INCORPORATING YOUTH: AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH TO

CONGREGATIONAL YOUTH PRACTICES

A thesis submitted to the
Drew University Theological School
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in Religion

Advisor: Meredith Hoxie Schol

Matthew Charles May
Drew University
Madison, New Jersey
May 2023

ABSTRACT

INCORPORATING YOUTH: AN INTERGENERATIONAL APPROACH TO

CONGREGATIONAL YOUTH PRACTICES

M.A. Thesis by

Matthew Charles May

This paper examines the praxis of youth ministry with the interpretive lens of a correlation between decades of relatively unaltered youth ministry practices and the decline of mainline church denomination through understanding the history, shifts, and modern structural church arguments in the implementations of youth ministry practices. This paper questions why youth ministry, in its current form, cannot provide for the needs of youth through a connection to the church community and God. Emphasizing the need for intergenerational practices within the church, this paper argues for methods of intergenerationality to bolster youth programming by incorporating youth into the life of modern church. This thesis will point to practices churches can embrace to become an authentic intergenerational community approach to faith formation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The formation of youth ministry in the general American church no longer meets the needs of the youth attending modern Sunday school classes and other youth formation religious education within the structure of the general American church. A reconsideration with youth ministry is necessary to reshape the design of the youth faith formation into a medium that actively engages the younger generations with their elderly counterparts where Holly Allen, former director of the child and family studies program at John Brown University, and Christine Ross, director of the Christian education program at Concordia University, note, "During the last hundred years, steady changes have occurred in society that have separated families and segregated age groups, not only in educational settings but in life in general. There are fewer regular and structured interactions between old and young…than ever before."[1] The lack of intergenerational connections creates a trend of the general decline in youth participation in mainline Protestant churches in the United States because churches are not fully incorporating youth into their congregations.

This research seeks to (1) understand the shift from the mainline Protestant traditional methods of youth formation, (2) learn the needs of the current youth generation, and (3) establish informed practices that can reshape the way all churches understand youth ministry in an intergenerational setting by examining Intergenerational faith formation is the formational shift in youth ministry the church requires to engage the twenty-first-century religious context. Churches must continually find ways to invite and welcome youth into the mainstream functions

---

[1] Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*, Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012, 30.

of the church through inclusion and engagement with leadership positions in the church that is a practical use of our theology.

I am using the term "youth" to describe people that are generally under the age of 18. This term encompasses terminology for older children, teenagers, and adolescents. The primary denotation is youth are a subculture that does not possess the ability to hold adult responsibility, which is the case for most children, or this age cohort is not allowed to be given adult responsibility because they are deemed "too young" and thus dismissed from "adult" conversations. According to Inge Wise, psychotherapist and consultant researcher of adolescent identities in post-Communist countries, the ages considered in this discussion can include up to age twenty-five but often are limited to twenty years old.[2] Mark Senter, chair of the Educational Ministries Department at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, articulates, "In the majority of the world, *youth* means everyone under the mid-thirties. If a person is not an adult, she or he is a youth."[3] There are many denotations of the term "youth" that exist from various perspectives in the world in the spheres of youth in sociological roles, developmental periods of non-adulthood, and cultural perspectives on how youth are viewed in society.

For this paper, I interpret the denotation of "youth" as a cohort that relies on adult figures to provide for their needs as caretakers both in the home and in the world around them. Youth are oriented towards achieving adulthood. This age range is often described as formative years in which the youth engage with the world on a journey of discovering their identity and whom they will grow into when they reach adulthood. Youth is a time of trial and experimentation with the ecosystem surrounding the youth as they explore the multiplicity of options and opportunities

---

[2] Inge Wise, *Adolescence*, Psychoanalytic Ideas Series, London: Routledge, 2004, 1-2.
[3] Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 26.

available to them for a path forward into their adult lives. This age cohort is the primary focus of this paper because of the criticalness of this liminal space between true childhood and adulthood. Youth experience this space as a foundation for their future, which is why it is often considered a time of great importance as youth seek to understand the world and their role in the world.

The importance of the time frame of youth is critical to developing young minds, especially when considering the prospects of youth ministry. Youth wrestle with the theology given to them during their childhood in this period. As John Roberto, founder of LifelongFaith Associates, notes, "This point in the formation is pivotal because it is often during this stage of life when youth will come to terms with their religiosity and either continue into membership of the church or explore other avenues of interest outside of the church sphere."[4] Religious leaders and educators aiding in the formation of youth are critical to helping youth engage in their religious questioning and provide guidance to a multitudinous approach to understanding religions, particularly within the context of their local congregation.

It is also important to note the meaning and purpose of the "church" being discussed throughout this paper. References to the "church" should be understood generally as the global church that professes Christianity as its religious identity. Specificity is offered as a denotation of a specific category of the church which typically will be portrayed from the mainline Protestant church in America.

This research project will explore the purposes of youth ministry, how youth ministry was formed, and to what end youth ministry hope to meet, in direct connection with the church of the twenty-first century and the practices of youth ministry programs to provide inclusionary opportunities for youth to become an active and interconnected piece of the modern church

---

[4] John Roberto, *Faith Formation with a New Generation,* Cheshire, CT: LifeLong Faith Publications, 2018, 6-7.

setting. These conversations will help interpret the trends of mainline churches seeing a decline in the retention of the younger generations in congregational worship spaces and will offer more formative theology and praxis that connect the importance of religion with the identity formation of youth attending the local congregation and beyond.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HISTORY OF YOUTH MINISTRY

Youth Ministry in America Before the Advent of Sunday School

Youth formation historically targeted family provisions before the twentieth century.

Mark Senter writes, "Family survival depended on the work of every able-bodied family

member… school attendance patterns adjusted to work schedules, especially in dominantly

agrarian societies… It was the necessity of youth working that gave rise to youth ministries in

the nineteenth century."[5] This era presents a time where youth formation was placed in adult

conditions from the onset of being "able-bodied." Family structures relied on earnings through

physical work to provide for the necessities of the family. Youth, during this era, were expected

to contribute to the family business when they were able to work to provide for themselves and

their family. The ability to work gave youth the autonomy to begin adult aspects of life which,

while providing for their family, allowed them to engage in labor that gave work experiences for

their future. Working in the 1700's gave space for youth to experience the transition into the

adult side of life. There were fewer formal educational practices and more reliance on mastering

skills to be productive members of society by the time youth reached adulthood.

The Rise of Sunday School

The marker of adulthood that Senter mentions is significant because it means that youth

were aiming for self-reliance. This portion of history challenges the modern interpretation of

youth. Senter notes: "The size of a young person was far more important than chronological age

---

[5] Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 27.

during this period. Size was assumed to indicate usefulness in the work that supported the family. If a fourteen-year-old boy or girl could 'work like a man' then they were considered grown-up. If a sixteen-year-old was small in stature or sickly in health, he or she was seen as child-like."[6] The importance of youth ministry in this era is minuscule to the overarching narrative, but the cultural strain of youth being fitted for adult working conditions is still heavily embedded into modern society. Senter states, "For youth ministry before the twentieth century, chronological age was not a determining factor. There was no youth culture... Leisure time activities were limited to a few hours on Sunday afternoon and were spontaneous gatherings, generally associated with church attendance."[7]

Carl Ellis Nelson notes that "youth formation has been located within Sunday school since 1751 when Robert Raikes created an idea to provide additional support in youth general and religious education."[8] The formation of the Sunday school movement had the purpose of concern for the spirituality of the younger generation while giving children an opportunity to receive an education. In "Robert Raikes and How We Got Sunday School," the author notes, "Robert knew the future was grim for these children who had to work all the time with no hope of an education. Worse yet, with no one to teach them the good news of the Gospel or how to live God's way, they were likely to end up cold, sick, and starving in the dreadful prisons"[9] The method to develop the youth was formed around education and evangelism in the United

[6] Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 28.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Carl Ellis Nelson, "Has the Sunday School Movement Played Out?" *Austin Seminary Bulletin* (Faculty ed.) 99, no. 8 (1984): 38.

[9] "Robert Raikes and How We Got Sunday School." *Christianity.com.* accessed March 20, 2023, https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/church-history-for-kids/robert-raikes-and-how-we-got-sunday-school-11635043.html

States.[10] In the United States, the Sunday School was domesticated by the denomination and, as indicated earlier, became the principal organization for religious instruction when the public schools eliminated religion from their curriculum.[11] The purpose was an institutionalized way for youth to experience, digest, and interpret the Bible through the lenses of their educators as they learned hygiene, manners, and ethics alongside how to read the Bible and religious practices.

Senter points to a shift in the cultures starting in the 1800s when child labor laws began to take shape. Senter says,

> Child labor laws went through three phases. In the first, (1830-1860) states required employers of children to provide education of various types. This was followed by a period (1860-1929) when various states limited the employment of children starting with age ten and gradually raising the minimum age to sixteen...With the stock market crash in 1929 and the Great Depression of the 1930s, the third phase of child labor laws began. Unemployment was so great that adults began competing with children for the few available jobs. In 1938, President Roosevelt signed the Fair Labor Standards Act into law and in so doing prohibited most employment of minors."[12]

These regulations create more leisure time for the youth of the era. The youth began to have a wealth of free time that the church would recognize as something they could provide a solution for.

---

[10] Carl Ellis Nelson, "Has the Sunday School Movement Played Out?" Austin Seminary Bulletin (Faculty ed.) 99, no. 8 (1984): 38.
[11] Ibid., 40.
[12] Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 30.

Responding to the Youth Crisis

The changes to child labor left an impact on the youth of the 1800s because they no longer had easy access to the transition to adulthood through labor. A new path to "coming of age" needed to be discovered for youth. The youth began to engage with social issues during this time as they took part in the temperance movement of the 1830s to 1890s. The key to the adult lifestyle was found in pledging abstinence and sobriety. Senter states, "Like adults, children were allowed to join abstinence societies by signing a pledge to abstain. Pledging sobriety allowed them to obtain cards of membership as well as to buy and wear medals of the society."[13] Membership in adult society was the driving force for youth as they sought acceptance into adulthood.

Youth ministry would take up these pledge groups as temperance allowed spiritual formation that these vices hurt one's relationship with God, family, and the broader community.[14] As the 1800s continued and denominational structures began heavily influencing spirituality, pledges were adapted into the molds of their specific denomination. These pledges came from the Christian Endeavor, founded in 1881, which had constructed a general pledge that attempted to encompass youth spirituality that was shared across Protestant denominations in America.[15] These practices continued for the next fifty years.

As the late 1900s rolled around, churches began creating youth ministry programming to satisfy the additional time youth experienced. The culture of the 1920s was particularly problematic for youth ministry as the era pushed social gatherings that encouraged alcoholic drinking and engaging in sexual relations. Youth ministry leaders were forced to figure out

---

[13] Ibid., 57.
[14] Ibid., 58.
[15] Ibid., 59.

countermeasures for youth who were beginning to reject authority figures and engage in adult activity. Mike Yaconelli, Co-Founder of Youth Specialties, states: "Youth ministry has been the church's response to the crisis of a generation of students who find themselves caught in the current of culture... Because of the effect their culture was having on teenagers several years ago, the church realized youth needed special attention, so youth ministry was created to help develop the resources to survive this culture as children of God."[16] This comes out of the period following the Great Depression and World War II as Senter notes this is: "framed in an era when parents of the 'greatest generation,' formed by the Depression and World War II, had a difficulty coming to terms with the peer influence and personal freedom of their children."[17] Youth ministry was a new war for young evangelists to fight as they sought to bring youth into the church and regain normalcy after the major derailment of the Great Depression and WWII. More regulations went toward child labor laws including the Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 which required a minimum wage for child workers as President Franklin Roosevelt sought to create industry. The youth experience gradually phased out of the workforce following WWII, creating more freedom outside of schooling hours.

Dave Wright gives a more detailed conversation of the creation of youth programming that Yaconelli and Senter allude to, "In the 1940s, Jim Rayburn began a ministry to reach teens at the local high school, which became Young Life (YL). Their mission—to introduce adolescents to Jesus Christ and to help them grow in their faith—remains to this day. The

---

[16] Mike Yaconelli, *The Core Realities of Youth Ministry: Nine Biblical Principles that Mark Healthy Youth Ministries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2003,) 4.

[17] Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010,) 25.

strategy was and is for caring adults to build genuine friendships with teens and earn the right to be heard by their young friends."[18]

Youth ministry experienced another reform starting in the 1930s and 1940s as the pledge groups no longer kept up the educational standards of the mid-1930s. These changes sought to combine Sunday school with a new, nighttime meeting designed to foster youth fellowship with God and peers. Senter tracts the change stating, "Parachurch youth ministry agencies arose from Protestant fundamentalism with the express purpose of evangelizing adolescents. Called by some the 'Youth for Christ' movement because of its explicit desire to reach young people for Christ, the movement included leaders from evangelical churches who felt their churches had lost the vision and/or capacity to evangelize the new generation for Christ."[19] These ministries were successful because they took advantage of the technological advances of the era by creating youth rallies using microphones and using the radio as a communication medium to promote their messages. These practices continued into the 1970s.

By the early 1970s, churches began hiring youth pastors to oversee specialized ministries for youth by using the relational strategy of the parachurch movement of the early 1900s. Youth pastors needed to find ways to attract youth to attend these ministry programs. Wright notes, "Gatherings with food and live music could draw enormous crowds. Churches found that large, vibrant youth groups drew more families to the church, and, therefore, encouraged more attraction-oriented programs."[20] Technology changes also provided a needed shift for youth ministry as the need for entertainment became more prevalent in the late 1990s. Wright states,

---

18 Dave Wright, "A Brief History of Youth Ministry," The Gospel Coalition, April 2, 2012, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/a-brief-history-of-youth-ministry/
19 Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 64.
20 Dave Wright, "A Brief History of Youth Ministry," The Gospel Coalition, April 2, 2012, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/a-brief-history-of-youth-ministry/

"By the 1980s the emergence of MTV and a media-driven generation meant church youth

ministry became more entertainment-driven than ever. Youth pastors felt the need to feature live

bands, video production, and elaborate sound and lighting to reach this audience. The message

had been simplified and shortened to fit the entertainment-saturated youth culture."[21] The

continued shifting needed to keep occurring to provide youth with the desire to come to youth

ministry programs and experience something different than what society offered. As the twenty-

first century started, youth ministry looked similar to many of the other youth-oriented programs

in the world. Youths no longer were satisfied by the entertainment format of youth ministry.

Increased Influence of Technology

Technology became more prevalent at the beginning of the twenty-first century as major

technological advances propelled the advancement of human society. The evolution of accessible

technology shifted a heavy reliance on electronic devices. The most notable of these inventions

is the smartphone which allows anyone to access the internet from virtually anywhere on the

planet. In addition, technology provides a place to create the "perfect" image of oneself which is

particularly important when understanding the need for youth to fit in with society and their

peers. Sherry Turkle, a psychologist particularly interested in people's relationships with

technology, states, "Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human

vulnerabilities… We are lonely but fearful of intimacy."[22] Technology encompasses a great

portion of socialization for society, particularly the youth, as access to updating social media

accounts with information or the latest photoshopped image is streamlined. These devices also

enable a way for humanity to disengage with the world by simply pulling their device out of their

---

[21] Ibid.

[22] Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, New York: Basic Books, 2011, 1.

pocket. Younger generations prefer engaging via social media and messaging applications since they grew up in a world where technology was readily available.

