churches directly.

- Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the private records. The interview will take place in a mutually agreed upon space where there are preferably minimal interruptions.

- The recordings and interview notes will be safely stored on a password secured iCloud storing system device and may be used for future presentations.

How will you be compensated for being part of this study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Does the researcher have any conflicts of interest?

The researcher serves as an associate pastor at The First Baptist Church (FBC) of Norfolk. This disclosure is made so that you can decide if this relationship will affect your willingness to participate in this study. No action will be taken against an individual based on his or her decision to participate or not participate in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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

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

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

The researcher conducting this study is Seth Peterson. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [redacted] and or speterson30@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Rusty Small, at rnsmall@liberty.edu.

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

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

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

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

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

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio and video record me as part of my participation in this study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to disclose my name and the name of my church with the dissertation and publication.

☐ The researcher has my permission to directly quote me by name within the dissertation and publication.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 9, 2022

Seth Peterson
Rusty Small

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-256 THRIVING: BEST STUDENT MINISTRY PRACTICES FOR REACHING GENERATION Z EFFECTIVELY

Dear Seth Peterson, Rusty Small,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

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

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

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

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

APPENDIX C

PASTORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been serving in student ministry?
2. What do you love about student ministry?
3. Why did you become a student minister?
4. What in your opinion makes Generation Z unique?
5. What in your opinion is the greatest need of Generation Z?
6. When does your student ministry meet during the week?
7. How many volunteer leaders do you have serving in your student ministry?
8. Where do you see God consistently showing up and showing out in your student ministry?
9. What is your greatest concern when it comes to the church not reaching Generation Z effectively?
10. In your opinion, what is the best way to grow a student ministry?
11. What specifically encourages you about what you see in Generation Z?
12. What do you see as the biggest obstacle in connecting with Generation Z effectively?
13. What has your student ministry found as the best way to engage Generation Z with discipleship?
14. Is discipleship structured into the culture of your student ministry, or would you say it happens organically/naturally?
15. What does your student ministry do to reach students with the gospel?
16. Is there something specific your student ministry does that leads to a high number of baptisms?
17. How do you structure your student ministry in such a way that effectively reaches Generation Z with the gospel?
18. What strategies or approaches would you identify as significant in leading to the evangelism of Generation Z?
19. How should a student ministry gauge success in ministry? Most by numbers, but consistency is key.

20. What is the message Generation Z desperately needs to hear most?

APPENDIX D

VERBAL RECRUITMENT DOCUMENT

Hello Potential Participant,

As a doctoral student in the School of Divinity at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a degree. The purpose of my study is to determine the best practices to reach Generation "Z" most effectively with the gospel, and if you meet my participant criteria and are interested, I would like to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be a current student minister in the Southern Baptist Convention of Virginia (SBCV), from the Southeast Region, with a top-baptizing student ministry. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an in-person interview. It should take approximately 60 to 90 minutes to complete and will be audio recorded. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

Would you like to participate? If so, great! Can we set up a time for an interview? If not, I understand and appreciate your consideration.

A consent document will be emailed to you one week before the interview and given to you at the time of the interview. The consent documentation contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me by email prior to the time of the interview, or in person at the time of the interview.

Thank you for your time. Do you have any questions?

Sincerely,

Seth Peterson
Ed.D. Candidate
Liberty University
School of Divinity