Youth ministry programs have needed to shift into these social media spaces to engage youth once again with church programming. Megan Brown's research shows that youth ministers and youth leaders became their church's technology person overnight because connecting with youth requires engaging with digital platforms.[23] Being technologically savvy has grown beyond youth ministry and is now a requirement for churches in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As congregations were no longer able to gather safely together in church sanctuaries, the entirety of church ministries had to adapt to an online environment. Churches began hosting worship services on platforms such as Facebook Live and YouTube that could be viewed from the safety of one's own home. Brown notes an important takeaway from the pandemic, "During the pandemic, these leaders saw firsthand how critical deep-seated belonging is for students. Feeling like youth group is where they belong, find hope, find encouragement, and find meaningful friendship is what keeps them coming back, learning, and growing in their faith."[24] The pandemic offered churches the experience to begin to forge connections beyond the meetings during church worship services and other church-sponsored activities. There is much research that needs to occur following the Covid-19 pandemic however, one thing churches can take away from the experience of this pandemic is the critical nature of how the church is connected beyond the physical structure of the building.

---

[23] Megan G. Brown, 2021, "Youth Ministry and Crisis," *Christian Education Journal* 18 (3): 450.
[24] Ibid*.,* 451-452.

CHAPTER TWO

WHY YOUTH ARE IMPORTANT

It is the work of local church leaders to identify and adapt to the new generations rising within the church. We are seeking to understand "What is the purpose of our youth ministry?" Malan Nel articulates that understanding the deeper 'why' in Youth Ministry, allows us to figure out several 'hows" as contexts and challenges for change.[25] The path I would like to answer this question follows a path towards connected and engaged conversations with the youth in the practices of deep formation. The importance here is not that this practice is particularly spiritually formative, although there should be some aspect of spiritual identity forged within youth ministry, but rather a deep understanding of whom the youth are finding themselves to be. Looking ahead, Andrew Root's understanding of youth finding themselves on explorative journeys, youth ministry should realize that there is an affirmation that needs to occur so that youth are not left to deal with their self-discovery on their own.[26] The church now deals with the aftermath of these great challenges by maintaining a youth presence in the church community. Those fun, entertaining methods of gathering youth no longer secure youth to attend youth ministry programs.

Discerning the "Why's" and "How's"

We start by answering Nel's questions of 'why' and respond to the following 'how's' that stem from our 'why.' Root takes our essential question of "Why do we do youth ministry" and answers it by noting an overarching theme of safety in conjunction with happiness. Root states,

---

[25] Malan Nel, "Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach," HTS Religion & Society Series. 1, (2018): 27.

[26] Andrew Root, The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020, 31.

"The highest moral good for parents in our time is to protect their children through oversight, helping prepare them for the competitive rat race of modern society, finding happiness with who they are in this fast-paced life."[27] Root continues to express that this monitoring and creation of activities are a "hypergood"[28] for the safety of youth, which then produces another "hypergood" of the happiness of youth.[29] Root's major importance comes with the telos of his argument; "We're keeping them safe from wasting their lives, from being unprepared to perform in a fast-paced world."[30] Root's interpretation is also held by David Hooker, Elizabeth Corrie, and Itihari Toure as they look at happiness in terms of joy stating, "Joy emerges as a measure of the sense of reciprocal well-being present in an ecosystem that forms individual and group identities in reciprocal relationships with people, groups, and systems."[31] Toure, et al. reveal later that joy is the source of continuation: "An unexpected revelation was to discover that this dual principle of life – community learning and generational identity formation – was exactly how African people survived the great interruption (enslavement) to our African spirituality, family life, and identity.[32] Foundations of intergenerationally are vital to survival within a context based on community.

---

[27] Ibid*.,* 31.

[28] Root acknowledges that "hypergood" comes from Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity.* Andrew Root, The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020, 30. Root describes hypergood as the good that attributes differential worth or importance to them that is signified in more attention.

[29] Andrew Root, The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020, 31.

[30] Ibid.

[31] David Anderson Hooker, Elizabeth Warden Corrie, and Itihari Toure, "Justice Seeking Is Joy Seeking: The Formation of Faith-Informed, Community-Focused, Critical Consciousness in Adolescents," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 20, no. 1 (2021): 69.

[32] Ibid*.,* 74.

The Increasing Loss of Youth

According to the 2020 United States Census, approximately twenty-five percent (24.6%) of the United States population is located within our definition of youth.[33] This makes for a major section of the demographics of the United States to consider when engaging in ministry opportunities especially when considering that youth are in developmental stages where they spend the majority of their time in educational settings. Providing education within these formative years as the youth experience growth is foundational to the connection with religiosity in their adult lives. Findings from Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, researchers for the National Study of Youth and Religion, give these conclusions: 1) religious commitments and orientations of most people appear to be set early in life, and 2) what matters most is what happened religiously before the teenage years, and that the early formative experience powerfully conditions everything that happens later.[34] Roberto reinforces these findings by offering a summary conclusion of Smith and Snell in which Roberto states:

> The lives of many teenagers who are transitioning into the emerging adult years reflect a lot more religious stability and continuity than is commonly realized. Everything simply does not change. The past continues to shape the future. This is important to know because it means that religious commitments, practices, and investments made during childhood and the teenage years, by parents and others in families and religious communities matter – they make a difference. Appreciating the stabilities and continuities that usually override unpredictable changes also reinforces the basic sociological insight that people's lives are profoundly formed by the social networks and institutions that

---

[33] The percentage calculated comes from the combination of the percentages from age groups "under age 4" through "ages 21-24." See Figure 1.
[34] Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 279-300.

socialize them, that the relational and social structures that compose and order life are not

easily changed or inexplicably made irrelevant. Again, who people are is very much a

product of where they are socially located, and of what social and relational forces that

have formed their lives. And who people usually do not randomly and unaccountably

change over time. What people have been in the past is generally the best indicator of

why they are what they are in the present and what they will likely be in the future.[35]

A greater possibility to forge relationships with God occurs at a young age which the church

should be utilizing to foster their young into members of their congregations. This falls in line

with much of the mainstream church thought that "youth are the future of the church," but need

to be cared for so that they form connections with the divine and prepare to be intrinsically

involved in church life during adulthood.

God's Invitation to Children

Nel frames our involvement of youth by stating, "God involves children and other young

people in God's coming to the people of God right through the ages."[36] Youth have a great value

to the formation of adults as each generational cohort generally experiences the world differently

from the next. The perception of youth in the lives of adults and the elderly has a substantial

impact on how those cohorts understand the new interpretation of the world as the church

hopefully prepares to adapt to the context of the ever-changing world. Without the informative

perspective of youth, writings, and research that has gone into youth ministry would be in vain as

they would become incomplete. If we are interpreting the church as a communal entity, which I

---

[35] John Roberto, *Faith Formation with a New Generation,* Cheshire, CT: LifeLong Faith Publications, 2018, 7.

[36] Malan Nel, "Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach," HTS Religion & Society Series. 1, (2018): 59.

hope is the case for every congregation in their journey of faith formation, the older population is inherently responsible for the growth of the younger generation. This includes the development of motor skills, knowledge, language, and spirituality.

The adult impact on youth and adolescence is during a formative stage of life where humans mimic and make sense of the world through individuals they trust. Youth workers have an important position in connecting pieces between the younger generations and the older, established generations. How churches are using those connections to aid youth in forming theological principles and understanding is imperative to the retention of the importance of faith in the lives of youth. Even if they eventually move away, values of spirituality will still be embedded within them as an option for a lifestyle they can make their own. Root identifies this as a slowdown from the fast-paced society. Root says, "Unlike the flow of the larger society, the youth group encouraged young people to slow down. That was its appeal. You came to play games, hang out with a cool, young youth worker who was gross and funny, and have wholesome fun."[37] Having theological understanding is a massive aid to youth who are questioning not only the ideology of God but also every area of existence as they seek to find their roles within the world. Youth groups provided a place of slowdown so that youth could engage in these theological questions. Root connects with the adult philosophy of creating spaces for youth to engage theologically in the slowdown. Parents saw youth group as a "good" for their youth because youth group was a locus for engagement in a relationship with the divine. The slowdown of youth groups provided youth an opportunity to intentionally engage with scripture, biblical lessons, ethics, and other key religious tenants that were not experienced in the other

---

[37] Andrew Root, The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020, 27-28.

social structures of the world. Parents wanted their children to have this engagement, so the youth group became an important program for their children to become involved with.

Spiritual leadership must understand the message that is being presented to the youth. Is there space made for youth to question theological ideas or are we postponing their importance until after they have already made it to the later stages of life? Often, we see the latter response rather than the former. Michael Droege highlights the primary shift modern church ministries are engaging within the area of youth ministry as located in the creation of the adolescent age group that was too young to be allowed in the working class, but uniquely exploring what adulthood was. Droege states:

> It is clear that before the industrial revolution and the rise of a span of age called adolescence, the church mostly grew together. They celebrated new births when through social changes together, wrestle with theological challenges together, and then often at death, it was mourned in that same together church. Before the end of the nineteenth century, people moved from childhood to adulthood somewhere in their early teens. Children grew to marrying age, took their place in the family farm of business, or began an apprenticeship. The economics of the industrial revolution, either from the success of parents as industry leaders or the scarcity of jobs created from automation and a rising immigrant class, forced these young workers from the job market and created an idle class that, due to the child labor laws, could not work. This allowed for the creation of a youth class or youth culture as 'teenagers.'[38]

Adolescence is characterized as a period when youth begin to experience adulthood but are not old enough to be considered adults. They are stuck in what Droege coins as an "in-between"

---

[38] Michael Droege, "A Weed in the Church: Modern Youth Ministry Practice and its Effect on Mainline Church Attrition," Master's Thesis, Drew University, 2017, 13.

where they want to start living into their newfound adult capabilities however, they are told they

are "too young" and are dismissed from being full adults until they reach the age of 18. In some

cases, this age can be placed at 21 or even older.[39]

A Personal Connection

The connection I have to this work lies in how I experienced personally, through peer

observation, and youth leadership roles, how modern church congregations treat youth. I have

been a part of several congregations in West Virginia and New Jersey in which the ability to

contribute to the adult sphere of the church, as a youth, is relatively inaccessible. As a teenager, I

experienced constant pushback from assuming responsibilities in the church since I was "too

young." At thirteen, I trained to become a pulpit supply. This was unheard of where I grew up

and often, I was met with dismissal as only "just a child." Throughout my teenage years, I

continued to struggle against the entities that would deny me a position as an able worship leader

and preacher. Rarely would I be allowed the opportunity to preach even though I had completed

training to preach. This opportunity was only available through the relationship I had with the

pastor (who was my father). I believe if a parent who had a prominent leadership position within

the church did not champion the ability I possessed as a teenager to be in leadership roles within

the church, I would have never been afforded those opportunities to preach to the congregation.

I was afforded another opportunity when I reached the age of sixteen when I was asked to

be on a committee that tied local congregations to the higher structures of the United Methodist

Church in West Virginia. This position would be similar to a regional overseer position. Even in

that capacity, I was not given the sole responsibility of agency which I was given to share with

---

[39] Inge Wise, *Adolescence*, Psychoanalytic Ideas Series, London: Routledge, 2004, 1-2. and Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 26.

another member of the committee. At the time, I did not recognize that my partner on the committee was partially given a charge to make sure I was capable of my function to be a committee member to be sure that my perceived ability by the adults of the committee was able to have such a leadership role.

Another opportunity occurred at age nineteen, an age that can still be construed as "not old enough," where I was assigned the pastoral capacity of six rural congregations. I was the youngest assigned pastor that the church conference had seen in many decades. Lisa Kinney notes "The first point of a struggle that young clergy often face is the question of whether they are qualified to ministry by virtue of their age."[40] Kinney recounts an experience of a young pastor who states, "Our structures are defeating us in a big way, in terms of how we are getting people into leadership and administering the church. I feel the tension all the time of 'this is how we've always done it; this is how we've always climbed the ladder; this is what successful ministry is like in the church. You either conform to that or you go somewhere else.' I perceive in our generation a real desire to change that."[41] These structures function to create an identical pathway of achieving positions in the hierarchy of church leadership. Rare cases, such as mine, were a challenge to the structure of the institution and are heavily questioned. Even in this capacity, as lead pastor, I still had to oppose the construct of "age begets ability" within the congregations that continuously reminded me I was perceived as being "too young." (I was explicitly reminded that these congregations had been denoted as first pastoral assignments as they were meant to raise a new pastor into someone who would go on to have a successful career in pastoral ministry capacity).

---

[40] Lisa Kinney, "On the Front Lines: Young Clergy Describe Their Struggles in the Church," *Congregations* 27, no. 2 (March 2001): 12.
[41] Ibid.

I can look back to this period through a critical lens to dissect that at every turn my contribution was questioned because of my age. Yes, the church was attempting to be supportive of my ministry journey and the efforts of these experiences connected me to mentors that have shaped my religiosity. All of these opportunities for leadership positions were afforded to me because a mentor recognized the qualities of a leader that I had to succeed in those leadership roles. These mentors were multiple adults throughout my youth that affirmed my gifts and abilities which ended up affording these opportunities of leadership at an age that is relatively unbelievable in the modern era. However, the praxis and beliefs of the larger community were "you are too young" and "wait until you are older." The experiences of other youth are relatively similar and relate to the sphere of the role of adolescence in the church. I understand that my experiences are not unique and are shared with my generation and every other generation after Generation X. It is the lack of a conviction that before adulthood, youth need to be monitored rather than trusted with important roles in the church that limits the potential of the youth. This in turn pushes the youth further ways from the community and eventually separates their ties to the local congregation.

The Goal of Youth Ministry

The goal of youth ministry is a topic that has mild variations across the religious sphere. Most expressions from mainline churches hold with the previous section that "youth are the future of the church." As mentioned above, this phrase is problematic because of the diminishing role youth have in the present-day church. The praxis of youth ministry is a preparatory space where youth engage with the traditions, religions, practices, and organization of their local congregation to become the leaders of the church during their adulthood. I believe there is a better way to think about the ministry we have with youth. Throughout my practices as a pastor

and working with youth is that there is incredible value when it comes to understanding religiosity through the lens of another person. We find practices, ideology, or theology that infuses our perspective which challenges what we have believed or can strengthen the theology we possess. Students or children can have a lens that is not corrupted through the Traditioning of the local congregation into dedicated members of that particular local church. The importance of a confirmation study I am working through with the youth I co-teach at Wilson Memorial Church has the slogan: "Confirm, not conform." There is great importance in creating a place of safety, comfort, vulnerability, and authenticity with the youth that allows them to explore their relationship with God. Youth should be permitted to theologically question the divine for themselves rather than be prescribed an inheritance of faith. A faith journey is personal and relational which requires the sojourner to wrestle with complex ideologies to shape their identity and beliefs. Youth ministry programs need to be the places that younger generations turn to so they can begin to experience these things for themselves.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CAUSES IN THE DECLINE OF YOUTH MINISTRY

The Church and Consumerism

The theology of youth ministry as an experience of who the youth are is important to the structure of the local church that is so enveloped in a world of consumerism.

'Consumerism' refers to a way of life structured by and around various practices of consumption and accumulation. In a consumerist society, consumption dominates social practices, such that relationships, activities, space, work, and leisure come to be structured around various practices related to consumption. Consumption becomes a way to achieve social solidarity – a relational connection with others, even as it also marks identity and status. The activities of consumerism are not limited to the moment of purchasing an item. They also include viewing advertisements, thinking about and planning for purchases, shopping, the acquisition of goods, and the use and disposal of consumer purchases, all of which take a central place in the lives of people in a consumerist society.[42]

The church is no exception from the consumerist society of the modern era. Our functions as a consumerist church align with the ideas of forming identity and status and how we are consuming our leisure time.

Having a religion is an identity marker similar to any other organization that a person would be involved with. In obituaries, it is commonplace to read "This person was a regular

---

[42] Joyce Mercer, "Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood," St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005, 73.

attendee and/or a member of such and such church." Identities make generalizations about what

a person might be like. If someone were to say you were a Christian, that would imply to others

that you identify with a group that they give characteristics to. These characteristics can be both

positive and negative. With the structure of the church in mind, identity is very important.

Churches might place a higher value on congregants that have been baptized or are official

members of the church. Pastors might be regarded as a figurehead or simply another member of

the church.

Finding Identity

Identity can be a problem within the church as well. Congregations can become divided

on social issues while both having the ideology that because they are a member of the church

identity group, their opinion would resemble how the church would side on the argument. The

ways of youth ministry often align with the identification process of the church. This could be

entirely problematic because it does put pressure on youth to conform to the theology of the

church or they lose their identity within the church.

I mentioned the slogan "confirm, not conform" which is part of the way churches have

begun to address the issues of identity forming in adolescence. Root notes that part of the move

from the fast times of the late decades of the twentieth century to the slow times of the twenty-

first century is interconnected with the sense that each young person *must* construct his or her

own identity and that this quest is a deep one with a surplus of options.[43] Part of the goal of

modern youth ministry must be invested in the space for youth to develop what identity they

assign themselves. Root notes the change in youth ministry from the fast-paced times of the

---

[43] Andrew Root, The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020, 59.

twentieth century to the slowdown of the twenty-first century is not due to a lack of

opportunities, but because these have sped up, exponentially expanding the identity options.[44]

The twentieth century allowed for a seemingly fast-paced exploration of identity structures since

the limitations were narrower. This allowed youth to experiment with different identities and

eventually settle into one that matched their internal identity. Root explains that the youth of the

1980s and 1990s could be left alone to go on all sorts of coming-of-age quests.[45] These quests

led to the adult behaviors such as drinking, smoking, and sex. The experience was tied to the

swift pace of youth to surpass the coming-of-age and achieve the reward of adult living through

their adolescent questing.

Shifting Parenting Styles

The difference with the twenty-first century is tied to the vast array of options available

which does not allow time for a youth to experiment with each identity. Instead, the process

becomes a more individual and intimate experience. The quest still occurs, but it is discovered

within the person as a test of their coming to terms with their identity. The cycles between

generations come into play once again as we examine the shift of parents who realize the

"questing" of the 1980s and 1990s is not as possible in a world with greater perceived danger.

Many of the activities youth in the 1980s and 1990s would engage with are risky to the point of

being illegal or acknowledged as very unsafe. Parental figures are drawn to be more protective of

their youth in the modern generational swing which also limits the ability of youth to experiment

through questing.

---

[44] Ibid., 60.
[45] Ibid., 61.

Root also acknowledges parental overseeing as another hindrance to the identity shaping of modern youth.

> Today the slowdown is in effect because parents take extensive steps to control their children's lives. They take these radical steps for control because they ultimately *feel* like they have *very little* control. The identity options are so staggeringly open. And, more disorienting, parents are so bound to children's internal *feel* that the only option seems to be to pull their children as close as possible, managing children's stations and making children their life by being their closest friends.[46]

Children are not allowed to create paths for themselves because they are constantly being pulled by their parents to stay close to them limiting their children to a path that is similar to their own. The quest for self-identity becomes shut off as an external source because of the overbearing of the parents that keep their children from exploring, thus children are forced to shift their self-discovery to an internal quest. In the vastness of the expansive options, youth are tasked with finding their niche and identity.

Youth ministry is involved because youth ministry is perceived as a place where children avoid fast-paced experimentation and have fun while doing something perceived by the parents as "good" and allows for identity formation. My experience of being a youth in the twenty-first century, observing generations that followed after my generation, and teaching in the field of youth ministry is that many adults hold onto the positive nostalgia of their youth ministry or youth group as something fun and somewhat formative in their life journey. These parents, in turn, want their children to experience the same fun adventures they had when they grew up, so they use their source of controlling their children to invest their time into youth ministry

---

[46] Ibid., 60.

groups.[47] As leaders in the youth faith formation practices of our local churches, we must examine what theological interpretations we have for our youth ministries.

Taking seriously the loss of younger generations that will be explored in the conversations of Christian Smith and John Roberto that youth often decide on paths of relationship with God at a young age, one might ask the question what is the purpose of the youth ministry program in my local congregation? The answer found within the local congregation would likely have variance depending on which congregation members are being asked the question. The observations I have made through the research of this thesis often point toward a desire for youth to have the opportunity to connect with God with a backing theology and praxis of youth ministry functioning as a path for youth to remain out of trouble while experiencing religious and theological themes. The current structure of church religiosity is situated in adulthood. Attaining deep connection to membership in the church is limited to the adult cohort and youth are not given access to fully submerse themselves in deeply rooted relationships within the church. Thus, youth ministry has allowed a space of "adult swim" within the church, the creation of a space where youth may exist on the fringes but youth are not permitted to jump into the main pool of the religiosity and praxis of the church.

Understanding Developmental and Social Theorists

The model of the school served as a structure for how Christian education should be modeled according to the Sunday School model. Allan Harkness notes, "The development of the

---

[47] There is a more comprehensive source of information notating the impact of organizations such as YMCA, Young Life, Christian Endeavor, Boy Scouts of America, and many other organizations that had ties to Christianity and the formation of youth-oriented groups. These groups excelled at the functionality of giving a safe space for youth to be doing something "good" rather than partaking in the experimentation of their identity functions. For this paper, these groups and their activities are mentioned and not fully explored due to the vast wealth of knowledge in the history of Youth Ministry. For further discussion of this point, see the here oft-cited authors, Michael Droege, Malan Nel, and Carl Ellis Nelson.

highly age-graded approach to educational activities within congregations arose out of this milieu, concurrent with the development of a widespread assumption of the schooling model as the appropriate one for Christian faith communities."[48] Many of these shifts come out of developmental and social theorists to understand how humans learn and interact. Senter, Allen, and Ross attribute the works of Piaget, Erikson, Kohlberg, Mead, and Bandura as catalysts for the creation of the modern school structure. Allen and Ross cover the important milestones of these cognitive, developmental, and social theorists which have been summarized below:

- Piaget's four stages of cognitive development which is used to determine levels of understanding in children. Ross and Allen pay particular attention to Piaget regarding Piaget noting that the process of shifting through stages requires social interactions. Piaget's work implements age cohorts in educational spaces due to cognitive developmental differences during child development through age limiters generating support for education through age cohorts.

- Erikson takes Piaget's work further to discuss the eight stages of psychosocial crises which regard the social aspect as a "highly dependent" factor that is required to navigate these developmental tasks. These stages are identity forming in the journey of youth as they age and form opinions about the world.

- Kohlberg applies the necessity of social engagement to morality. Moving to higher stages of morality requires interactions with others, especially those who question the other's current stage. This research examines the changes and processes going on inside a person meeting with the objects, challenges, and people outside the person.

---

[48] Allan G. Harkness, 1998, "Intergenerational Christian Education: An Imperative for Effective Education in Local Churches. Part 1, *International Journal of Christian Education* 41 (2): 7.

- Mead studied how culture is transferred from generation to generation. Mead notes that continuing all cultures relies on the presence of three living generations in the prefigurative (rapidly changing at a rate that causes major differences between generations) society. The keys to functioning in a prefigurative society rely on communication, dialogue among generations, and a willingness to learn from each other.

- Bandura acknowledges that acquiring knowledge through trial and error is tedious and human beings can learn many things through observation and modeling. People need concrete examples of principles to understand and practice them.[49]

The structure of youth education is formed with some of these principles in mind (mostly regarding a heavy reliance on Piaget) to form age-in-stage learning and community opportunities. School systems use this model to delineate youth into grades that supposedly match their developmental status so that education would meet a group of students at the same point in development. We see this generalized in the American school system which places students in age cohorts (grades) that they, relatively, maintain throughout their educational practices until they graduate high school at eighteen. This limits exposure to other groups in an educational setting even among similarly aged children until the students have the opportunity to take classes that meet their interests which then allows for some connection between grade levels.

Generational Disconnect

While this movement was successful during its integration, the Sunday school movement has been outgrown by the current generations. Cory Seibel and Malan Nel note, "As we now

---

[49]Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*, Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012, 87-94.

examine the behavior of Gen Xers as adults, it is evident that many established churches have failed in transmitting their faith traditions to this first postmodern generation. Recent empirical studies have generated compelling evidence to demonstrate the relative absence of this first postmodern generation from many established churches."[50] The structure has not been shifted to match the generational cohort that it serves. The methodology of the Sunday school movement no longer captures the needs of the current generations as they have shifted into postmodernity.

The research that was previously presented by Seibel and Nel indicates that the Sunday school format has failed to produce modern generations that desire to be connected with the church as Gen Xers move away from religious institutional ties. Seibel also contests that "1950s congregations were dynamic, effective, growing churches that met the needs of people during that particular passage in the nation's history."[51] Much of the success of the mainline American church in the 1950s was due to the timeliness of the structure of faith formation being implemented during large growth opportunities through connection to the issues of the Baby Boomer generation. Allen and Ross discuss, "the enormous Boomer generation with its particular outlook and its members' demands for doing things their way has enormously influenced decisions in faith communities."[52] Youth programming adapted because the Boomer generation only wanted to take part in the activities they were excited about which involved youth ministry taking the form of social parties and outings that targeted creating a fun atmosphere. These youth were absorbed into the church to continue participation in the fun events planned through youth ministry.

---

[50]Cory L. Seibel and Malan Nel, "Generation X, Intergenerational Justice and the Renewal of the Traditioning Process," HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 66, no. 2 (2010): 3. doi: 10.4102/hts.v66i2.876. 2

[51] Ibid., 4

[52] Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*, Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012, 38.

The growth stemmed from a direct understanding of the demographic the church was working to create programming for. Senter notes: "The G. Stanley Hall framework [claiming 'adolescence' as a distinct period between childhood and adulthood] of understanding adolescents, youth workers, educators, and legislatures assumed teenagers to be pretty much the same anywhere in the nation or the world. Based on the common assumptions, church programs were designed to address the 'problems' of teens. Ministry strategies, built upon the assumption that teenagers were attempting to discover their identity, provided opportunities for young people to associate with student body leaders to enhance their status among their peers."[53] Being connected to the understanding of teenagers in post-WWII times allowed the church to create specific programming that targeted the needs of the teenager demographic resulting in greater opportunities for growth in the youth departments.

Noting that the research from Seibel is about Generation X, a generation that is thrice removed from the newest generation, means that the continuation of these practices has impacted the religious practices of every generation since Gen X which impacts generational cohorts in the church. This means the church structure that congregations are getting older, but not retaining youth that can maintain and continue the church establishment after the passing of the oldest generations.

The experience of many churchgoers is located in the formation and practices of their upbringing. While Baby Boomers took their children to church because of their connections to faith and the church, their children are not as likely to return because they did not create those connections with a faith community as an important facet of life because, unlike the post-WWII generation, Gen Xers did not have programming designed to their specific generational needs.

---

[53] Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 32-33.

Similar programming from the post-WWII era continued to be used during the raising of Gen X. Root notes this: "Yet if we see things through a moral imagination, then youth ministry isn't being done more poorly, but the moral ground youth ministry stands on is shifting. Goods have been redefined and youth ministry has not caught up, making those of us who sense this transition unaware of what youth ministry is for."[54] This realization also means that children of Generation X are extremely unlikely to be found within the context of American church organizations because their parents are not establishing church community as a priority for their formation and youth lost interest in the church structure once it stopped adapting to the societal changes. The loss of Generation X from the church demographic subsequently means that, as the generations continue, there will be fewer and fewer youth attending churches in the American context.

American churches now are tasked with reevaluating their purpose and how they are forming their members. Seibel suggests that congregations are ill-prepared to respond creatively to the cultural changes associated with the postmodern transition which makes them ineffective at transmitting their faith traditions to the younger generations.[55] The practices of the older generations do not translate to newer generations because there is no connection with the modern cultural period when Generation X was being formed as a youth in the mainline American church. Since the structure of formation has not changed to meet the evolving world, younger generations are extremely likely to adopt a similar approach which will destroy institutionalized church structures. The structure of the church needs to shift to meet the needs of the current culture of the world rather than being frozen in the era of the 1950s and 1960s. The question is

---

[54] Andrew Root, The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020, 30.
[55] Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 32-33.

now, what does this new structure look like? How can leaders in the religious sphere create spaces to support new faith-formation practices? In the chapters ahead, we will search for answers to these questions that are imperative to how modern-day church leaders think about and practice youth and adolescent faith formation.

What the Church Has Missed

Church leaders have not recognized the way we are doing youth faith formation has been unable to achieve its goals. If a youth is recognized within the body of the church congregation as a full member of that local congregation, why are they not given the rights to duties as a full member of the church? Nel notes, "When one accepts my basic thesis, namely that youth are an integral part of the faith community, signified and sealed by their baptism, they can be seen as sharing in all ministries."[56] In Christian churches where children are not baptized as infants or the parents choose to not baptize an infant, baptism happens as part of the confirmation rites as a precursor to full membership in the church. In churches that do not participate in confirmation studies with youth, "full" membership comes after reaching certain ages that mark adulthood (usually 18 or 21), or by achieving some sort of milestone of life (graduation from high school or college or independency status from their parents).

John Young notes a traditional pattern in early Methodism, "At some point, usually during teenaged years, those young persons who wished to become full-fledged members of the church appeared either before the minister and what we would now call the session, or before the entire congregation. They would demonstrate their knowledge of what were judged to be essential areas (the ability to recite the Ten Commandments, for example). Then during a service

---

[56] Malan Nel, "Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach," HTS Religion & Society Series. 1, (2018): 13.

of worship, they would make a public profession of their faith and commit themselves to be

active members of the church community. Following this action, the minister and, perhaps, a lay

leader also, would extend to each of these persons 'the right hand of fellowship', and they would

then be recognized as full-fledged members of the congregation."[57]

A primary function of engaging in youth faith formation, particularly in confirmation

settings, is to open youth to find their connection to God, but it also serves to maintain a youth

presence in the local congregation. Empirical data from the Pew Research Center highlights a

trend in mainline churches; the attendance rates have been steadily decreasing.[58] This research

confirms the loss of a substantial part of the youth in the 1960s in which mainline churches were

left with relatively few members of child-bearing years.[59] The research also dictates the

following chain of events: The decline in membership of the 1960s youth removes a large

population of potential parents in the church in the following decades which reduces the

aggregate birth rate in churches establishing a continuing decline in membership in mainline

denominations.[60] This chain acknowledges a struggle the mainline church has been having for

decades; children just are not coming to church anymore and churches are still experiencing the

growing pains of the youth counter-culture to remove themselves from religious spaces. These

studies also have shown the exodus of youth during the 1960s led to an accelerating decline of

the mainline churches.[61] This trend is highlighted in the report by Pew Research Center that

[57] John H. Young, 2002, "Membership and 'Full' Membership in the United Church." *Touchstone* 20 (3): 18.
[58] "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, Published October 17, 2019.
[59] Robin Perrin, "American Religion in the Post-Aquarian Age: Values and Demographic Factors in Church Growth and Decline," Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 28, no. 1 (March 1, 1989): 82.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 86.

adults who describe themselves as Christian dropped eight percent from 2007 to 2014 and shows in 2019 that sixty-five percent of Americans describe themselves as Christians.[62]

This also coincides with the points of Roberto and Smith about the criticalness of the youth's timeframe when committing to God. Further indulgence in Roberto's work finds more empirical data directing to the importance church leadership has in the lives of youth when they question their relationship with God. Smith found from the National Study of Youth and Religion that:

Almost sixty percent (58.8%) [of Christians] made their first commitment to live their lives for God before the age of fourteen. Most of them probably committed to God during their childhood years. Approximately, six percent made a first commitment from ages fourteen to seventeen, and another five percent from eighteen to twenty-three. Thirty-one percent of young adults reported never committing to God as a teenager or emerging adults; One can expect few of them probably ever will [commit to God]. So, eighty-five percent of young adults who have committed their lives to God appear to have made their first commitment before age fourteen. These findings complement and reinforce one of the larger stories of this research: that the religious commitments and orientations of most people appear to be set early in life and very likely follow a consistent trajectory from the early formation through the adolescent and into the emerging adult years.[63]

---

[62] For more information, see Figure 2, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, Published May 12, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/ and Figure 3, "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape," Pew Research Center, Published October 17, 2019.

[63] Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009, 247-248. And John Roberto, *Faith Formation with a New Generation,* Cheshire, CT: LifeLong Faith Publications, 2018, 6.

Important takeaways from Christian Smith's work in *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* are shared by Gordon Smith as he concludes, 1) "Young people are not inherently belligerent or difficult but rather eager to be a part of the religious communities – insisting that the 'vast majority' are prepared to embrace the religious affiliation in which they have been raised," 2) "religious communities need to not think of a generation gap between old and young as those young people are 'aliens' or but rather that 'any generation gap that exists between teens and adults today is superficial compared with and far outweighed by generational communities."[64]

Identifying Issues

The struggle for current church leaders is counteracting the decline in connections churches are making with their youth to keep them involved in the church. Seibel details the realization that for the most part, "Gen Xers have given up on the church and they do not look to the Christian churches to meet their spiritual needs."[65] When looking at the research of Smith and Roberto there is a present disconnect between the youth that are ready to make commitments to God and the decrease in church attendance rates. Why are the rates dropping if youth are wanting to be connected to the church? Jones makes some realizations that the church avoids confronting which has caused the problems of retaining members to continue for decades:

- The world has so radically changed in the past fifty years that without comparable radical change, congregations are destined to a slow death.

---

[64] Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching. The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005, 259-264. And Gordon T. Smith, "Generation to Generation: Inter-Generationality and Spiritual Formation in Christian Community," *Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 10, (2018): 186-187.

[65] Cory L. Seibel and Malan Nel, "Generation X, Intergenerational Justice and the Renewal of the Traditioning Process," HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 66, no. 2 (2010): 3. doi: 10.4102/hts.v66i2.876. 2.

- The church can never again be what it used to be.

- Old power groups rarely change their view about the way a congregation should be; new ways of being will only arise when they no longer have power

- The chances of our church surviving another ten years are exceedingly slim, but we do not want to face the changes that might make it possible. [66]

The additions, specifically concerning youth ministry, require the ability to do something different from the pattern of faith formation that has been established for centuries. The primary concern I have with the truths Jones acknowledges is the change in "power dynamics." This truth captures an inherent flaw in the structure of most modern-day churches, the "power struggle."

The "Power Struggle"

The Search Institute, a non-profit organization promoting youth development, provides a great understanding of power-sharing models that are helpful when discussing the church's "power struggle" These are some important understandings noted:

- "Sharing power" is not the same as "equal power." It doesn't mean letting kids make all their own decisions. Parents do, and should, have more power and authority than their kids, particularly when the children are young. As parents, we know more, have more resources, and are physically stronger. Part of our job in raising our children is to teach them, guide them, make demands on them, and set limits that help them grow.1

- "More power" isn't the same as "all power." Though parents have *more* power in parent-child relationships, our kids also have—and need—power in our relationships.

---

[66] Jeffrey Jones and Phyllis Tickle. Facing Decline, Finding Hope: New Possibilities for Faithful Churches, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015, 6-7.

Discovering how we share power in our relationships and encouraging kids' power to grow as they mature is a core task of parenting.

- With power comes responsibility. This means treating children with love, respect, and fairness without manipulating, coercing, or threatening them in ways that harm them or our relationship. This abuse of power can include physical or emotional violence or manipulation, including withholding affection or approval to get our way.

- If we want kids to become responsible, they need to learn to use power. They need opportunities to make choices, work through problems, make mistakes, and learn from their actions. Otherwise, they will not develop responsibility. We must let go of them to grow.

- Sharing power happens in different ways for different families and different kids in different places and cultures. Do what fits best for your family right now."[67]

The structure of the adults as "those with power" is logically flawed within our churches because they marginalize the other demographics into being less important. In the previous chapter, I discussed the premise of youth being displaced from the mainstream functions of the church. Not only is this true for the youth in our congregations, but many of the elders of the church community also find themselves on the margins, beyond the usability of the church due to their age. This is another preconception many modern-day churches face. From my experience "Those with power" are *often* the adult cohort of a congregation. This does not mean that every church functions in this manner, but "those in power" are going to be trusted members of the community that can care for the maintenance of the church. James Provost, Knut Walf, and

---

[67] "Share Power: Treat Me with Respect and Give Me a Say," Keep Connected, accessed March 21, 2023, https://keepconnected.searchinstitute.org/strengthen-your-family-relationships/share-power/

James Gardiner account better for this position: "This 'power' is not one's own, it is rather a vicarious power, conferred by the Lord of the church…Properly understood, this conception of power in the church is a protection against the abuse of power and arrogance. And understood in this way, power is service."[68] These typically are adults in the mid-adulthood stages of life (35-60) with youth being labeled as "too young" and elderly already having their period of power. Common practices within mainline American churches use democracy to have members of the church board be elected by the congregation as representatives of the entirety of human power within the church. Within this "group with power" are all the decision-making and ministry-deciding entities of the church. On the rare occurrence, younger or older congregation members might have a small portion of the "power" of the church, but often this is left to the adult cohort.

The default setting of this "group with power" understands a primary objective to maintain the church by maintaining the mechanisms that keep the church functioning. In other words, "power-holders" bolster resources that will engage with their demographic since they are the primary caretakers of the church. This is not an argument to convince churches to remove the resources that keep their churches running, but an understanding that the church should consider all cohorts in the processing of the church. Looking at the wealth of knowledge offered by both young and old makes the church a unique place that embodies the mission of Christ to welcome all. If our current praxis denies the accessibility to the full membership of the church to members of our church community, there is no assurance to the outsiders looking into the church to welcome them because they see how the members of the church disregarded and realize they too will be disregarded if they are not within the cohort that is the "power holders."

---

[68] James H. Provost, Knut Walf, and James Aitken Gardiner, *Power in the Church*, Concilium: 197, T.&T. Clark, 1988. xix.

Seibel notes, "Much of what is called 'tradition' within our contemporary context 'is an innovation little older than our grandparents'. Nonetheless, these practices have come to be characterized by predictability and control, rather than life. As a result, they no longer are proving meaningful to many young adults. Thus, many churches, while keeping their traditions, have lost their children."[69] When we look back into the recent history of the churches, the "power struggles" have a major impact on how churches have declined. Seibel and others have examined the loss of Gen X that is tied to "power control" through the understanding that Gen X grew up in the struggles of the Boomer generation and their parents which often created a divide based on who won the power struggle.[70] Seibel concludes, "Many Gen X Christians have chosen to respond to the marginalization by simply walking away. Gen Xers are keenly sensitive to issues of institutional injustice… Once they are in the door, they want to be empowered to become a meaningful part of the community. Where Gen Xers sense that their contribution is not welcomed or appreciated, they may simply withhold or withdraw their participation."[71] The church has not shifted because there is not a great enough effort being made to include the younger generations in the interconnectedness of the full membership of the church, who are being treated similarly to youth and placed on the margins of the church. The refusal of the Boomer generation and generations that came before the Boomers to relinquish some power control to younger generations keeps the younger generations from engaging in the church even though, as Smith articulates, they want to be a part of the church.

---

[69] Cory L. Seibel and Malan Nel, "Generation X, Intergenerational Justice and the Renewal of the Traditioning Process," HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies 66, no. 2 (2010): 3. doi: 10.4102/hts.v66i2.876. 3.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid., 3-4.

Youth Dismissed: Understanding Adolescence

Modern church theology and praxis cast children, adolescents, and teenagers as the future of the church whereas the adult population is responsible for the maintenance, organization, missional practices, ritual practices, education, and faith formation of the current church. Nel discusses that this is counter-intuitive to the teachings of Jesus by stating, "His dealings with children are like his entire ministry -the manifestation both of existing and ancient views of God. It is not true that Jesus loves children and therefore brings about something new that has never been before. God loves children and Jesus confirms this in a society and culture that has lost this insight."[72] This means that the American church mimicked the world social structure of placing teenagers and adolescents in a liminal space where they might possess fully capable life skills to obtain positions within church leadership but are regarded as "too young" to practically hold such positions within the church rather than embracing the Biblical traditions and patterns of Christianity. Liminal space is a threshold that refers to a period of in-betweenness where the inhabitants no longer have the stage of life or find themselves a part of the demographical ranges before yet cannot obtain the identity of the stage of life or demographic following where they were. Particularly in youth, this has created the terminology of "adolescence," a space between childhood and adulthood. Wise describes adolescence as:

> ...A time of turbulence, disturbance, and struggle, often of inner uncertainties and chaos, the adolescent's growing discovery of their sexually maturing body and physical strength, alongside their developing mind and intellect usually enables them to move from dependence to independence. Thus adolescence – a developmental and maturational stage – makes great demands of the adolescent, who is called upon by parents and society at

---

[72] Malan Nel, "Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach," HTS Religion & Society Series. 1, (2018): 61.

large to get on with the task of sorting out the enormous upheaval of their inner world. As this process becomes established and new solutions are found to old inner conflicts, the adolescent's powerful energies turn towards reality testing and the turmoil and conflicting demands of their inner and outer worlds... All this takes time. The age from twelve to twenty years old used to be defined as adolescence. It seems to take longer now [in modernity]; twelve to twenty-five years of age (or even longer) is a not uncommon time span in today's uncertain and complex times.[73]

Christian Smith and his colleagues in the National Study of Youth and Religion found that young people committing to live their lives for God is one religious experience that is among the most important factors in leading teenagers into the highest levels of emerging adult religion.[74] Our provisions as youth ministers and educators play an increasingly pivotal role in the relationship that future generations develop with the divine. Youth ministry provides the space for encounters with God and forges connectional relationships between youth and God during the critical questioning liminal space of youth and adolescence. How youth ministry is provided to younger generations often determines what shifts need to occur within a church so that the local congregation can sustain the life of the church in their community.

In theory, each generation has the ability to adapt to the church structure when they become the leaders of the church so that the church might resemble the current sphere of the world. In practice, churches remain relatively unchanged for centuries because of deep traditional ties to the inherited structure of the church. The unchanging church structure

---

[73] Inge Wise, *Adolescence*, Psychoanalytic Ideas Series, London: Routledge, 2004, 1-2.
[74] John Roberto, *Faith Formation with a New Generation,* Cheshire, CT: LifeLong Faith Publications, 2018, 6

perpetuates a cycle of each generation experiencing a time when they are not children, yet also not given the responsibilities of adulthood. This thesis only touches on one of these inherited traits: the removal or denial of youth as an essential part of the church community.

"Too Young" Theology

Churches demonstrate their "too young" theology in that, the church has some form of youth programming that is geared toward youth groups as a way to control youth. In the twentieth century, the notion among parents was that children were growing up too quickly which Root discusses: "Young people were growing up too fast, using all the free time and space of the suburbs to experiment with drugs and sex. Youth ministry was for slowing down, giving them something more positive, even wholesome, to do."[75] This parallels the origins of the Sunday School Movement from the late 1700s and early 1800s that Nelson describes.[76]

Twentieth-century youth groups were formed around the idea to fill up time for their children rather than having them get into adult activities as part of the way to slow down the aging process described earlier. Senter understands this as the "youth problem." This problem is discussed by Senter: "As far as pastors were concerned this 'youth problem' had to be addressed. Some blamed parents for failing to insist that their children attend church services or provide religious instruction in the home. Others pointed out that Sunday schools were full of children and youth but that the instruction received did not bridge the gap between childhood and adult membership. Still, others admitted that methods used in church services and prayer meetings failed to interest anyone except those who led, and it was questionable if even they were fully

---

[75] Andrew Root, The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020, 26.

[76] Carl Ellis Nelson, "Has the Sunday School Movement Played Out?" Austin Seminary Bulletin (Faculty ed.) 99, no. 8 (1984), 38-42.

engaged when not speaking or praying… Not only was the church losing its youth; they had begun to 'worship' elsewhere."[77] Root notes, "Youth ministry was all about activities and outings because other than an after-school sport and a little homework, young people had little else to do than hang out with peers."[78] These activities were more occupied by a vacancy in time than investing in faith formation because they kept youth from "growing up too fast" by experimenting with "adult activities." Opportunities to engage with faith formation were present, but the primary function of the youth group was to contain youth by having them participate in something they enjoyed that would keep them out of trouble.

A shift occurred in the late twentieth century where parents felt it was good for children to be free, able to roam the neighborhood, and do what they wanted with their free time.[79] Space was created for the youth to experience life without being constantly watched over by their parents. This space and time most often produced self-enclosed peer groups in which the task was to grow up quickly by experimenting with all sorts of adult activities.[80] Spaces for youth reflected the new shift by making youth groups purposefully about youth with no connection to parents. Root denotes, "Again, the narrative would shift in the late 1990s when a new moral vision was being birthed, and youth ministries began adding "family" to their titles."[81] This changed the methodology to an approach that examined the connection between child and parent as essential to youth ministry. Youth ministry finds its roots in the structure of the home. Karen-Marie Yust argues from the perspective of children's development, however, the ties to the family can be directly connected to youth in general as parents function as providers for the

---

[77] Mark H. Senter III, *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America,* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010, 154.

[78] Andrew Root, The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020, 26.

[79] Ibid.

[80] Ibid., 27.

[81] Ibid.

youth. Yust acknowledges, "Most children construct some kind of God concept from their parents and other significant adults before entering their preschool years…The ways that young children describe God also reflect their growing awareness of the social structures of their environment."[82] The family dynamic contributes to the slowdown Root discusses because the 1990s recognized the critical role of families in the spiritual formation of youth. Family structures are how youth initially engage with religion and youth ministry began to include parents because they were the primary supporters and examples for their youth to engage with the divine. Joyce Ann Mercer notes the perspectives of Barth and Christenson that, "considers the parents to be presbyters or elders over their children. They are 'charged to imitate God's action, and in so far as they do so in all honesty, the children are summoned to honor God by honoring their parents, by being content to accept this action of their parents."[83] This, once again, sought to slow down the adult activities youth were engaging in by offering a place where youth were meant to have a fun time by playing games or enjoying a snack with other youth.

By examining the shifts that have been laid out over the past centuries, a pendulum swing can be observed. One generation is exposed to youth groups as a way to slow down access to adult activities and the other allows great freedom to explore life without overbearing supervision. The shifts occur in alternating generations as Root discusses. Generation A might be able to explore the world while Generation B is forced into youth groups to prevent "adult behavior" at too young an age. Root discusses this in terms of "the flip" where it is stated:

This shift in moral imagination began to occur with the arrival of the new millennium.

For young people raised in the 2000s, the sense that free time and space were a high good

---

82 Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives,* Families and Faith Series, Place: Jossey-Bass, 2004, 11.

83 Joyce Mercer, "Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood," St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005, 133.

started to quickly disappear. As the children raised in the teenage fast times of the 1980's and 1990's became parents, they imagined a very different way of helping their children flourish. It's no longer good to give young people lots of free time for experimentation, allowing enclosed peer environments in which to experiment… The old 'good' is now seen as a moral violation."[84]

Parents who attended youth groups want their children to experience a similar youth ministry program because the parents see the time they spent in youth groups as formative to their development and their children should also have this opportunity. The cycle of generational shift is embedded within the church it does not realize that its praxis is not functional for growth and development. This structure is correlated to an assumption, embedded in our developmental psychology and our uninterrogated theological understanding that youth will eventually have their time to "have power" in the church, but it is reserved for when they are older because of how the church deals with adolescence. Droege submits this response to the "too young" theology:

> Education stepped in as an answer to the problem of adolescence as it became more common for people to continue their education through high school. However, it is the effect on the church that is critical to our understanding here. Youth ministry as we understand it began to emerge in this new adolescent environment as church practices followed culture change. Emerging adults were given a "wait until you are older" signal even though theologically children were confirmed into the whole church in their early teenage years. To address the problem of the "not yet" generation of people, age-specific

---

[84] Andrew Root, The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020, 28-29.

categories of ministry were born that were focused primarily on Christian education, ethics, and acts of service driven characteristically by youth culture. Nel argues that this focus on adolescent development began to distance the church from the teleological drive of faith formation.[85]

The church dismisses the "too young" or "not yet" generation as capable in the capacities of adult behavior within the church by enacting these ministry opportunities to sustain the youth until a time when they are fully recognized as adults. Droege notes, "In the Christian tradition, the process of confirmation begins around 12 or 13 years of age and is completed after a period of catechesis and celebrated with a ceremony that welcomes the confirmands into full members of the Christian church. The rite given affirms the early baptism of the child and confers on them the gifts of the Holy Spirit that equip them for membership in the church."[86] According to the text from Droege, congregations confirm early teens as full members of the church, which is a good practice for youth that demonstrate they have the ability and connection to faith necessary to accomplish the adult responsibilities of the church however, confirmation does not guarantee that any roles would be bequeathed to the rising generation. Despite the praxis of inclusion of youth into the body of the church, the fundamental theology of the adult congregants still views confirmed youth as "too young" to take on the responsibilities that the church affirms they can perform.

---

[85] Michael Droege, "A Weed in the Church: Modern Youth Ministry Practice and its Effect on Mainline Church Attrition," Master's Thesis, Drew University, 2017, 14.
[86] Ibid*.,* 55.

Not Quite Permitted: How to Welcome Youth

The culture of many modern churches theologizes that the spaces of church life are granted specifically to the adult population of the church. I must note here that Mercer's work is particularly aimed at children, and, while not the primary focus under our "youth" terminology, the models Mercer shares are easily adaptable into the sphere of youth ministry and are worth being considered in conjunction with our understanding of youth. Mercer states, "Children are permitted to be in the church as long as they remain quiet otherwise, they must leave."[87] Mercer further describes, "the modern 'child-friendly' church as a paradox of wanting children for the church's future without the investment in the children in the present time."[88] Mercer explicitly states that congregations generally view themselves as "child-friendly" places. Most church members will speak of the desirability of having plenty of children in the church, but at the same time, many congregations demonstrate that they in fact do not want children to be present in worship, their central gathering of the church life. This is expressed through the ban on children through "adult-only" styles of worship and through the disapproving words and glances they give to noisy or disruptive children.[89] Perceiving children as disruptors to the connection to worship service or other faith practices of the church community limits the connection across generations that is critical for both the youth and older generations.

As a community, our focus should be caring for each and every member of our community. This does not exclude those that are incapable of caring for themselves. Since children cannot fully care for themselves, the practice of the community should have provisions for childcare for the youth that come into the community. I would continue to argue that it is not

---

[87] Joyce Mercer, "Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood," St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005, 2.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Ibid.

solely the responsibility of the parents or guardians of the child to provide for the needs of the child. While the primary purpose of youth faith formation is a journey of interpretation and knowledge-seeking, there is an element of child care that needs to be provided to grant spaces where deeper theological understandings can occur. Children need to have the assurance that their needs will be met. Molding local congregations into spaces where children have safety, affirmation, friendship, love, and bodily needs allows the opportunity to think more deeply about questions of God which creates opportunities for engagement with faith formation. While churches are not childcare facilities, they should function to meet the needs of the congregation that worships there allowing congregants to focus on their spirituality with God.

Modern church entrenchment in the "child-friendly" passive perspective only lures churches into a false sense of identity of "double messages" which hide the true intentions of requiring the children to meet the social expectations of the congregation.[90] Part of the educational work of religious leaders in local congregations, specifically religious leaders who continually study academic writings, is to share their findings with the congregations.

Nel takes a firm stance that:

There is no justification to "count youth out" because they are young or counting them out until they reach a certain age. They are part of God's faith community because God brought them to life. Integral means to be part of, in such a way like every single chord in a woven cloth, is part and parcel of the whole. There is no way of separating that chord from the whole without damaging the whole. Many local churches have tried it. The Inclusive Missional Approach, [how youth are being incorporated into the mission of the church] is about taking 'integral seriously, even before they lie in the cradle, before birth.

---

[90]Ibid.

God knows about them. God, and God alone gives life. Therefore, to say: from the cradle until they are standing at the cradle of the next generation (as youth) are an integral part of the faith community.[91]

The current climate of the majority of modern churches does not create spaces that would grant access to the youth to become part of the community. So often youth are forced out of the sanctuary during worship service into spaces that are "more suitable for their noise."

Our objective as religious leaders should not be aimed at pawning the children off to some other area of the church but working with them to form them into spiritual beings that have wrestled with spirituality. This phrasing is specific because our goal should not be total conformation to our rituals, practices, or engagement with God. We must realize that there are different theological approaches and interpretations of God. Our theology dictates our relationship with God and that relationship gets fractured if we are forced into another traditional theological understanding of God. Youth should be allowed the space to figure out their theology of God for themselves while being guided by religious leaders through that process which is confirming, not conforming. Each person has a sacred worth and how our praxis of interactions and how we involve each generational cohort in the functions of the church, or the lack of their involvement, has established our congregational praxis of how each generation is treated. When we look at the practices for ministry and involvement of youth in the greater church structure, there is usually a removal of this demographic from the mainstream praxis of the congregations. Mercer suggests this theological understanding:

---

[91] Malan Nel, "Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach," HTS Religion & Society Series. 1, (2018): 64.

Our ideas about children (theological and others) and our practices with children (religious and others) mutually influence each other. Both are formed socially and culturally within the various "communities of practice" we inhabit. Beliefs do influence actions, although there is no single, fixed formula for this influence. Actions also affect beliefs.[92]

Our beginnings in actively involving youth in the church rely on purposefully examining the belief system of the local church congregation and adjusting our behavior in such a way that we reflect what we are saying rather than having "double messages" of wanting children and then sending them away. If the church is going to host future young generations, the shift needs to be in giving youth access to the whole structure of the church.

Youth as "the Future of the Church"

The church theology of youth is often previous arguments of youth being "too young" to be contributors to the current sphere of the church. Too often in the praxis of the church structure and planning for youth ministry the problematic phrase "the youth are the future of the church" is used as a justification to prepare the way for youth to inherit the church structure and become the church overseers when they achieve the age of readiness. This explicitly connects to the intergenerational relationship approach I am arguing through the need of youth towards their self-realization of importance within the structure of the church. Nel critiques this "future church heresy" stating:

---

[92] Joyce Mercer, "Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood," St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005, 30.

The survival of a particular denomination has often been the purpose of a Youth

Ministry. Dubose shows, for instance how most denominations reacted during the so-

called youth revolution (the late 1960's and early 1970's) and focused on preserving their

own. The youth then became an investment in the future of the church. According to such

an approach, they were also called 'the future church.' As far back as 1964, Little

referred to this attitude as the 'future church heresy' and adds the fallacies of 'the

numbers-game,' 'street-cleaning,' and the 'stop-gap.' Because of the complex history of

Youth Ministry, one could expect many motives for the ministry over time – some further

from the mark, others closer. It is important to note that the goal of youth ministry is

closely, if not directly, related to its theological departure points. Someone with departure

points different from mine [Nel's] may decide on goals different from those listed.[93]

This phrase is problematic in our theological ideology of the church structure because it dictates

that the youth are not part of the current church. The literal translation of the ideal of "youth are

the future of the church" places youth outside of the current context of the church where they are

not able to engage with the modern era of the church. Their time to be "the church" is placed in

the future.

Our linguistic practices shape a locus where youth connection to the church body is not

relevant in the current era, but does become relevant as they age into adulthood. Similarly, we

see the mentality of church elders being considered as the "members of the church in the past"

which discounts their role in the present structures of the church. These ideals place the church

---

[93] Malan Nel, "Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach," HTS Religion & Society Series. 1, (2018): 195-196.

as something that can only be accessed by the current adult generation of the local congregation that manifests themselves as the church.

By operating from this praxis, the church only values members of the "active adult cohort."[94] Any other cohort becomes irrelevant within the structure. If the current structures of the church abide by this mentality, there is no need for the youth or elderly to have membership within the church. This prospect is terrifying simply because it removes the wisdom of the elders and the security that there is a future for the church. Understanding the current atmosphere of the church that active adults have a practical theology that removes every other cohort as a necessity of the church. I believe the real practical approach of the church wants to be inclusive of all cohorts and to achieve this, every cohort needs to have agency within the decision-making body of the church.

The idea that youth would take over the roles of leadership in the church is an ancient form of inheritance that does not match the current world culture. The identity of the youth does not rely on the careers of their parents, but they are open to the vast array of paths in front of them. By holding onto the belief that the youth are "the future of the church" their parental generation is assigning them to inherit the local church into their care when they become of age to begin making decisions regarding the well-being of the church. As noted previously, the structure of the world is vastly different from the ancient times when children were expected to become the apprentice of their parents and learn the "family business." The opportunities of younger generations do not hold the familial ties that require someone to inherit the business when the adults become too old to be a part of the working class.

---

[94] "Active adult cohort" refers to the portion of adults that are laborers of the ministries of the church. These members plan, carry out, and assess the church's ministries for decision-making purposes in the local church's life.

Youth have the opportunity to strive for any career path they desire and depending on the cycle of the generations and if there is a youth counter-culture or not, youth might decide to remove themselves from the "family business." In the case of this paper, the "family business" refers to the upkeep of the church structure. If the youth of the church decide a different path than being involved in the church, who then does the upkeep fall to? The stock of the current generation relies on the assurance that the youth with maintain the church when they pass on. The grave error is that this assumption is not guaranteed.

Acknowledging the Decline

Since modern churches primarily operate with a theology that youth are future overseers of the church, youth are pushed aside as matters that are not as important as the current maintenance of the church. As I mentioned in the section, "What We Have Missed," statistical data acknowledges that the decline of young people in the church is on a steady decrease. The opportunities for youth to be engaged in other activities are a massive proponent of youth not attending worship services. Churches cannot compete with sporting events, technology, and other forms of entertainment or time absorbers for youth especially when the praxis regarding youth does not include them as valuable pieces of the current church congregation. Churches cannot succeed in attracting youth when the youth ministry program is outdated and unable to compete with the world around them. Youth programming must be shifted to ensure the church has a future beyond the current generation. I have watched many churches die because of the failure to correct the livelihood of the church to be more inclusive to youth and create programming that is youth-oriented and authentic to the current era. Youth have no reason to desire participation in an outdated youth ministry structure that approaches their needs in the

same way as a society when they can find better ways through the other social groups in the world.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCERNING ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

Foundational Questioning for Moving Forward

The observations I have made through this research raise several foundational questions when investigating youth ministry:

- Why are we doing youth ministry and what does our church hope to achieve through youth programming?

- How does the church create its youth ministry formula and how often is the strategy for youth ministry revised? Whose input is considered during the formation of the youth ministry plan?

- Does the youth ministry program meet the standards of the local church in youth education and youth development into full members of the church through its praxis?

Implementing Thought into Action and Reflection

The important articulation that must be stressed as we examine methods to improve the quality of the church community is the understanding that there is no set definitive way to ensure that every practice offered in this paper will be the most constructive for every local church community. Every process must be carefully considered with the intentionality of the context of the local church as the basis for beginning practice. The goal of this section is to provide potential ways that a local congregation might explore the inclusion of the youth in their context. We incorporate youth by changing our philosophy about the importance of youth in the church community. Mercer describes this as "the search for child-affirming theology and a church in which children are genuinely welcome necessarily concerns itself with children as they are formed within contemporary culture and also with those cultural and social forces at work to

reshape childhood in our time."[95] This chapter will examine praxis that will help churches create spaces for youth.

Exploring Foundational Questions

Exploring these questions determines for the local church what kind of importance youth ministry plays in the overall practical theology of the church. These questions assess the views of the youth ministries and how much support from the congregation is given to these ministries. In my experience, many of these questions go unanswered, specifically the ones regarding the last time the curriculum was agreed upon by the majority of the local congregation. These questions point to intentionality. Nel, Droege, Mercer, Barnes and Wimberly, Roberto, Allen, Smith, and Yust all connect failures of youth ministry with the lack of intentionality that was the adhesive pieces that held youth ministry together. This data produces the interpretation that most churches in modern America are not truly intentional about their youth ministry through examination of the current generation of youth and providing for their needs in a way that is counter-cultural and invites you to deeply engage with their spirituality and connection to the church community. Changes to youth ministry in the recent decades have not approached youth ministry in the ways that made youth programs succeed years in the past by being intentional with the societal structures of the time and changing programming to meet the needs of the current generation. The empirical data and research provided by the Pew Research Center and Smith also confirm that there is a significant decrease in the attendance and member rates of modern churches.

The issue of youth ministry is not that the content is not theological or lacking wisdom, it is that our praxis is not one of intentionality connecting with the generational shift of the current

---

[95] Joyce Mercer, "Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood," St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005, 3.

world. Nel notes that: "Theology is more than knowing, adding, and applying biblical verses to whatever issues there are and in whatever way to issues in the lives of the youth."[96] Nel points towards the argument of being intentional about how we are doing youth ministry rather than passively expecting that the youth will be shaped in generalized practices that often leave the youth disconnected from the church because the position of the church pushes youth to the fringes; the church opts to not include them but offer to babysit until they reach the coming-of-age that they are welcome as adults into the church community.

Nel continues the argument by saying: "Youth Ministry continuously calls for deep theological motivation and rooting. It has to be theologically founded…Youth Ministry is inclusive, comprehensive, and that it includes (or at least stands in a direct relationship to) catechesis and family ministry."[97] In other words, the tribal philosophy of "it takes a whole village to raise a child" certainly is a helpful theological praxis for local congregations to operate out of.[98] Barnes and Wimberley describe village-mindedness as "reflecting the beliefs and behavior of a community of compassionate, committed, and prepared adults, including parents, extended family, fictive kin, educators, other caregivers, and community allies."[99] The responsibility of youth leadership within the local congregation is not the sole provider of youth formation.

The Four Tasks of Practical Theology

The culmination of the sections titled "Foundational Questioning for Moving Forward" and "Exploring Foundational Questions" seeks to provide a structure for thinking about the

---

[96] Malan Nel, "Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach," HTS Religion & Society Series. 1, (2018): 55.
[97] Ibid*.,* 22.
[98] Sandra L. Barnes and Anne Streaty Wimberly, "Empowering Black Youth of Promise: Education and Socialization in the Village-Minded Black Church*,"* London: Routledge, 2018, 5.
[99] Ibid*.,* 6.

intentional planning of youth ministry practices that are intergenerational. To achieve the goal of

intergenerational connection, the approach taken should consider practical theology as we are

considering how the theology of intergenerational connections is implemented in our churches.

Richard Osmer articulates four tasks that are understood when engaging with practical theology:

"We explore four questions that can guide our interpretations and response to situations: What is

going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond?"[100] Osmer

continues by explaining these questions as tasks for church leaders to be intentionally practicing:

Answering each of these questions is the focus of one of the four core tasks of practical

theological interpretation:

- The *descriptive-empirical task.* Gathering information that helps us discern patterns and

    dynamics in particular episodes, situations, or contexts.

- The *interpretive task.* Drawing on theories of the arts and sciences to better understand

    and explain why these patterns and dynamics are occurring.

- The *normative task.* Using theological concepts to interpret episodes, situations, or

    contexts, constructing ethical norms to guide our responses, and learning from "good

    practice."

- The *pragmatic task.* Determining strategies of action that will influence situations in

    ways that are desirable and entering a reflective conversation with the "talk back"

    emerging when they are enacted.

Osmer notes, "Together, these four tasks constitute the basic structure of practical theological

interpretation... While the terms may differ, something like each of them [the four tasks] is

taught in clinical pastoral education, Doctor of Ministry courses, and courses on preaching,

---

[100] Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction,* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008, 4.

pastoral care, administration, Christian education, and evangelism in schools of theology. Moreover, pastors and church leaders carry out these tasks in ministry."[101] These tasks help church leaders understand how the congregation is functioning and provide insight into how ministry should be adapted over the years.

There is great importance in continually assessing the purposes of youth ministry programming in the local church. Osmer argues, "Often, it is helpful to think of practical theological interpretation as more like a spiral than a circle. It constantly circles back to tasks that have already been explored."[102] The spiral of questioning forges deep conversation and theological interpretation into why churches practice youth ministry the way it shows up in the context of the local church. The spiral is important and the connection Osmer makes to a spiral structure articulates that each task lends itself to the other tasks in unique ways that require the tasks to be dealt with more than once. If we are doing the work of practical theology, we are connecting each task to have a deep, formative understanding of the situation we are dealing with in the church.

The spiral language of Osmer also gives insight into our youth ministry programming and how they are tied to intergenerational connections. An intergenerational spiral begins in youth ministry as the youth begins to engage with adult mentors who assist in the spiritual formation of the youth. As the youth becomes a member of the adult cohort, they join in the responsibility to help guide participants in the youth ministry program; thus, there is a continuous spiral of information, guidance, and teaching through an intergenerational connection that provides formative experiences for both adults and youth engaged within youth ministry.

---

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid., 11.

"It Takes a Village"

Barnes and Wimberly point out that the Black church tradition is successful because of the "village-mindedness" of the church community. This tradition has strong roots and Barnes and Wimberly discuss that:

A strong case can be made that an ideology of child-centeredness is part of the overall culture, undergirds the purpose, and informs the programs of many Black churches. We consider the presence, influence, and implications of this ideology as a guiding framework for *Empowering Black Youth of Promise: Education and Socialization in the Village-minded Black Church.* A large literature illustrates that protectiveness, unconditional acceptance, and religious as well as secular socialization by Black churches is: reflective of a broader, family-centered edict; an extension of African "village" child-rearing practices; and, in response to the legacy of slavery and continued racial oppression… Child-centeredness places the onus on Black churches to provide an overall safe, nurturing environment for youth as well as holistic programmatic instruction that fosters morality, character development, self-efficacy, hard work, and appreciation for the benefits of broad-based education and training.[103]

As Barnes and Wimberly suggest, every encounter with other individuals within the church, especially ones that are geared toward caretaking or education, impacts the experience of the youth concerning the church community.[104] The work of Barnes and Wimberly, Mercer, Droege, Nel, Roberto, Allen, Jones, Nelson, Root Yust, Hooker, Corrie, and Toure, lead towards

---

[103] Sandra L. Barnes and Anne Streaty Wimberly, "Empowering Black Youth of Promise: Education and Socialization in the Village-Minded Black Church*,"* London: Routledge, 2018, 9.
[104] Ibid*.,* 6.

the understanding that modern churches should aim to function as a community where each

member has a vital and intrinsically important place within the community. The stress is towards

those that modern churches leave on the fringes; those that are not part of the "dominant power"

of the church. Churches cannot function in such a way that one person's right to be in church

spaces supersedes other members of the congregation. Each member has an importance within

the church through the diversity that is achieved through our community sharing.

The governing body of the church should not dislocate the essentialness of each member

of the local congregation because of the differences between members. Not every person can be

on the church board, run church education, or assist with planning worship services, but it takes

all of the members of the church to allow the church to function.

The church is not an entity of separation because of our differences or a judicial seat that

makes the defining call on who is right or wrong, but the church exists as an embodiment of

Christ who by all interpretations was about the love of each other.[105] The writer of Galatians

calls the church of Galatia to carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law

of Christ (Gal. 6:2 New International Version). Forming our church in "village-mindedness"

functions as an earthly establishment of the Kindom of God.[106] The community orientation of

church congregation creates a practical location for the theology of connectedness within the

---

[105] Jesus explains this through the two greatest commandments: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:37 NIV, Mark 12:30 NIV, Luke 10:27 NIV).

[106] Traditional terminology denotes Christ as a teacher towards the "Kingdom" of God rather than "Kindom." The use of "Kindom" in place of "Kingdom" is an equal substitution for "Kingdom" which still is described as the providence of God. "Kindom" is used to refer to the providence of God however the language is adapted to be inclusive. "Kingdom" often is tied to practices of patriarchy, imperialism, exclusivity, oppression, exploitation, violence, and control systems. "Kindom" language supposes that the providence of God would be inclusive, non-hierarchical, compassionate, relational, justice-oriented, and anti-imperial. Mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isai-Diaz is credited with the phrase as it appears in her book *Mujerista Theology,* which transforms the established community of God not as a vertical hierarchy but as a horizontal entity of solidarity. For more information about the inclusivity offered with the "Kindom" terminology, see Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century.* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.)

body of Christ; members of the community have an intimate shared locus rooted within the theological understanding of the ministry of Christ.

The importance of community is tied to the earlier section of this paper, "The Goal of Youth Ministry," alongside the conversations with Mercer, Root, Roberto, and many other theologians. Being a member of a community attaches a certain identity moniker to individuals who belong to the community. As mentioned previously, these ties have connotations about the character of the individual that are characteristics of the community. Youth that are connected to the local church community also become entangled in the characteristics of the community. Stating you are a member of your local church directly creates assumptions about your character. Humanity uses the taxonomy of identity markers as an ease of access to understanding the individual. This is a fundamentally external experience that does not allow for a connection to be established with the outside source. There is no communication between the two entities, thus no corrections to mislabeled identity can take place. Identity within a church congregation also creates characteristics of the members of the church which determines how the outside world views the church. There is no ability to correct this with outsiders looking in who do not have conversations with the church group. This means the church must be intentional about how the congregation is perceived through the identity designation of a member of their local congregation.

Understanding the Goal

Looking back on the questions offered in the "Foundational Questioning for Moving Forward" section, I acknowledge that the telos of my questioning targets the understanding of the church identity within youth ministry which is determined by how our church would answer that line of questioning. If the majority of the questions are answered with well-thought-out

answers, our church likely has a strong focus to foster youth ministry, yet the opposite is true for churches that cannot answer the questions or have not discussed their answers to the questions. I would encourage those "Foundational Questions for Moving Forward" as a starting point for local churches looking to invigorate their youth ministry programming. The process begins with identifying what space the church currently occupies then, determining what areas we are lacking, and then improving those locations. How the world interprets the church is a significant factor in choosing to join the local congregation, so church leaders should examine what identity the church has beyond the walls of the building.

CHAPTER FIVE

BUILDING TOWARDS THE FUTURE: WHAT IS OUR APPROACH?

Understanding Culture

One approach is through a lens of understanding the current climate of the world in which our churches are located and understanding what are the needs of the people in the places we encounter them on their spiritual journeys. Since the youngest of the current generations are mostly unexposed to a community of faith there needs to be a connection to evangelism to have those uninformed individuals attain access to the church. This is not to say that modern churches are exclusive gatherings that require membership, but rather programming and outreach should target the younger demographics of the church. Droege notes an important understanding of the modern youth ministry field by stating, "Modern youth ministry finds its roots in the creation of a youth subculture."[107] Acknowledging culture and the shift in society is connected to how church leaders gain access to the lives of youth. We are required to meet them where they are which includes entering the culture in which they exist.

Ross and Allen aim towards the importance of understanding the changes in society that have affected the connectivity between generations. They state,

> During the last hundred years, steady changes have occurred in society that have
>
> separated families and segregated age groups, not only in educational settings but in life
>
> in general. There are fewer regular and structured interactions between old and
>
> young…than ever before. Not only families but also other institutions in modern society
>
> have reduced the chance for old and young to share activities in meaningful ways.'

---

[107] Michael Droege, "A Weed in the Church: Modern Youth Ministry Practice and its Effect on Mainline Church Attrition," (MA Thesis, Drew University 2017), 12.

Examples of this pervasive age segregation include the ubiquity of age-graded public

education, the geographical mobility of families, the movement from extended to the

nuclear family, the rise of divorce and single-parent families, and the prevalence of

retirement and nursing homes for older persons and preschools for the young.[108]

Allen and Ross attribute the church to be one of the final refuges for the possibility of

relationships between young and old to occur since congregations create one of the only spaces

for potential interactions intergenerationally since all cohorts are present within the church

building. However, Ross and Allen also note:

Though church leaders endorse intergenerationality in general whenever they cite biblical

metaphors such as 'the body of Christ' or 'the family of God,' in practice American

mainline and evangelical churches generally conduct many of their services and activities

(worship, Sunday school, fellowship, outreach, service, etc.) in age-segregated settings.

Consequently, in the second decade of twenty-first century America, all generations of

the faith community – babies through nonagenarians – are seldom together.[109]

Spaces such as community or church dinners showcase this when we see similar cohorts sitting

next to each other enjoying the meal. There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence that this natural

age separation occurs in many local church contexts. I have noticed the phenomenon of age

separation interweaving itself through many aspects of church life. For example, the executive

board of the church I currently serve maintains mostly female adults from the Boomer generation

---

[108] Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*, Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012, 30.
[109] Ibid*.,* 30-31.

on the board with some minor instances of inclusion of other cohorts that have been recent

changes to the structure of the board.

Providing for the Needs of Youth

The objective of church leaders is to understand how to get every age cohort involved in

the community of the church by relying on meeting physical, spiritual, emotional, and especially

social needs all of which are part of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.[110] Jonathan Ruehs notes,

"Maslow makes the argument that all humans have the same basic needs which are organized

upon a hierarchical structure."[111] Ruehs continues by connecting the hierarchy of needs to the

life of the church:

> "God is involved with all aspects of our needs and does indeed care about providing for
>
> them. We are also reminded in the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer to ask God for
>
> these daily needs, summed up in the words 'daily bread.' While God can provide
>
> direction for our daily bread as God did with the Israelites in the wilderness, God more
>
> often than not provides for our daily needs through the vocation of others."[112]

Youth must be included in the process of the functioning of the church so that they learn that

their needs will be provided for and so that they might begin to provide for the needs of others in

the community. Maslow's hierarchy of needs does not require that the one providing for the

needs be exclusively adults in church provision of these needs. Youth can participate in the needs

for social connection, esteem, and self-actualization. Some of the practices I am involved with

facilitating with the youth in my local church involve how we are allowing them to take part in

---

[110] See Figure 4.

[111] Jonathan Ruehs, "Millennials and Maslow: First Article Needs and Christian Apologetics," *Missio Apostolica 21,* no. 1 (May 2023): 58.

[112] Ibid*.,* 59.

the worship service. Youth help out with music, liturgy, lighting the candles, and receiving the

offering; anything that youth can do can and should be offered as a role they have during

worship services and beyond in the life of the church. During community dinners, youth, that

desire to serve, can assist in serving the meal or refilling coffee from the patrons. Youth must be

involved. Yust advises that there is more beyond incorporating youth into the service to be

successful. We are tasked with being intentional about what illustrations and methods we are

using in congregational development. Yust suggests:

> "It takes ongoing effort for a faith community to be inclusive of all ages… Adult
>
> members should appear comfortable with the inevitable sounds and small movements of
>
> the young children among them. Children should engage in any activity that involves
>
> adult volunteers as doesn't require capabilities beyond a child's developmental reach… If
>
> congregations' worship seems to function as an adult experience to which children are
>
> admitted only if they act like little adults, a faith community is not truly welcoming their
>
> younger members."[113]

Welcoming youth takes a full investment in the intentional development of the church space in

such a way that all members of the congregation feel their needs have been met and assured

every time they enter the church building. Ross and Allen grapple with the connection of youth

to belongingness in the church. They write, "'Belongingness' is third in Maslow's hierarchy of

needs. After physiological needs and safety are met, human being seek – and need – places to

belong… Belongingness is particularly important in the realm of spiritual care and formation.

Healthy belongingness offers support for people in difficult situations, release from shame

through forgiving grace, and opportunity for authenticity. Intergenerational faith communities

---

[113] Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives,* Families and Faith Series, Place: Jossey-Bass, 2004, 168.

provide an experience that fosters this deep sense of belonging in children, teens, and adults; all

feel welcome and received."[114] The creation of social practices within church settings should be

positive and reinforce the connection that youth have to the church community. These spaces

should aim to invite youth into a greater connection with the community as valued members of

the church.

Continuing to engage with Maslow, the direction many of the scholars I have engaged

with points towards the highest need, the need for self-actualization. The goal of Maslow is to

achieve the highest level of fulfillment, aiming at the universal good of human happiness. Root,

Hooker, Corrie, and Toure discussed the provisions needed for happiness and that the goal of our

youth ministry program is to provide a space where happiness can occur. This is done by

securing the needs of the youth so that they might achieve self-actualization. The church does not

necessarily need to be the provider for the lower levels of needs, rather it creates a space where

the needs have been met and the congregation can experience the highest stages of needs.

Examining Maslow's hierarchy of needs showcases the importance of the top level of

needs. Maslow also denotes authenticity as a part of self-actualization. Part of attaining the

highest need is to have authentic relationships with each other. Youth should experience adults

as authentic partners in their lives. If youth figure out that adults are not being truthful to them,

the trust is shattered between adults and youth which denies access to true self-actualization. Our

goal should be forming a space where anyone, particularly youth, is not afraid to express

themselves because they are already loved and welcomed into the church community. Jesus

enforces this concept with children in a passage from Matthew: "Then people brought little

---

[114] Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*, Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012, 48.

children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples rebuked them. Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'" (Matt. 19:13-14). When we enforce a barrier between being truly authentic and matching the ideal members of the church community, we lose youth who are in the process of figuring out their identity and connection with the community. This can cause the church to be yet another place where the youth are not accepted.

Our authenticity serves to fill the relational and self-actualization needs of the youth by being counter-cultural. Social media platforms embrace the "perfect moments" of life rather than capturing an authentic reality that has pain, struggle, and imperfection, however, the church does not have room to operate in this capacity. The religious and spiritual formation we offer our youth needs to come from a place that embraces awkwardness and imperfection; it is not a place to hide behind the mainstream culture's perfectionistic social media presence. Relationship with God is personal and authentic. Our teachings should resemble the relationship we experience with God that recalls our knowledge and experience whether good or bad. There are lessons for youth leaders to teach through imperfections such as how not to live or act as we recognize that humanity is rooted in imperfection. We should embrace this as a learning opportunity for youth in our program and our authenticity will generate deeper relations between the youth, their mentors, and their church community.

Yaconelli's CORE Nine Principles

Osmer's theological tasks detailed in the section "The Four Tasks of Practical Theology" in conversation with the need for self-actualization described by Maslow connects to the work of Mike Yaconelli. Yaconelli highlights nine principles that demonstrate that the church has healthy youth ministry programs. These principles are The Bible, veracity, authenticity, audacity,

humility, diversity, sanctuary (refuge from the busyness of the world), intimacy, mystery, and creativity.[115] Applying these tenants together allows the youth ministry programs to engage intentionally with the youth they are fostering. To improve the context of Yaconelli's work, youth leaders should investigate the connection their youth have with the congregation of the church as well. This method provides a great foundational basis for conducting youth ministry, but it needs to be applied to the larger congregation as well as the youth ministry program so that the praxis of youth ministry mirrors the theological understanding the local church has for youth ministry in their context.

Finding Your "Fit"

Yust articulates integrating youth through family models of ministry where adults are looked upon to act as models for youth and how they might find themselves fitting into the church structure that has been intentionally designed for youth prospering. Yust states: "Rather than a preference for convenience, program size, or homogeneity, our search for a faith community in which to raise a family needs to emphasize other markers of spiritual engagement and attentiveness"[116] This can be interpreted as a church model that is designed with intentionality when planning youth ministry through openness to inclusive practices with youth as members of the community. Yust and Mercer are using the term "children" throughout this section. This does not mean that the models are exclusively youth oriented, rather they serve as a model to showcase Yust's theology and argument. These models can and should be adapted to this paper's understanding of "youth." Yust continues, "One such marker [of spiritual

---

[115] Mike Yaconelli, *The Core Realities of Youth Ministry: Nine Biblical Principles that Mark Healthy Youth Ministries,* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2003.
[116] Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives,* Families and Faith Series, Place: Jossey-Bass, 2004, 165.

engagement and attentiveness to youth] is openness on the part of the congregational leaders to ask questions about the community's understanding of the spiritual life and children's participation in it."[117] Youth leaders should spend time considering the spirituality of the congregation so that they can support youth involvement with the local congregation. This takes intentional listening and understanding of not only the youth in the church but the overall spirituality of the church so that youth are included as part of the spiritual experiences of the church.

This is continued by Yust in understanding "Another mark of a congregation's ability to nurture children's spirituality is its commitment to welcome children into all aspects of community life as participants, according to their abilities."[118] This perspective is similar to the argument made by Nel and Mercer in the "Understanding Culture" section of this paper in which youth are discussed as vital members of the congregation despite the mainline church's "double messages" of desiring youth. Barnes and Wimberly, Droege, Roberto, Yaconelli, Seibel, and Coda all argue similar positions regarding youth inclusion as an important piece of the youth ministry puzzle. Mercer notes, "A central question within my search for a welcoming theology of childhood concerns practices of education with children. *Such practices should invite and welcome children's participation together with adults in communities* shaped around the stories, symbols, and practices of the Christian faith."[119] Emphasis is given here to the highlight of Mercer's argument which points towards intergenerational faith formation through connections across generations. These generational lines are not exclusive to youth and adults but should include every generation present within the church community. Yust gives us some essential

---

[117] Ibid.
[118] Ibid*.,* 166.
[119] Joyce Mercer, "Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood," St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005, 3.

questions when looking into a church community to gauge their openness; these questions

include:

- "How would you describe your congregation?

- What is the most important aspect of your congregation's life together?

- How does your congregation nurture children's spirituality?

- Who are the teachers in your children's programs?

- What resources do you have to support my spiritual formation as an adult and parent?

- How do children participate in worship?

- What kinds of commitments do you expect from families who are members of your

    congregation?[120]

The answer to these questions should obtain a wealth of connection to the youth ministry

programs of that particular congregation. This allows parental figures to see if the church

understands the role of youth ministry in the church and it allows for an insight into how

important the youth ministry program is within the church. Congregants that cannot answer or

cannot provide information connected to youth ministry are in church congregations that do not

have an emphasis on the importance of youth ministry.

Yust offers "A third mark of a faith community's interest in supporting children's

spiritual formation is its commitment to programming structures that give preference to long-

term relationships between adults and children over convenience and minimal engagement on the

part of adult leaders."[121] This is a direct connection to how churches are forming lasting

intergenerational connections and holding a theological value that youth should have access to

---

[120] Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives,* Families and Faith Series, Place: Jossey-Bass, 2004, 167.
[121] Ibid*.,* 170.

the older generations of the church. These settings provide youth with the opportunity to see the adult lived faith as they continue to explore their spirituality.

Roberto places this as a way to, "utilize intergeneration events and experiences of church life as primary 'content' in faith formation by preparing people with the knowledge and practice for participating in the event, by engaging people in the event, and by reflecting upon the meaning of the event and how to live and practice the experience in daily life."[122] The intergenerational connection experienced in this method allows the youth to form trust through authenticity with their adult partner so that they can question their spirituality deeply in a safe space with someone experienced.

This benefit is not only applicable to the youth, but adults can see beyond the surface issues of youth to help foster spiritual experiences and reflection. Yust offers some creative ways to invite adults to dwell with children over time through co-teaching religious classes, including a combination of short-term and long-term adult spiritual companions, and involvement with church life.[123] Roberto connects this to infusion: "Infuse intergenerational experience and relationships into existing programs and activities, such as bringing mature adults into children and youth programs for interviews, storytelling, and mentoring, and transforming age group programs into intergenerational opportunities."[124] Roberto requires that we are utilizing the whole of the church programming to foster intergenerationality that would become a core understanding in the local church structure. There is no need to create new programming, although Roberto acknowledges there is an opportunity to, "connect the generations through new

[122] John Roberto, *Faith Formation with a New Generation,* Cheshire, CT: LifeLong Faith Publications, 2018, 29.
[123] Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives,* Families and Faith Series, Place: Jossey-Bass, 2004, 171-172.
[124] John Roberto, *Faith Formation with a New Generation,* Cheshire, CT: LifeLong Faith Publications, 2018, 29-30.

intergenerational programs and experiences that bring together all of the generations for learning, celebrating, praying, reading the Bible, serving and working for justice, and worshiping."[125] The point being made is that the praxis of the church should target an intergenerational understanding that connects every generation. Churches can invent new programming or modify current structures so that there are possible connections between age cohorts.

Yust also articulates the need to pay attention to the culture of youth. This is described as "One of the problematic trends of the last decade among religious institutions has been the movement away from clearly delineated identities in particular traditions to a more generic version of religious expression… In the rush to mimic the formats and presentation of popular public events and places – rock concerts, movies, coffee houses, nursery schools – some congregations no longer provide an alternative reality to the messages and practice of mainstream social culture."[126] Again, church leaders must pay particular attention to being intentional with youth practices and not fall into consumerism. These practices are harmful to youth spirituality because it removes the intentionality and authenticity of the programming as something that was copied from other sources rather than intentionally designed for the youth of that specific church to engage with.

Building on Roberto and Yust, the alternative reality I envision involves deep relational ties within the local congregation. Congregants should experience the church as a space where they are cared for by every member of the church and have a connection that is free from creating a façade to be able to engage with the church community. This community structure

---

[125] Ibid., 30.

[126] Karen-Marie Yust, *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives,* Families and Faith Series, Place: Jossey-Bass, 2004, 173.

embodies deep care for every member and seeks to shoulder the burdens of each other using their gifts and graces to support the other community members.

Further, this deep care provides a connection through the welcoming and inclusion of youth that the congregations should celebrate the youth amid the church. Yust notes, "The fifth mark of congregations capable of caring well for children's spiritual formation is a communal attitude of thanksgiving for children's gifts and hopefulness about the role of children in helping to change the world. Faith communities sometimes delight more in the pleasure of holding babies or watching children engage in cute behavior than in the many other contributions children can make to the life and mission of the congregation."[127] Mercer would discuss this in terms of "child-affirming practices." These can take the shape of what Mercer describes as honoring children's thoughts and initiatives. Mercer states "Children not only are shaped by practice in which they participate. They also 'act back' on the community of practice, with new insights, ideas, and actions that can contribute to the transformation of those practices and, therefore, of the community."[128] Congregation members should celebrate the achievements of youth and each other as progress towards greater love and inclusion of all inside of the church. The reaffirmation allows children to be praised for positive behavior making them feel good and valued as a member of the church community that can help shape the practices of the community in new, invigorating ways.

Mercer also discusses these points from Yust in that, "A key strategy involves increasing children's access to the full range of congregational practices and to relationships with particular adults who demonstrate their gifts for mentoring newcomers into those practices."[129] The role of

---

[127] Ibid., 176.

[128] Joyce Mercer, "Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood," St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005, 202.

[129] Ibid., 200.

youth in the church cannot be partial, it must be full responsibility in connection to the church. Mercer defines this as "Lave and Wenger's studies of other kinds of communities of practice into which newcomers seek membership suggest that when newcomers only gain access to menial or inconsequential practices that lack substance and importance for the "core practices" that define that community's identity they occupy positions of marginality rather than peripherality. Under such conditions, their access to practices remains too limited to form in them an identity."[130] For youth to experience spiritual formation, they are required to have access to the whole of the community. There cannot be limitations that remove core practices and rituals from youth who are seeking to find their identity within the church. Church leaders should identify particular areas that youth members are interested and engage the youth with those opportunities to become involved in the greater workings of the church. Banning total participation in the church until adulthood removes the desire of youth to participate in the church structure and with the multitudinous organizations outside of the church, youth will be lost to other groups that will embrace them.

---

[130] Ibid., 201.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION: HOW TO BE THE INTERGENERATIONAL CHURCH

The practices of intergenerational faith formation showcase the intentionality within a faith community that ties community members together in such a way that each person is valuable. The arguments made throughout this paper only are a portion of the scholarship available on the topics of fostering deep connectional roots for youth in church life. Intergenerationality connects these roots in intentionality with the locus of church youth so that they have access to the whole church before they reach adulthood. Allen and Ross note the importance of this connected community by stating, "Intergenerational faith communities are God-designed places for Christian formation. But for intergenerational Christian formation to happen, the generations *must* be together; they must *know each other;* and they must experience life in the body of Christ *together.*"[131]

The connection of true Christian faith comes out of the experiences of every member of the community being a part of the sharing together.

Church leaders have a lot of work to do to reshape the church atmosphere into a place that matches the needs of modernity. Robert Quinn states, "Ultimately, deep change, whether at the personal or the organizational level, is a spiritual process." The work we are about needs to be aligned with our values and true purpose to be meaningful."[132] The practices of the church need to be reshaped into the meaningful practices our church communities believe they are.

---

[131] Holly Catterton Allen and Christine Lawton Ross, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*, Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012, 270.
[132] Robert E. Quinn, *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within,* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996, 78.

Through deep, critical examination of the programming of youth ministry within the context of each local church, there is a space for new development towards intergenerational practices that impact youth and all other members of the church in rich spiritual ways that deepen their connection to the divine.

Our job as the leaders of the church and the movers in youth ministry programming is reconnecting with the authenticity of our youth missing from our programs and practices for several years. We achieve this by actively engaging in the spaces where youth are already present and by forming our youth ministry programs as spaces where deep theological conversations are welcome. These spaces are required to allow youth to be able to explore their own identity as programming offers the opportunity for youth to experience the soul-searching questing that every youth embarks on during their coming-of-age. Our connections must be rich in the current societal and technological advances of the present era. Youth ministry should have a presence on the popular social media of the day including regular postings to applications such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram. Modern youth leadership teams should be intrinsically trained and engaged with programs that youth are playing by maintaining a presence in popular culture.

Once we are accessible to youth, our programming can be recognized. I want to stress that our engagement on social media platforms should be spaces to make our presence known as a required medium to expand the reach of our programming, but the ministries we are engaging with should be what guides our online presence. Our ministry can be realized by the spaces we create for youth to be engaged within the church. As youth begin to join the church, they should be connected intergenerationally with the other members of the church through programs such as mentorships. Youth should begin to pick up roles in areas of their interest; perhaps this also is a

method to allow them to engage with the church. Youth can begin expanding into other ministries of the church as they become aware of their gifts and interests in other church ministries. Once we have youth coming to church, they need to be implemented into the church by becoming a part of a ministry the church is offering. If no such ministry exists, new ministries should be created.

Congregational leaders must also recognize that access to the church is only as accessible as we allow it to be. For example, we cannot expect youth to be able to join ministries that are during other events in their lives such as school. The midday meeting times need to be adjusted so the whole body of the church can attend. Every ministry should allow access to every generational cohort. Worship services on Sunday mornings cannot be the only time we connect because that causes the younger generations to see themselves as unimportant since they are not being invested during any other time in the life of the church. The change begins in how we offer programs not only to youth but to every cohort of the church. Intergenerationality requires the possibility that every generation can participate. We also should apply the intergenerational mindset to every activity the church sponsors by constantly participating in Osmer's four tasks of practical theology so that we create spaces that every generation feels and wants to be connected with.

Implementation of intergenerationality takes time; there is not an immediate change to everything the church is currently doing or not providing. Our leadership must constantly be observing and recognize the successes and shortcomings of every activity of the church so that improvements can be made for the next event. The task of intergenerationality is also a massive undertaking because it requires the full cooperation of the entire local congregation. As leaders, we take up the task of training our congregations to become intergenerational by inviting church

members to begin to think of their experiences as intergenerational. We want our members to be open to going to a different table during church dinners than the one where their generational cohort is sitting. Connections between church members should not feel forced to either party, but each individual should feel like they can approach any other member of their church with issues or questions they are struggling with. Youth should feel welcome to approach their elders for opinions about their identity and belief formation journey in ways that are non-judgmental but rather supportive and understanding even if there is a difference of opinion. The church should experience genuine love and connection within the community through intergenerational connections that allow everyone to experience the church community as welcoming and deeply invested in the individual as a valuable part of the church identity.

In a conversation with the church leaders of the church I am currently serving, we committed that losing even one individual is too great of a loss for the church community. This statement was not made in a vacuum with only one demographic of the church rather the statement stems from the whole of the community, including those on the fringes. David Hooker, Elizabeth Corrie, and Itihari Toure articulate this as, "Joy occurs as we come to see that God is neither arbitrary or capricious, that God is concerned with the details of not only our lives and the lives of those like us but the lives of others not like us."[133] The theology that every member has a sacred worth is a vital practice to the church living so that every member is treated in such a way as they feel welcomed into the community and not merely exist as part of the community. This statement is rooted in an intentional operation of the church that since every member has a significant value to the church, everything we do must connect back to our theology that

---

[133] David Anderson Hooker, Elizabeth Warden Corrie, and Itihari Toure, "Justice Seeking Is Joy Seeking: The Formation of Faith-Informed, Community-Focused, Critical Consciousness in Adolescents," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 20, no. 1 (2021): 69.

everyone is worth considering in decision-making. This requires great work for our church leaders, but the work is important to the security of the members of the church to feel like they are valued and important pieces of the church community. Churches offer a unique space where intergenerationality is possible; one might even consider it the final frontier of intergenerationality which gives churches the important position of connecting every generation. Our niche, as a church in the post-modern world, lies in the connections we create beyond the borders of generational cohorts.

Each church must work to establish its community as one that also values each individual that enters the edges of the community space. The approach of intergenerationality is not one-size-fits-all. Each congregation must examine what is required in their community to transform into a diverse community that accepts all of its members fully. I wish there was a prescription that would account for all of the churches of the world, but there is not. Each congregation must make an effort to solidify its identity, particularly concerning how each congregation values the prospect of youth in its midst. I offer up the questions in the "Foundational Questioning for Moving Forward" as a preliminary guide to begin to assess your local church's youth ministry formation as a starting point to implement intergenerationality. The role of youth leaders is to secure youth in meaningful spiritual and congregational development. How every church achieves the most meaningful connection between youth and the congregations becomes intentional, creative, and unique to the identity of each congregation. Droege articulates this in the phrase: "The church grows best when we grow together."[134] Living into growing together will take the church some time to master, but it is an endeavor that we must continue for the benefit of the church and every member within its walls. How we connect is imperative to the

---

[134] Michael Droege, "A Weed in the Church: Modern Youth Ministry Practice and its Effect on Mainline Church Attrition," Master's Thesis, Drew University, 2017, 68.

survival of the church in the future; intergenerationality provides the tools for connection that the church needs to embrace so that our ministries may be fruitful in the new age, and this formula must continue to adapt to the context of each new modern era to provide belonging, authenticity, and self-actualization in the new world in which we find ourselves.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allen, Holly Catterton, and Christine Lawton Ross. *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community, and Worship*. Downers Grove, Ill: IVP Academic, 2012. http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001938550&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Barnes, Sandra L. and Wimberly, Anne Streaty. *Empowering Black Youth of Promise: Education and Socialization in the Village-Minded Black Church.* London: Routledge, 2018.

Brown, Megan G. 2021. "Youth Ministry and Crisis." *Christian Education Journal* 18 (3): 444-457. https://doi.org/10.1177/07398913211026687.

Christianity.com. "Robert Raikes and How We Got Sunday School." Accessed March 20, 2023. https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/church-history-for-kids/robert-raikes-and-how-we-got-sunday-school-11635043.html

Coda, Teresa. "Across the Years: These Five Practices Help Foster Meaningful Connections across Generational Lines." *U.S. Catholic* 85, no. 8 (2020): 17-19. http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=fth&AN=144276398&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Droege, Michael. "A Weed in the Church: Modern Youth Ministry Practice and its Effect on Mainline Church Attrition." Master's Thesis, Drew University. 2017.

Harkness, Allan G. 1998. "Intergenerational Christian Education: An Imperative for Effective Education in Local Churches. Part 1." *International Journal of Christianity & Education* 41 (2): 5-14. https://doi.org/10.1177/002196579804100202.

Hooker, David Anderson, Elizabeth Warden Corrie, and Itihari Toure. "Justice Seeking Is Joy Seeking: The Formation of Faith-Informed, Community-Focused, Critical Consciousness in Adolescents." *Journal of Youth and Theology* 20, no. 1 (2021): 65-81. https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-02001003.

Jones, Jeffrey D., and Phyllis Tickle. *Facing Decline, Finding Hope: New Possibilities for Faithful Churches*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield. 2015.

Isasi-Diaz, Ada Maria. *Mujerista Theology: A Theology for the Twenty-first Century.* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996.

Keep Connected. "Share Power: Treat Me with Respect and Give Me a Say." Accessed March 21, 2023. https://keepconnected.searchinstitute.org/strengthen-your-family-relationships/share-power/

Kinney, Lisa. "On the Front Lines: Young Clergy Describe Their Struggles in the Church." *Congregations* 27, no. 2 (March 2001): 12–13. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001506624&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Malan, Nel. "Youth Ministry: An Inclusive Missional Approach," *HTS Religion & Society Series.* 1, (2018): 1-420. http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsair&AN=edsair.doi...........161007cc6059ecf2c1bb0e953e731ded&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Mercer, Joyce. *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood.* Place: Chalice Press, 2005.

Nelson, Carl Ellis. "Has the Sunday School Movement Played Out?" *Austin Seminary Bulletin (Faculty ed.)* 99, no. 8 (1984): 37-44. http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0000942818&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Osmer, Richard R. *Practical Theology: An Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company. 2008.

Perrin, Robin D. "American Religion in the Post-Aquarian Age: Values and Demographic Factors in Church Growth and Decline." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28, no. 1 (March 1, 1989): 75–89. doi:10.2307/1387253.

Pew Research Center. "America's Changing Religious Landscape." Published May 12, 2015. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/

Pew Research Center. "In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace: An Update on America's Changing Religious Landscape." Published October 17, 2019. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/

Provost, James H., Knut Walf, and James Aitken Gardiner. *Power in the Church*. Concilium: 197. T. & T. Clark, 1988.

Quinn, Robert E. *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1996.

Ruehs, Jonathan. "Millennials and Maslow: First Article Needs and Christian Apologetics." *Missio Apostolica 21,* no. 1 (May 2023): 55-62. https://eds.s.ebscohost.com/eds/detail/detail?vid=3&sid=f4451117-a329-4b18-b67a-

d761a08bb20f%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWRzLWxpdmUmc2NvcGU9c2l0ZQ%3d%
3d#AN=ATLA0001942308&db=rfh

Roberto, John. *Faith Formation with a New Generation.* Cheshire, CT: LifeLong Faith
   Publications, 2018.

Root, Andrew. *The End of Youth Ministry?: Why Parents Don't Really Care About Youth
   Groups and What Youth Workers Should Do About It.* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker
   Academic, 2020.
   http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&
   db=rfh&AN=ATLAiGU0200622002008&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Seibel, Cory L. and Malan Nel. "Generation X, Intergenerational Justice and the Renewal of the
   Traditioning Process." *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (2010): 1-7.
   doi: 10.4102/hts.v66i2.876

Senter III, Mark H. *When God Shows up: A History of Protestant Youth Ministry in America.*
   Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic. 2010.

Smith, Christian, and Melinda Lundquist Denton. 2005. *Soul Searching. The Religious and
   Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2005.

Smith, Christian, and Patricia Snell. *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of
   Emerging Adults*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2009.

Smith, Gordon T. "Generation to Generation: Inter-Generationality and Spiritual Formation in
   Christian Community." *Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 10, (2018): 182-93.
   http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&
   db=edsair&AN=edsair.doi...........77abdd51e38251d5dfa09b2b1980d694&site=eds-
   live&scope=site

Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 1989.

Turkle, Sherry. *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other.* New York: Basic Books. 2011.

Wise, Inge. *Adolescence.* Psychoanalytic Ideas Series. London: Routledge, 2004.

Wright, Dave. "A Brief History of Youth Ministry." The Gospel Coalition. April 2, 2012. https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/a-brief-history-of-youth-ministry/

Yaconelli, Mike. *The Core Realities of Youth Ministry: Nine Biblical Principles that Mark Healthy Youth Ministries.* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2003.

Young, John H. 2002. "Membership and 'Full' Membership in the United Church." *Touchstone* 20 (3): 16–24. https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=rfh&AN=ATLA0001516815&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Yust, Karen-Marie. *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives.* Families and Faith Series. Place: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Fig. 1

American Community Survey
DP05 | ACS DEMOGRAPHIC AND HOUSING ESTIMATES
2021: ACS 1-Year Estimates Data Profiles ∨

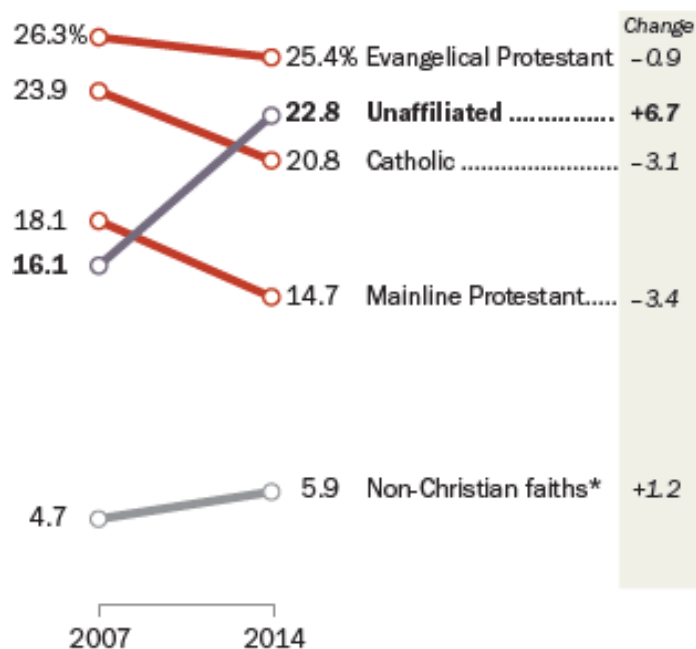| Notes | Geos | Years | Topics | Surveys | Codes | Hide | Transpose | Margin of Error | Restore | Excel | CSV | ZIP | Share | Print | Map |

	United States			
Label	**Estimate**	**Margin of Error**	**Percent**	**Percent Margin of Error**
∨ SEX AND AGE				
∨ Total population	331,893,745	*****	331,893,745	(X)
Male	164,350,703	±26,594	49.5%	±0.1
Female	167,543,042	±26,594	50.5%	±0.1
Sex ratio (males per 100 females)	98.1	±0.1	(X)	(X)
Under 5 years	18,661,245	±17,131	5.6%	±0.1
5 to 9 years	20,010,813	±69,083	6.0%	±0.1
10 to 14 years	21,821,492	±72,184	6.6%	±0.1
15 to 19 years	21,824,088	±40,212	6.6%	±0.1
20 to 24 years	21,382,643	±38,621	6.4%	±0.1
25 to 34 years	45,079,138	±45,900	13.6%	±0.1
35 to 44 years	43,733,561	±36,351	13.2%	±0.1
45 to 54 years	40,673,717	±36,895	12.3%	±0.1
55 to 59 years	21,141,152	±62,272	6.4%	±0.1
60 to 64 years	21,673,882	±60,504	6.5%	±0.1
65 to 74 years	33,778,204	±20,987	10.2%	±0.1
75 to 84 years	16,151,137	±36,901	4.9%	±0.1
85 years and over	5,962,673	±34,538	1.8%	±0.1
Median age (years)	38.8	±0.1	(X)	(X)
Under 18 years	73,475,278	±29,348	22.1%	±0.1
16 years and over	267,057,693	±50,096	80.5%	±0.1
18 years and over	258,418,467	±29,348	77.9%	±0.1
21 years and over	245,143,605	±75,679	73.9%	±0.1
62 years and over	68,689,093	±62,061	20.7%	±0.1
65 years and over	55,892,014	±22,817	16.8%	±0.1
❯ 18 years and over	258,418,467	±29,348	258,418,467	(X)
❯ 65 years and over	55,892,014	±22,817	55,892,014	(X)

Fig. 2

Changing U.S. Religious Landscape

Between 2007 and 2014, the Christian share of the population fell from 78.4% to 70.6%, driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestants and Catholics. The unaffiliated experienced the most growth, and the share of Americans who belong to non-Christian faiths also increased.

		Change
26.3% → 25.4%	Evangelical Protestant	−0.9
23.9 → 22.8	Unaffiliated	+6.7
→ 20.8	Catholic	−3.1
18.1 / 16.1 → 14.7	Mainline Protestant.....	−3.4
4.7 → 5.9	Non-Christian faiths*	+1.2

2007   2014

* Includes Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, other world religions and other faiths. Those who did not answer the religious identity question, as well as groups whose share of the population did not change significantly, including the historically black Protestant tradition, Mormons and others, are not shown.

Source: 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted June 4-Sept. 30, 2014
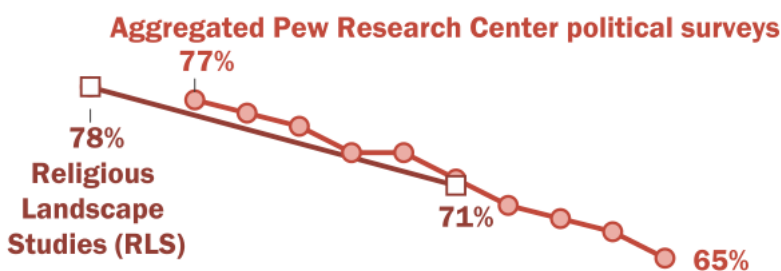
PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Fig. 3

In U.S., smaller share of adults identify as Christians, while religious 'nones' have grown
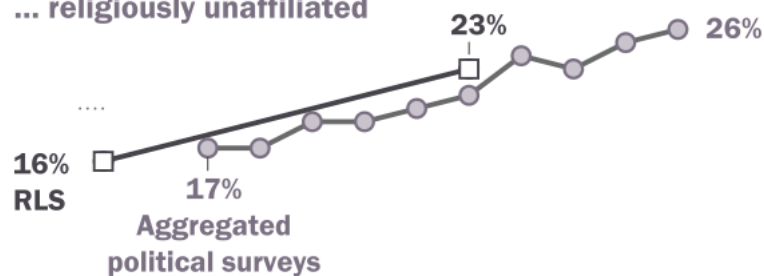
% of U.S. adults who identify as …

… Christian

Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys

77%

78%
Religious Landscape Studies (RLS)

71%

65%

60 ⋯⋅

40 ⋯⋅

… religiously unaffiliated

23%

26%

⋯⋅

16% RLS

17%

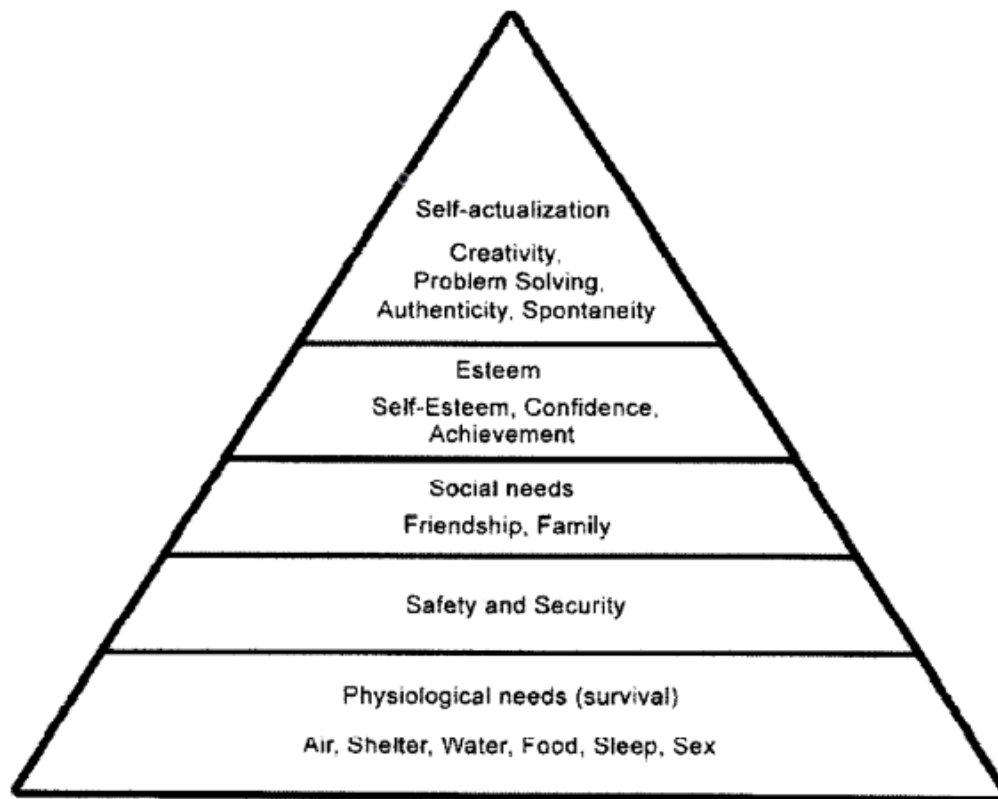**Aggregated political surveys**

0

2007   2009   2014   2018/'19

Source: Pew Research Center Religious Landscape Studies (2007 and 2014). Aggregated Pew Research Center political surveys conducted 2009-July 2019 on the telephone.
"In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Fig. 4

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs