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AN ASSESSMENT OF DROPOUT RATES OF FORMER YOUTH
MINISTRY PARTICIPANTS IN CONSERVATIVE SOUTHERN
BAPTIST MEGACHURCHES

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
James Brandon Shields
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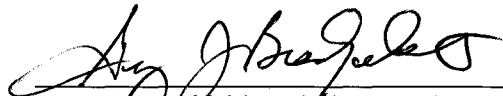
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**AN ASSESSMENT OF DROPOUT RATES OF FORMER YOUTH
MINISTRY PARTICIPANTS IN CONSERVATIVE SOUTHERN
BAPTIST MEGACHURCHES**

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Read and Approved by:



Gary J. Bredfeldt (Chairperson)



Michael S. Wilder

Date December 5, 2008

To my wife, Emily,

And our sons, James and Cooper,

Your support and patience have gone beyond the call of duty.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AJC	Atlanta-Journal Constitution
ISYP	Initial Survey of Youth Pastors
MTF	Monitoring the Future
NORC	National Opinion Research Center
NSYR	National Study of Youth and Religion
PDYM	Purpose Driven Youth Ministry
SBC	Southern Baptist Convention
YMRQ	Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire

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PREFACE

I wish there were sufficient space and time to thank every person who has contributed to the development and completion of this research. I would be remiss, however, to neglect the opportunity to thank some of the most influential. First, I want to thank my wife, Emily, and our sons, James and Cooper, for supporting, encouraging, and challenging me to pursue the highest academic credentials I could attain. You are my greatest ministry endeavor and a source of constant motivation to be the best husband, father, and leader God will give me the grace to be.

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Last, I want to extend my utmost gratefulness to Dr. Jimmy Scroggins, my mentor and friend, for challenging me to pursue this research. I am indebted for the numerous conversations with you which sharpened my understanding of this phenomenon of post-youth group dropout. I am also thankful for Highview Baptist Church, which allowed me the time and ultimately provided my family the resources to obtain this degree.

I pray that this work will dare the church to never stop fighting for the souls of those who have graduated our youth ministries.

James Brandon Shields

Louisville, Kentucky

December 2008

CHAPTER 1
RESEARCH CONCERN

“Youth ministry is in significant trouble.” If one does not believe it, we should ask certain youth ministry experts, youth pastors, or adolescent researchers in America right now.

Introduction to the Research Problem

In his new book *Family-Driven Faith*, popular youth-evangelist-turned-pastor Voddie Baucham issues some heavy indictments against modern youth ministry:

“According to researchers, between 70 and 88 percent of Christian teens are leaving the church by their second year in college. That’s right, modern American Christianity has a failure rate somewhere around eight (almost nine) out of ten when it comes to raising children who continue in the faith” (Baucham 2007, 10-11). Armed with this airtight “research,” Baucham draws the following conclusion: “In other words, the culture of secular humanism appears to have co-opted America’s Christian teens” (Baucham 2007, 12).

Just who is to blame for this modern catastrophe in reaching and keeping America’s teenagers for Christ? As far as the church is concerned, the primary problem, according to Baucham, is the youth ministry movement. Baucham gets right to the heart of the issue when he asks, “Could it be that the paradigm itself (i.e. modern youth ministry) is broken?” (Baucham 2007, 176). He would answer this question by stating,

“The current approach isn’t working. Remember, we have already established that in our current condition we are losing the overwhelming majority of our youth by the end of their freshman year in college” (Baucham 2007, 182).

Baucham is not alone in his critique of youth ministry effectiveness – a growing number of youth ministry experts and writers in the last decade have expressed similar laments regarding the state of contemporary youth ministry philosophy and practice. LifeWay Research, which is the research arm of LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention, recently conducted a “Church Dropout Study” with more than 1,000 young adults ages 18 to 30 who reportedly attended a Protestant youth ministry as a teenager. According to their study, LifeWay found that “70 percent of young adults ages 23 to 30 stopped attending church regularly for at least one year between ages 18 to 22” (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007).

Ed Stetzer, the director of LifeWay Research, summarizes the research by noting,

There is some bad news here, no question There is no easy way to say it, but it must be said. Parents and churches are not passing on a robust Christian faith and an accompanying commitment to the church Christian parents and churches need to ask the hard question, ‘What is it about our faith commitment that does not find root in the lives of our children?’ (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007)

Another group of researchers led by Powell and Kubiak, under the direction of the Center for Youth and Family Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary, recently launched a longitudinal study (the College Transition Project) into the dynamics of this dropout phenomenon. The initial catalyst for their research project, not surprisingly, was the high attrition rate of post-youth ministry students: “Various denominations have estimated that between 65% and 94% of their high school students stop attending church

after they graduate Even that best-case scenario is alarming” (Powell and Kubiak 2005, 51). To their credit, their questions led them to conduct further research in the area of post-youth ministry retention and dropout.

Researchers are not alone, however, in sounding the alarms about modern youth ministry. A good deal of youth ministry literature written in the last decade has used the dropout statistic as a springboard to launch into critiquing and reconceptualizing the youth ministry task. According to Alvin Reid, Professor of Evangelism at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, “The North American Mission Board reports that 88 percent of church youth drop out of church when they finish high school” (Reid 2004, 44). From this and a few other observations, Reid constructs some sweeping generalizations about youth ministry: “Discussions with colleagues and others led to the conclusion that current youth ministry has not been effective. The cottage industries related to youth ministry are, although financially lucrative, spiritually anemic” (Reid 2004, 42).

Similarly, Mike King, President of YouthFront, writes matter-of-factly, “According to data from denominations and research organizations, a majority of youth are walking away from the institutional church when they reach late adolescence, and most don’t come back” (King 2006, 11). King’s prescription for the problem is very simple: “It’s time for a thorough examination of our youth ministry philosophy and praxis” (King 2006, 11). Other writers such as Chris Folmsbee (*New Kind of Youth Ministry*), Tony Jones (*Postmodern Youth Ministry*), and Chap Clark (*Deep Ministry in a Shallow World*) raise analogous concerns about youth ministry from the same “data” as King references.

Finally, Carol Lytch, in her book *Choosing Church*, writes, “Studies have documented that church-reared youth start disappearing in high numbers in their junior and senior years of high school. The dropout rate accelerates further after teens graduate” (Lytch 2004, ix). Lytch points to the sociological observations of Wade Clark Roof (1981) and the research of George Barna (1991) to provide empirical substantiation for skeptics of youth ministry effectiveness.

The bottom line is this: a tidal wave of statistics, anecdotes, and prophetic calls from those influencing the discipline of youth ministry are beginning to reshape the entire field of youth ministry. While there is little doubt from both those in the trenches and those writing journal articles that youth ministry has had its share of problems, questioning the viability of youth ministry on philosophical and biblical grounds using statistical data is a novelty. Undoubtedly, regular evaluation and constructive critique can be healthy for any enterprise. Youth ministry is not exempt from healthy skepticism – practices need to be refined and models need to be modified as cultural and societal changes alter the landscape of youth culture.

This researcher would raise the concern that the major problem with so much of what is being challenged in the literature, articulated at national youth ministry conferences, and discussed vehemently on weblogs and in private conversations is the grounds upon which the entire conversation is based. Sweeping changes in youth ministry theory and practice, for the most part, rest tenuously on a precious few “statistics” that upon closer scrutiny may be flawed or incomplete. If the statistics are indeed inaccurate or at least inconclusive, then the aforementioned proposed solutions to

the youth ministry dilemma will need to be retracted or revised in light of this new information.

Sources for the Dropout Rate

An examination of the social science and youth ministry literature over the last twenty years yielded six primary sources for the so-called “dropout rate” that is being used to question the modern youth ministry paradigm. First, as early as 1991, George Barna measured church attendance patterns for both teenagers and young adults, something many others before him had done previously. However, Barna compared the attendance patterns of these two groups and from this data extrapolated that churches were losing a large majority of their teenagers (61% leave the church) subsequent to high school graduation (Barna 1991; Barna 2006).

Second, sometime in the early 1990s author and evangelist Jay Strack popularized the dropout discussion by articulating his own impression of the phenomenon: 90% of young people were leaving the church after graduation. This “statistic” has been quoted by countless speakers and writers – however, Strack contended in a personal interview that he never intended for it to be used as such. He submitted that this statistic came from a gathering he called of denominational leaders, parachurch workers, and youth pastors from a variety of backgrounds where he asked them to give their “gut feeling” on how many kids they were losing (Strack 2006).

Third, sometime in the mid-1990s youth speaker Josh McDowell began quoting research indicating that somewhere between 85% and 93% of teenagers were leaving the church after high school. While this researcher can find no published works

from this period where McDowell puts these observations in writing, they did begin to surface recently in interviews and books (Calloway 2006; McDowell 2006).

Fourth, in 2001, T. C. Pinckney reported to the Southern Baptist Convention's Executive Committee his observation that 70% of teenagers involved in church youth ministries stopped attending church within two years of their high school graduation (Pinckney 2001, Pinckney-WeAreLosingOurChildren.htm). Just one year later, the fifth statistic was propounded when the SBC's Council on Family Life reported that approximately 88% of evangelical children are leaving the church shortly after they graduate from high school (Lee and Pipes 1999). The sixth and final statistic, as previously mentioned, is the LifeWay Research effort in 2007 which states that 70% of young adults ages 18 to 22 who had previously attended a Protestant church during high school reportedly dropped out of church for at least a year (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007).

These statistics have been advocated as near-gospel truth for at least a decade now. Even the most cursory Internet search revealed 194,000 references (blogs, articles, websites) to the SBC Family Life reports and 53,900 references to the LifeWay study. While there is near unanimity in the field of youth ministry that these statistics represent the hard truth about the modern youth ministry paradigm, nobody has challenged the veracity of the data and the accompanying assumptions underlying much of the contemporary discussions regarding youth ministry's "new direction." In fact, not one single published work in the current youth ministry literature critiques the dropout statistic. Only LifeWay's study has even attempted to empirically verify or refute the

theory that the majority of committed evangelical teenagers are leaving the church after high school.

Limitations of Prior Research

The rationale behind the current research study was that some serious limitations existed in both the published research on youth ministry dropouts and the resultant prescriptions articulated by youth ministry experts and writers. A closer examination of the research has exposed several statistical, logical, and analytical concerns that need to be addressed before one makes conclusions regarding the state of youth ministry.

Statistical Limitations

Looking at the pure science behind the dropout statistic, there were some substantial reasons to doubt the accuracy and comprehensiveness of post-youth ministry retention rates. The first wave of data popularized and cycled through youth ministry circles, first noted by Barna and then popularized and embellished by Josh McDowell, reported that teens' religious participation declines precipitously at age 18 and continues into the early 20s. The problem with this research was primarily that it lumped together young people from a variety of denominational backgrounds and theological commitments, thus failing to account for broader trends in attendance growth and decline. In his methodology section, Barna notes that his team phoned a random sampling of teenagers and young adults from across the country. There was no mention of what defined "involvement" in youth ministry or what kind of church these people attended.

These methodological flaws rendered Barna's research inconclusive and limited in generalizability.

As for the SBC's Council on Family Life reports, this researcher contacted both LifeWay Resources and the Ethics and Religious Liberties offices for further information regarding the data collection and analysis process for these reports. After several email correspondences, the researcher was directed to the book *Family to Family* by Victor Lee and Jerry Pipes as the source of the SBC Council on Family Life's data. In this work, Lee and Pipes state that 88% of evangelical youth drop out of the church after high school graduation. In the footnote for this statistic, the authors admit, "The 88 percent drop out figure is from Jay Strack's experience among the nation's top student ministry leaders. The second figure is based on Proverbs 22:6 and author Jerry Pipes' experience from 23 years of ministry with students and parents" (Lee and Pipes 1999, 124). Once again, the "research data" so widely quoted and used as justification for turning youth ministry on its head is found to be no more than anecdotal speculation by those with a heart for the condition of the modern evangelical family.

Finally, it was imperative to examine the most current research available on church retention and dropout: Wes Black's study and LifeWay Research's study. While these two studies were markedly different in terms of their population, methods, and purposes, they will be examined together because they both exhibit similar methodological shortcomings. Wes Black's "Faith Journey of Young Adults" sought to "determine factors that influence adolescents who are actively involved in church during their teenage years to remain active in their young adult years as well as the factors that influence others to become inactive" (Black 2006, 19). Using the 88% SBC statistic

(Black did not generate a statistic from his study), Black set out to discover why this phenomenon is so prevalent among Baptist institutions. Black's population included the following: Baptist college ministries, college classrooms, and church collegiate ministries from five state universities and five church related (Baptist) universities located in Texas, Missouri, and Alabama.

LifeWay Research's "Church Dropout Study" purposed to "determine what impacts whether they (formerly active Protestant youth) leave between ages 18 to 22" (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007). Utilizing a web survey, LifeWay Research's population included respondents who reported attending a Protestant church regularly (twice a month or more) for at least a year in high school. The web survey utilized a representative national panel of Americans much like a Gallup Poll or Harris Interactive survey. An assessment of these two studies revealed several limitations:

1. A Polluted Pool – surveying all "Protestant" young adults mixes theologically conservative churches and more liberal denominations in a way that completely confounds the results. For example, recent research conducted internally by the Presbyterian Church demonstrates a massive decline in denominational membership and attendance (Presbyterian Record, September 2004). So, in the two dropout studies, churches already in decline and systematic disarray are lumped together with conservative SBC churches that are growing. Consequently, the studies at best provide a truncated and inconclusive snapshot of dropout figures since one cannot be sure exactly to whom the results are generalizable and applicable.
2. An Insufficient Definition of Involvement – in both studies, the research teams chose to define "active" or "regular" involvement as attending youth ministry at least twice a month. Personal experience as a high school pastor, however, tells this researcher that there are a large number of students who attend twice a month that are far from "actively involved" with a youth ministry. In fact, those attending twice a month are in most cases considered evangelistic prospects or marginal attenders at best. There is a huge chasm of involvement separating the truly committed student who is engaged at a heart level with the youth ministry, and the twice a month attender who may be showing up for a myriad of social reasons. So, the core issue might be a clarification of youth ministry commitment and not primarily youth ministry philosophy.

3. Relying Solely on Memory for Attendance Patterns – in both studies, the researchers asked students to “remember” how involved with youth ministry they were in high school. Rather than verifying their involvement through attendance records or conversations with their youth pastors, the research relied on pure memory to categorize the students as “actively involved” during their high school years. What if those students, years removed from their youth ministry experience, were looking back with nostalgia and their impressions were inaccurate? What if, like most human beings, they did not want to make themselves look bad and painted a brighter picture of their involvement? Theoretically, those students who “dropped out” after high school could have been gone long before college or never really involved in the first place.

An analysis of the current research on youth ministry retention and dropout uncovered a significant gap in statistical data concerning different levels of youth ministry involvement in conservative churches. By simply narrowing the criteria for both theological commitment and youth ministry involvement, a completely different set of youth ministry retention data and patterns surfaced that actually contradicted previously held assumptions and popular myths.

Logical Flaws

In addition to statistical ambiguities, the logic of much of the literature regarding youth ministry dropout was questionable and in some cases potentially fallacious. After surveying the literature, the following logical syllogism emerged from the writings of youth ministry dropout critics:

1. Premise A: Any paradigm of ministry that loses more people than it retains is broken.
2. Premise B: The modern youth ministry paradigm is losing 70-90% of its active participants.
3. Conclusion: Therefore, youth ministry is broken and needs to be reconceptualized.

While one will never observe this syllogism stated in any book or journal article, these statements capture the essence of the logical argument that was being used

to attack the prevailing youth ministry paradigm that has been operating for the last thirty years. A quick assessment of this syllogism revealed that it is logically flawed on several levels. First and foremost, the question must be raised: what was the historical reference point by which critics were judging youth ministry retention rates? As chapter 2 points out, religious apostasy and dropout rates have always plagued Christian churches. Social science, a relatively new discipline, began as early as the 1960s investigating the phenomenon of religious apostasy. Landmark studies confirmed time and time again that churches and denominations as a whole were trending negatively in terms of membership, attendance, and retention (Hirschi 1969; Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977; Hoge and Roozen 1979; Roof and Hadaway 1988). Apostasy, then, has always been a challenge for the modern church, and contemporary critics of youth ministry have no anchored reference point for arguing that the current dropout rates are “worse” or “more alarming” as opposed to past generations. Based on the research alone, one could be justified in saying that churches today are doing just as good of a job or better as compared to previous generations. The point is that there is no monolithic reference point to anchor the claims of many youth ministry critics concerning paradigm shifts.

Returning to the above syllogism, positing that youth ministry is a broken enterprise is far from an airtight case. First, let us examine Premise A. According to this assumption, any ministry endeavor which loses more than it retains is broken. Is this premise being rigorously applied to all ministries of the church and systematically to the institution of the church? Are critics like Baucham ready to take on children’s ministry, adult ministry, senior adult ministry, men’s ministry, and women’s ministry with equal voraciousness? Can one say with integrity that the church is retaining by and large the

majority of its twice a month attendees, evangelistic prospects, or even assimilating its new members into the service of the church at a rate of more retainees than dropouts? Viewed in this light, one would have to contend that the entire modern church paradigm is broken and needs to be rethought. Youth ministry does not exist in a vacuum – it is one microsystem that exists in the larger context of a local church.

Furthermore, the bigger question here is whether or not a ministry's "effectiveness" and "viability" should be determined based on the retention of everyone who walks through the church's doors. Is the church to expect everyone who visits or attends, however infrequently (even twice a month), to become a committed member and to stay vibrantly connected to the local body for the rest of his or her life? How does such an expectation square with Jesus' own words in passages like Matthew 7:13-14 (the narrow road to life), John 6:66-67 (many disciples left him), and Luke 13:22-25 (the narrow door)? While these verses certainly do not excuse human laziness, ineffectiveness, or foolishness, they do suggest that over the course of time only a small remnant of committed disciples will emerge from the masses that are initially attracted to Jesus' church.

As for Premise B, it has already been demonstrated that the best statistics currently available are at best inconclusive and limited. So, once again the logic employed by some youth ministry critics was specious with reference to actual data. Taken together, Premises A and B do not lead to the resultant conclusion that youth ministry is broken and in need of reconceptualization. While youth ministry may indeed be broken and the paradigm may indeed need to be shifted, the argument for a paradigm shift cannot be based on any kind of substantial research or so-called dropout statistic.

More focused and purposive research needs to be conducted before any conclusive results or theories can be hypothesized from the data.

Analytical Flaws

It was the contention of this research that the thrust of faulty thinking regarding youth ministry stemmed from an imposition of unrealistic and unfair expectations or goals on the current youth ministry paradigm. In other words, the contingent of youth ministry critics citing the dropout statistic may not have been evaluating youth ministry philosophy and practice by its own standards and measures. Thus, many of the conclusions drawn could potentially be unwarranted given the nature of the youth ministry task as defined by the youth ministry literature.

For example, Baucham states in his work, “According to researchers, between 70 and 88 percent of Christian teens are leaving the church by their second year in college. That’s right, modern American Christianity has a failure rate somewhere around eight (almost nine) out of ten when it comes to raising children who continue in the faith” (Baucham 2007, 10-11). So, Baucham’s expectation for youth ministry is that the majority (say, 70 to 90%) of students who come through a given youth ministry program should end up as committed disciples of Christ. If the youth ministry enterprise fails this test, then it is broken and has no place in the ministry paradigm of a local church.

The problem with this prescription and others like it is that youth ministry’s stated purpose has never been in any context to produce those kind of results. Since the invention of American youth ministry in the late nineteenth century, youth ministry philosophy has always been missiologically driven. Thus, those engaging in youth work have seen themselves as missionaries to a foreign culture, specifically the youth culture,

and their task as the Great Commission. To accomplish this mandate, early youth ministry pioneers enacted a “multi-layered” approach to evangelism and discipleship – multiple entry points for evangelism (relationship building, recreation, etc.), multiple levels of discipleship (Bible studies, accountability groups, mentoring, camps and retreats, etc.), and opportunities for student leadership and reproduction for the extremely committed. Far from being a linear progression from non-believer to spiritually mature follower of Christ, youth ministry has always attempted to view discipleship as a fluid process with multiple levels of involvement and a myriad of acceptable outcomes.

In addition, youth ministry is not the panacea for discipling young people. Youth ministry is not God’s primary mechanism for reaching and discipling young people – God issued that directive to the family (Deut 6:6-9) and the church (Eph 4:11-13). However, youth ministry exists because youth culture exists. While youth ministry is certainly not biblically mandated, it is not prohibited by Scripture and can be a culturally acceptable means for the church to evangelize and disciple young people alongside the family and the church body.

Conclusion: A Gap in the Research

In conclusion, the call for an abolition of youth ministry or major paradigm shift was premature based on the available empirical data regarding youth ministry retention. Youth ministry should be judged on the merits of its own philosophy and stated goals, which were to reach students where they are and move them toward salvation and lifelong discipleship in the local church. To that end, there was a significant gap in the literature and research when it came to youth ministry effectiveness. Rather than measuring all students from all denominations and holding youth ministry

accountable for the resulting retention statistics, there was a need for purposive research into the relationship between different levels of youth ministry involvement and subsequent church involvement as a young adult. Additionally, this research needed to be conducted in conservative Baptist churches where intentional and systematic youth ministry was taking place under the supervision of a seasoned youth pastor. This gap was addressed in the following research study.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the claim that 70 to 90 percent of actively involved youth ministry participants drop out of church after high school. In order to accomplish this stated objective, the research investigated the relationship between differing levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and current levels of church involvement in theologically conservative SBC churches.

Research Questions

The following questions directed the collection and analysis of the data for the current research study:

1. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 1 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently committed to a local church?
2. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 2 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently involved with a local church?
3. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 3 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently involved with a local church?
4. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 4 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently involved with a local church?
5. To what degree, if any, are demographic variables significantly related to levels of youth ministry commitment and current local church involvement?

6. What is the relationship between different levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and level of current local church involvement?

Delimitations of the Study

In order to gain a more comprehensive and longer-term understanding of post-youth ministry retention, this study was delimited to young adults who graduated from high school prior to the year 2008. Sampling young adults of different age segments provided the researcher a snapshot of variations in the data as young adults progress through the various seasons of life. Furthermore, measuring some of these young adults as much as ten years after high school may have reduced extraneous factors such as late adolescent development, juvenile rebelliousness, and collegiate moratorium. Ideally, by this time most young adults have made decisions about faith and church involvement that were more permanent and intensive.

The current research study was also delimited to theologically conservative Southern Baptist churches; therefore, this research may not be generalizable to denominations outside the Southern Baptist Convention or churches that hold divergent theological beliefs on the traditional orthodox doctrines such as the inerrancy of Scripture, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the Gospel, and the Trinity.

Furthermore, this study sampled “dynamic” youth ministries in a megachurch context. Consequently, this research may not necessarily generalize to smaller churches or churches that are not engaging in intentional and systematic evangelism and discipleship of young people under the supervision of a veteran youth pastor.

Finally, the study was delimited to Southern Baptist young adults who were committed to their youth ministry during high school. While further research into this

area may yield rich data concerning those who were unchurched and have since become involved in a church, the purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between previous levels of commitment and current levels of church involvement. As such, an investigation of the unchurched was beyond the scope of the research.

Terminology

For the purposes of this study and to avoid misunderstandings, the following definitions were utilized throughout the research study:

Adolescent. “Adolescence is the period of growth between childhood and adulthood” (Rice and Dolgin 2002, 1). The idea of an adolescent waiting period between childhood and adulthood is a recent social innovation, having developed in the later stages of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century to prolong childhood (Bakan 1971, 979-95). Adolescence is usually divided into three distinct but overlapping stages: early adolescence, ages 11 to 14, middle adolescence, ages 15 to 19, and late adolescence, ages 19 until adulthood (Rice and Dolgin 2002, 1). For the purposes of this study, the terms “adolescent,” “teenager,” and “young people” were used interchangeably to describe this life stage.

Post-youth ministry dropouts. “Students who graduate from our youth ministries and seem to graduate from following God” (Powell and Kubiak 2005, 51). Since this is a recent phenomenon (at least in academically-based research focus), the terminology is somewhat fluid and ill-defined. In the broadest sense, post-youth ministry dropouts are students who were actively involved in the youth ministry growing up and who stopped attending church regularly subsequent to high school graduation.

Retention. Retention is the process of assimilating active high school youth ministry participants into the life of the larger church post-youth ministry. For the purposes of the following study, retention will be measured by four levels of current church involvement: no involvement, low involvement, moderate involvement, and high involvement. Effective retention will be defined as a minimum of a low level of current church involvement.

Southern Baptist Convention (SBC). A voluntary association of Baptist churches across America that was formed in the nineteenth century. Although there is virtually no agreement on a complete list of SBC distinctives, Southern Baptists are typically identified by their commitment to the autonomy of the local church, salvation through personal faith in Christ, believers' baptism, congregational polity, and the authority and inerrancy of the Bible.

Youth ministry. "Youth ministry begins when adults find a comfortable method of entering a student's world . . . [and] happens as long as adults are able to use their contacts with students to draw them into a maturing relationship with God through Jesus Christ . . . [and] ceases when either the adult-student relationship is broken or the outcome of that relationship ceases to move the student toward spiritual maturity" (Benson and Senter 1987, 16). In other words, youth ministry is the intentional, purposeful ministry of the church community to emerging adolescents and their families with the goal of seeing them become fully assimilated, mature adult disciples of Christ. While it is acknowledged there are many things done in the name of "youth ministry" (i.e., parachurch organizations, youth rallies, etc.), the working definition for the

following research was limited to youth ministry carried out purposefully in the local church.

Youth pastor. While churches may differ on the semantics of a youth minister/pastor/director, for the purposes of this study a youth pastor was synonymous with a biblically qualified pastor designated to oversee the local church's ministry efforts to evangelize and disciple the teenagers in its community.

Research Assumptions

This study, like any human endeavor, operated under a number of assumptions.

1. Young adults can recall with relative veracity their youth ministry experiences during high school, including program involvement and personal spiritual habits.
2. An age-graded, funnel-model of youth ministry philosophy predominates the average Southern Baptist megachurch environment.
3. While the spiritual development of adolescents and young adults is an admittedly multi-faceted process, the process can be quantified and measured to some degree through church commitment and involvement studies.
4. Based on the precedent literature, this researcher will assume that long-term relationships, conservative theology, and evangelistic programming (including discipleship) are accurate gauges of a dynamic youth ministry.

Procedural Overview

The basic research design for the current study followed a quantitative survey format. In order to appropriately answer the research questions posed above, the researcher developed a survey instrument known as the Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire (YMRQ). The instrument, based on implications derived from the precedent literature, was comprised of 45 objective questions pertaining to youth ministry commitment during high school, demographics, and current level of church involvement.

Questions relating to youth ministry commitment were comprised of both forced response and Likert-type responses, so that commitment could encompass dimensions of intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity.

The sample youth ministries selected for this research were purposefully selected because they met the criteria established in the delimitations: membership in the Southern Baptist Convention, theologically conservative, the same full-time youth pastor (either hands-on or an oversight position) for at least five years, separate age-graded ministries, and an intentional evangelism and discipleship strategy (including programs such as mission trips, camps and retreats, and small groups) in place for youth ministry participants.

Once the churches were selected, the researcher contacted each youth pastor by phone to solicit their involvement in the research study. Permission to conduct the research and to utilize various online platforms to invite former youth ministry participants to the online survey was granted by each of the twelve participating churches. Upon confirmation via this initial call, the youth pastor was mailed a formal letter requesting their consent to participate, which was a step several of the churches requested for administrative purposes. Additionally, a confirmation email was sent to each church's administrative assistant outlining once again the details of the research as well as including instructions for how they were to invite the young adults to the online survey.

The desired target response was 300 completed surveys, which would grant the research more significance than smaller sample sizes. However, it must be conceded that since the current research relies heavily on the use of levels of involvement, some

purposive sampling was necessary to make an attempt at securing an equal distribution of students representing the various levels of youth ministry commitment. In conjunction with the researcher's dissertation supervision committee, a deadline of May 31, 2008, was set for completed surveys to be filled out. A total of 279 usable surveys were completed online by this deadline.

Upon the completion of the surveys, the data was coded for further analysis and comparison purposes. The coding process included assigning numerical values to each of the categorical forced responses, in accordance with the guidelines established in chapter 3. Also, the demographic responses were isolated and run against various questions in an effort to discover similarities and differences that could be used as seeds for future research efforts. Once the data was encoded, a series of statistical tests was conducted to determine if a significant relationship existed between levels of youth ministry commitment, demographical data, and current levels of church involvement. The tests encompassed such measures as a Chi-Square Test for Independence, t-tests, and correlation tests. Additionally, a comprehensive retention statistic was obtained across the levels of youth ministry commitment and sample churches which in effect called into serious question the veracity of the claim that 70 to 90% of actively involved students drop out of the church after high school.

CHAPTER 2

PRECEDENT LITERATURE

Many youth ministry experts have lamented the failure of high school students and churches to effectively manage the ministry transition that follows high school graduation (Roof 1981, 87-99; Barna 1991; Lee and Pipes 1999, 50; Lytch 2004, ix). The purpose of this chapter is to review the precedent academic literature regarding youth ministry models, adolescent religiosity, ministry retention, and late adolescent development. A brief theological and biblical analysis of the church body, discipleship, and apostasy was included at the beginning of this chapter to demonstrate the historical dynamics of the issue at hand. The goal of undertaking such a task was to justify the need for the current research study by discovering gaps in the literature.

The Local Church and Discipleship

Before surveying the social science literature on religiosity, a synopsis of the biblical and theological principles regarding the centrality of the church in God's plan for redemption is necessary. If regular corporate worship is expected and necessary for ongoing spiritual maturity and the advancement of God's kingdom on the earth, then the implications for churches are clear: churches must take seriously the assimilation and retention of the flocks under their care. Every member needs an intimate connection to a Christian community for mutual support, encouragement, discipline, and protection from false teaching.

This review will help the reader understand the vital importance of church involvement for the life of a Christian believer, as well as demonstrate that the church has always struggled with the problem of wayward and apostate believers. This section will examine the biblical mandates concerning the centrality of the church, the role of believers in the ministry of a church, key underpinnings for the process of discipleship, and the issue of apostasy that pervades both the Old and New Testaments.

The Centrality of the Church

The local church holds a position of supremacy in the New Testament that cannot and should not be rivaled by any other institution. The church's importance cannot be underestimated: it is the center of God's unfolding salvific plan for the world and the headquarters for carrying out the Great Commission. It is the church who God has ordained as the primary instrument for evangelism of the lost and sanctification of the converted Christian (Mack and Swavely 1996, 6).

Mark Dever speaks of the central role of the church in God's plan of redemption: "The church is the center of God's plan to display His wisdom to the heavenly beings The church was clearly central in God's eternal plan, in His sacrifice, and in His continuing concern And the local congregation is the place which claims to display this love for all the world to see" (Dever 2004, 14).

Jonathan Wilson summarizes concisely the necessity of the church: "Why does church matter? Because 'church' names the people of God who make known God's love for the world in Jesus Christ through the work of the Holy Spirit" (Wilson 2006, 4). The centrality of the church in God's scheme of salvation is evident throughout the Scriptures. Jesus said that He would build His church (Matt 16:18), delegated it the authority to

execute heavenly mandates (Matt 18:17-20), and revealed His ultimate intention that the world be filled with disciplined believers (Matt 28:18-20).

In a similar vein, Robinson and Wall describe this pivotal function of the church in terms of God's mission, sometimes labeled the *mission Dei* by missiologists:

The church is in its nature and its total life a mission and missionary endeavor; in its very essence it seeks to be, and is called to be, Jesus' witness in all its words and deeds, in all its life, whether gathered or scattered. The church does not exist to provide a congenial social experience for its members; nor does it exist to satisfy the ego needs of its leaders. The church exists to bear witness to the new creation in Jesus Christ and to be the beachhead of that new creation in the midst of the old. (Robinson and Wall 2006, 44)

In other words, the church should be understood theologically and biblically not to be a collection of individual Christians who merely "exist" together as one of many competing social structures, but rather as an integrated whole fused together and transformed by the gospel of Jesus Christ with the explicit purpose of displaying the greatness of God to a lost and dying world. Ephesians 1 makes it strikingly clear that this has been God's plan from the very beginning, and that there is no secondary strategy (at least humanly speaking) for accomplishing God's scheme of redemption. As Millard Erickson notes, "The church was not brought into being by our Lord simply to exist as an end in itself. Rather, it was brought into being to fulfill the Lord's intention for it. It is to carry on the Lord's ministry in the world – to perpetuate what he did and to do what he would do were he still here" (Erickson 1998, 1061).

The Call to Church Involvement and Membership

Now that the centrality of the church in redemption has been established and church history has supported this claim, the biblical evidence for church involvement and membership will be put forth to make a case for the urgency of ministry retention.

Church as a Christian Community

Hebrews 10:24-25 says, “Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.” The Bible is unmistakably clear in its affirmation of a Christian community that meets on a frequent basis for encouragement and spiritual growth. Christianity was never intended to be individualistic – a mixture of isolated persons who share a common religious affiliation. Rather, to be a Christian is to exist in a historic community of both universal and local believers. As Calvin warns in his commentary on this passage:

It is an evil which prevails everywhere among mankind, that every one sets himself above others, and especially that those who seem in anything to excel cannot well endure their inferiors to be on an equality with themselves. And then there is so much morosity almost in all, that individuals would gladly make churches for themselves if they could; for they find it so difficult to accommodate themselves to the ways and habits of others Unless similarity of habits or some allurements or advantages draw us together, it is very difficult even to maintain a continual concord among ourselves. (Calvin 1999, 240)

According to Erickson, church affiliation was found in the Scriptures as early as the beginning of Acts:

It was apparently the standard procedure for the believer to become a part of the fellowship (see, e.g., Acts 2:47). Although we do not know exactly what membership in the apostolic church entailed, it was certainly for the purposes of edification, prayer, service, and, as can be seen particularly in Acts 5, discipline. We should therefore emphasize the importance of every believer’s becoming an integral part of a group of believers, and making a firm commitment to it. Christianity is a corporate matter, and the Christian life can be fully realized only in relationship to others. (Erickson 1998, 1058)

Furthermore, in Romans 12:4-8, Paul speaks of believers as “members” who are joined together to form one “body.” While the English translation does not refer specifically to church membership, the principle is clear: Christians are to band together

in a community where they can exercise their “gifts” to build up the body of Christ: the local church (Matt 16:18; 1 Cor 14:12).

In concluding this section on community, it is helpful to examine the theological observations of the great Dietrich Bonhoeffer in regard to Christian community. In Bonhoeffer’s work on community, he identified three critical elements necessary for the existence of a true Christian community. First, Christian community means that “a Christian needs others because of Jesus Christ” (Bonhoeffer 1954, 21). Bonhoeffer argues forcefully for the need Christians have for other Christians to speak God’s Word to them on a consistent basis. Second, Christian community means that “a Christian comes to others only through Jesus Christ” (Bonhoeffer 1954, 21). Since the Fall, the chaos and brokenness of sin so damages our ability to maintain peace and harmony with others that only through the sacrificial death of Christ can we live with each in a peaceful community. Third, Christian community means “that from eternity we have been chosen in Jesus Christ, accepted in time, and united for eternity” (Bonhoeffer 1954, 21). Bonhoeffer concludes that since we have been united with Christ in on this earth through the church, we should take heart in knowing that we will also be eternally united with these other believers in the perfect community of heaven (Bonhoeffer 1954, 24).

Church as the Primary Mechanism for Spiritual Maturity

The Bible is clear about the role of the church in the faith community – it is absolutely vital and indispensable. Every person who is a Christian, united with Christ in salvation, must also unite themselves to a visible, local church body of believers. This is

God's context and mechanism for growth and transformation. Charles Spurgeon wrote concerning this truth:

I know there are some who say, "Well, I have given myself to the Lord, but I do not intend to give myself to any church." Now, why not? "Because I can be a Christian without it." Are you quite clear about that? You can be as good a Christian by disobedience to your Lord's commands as by being obedient? There is a brick. What is it made for? To help build a house. It is of no use for that brick to tell you that it is just as good a brick while it is kicking about on the ground as it would be in the house. It is a good-for-nothing brick. So you rolling-stone Christians, I do not believe that you are answering your purpose. You are living contrary to the life which Christ would have you live, and you are much to blame for the injury you do. (Mack and Swavely 1996, 22)

Mark Dever, writing on this issue of the church membership, echoes a similar concern for the primacy of the church in the process of discipleship. He writes,

Church membership is our opportunity to grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular church, we let the pastors and other members of that local church know that we intend to be committed in attendance, giving, prayer, and service. We allow fellow believers to have greater expectations of us in these areas, and we make it known that we are the responsibility of this local church. We assure the church of our commitment to Christ in serving with them, and we call for their commitment to serve and encourage us as well. (Dever 2004, 157)

Edmund Clowney also discusses the vital role of the church community in the process of spiritual maturity: "While the church cannot be defined in terms of nurture alone, it cannot be understood without it: God the Father instructs and trains his children; Christ teaches his disciples; and the Spirit equips the saints to serve the nurture of the body" (Clowney 1995, 138). In his excellent work on the church, Clowney envisions three primary goals for nurture that can be accomplished through the ministry of a church:

1. Nurture in knowing the Lord: the knowledge of saving faith.
2. Nurture in doing the Lord's will: the commitment of disciples to follow Christ.

3. Nurture in being like the Lord: growth in love toward God (Clowney 1995, 138).

Millard Erickson also discusses the vital role of the church in producing spiritually mature Christians. According to him, one of the essential functions of the church is the edification of believers. Erickson lists several means by which the church accomplishes its God-given task of edification:

1. Fellowship: “literally, a having or holding all things in common.”
2. Instruction/Teaching: “This is part of the broad task of discipling . . . education may take many forms and occur on many levels. It is incumbent upon the church to utilize all legitimate means and technologies available today.”
3. Biblical scholarship: “Since the church has the task of teaching the truth of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures, by implication it has the obligation to grow in its understanding of that revelation.”
4. Preaching: “Preaching is another means of instruction that has been used by the Christian church from its very beginning.”
5. Spiritual gifts: “The Holy Spirit in his wisdom has given just what is needed, so that the body as a whole may be properly built up and equipped.” (Erickson 1998, 1064-66)

Church Membership and Retention

A proper understanding of the role of the church as the critical context for Christian community and spiritual growth provides a firm underpinning for the current research. When people fail to remain actively connected to a church body, they step outside of God’s revealed will for discipleship and fall short of adequately fulfilling God’s plan for their lives. If spiritual maturity as God intended it to occur is primarily a function of the church, then there are two immediate implications for successful church ministry: (1) Churches need to do everything within their means to keep people connected to regular corporate involvement; (2) People must take the church’s ministry

seriously enough to remain connected at each life stage, regardless of external cultural transitions that might encourage them to explore other institutional alternatives.

The Problem of Apostasy

Despite the compelling arguments found throughout the Scriptures for church membership and involvement, there has always existed in the church a problem with those who fall away from consistent corporate worship. Consequently, it should come as no surprise to contemporary youth ministry researchers that both adolescents and adults fade in and out of the church for periods of time. The following section will examine the causes of apostasy given in Scripture and selected instances where church leaders have struggled with this issue in the past.

Causes of Apostasy

It must be admitted that the subject of religious apostasy is one of open and bitter debate among scholars of the Bible. While the Bible is clear that there are instances of apostasy (leaving) within the church, the exact meaning of passages such as Galatians 5 and Hebrews 6 offers no monolithic interpretation. Even the term “apostasy” suffers from confusion and misunderstanding, with some using it to mean abandoning the faith altogether, while others employ it as a sociological descriptor for those who simply leave the church. Furthermore, the contemporary absence of intact communities in America coupled with an inability to enforce rigorous church discipline makes it nearly impossible to tell who is in and who is out. Does moving to college justify being out of the church? Does a month’s vacation in the Caribbean mean one is out of the church? Apostasy, then, is a rather complex theological conundrum.

For instance, a cursory look at Hebrews 6:4-6a (“It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance”) yields no fewer than three competing interpretations (Erickson 1998, 1004):

1. Genuinely saved persons can lose their salvation, never to regain it (see Marshall 1969).
2. People who apostasize were never regenerate to start with (see John Calvin 1949).
3. This passage describes a hypothetical “what if” that could never really occur. The writer is simply discussing what might happen if a believer could fall away (see Hewitt 1960).

Regardless of how this passage and others are interpreted, it is quite evident that theologians have reached no universal consensus on either conceptualizing or handling those who apostasize from the church’s fold. Surprisingly, few theologians have undertaken the task of explaining why people leave the church. In most cases, theologians restrict themselves to discussions of the eternal implications of either full-fledged apostasy (losing one’s salvation) or hypothetical apostasy as a warning for those who are saved, depending on the particular nuances of their stream of theological thought (see Wilson 2004 for a fuller treatment of historical theological analysis and apostasy).

On the other hand, a few theologians do attempt to address the issue of apostasy. John Owen, one of the greater Puritan writers from centuries past, gives several explanations for apostasy from the gospel and church:

1. Because of the enmity in their minds to spiritual things – “The danger of apostasy will always be present if men receive the truth only in their minds, but do not love it in their hearts and gladly submit to it in their wills.”

2. Because of darkness and ignorance – “Darkness keeps the mind and soul from arriving at any assurance of the truth; it prevents the soul from loving the truth and so providence no defence for the person against apostasy.”
3. Because of pride, neglect, and worldliness – “Neglect of the Spirit’s warnings about the danger of falling into apostasy leads to a false sense of security.”
4. Because of Satan – “The devil, that greatest of all apostates, has it as his chief desire to destroy Christ’s church on earth.”
5. Because of divisions in the church – “If the world cannot see any good coming from Christians, but sees only hatred and strife, then it is no wonder that it has no desire for fellowship with us” (Owen 1992, 52-142).

Erickson makes a helpful distinction between those who have apostasized (defined as falling away from the faith) and those who have backslidden (temporary leaving or abandonment). According to Erickson, many of the cases of apparent apostasy in the New Testament can be resolved by using this distinction, which is more cogent with the rest of the New Testament’s teachings on salvation, as a hermeneutical filter. Peter’s denial of Christ, then, can be seen as a temporary moment of weakness, not as an act of apostasy. Obviously, Peter was restored and became a prominent leader in the early church’s mission to the Gentiles (Erickson 1998, 1006). In addition, James warns his readers that “whoever turns a sinner from the error of his ways will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins” (Jas 5:20). This passage supports the idea that even the early church dealt with the issue of backsliding Christians, and that the presence of continuing struggles with sin caused some to lose heart.

Instances of Leaving in Church History

After surveying the earliest Christian sources and writers from antiquity, Stephen Wilson notes the following: “Whereas the phenomenon of defectors has been raised and, in a few recent studies, discussed with a considerable degree of sophistication

with respect to Judaism, it has scarcely appeared in discussions of early Christianity” (Wilson 2004, 8-9). Wilson gives three reasons for the lack of credible sources: (1) Groups were very unlikely to publicize potentially embarrassing accounts of people who had dissented from their group; (2) those who accepted the label of defector probably did not want to draw attention to themselves but instead preferred to slip away anonymously; (3) the religious boundaries between Jewish, Christian, and pagan communities were not always rigidly marked (Wilson 2004, 8-9, 66).

Despite the seemingly scattered nature of evidence, a plethora of both biblical and extra-biblical data supports the fact that apostasy or backsliding has always been part and parcel of the church’s ministry. Biblically, the issue of apostasy is seen clearly in Galatians 4 (Jewish Christians), 2 Peter 2 (false teachers), and 1 Timothy 4 (some type of asceticism). Furthermore, it becomes obvious to even the most elementary reader of 1 Corinthians 5 that Paul has in view here a backsliding Christian whose sin was so egregious and whose heart so unrepentant that he had to be removed from the church’s fellowship. However, it is important to note that this was a part of a disciplinary protocol so that “his spirit may be saved” (Wilson 2004, 66-69).

Beyond the scope of the New Testament, it is also evident that churches in the early centuries struggled with this issue as well. Wilson cites numerous instances of apostasy and defection as a primary issue in early Christian communities: the book of *Hermas* and those struggling with persecution and wealth; Pliny’s accounts of Christians who recanted in the face of imminent death; Eusebius’ retelling of Quintus and his apparent reneging while under persecution; Cyprian’s defense of the “lapsed” Christians during the Decian persecution of AD 250-51; Justin’s discussion of Jewish Christians

who were struggling to leave the synagogue behind; Jewish Christians caught up in the Bar Kokhba rebellion; Porphyry's description of a philosopher named Ammonius who turned from Christianity; and an anonymous Christian senator in the fourth century who transferred his loyalty to a pagan cult (Wilson 2004, 76-96).

Apostasy and Retention

While it may be true that the concept of apostasy is ill-defined and subject to confusion, the fact still remains that to some degree churches have always struggled with people leaving the fold. Some people renounced the faith and left permanently, while others simply ceased coming and were promptly disciplined by the church. The point to be made here is that modern churches, while they have every right to be concerned, should not be caught off guard when people leave the church. This phenomenon of leaving and the subsequent issues of retention are as old as the church itself. The greater theological question is: what are churches doing either to retain or to repel those most actively involved?

Contemporary Models of Youth Ministry

In order to understand the church's recent efforts to reach and disciple young people, a brief history of contemporary models will be helpful. While the following section will certainly not be exhaustive, examining the primary paradigms will aid those less familiar with youth ministry history to get a clear picture of the origins and purposes of youth ministry proper. This section also provided a theoretical basis for the creation of youth ministry "levels of involvement" during the high school years that were used for comparison purposes in the current research effort.

Origins of Age-Graded Ministry

Before delving into a discussion on the emergence of contemporary youth ministry models, it is first necessary to trace the development of the overarching structure guiding American youth ministry for the past century. Age-graded ministry, as it came to be known, developed in response to sweeping socio-cultural changes in the education system and consequently American youth culture.

Youth Ministry Pioneers

The genesis of youth ministry began in the mid-nineteenth century in response to what many called the “youth problem” – large populations of uneducated, poor, and spiritually disinterested young people from ages 16 to 40. At the time, there was no formal strategy for reaching young people with the gospel. As Mark Senter notes, “Changes in culture gave birth to program which was quickly grounded in theory” (Senter 2004, 31).

Early forerunners of youth ministry such as Horace Bushnell, Theodore Cuyler, and Francis Clark attempted to address this “youth problem” in a number of innovative ways. Bushnell, pastor of North Congregational Church in Connecticut, sparked what has come to be known as the “Christian nurture revolution” – the idea that the primary source for the nurture of young people should be the Christian family. Francis Clark engineered the Society of Christian Endeavor, a youth organization that “moved spiritual accountability from event (emotional conversion experience) to process (endeavoring to know God) . . . he expanded Christian nurture from a family responsibility to a normal function of the faith community” (Senter 2004, 48).

Theodore Cuyler founded the Young People's Association, which provided the first organizational structure for intentional ministry among young people. The purposes of the Young People's Association were "the conversion of souls, the development of Christian character, and the training of new converts in religious work" (Senter 2004, 36).

Bushnell, Clark, and Cuyler were among the first to attempt to identify young people as a target group for evangelism. While they certainly were not the only men to attempt this feat, their magnanimous efforts to address the problem of a growing population of spiritually disconnected young people set the stage for youth ministry in the twentieth century.

The "Invention" of Adolescence

Age-graded ministry models really trace their origins back to the invention of adolescence, which in turn led to the creation of universal public schools in the early twentieth century. Following the Industrial Revolution, large scores of opportunistic young people flooded American cities in search of jobs. Around this time, psychologist Granville Stanley Hall began studying young people as a culturally distinctive group. The result was what Hall coined "adolescence," a term used to signify a separate developmental phase bridging childhood and adulthood. According to Thomas Hine,

Granville Stanley Hall, psychologist and college president, didn't invent the American teenager. But his vision of adolescence as a beautiful and perilous time still exerts a powerful influence over the way we see the young. As the founder of the study of adolescent psychology, he pioneered scientific inquiry into nearly every facet of the youthful mind and body. He also created persistent, destructive clichés. (Hine 1999, 158)

Hall's theory of adolescence cannot be understated in terms of its impact on American culture: "Hall's ideas were ultimately ratified by American society when American

educators sought to address these unique and specific needs through the creation of the universal public high school” (Scroggins 2004, 23).

Following the progressive ideas of men like Dewey and Spencer, the United States government introduced for the first time compulsory public education and subsequently made it mandatory for every high school student in America. Hine states the importance of this measure when he writes,

For ever growing numbers of young people, the real life of going to work and starting a family was deferred, replaced by a student life, played out almost entirely with people one’s own age. Young males and young females, most of them past puberty, met every day at high school. Parents could no longer control their interaction. The central social role once performed by the family had been usurped by the aggressively modern institution of the high school. (Hine 1999, 197)

For the first time in modern history, American culture included a subculture of teenagers who spent large amounts of time interacting with their peers apart from their nuclear family unit. The public high school, according to Hine and most youth ministry historians, created American youth culture and facilitated its rapid spread in urban cities.

Consequently, the response of those engaging in ministry among young people was to see themselves as missionaries to a “foreign” culture: youth culture. While churches were slow to respond to the changing cultural tides, a number of parachurch organizations stepped in and developed aggressive campus ministry outreaches that specifically targeted the needs and challenges facing American teenagers (Senter 1992, 108-20). As compulsory education spread from high school down to elementary, churches eventually began to pattern their organizational infrastructure after the public school model: children’s ministries, junior high, and high school ministries existed to accommodate the unique developmental needs of elementary, junior high, and high school students.

Early Models

Youth ministry has always been a missiological enterprise. As Mark Senter puts it, “Youth ministry begins when adults find a comfortable method of entering a student’s world” (Benson and Senter 1987, 26). As such, many of the principles and models of youth ministry have borrowed their ideas from the disciplines of missiology and church growth.

Donald MacGavran and Church Growth

One of the earliest writers in the field of church growth was Donald MacGavran, a missionary to India who studied the reasons behind why some churches grew and some failed to grow. Among the myriad of findings MacGavran detailed, the principle of receptivity has had a residual impact on the current practice of youth ministry. MacGavran writes, “Our Lord took account of the varying ability of individuals and societies to hear and obey the gospel. Fluctuating receptivity is a most prominent aspect of human nature and society No person is equally ready at all times to follow the way” (MacGavran 1990, 179-80). From this observation MacGavran differentiates between levels of discipleship for varying degrees of receptivity: D-1, D-2, and D-3.

Robert Coleman

Following MacGavran, Robert Coleman attempted to undertake a study of the life of Jesus “to see controlling principles governing the movements of the Master in the hope that our own labors might be conformed to a similar pattern” (Coleman 1993, 20). Coleman suggested eight guiding principles from the evangelistic strategy of Christ that

should undergird personal and corporate evangelistic efforts in the modern church: selection, association, consecration, impartation, demonstration, delegation, supervision, and reproduction.

The principle of selection states that “It all started by Jesus calling a few men to follow him The initial objective of Jesus’ plan was to enlist men who could bear witness to his life and carry on his work after he returned to the Father” (Coleman 1993, 27). Jesus selected the men on which he would build his kingdom, concentrating his primary energy on a few teachable followers while simultaneously not neglecting the needs of the masses (Coleman 1993, 28-32).

The principle of association notes that “having called his men, Jesus made a practice of being with them. This was the essence of his training program – just letting his disciples follow him” (Coleman 1993, 41). Jesus’ training program with the disciples involved no formal schooling or seminary education – he simply invited them to experience the instruction that comes with personal interaction and time spent together.

The principle of consecration explains that “Jesus expected the men he was with to obey him. They were not required to be smart, but they had to be loyal” (Coleman 1993, 51). Only those who were willing to submit themselves completely to following Jesus would be worthy of being called his closest “disciples.”

Next, Coleman describes the principle of impartation, “His was a life of giving – giving away what the Father had given him He gave all he had – nothing was withheld, not even his own life” (Coleman 1993, 61-62). In a similar vein, the principle of demonstration reveals how Christ gave himself away: “Jesus saw to it that his disciples learned his way of living with God and man” (Coleman 1993, 71). To that end, Jesus

specifically taught his disciples how to pray, how to use the Scriptures, and how to win souls (Coleman 1993, 71-74).

Once Jesus demonstrated how evangelism was to be done, his next step was to commission them to go out and do likewise through the principle of delegation. Following an intensive period of training and instruction, Jesus sent his disciples out in teams to accomplish various aspects of his mission on earth. He did not send them out on their own, however; according to Coleman, Jesus implemented the principle of supervision: “Jesus made it a point to meet with his disciples following their tours of service to hear their reports and to share with them the blessedness of his ministry in doing the same thing” (Coleman 1993, 89).

Finally, Coleman introduces the principle of reproduction, “Jesus intended for the disciples to produce his likeness in and through the church being gathered out of the world. Thus his ministry in the Spirit would be duplicated many-fold by his ministry in the lives of his disciples” (Coleman 1993, 97).

Undoubtedly, the eight principles of evangelism outlined by Robert Coleman have profoundly impacted the field of evangelism and more specifically youth ministry. Contemporary models of youth ministry incorporate and synthesize Coleman’s principles with such phrases as leadership development (impartation and delegation), multiplication (reproduction), relationship (association), and so on.

The Engel Scale

In addition, many missiologists refer to the Engel Scale to describe the different levels of commitment, ranging from the unbeliever’s awareness of a Supreme Being (labeled as an “-8”) to conceptual and behavioral growth in Christ (labeled as a

“+3” and beyond). The Engel Scale was developed in an effort to study why and how people respond to the gospel (Engel and Ward, 1975, 45).

The Sonlife Strategy

Using the principles of missiology and evangelism, youth ministry writers have sought to construct models of youth ministry designed to meet the needs of various levels of readiness and commitment exhibited by students. Dann Spader, founder of SonLife and one of the pioneers of modern youth ministry practice, first articulated this approach in training manuals during the 1970s and eventually published the material in a book entitled *Growing a Healthy Church*. Speaking of the influence of Sonlife on youth ministry, Mark Senter says, “There is no doubt that the Sonlife training has contributed to a dramatic shift from youth groups to youth ministry witnessed in the final decade of the twentieth century, especially in North America” (Senter 2002, 23).

Spader bases his Sonlife strategy of youth ministry on a study of the ministry methods of Christ using Thomas and Gundry’s *The Harmony of the Gospels* (1988). Spader argues that Christ’s discipleship methods encompass four distinct “phases” beginning with his public ministry. Phase 1, described as 18 to 21 months of time, marks what Spader calls Building – Christ prepared himself and his disciples by building relationships and transferring priorities to them that would undergird the future movement of Christianity (Senter 2002, 25-26).

Phases 2 and 3, which overlapped for the next six to nine months, are labeled Equipping/Winning, “although we call the outreach aspect of Jesus ministry a separate phase, it is really part and parcel of the equipping process” (Spader and Mayes 1991, 40). Spader distinguishes between mobilizing for peer care or teamwork (Phase 2), and

mobilizing for peer evangelism (Phase 3) as functionally separate aspects of Jesus' ministry (Senter 2002, 26).

Phase 4, described as lasting from AD 28 to AD 30, is what Spader refers to as Multiplication. Multiplication, according to Spader, is comprised of four sublevels of leadership: (1) leadership apprentice stage, (2) leadership training, (3) leadership delegation, and (4) leadership multiplication (Senter 2002, 26).

Building on this study of the life of Christ, Spader's *Sonlife Strategy* materials theorized five "types" of students that a youth ministry must account for: (1) secular (outside the church and disinterested), (2) fun seeker (uninterested in spiritual things but likes to have fun), (3) curious (asking serious spiritual questions), (4) convinced (has Christ in his life and growing), (5) committed (wants to minister to others). Spader says, "It is critical that the development of our ministries reflect a commitment to reach and challenge students at various levels of spiritual need" (Spader 1984, 226-27; *Sonlife* 1999).

Spader's work, while seminal and influential in the field of youth ministry over the last few decades, has been thoroughly critiqued in terms of methodology and primacy as *the* strategy of Jesus (see Senter 2002, 41-48). Nevertheless, Spader serves as probably the "founding father" of most contemporary models (i.e., Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry, the Funnel, etc.).

Duffy Robbins' Funnel

Duffy Robbins, Professor of Youth Ministry at Eastern College, was one of the first to articulate a youth ministry model for popular consumption. Building on the work of Dennis Miller, Robbins argued for a "funnel" conceptualization of youth ministry

strategy and programming. As he put it, “Wide enough at the top to bring students in, but intentional enough at the bottom to accomplish our objectives” (Robbins 1990, 108).

Robbins’ funnel was comprised of five primary levels:

1. Come Level – an initial contact with the program. For students at this level, “their only commitment to the group is to come when the group is doing something they like – something fun or entertaining” (Robbins 1987, 26).
2. Grow Level – a willingness to attend programs where spiritual growth is involved. The distinctive of a grow level student is that they “take part in a youth activity, even if it involves them in some amount of Bible study of spiritual input” (Robbins 1987, 27).
3. Disciple Level – a desire to take the initiative for their own growth. “A student at the disciple level is a student who is willing to discipline himself – to do personal Bible study on his own, memorize Scripture . . . or personally seek to be a witness at school, at home, or wherever” (Robbins 1987, 28).
4. Develop Level – a willingness to assume responsibility for other students’ spiritual growth. Developing leaders at this level involves two key components: (1) modeling the task, and (2) “ministry training should begin with physical responsibilities . . . and then expand to include spiritual responsibilities” (Robbins 1987, 28).
5. Multiply Level – an ability to assume some responsibility for their own personal ministry. This level is often known as “multiplication” of effort (Robbins 1987, 29).

Robbins explains that the value of this funnel is in its ability to keep youth ministry focused on achieving its primary objectives: “For a youth program to be well-rounded, accomplishing the purpose for which it was designed, there needs to be some type of formal or informal programming that will meet the needs of kids at each of these levels of commitment” (Robbins 1987, 31). Robbins outlines two essential implications for youth ministry theory from the funnel concept: the law of spiritual commitment and the importance of the unspiritual. According to the law of spiritual commitment, “as commitment increases, attendance decreases” (Robbins 1987, 31). In other words, higher levels of programming commitment place greater expectations on students and bring

lower attendance figures. Attendance, then, may be a deceptive indicator of the effectiveness of a given program. The importance of the unspiritual points to the fact that in a healthy youth ministry philosophy, there may be a significant number of “unspiritual” activities (basketball, camping, etc.) that can be used to accomplish spiritual goals. Robbins summarizes the overarching process by noting:

As a balance for the Law of Spiritual Commitment, we need to realize that we can't get students to be multipliers if we can't involve them in leadership development. And we can't get them disciple if we can't get them interested in growth. And we can't get them to grow if we can't get them to come. And that might mean that the most spiritually strategic action I can take with some students is to take them away with me for a day of white-water rafting, building relationships, and breaking down defenses. (Robbins 1987, 32)

Another well-known writer, Mark Senter of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, compiled a list of potentially viable youth ministry strategies into one of his early works. Some examples of these models included the community model, competition model, discipleship model, fundamentalist model, gift development model, and the urban model (Senter 1987, 239-69). While each of the models Senter commends has shortcomings, the value of his list rests in the diversity of approaches to ministry represented by youth ministry models during the 1980s and early 1990s.

The 1990s to the Present

The 1990s witnessed an explosion of literature both from practitioners and academicians purporting various models of youth ministry. While no one model has carried the day, there seems to be a clear trend towards a more family-focused style of youth ministry.

Doug Fields' PDYM

Youth ministry since the mid-1990s has been heavily influenced by the “Purpose-Driven” movement. Drawing on the work of Rick Warren, youth pastor and writer Doug Fields penned the now-landmark youth ministry work entitled *Purpose-Driven Youth Ministry*. While very few of the ideas were original in terms of youth ministry philosophy or practice, Fields articulated the model of “healthy youth ministry” at one of the fastest-growing churches in the world. Fields goes so far as to say that his five purposes “reflect the purposes that were commanded by Jesus and manifested in the early church” (Fields 1998, 17). The five purposes are worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship, and discipleship. According to Fields, these five “biblical” purposes shape every aspect of the youth ministry task, from programming events to ministry evaluation.

This is the true novelty in Fields’ paradigm for youth ministry – every program or event carried out in a youth ministry must have as its goal the fulfillment of one of the five purposes. In order to determine which purpose is appropriate for a given program, Fields recasts the levels of commitment used by Spader and others in terms of “target audiences.” The five audiences, which form concentric circles to reflect declining levels of involvement, include the community students, crowd students, congregation students, committed students, and core students. Fields then integrates the five purposes into a programming strategy that will target each one of these groups. Fields concludes,

The circles help communicate the goal of our youth ministry: to reach students from our community and move them to core commitments The clearer the picture you have of what each commitment level looks like, the easier it will be for you to relate to students at their respective levels. (Fields 1998, 87-91)

Mark Devries' Family-Based

While PDYM has been replicated in churches across the country since 1998, several other authors have offered some helpful correctives to some of the deficiencies of these prior models. Mark Devries wrote an extremely popular book, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, in which he calls for a shift in the paradigm away from “traditional youth ministry.” The key problem, in his opinion, is that traditional youth ministry promotes the “isolation of teenagers from the adult world and particularly from their own parents” (Devries 1994, 21). Burns’ solution “is to find ways to undergird nuclear families with the rich support of the extended Christian family of the church and for these two formative families to work together in leading young people toward mature Christian adulthood” (Devries 1994, 18). Admittedly, Burns’ diagnosis of youth ministry is accurate in that much of the literature says nothing about reaching and involving the family in the discipleship process of teenagers. Burns’ prescription, however, leaves more to be desired: his “117 ways” to begin a family-based youth ministry offer no clear and compelling model for churches to implement.

Experiential Models

In recent years, youth ministry literature has seen a shift toward more experiential models and paradigms. Authors such as Richard Dunn, Kenda Dean, Mike King, Mark Yaconelli, and Tony Jones make the case that “youth ministry must move away from behavioral modification techniques and focus on creating environments for genuine spiritual transformation. We must guide young people into the presence of God” (King 2006, 11). Using terminology like “Christian formation” or “Christian nurture,” these postmodern spirituality writers hearken back to the ancient Christian traditions of

people like Thomas Merton, Brother Lawrence, and Ignatius of Loyola for instruction in how to “practice the presence of God” or “create sacred space.” Elements such as liturgy, imaginative prayer, lectio divina, and pilgrimages, all rooted in medieval Catholicism and church tradition, are part of the process of engaging students with the real power and presence of God (King 2006, 98-165).

Common Threads in the Models

While there are literally hundreds of youth ministry models available to the avid researcher, Chap Clark offers a helpful summary of the “common threads of youth ministry models.” Clark identifies two essential components of youth ministry programming that have emerged over the past two decades in every model of youth ministry. First, according to Clark, “is a formula for making programmatic decisions in response to a defined mission statement and identified set of students needs” (Clark 2001, 113). The events, programs, and supporting infrastructure for youth ministry are always in response to the needs and commitment levels of the target students within its scope of ministry. This concept is in keeping with youth ministry’s missiological nature to reach the student culture on its own terms. The second component, Clark notes, “is exemplified by the funnel of programming the Funnel of Programming offered herein provides a theological framework for deepening a student’s level of interest in – and therefore, hopefully, commitment to – a deeper walk with Christ” (Clark 2001, 113). In summary, Clark cogently assesses the primacy of the funnel as the prevailing template:

In synthesizing the wide variety of youth ministry programs and models of the last 40 years, there has emerged a general consensus that it is important to employ a diversity of programmatic options according to the interest level of the students who we are trying to reach In other words, we must scratch where they itch, instead of trying to place the round peg of the students that God has called us to work with

into the square hole of a prepackaged model of ministry The Funnel of Programming represents a synthesis of the most effective, historically viable, and biblically appropriate of contemporary youth ministry models. (Clark 2001, 118)

Based on this funnel, Clark theorizes five levels of youth ministry involvement and interest: outreach level (students who would not show up to a Christian event); entry level (students who come but are disinterested or bored); discipleship level (students with a genuine relationship with Christ who want to grow); intimate relationship level (students involved with small groups); and the mentoring level (students willing to be loved and led one-on-one by an adult). The bottom line here is that youth ministry intentionally targets and programs for students with different levels of spiritual commitment and sociological development (Clark 2001, 118-21). Measurable goals and results, consequently, must be assessed through this framework.

The Funnel of Youth Ministry Commitment

Since the funnel has such a prominent place in youth ministry literature over the past thirty years, a modified version of it was utilized to theorize the different levels of youth ministry commitment and involvement during high school. For the purposes of this research, the following “Funnel of Youth Ministry Commitment” guided the criteria for the sampling process and the analysis of subsequent data regarding youth ministry retention after high school.

This framework for theorizing youth ministry commitment levels is a hybrid of several models discussed in the previous sections. Due to the nature of a time-lag study, it was nearly impossible to account for the “outreach level” or “community audience” mentioned by Chap Clark and Doug Fields in their respective versions of the funnel and concentric circles of student commitments. In addition, this group was

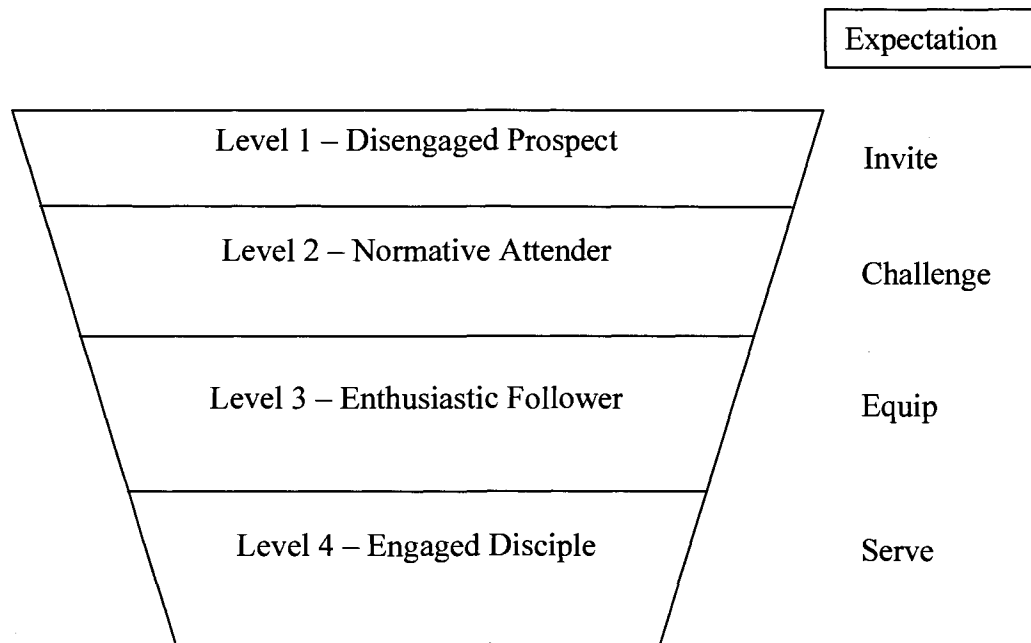


Figure 1. Funnel of youth ministry commitment

considerably outside the scope of the current research since the purpose was to examine the outcomes of *youth ministry* commitment after high school. Furthermore, the “Disciple” and “Develop” levels mentioned by Duffy Robbins have been combined into one category labeled “Enthusiastic Follower” in an attempt to better quantify these two nearly indistinguishable levels of commitment. Synthesizing multiple levels of commitment into a more eclectic framework was necessary because youth ministry attendance frequency numbers for the years 2000 to 2007 were non-existent in the majority of SBC churches.

Adolescent Religiosity

In examining the religious behavior of adolescents, two major topics were examined: the impact of “religiosity effects” on adolescents’ attitudes and actions, and

patterns of adolescent religiosity, including religious service attendance, practices, and beliefs of adolescents.

It should be noted at the start, however, that a dearth of scholarly literature exists regarding adolescent religiosity. This fact has been noted by several writers, including the most prolific contemporary researcher on adolescent religious behavior and its effects, Christian Smith of the National Study of Youth and Religion at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Smith explains,

In fact, reading many published overview reports on adolescence can leave one with the distinct impression that American youth simply *do not have* religious and spiritual lives So we continue to lack reliable, nationally representative knowledge about and understanding of the religious and spiritual lives of American youth. (Smith and Denton 2005, 4 and 312)

Consequently, this section relied heavily on non-academic opinion polls and national surveys such as Gallup polls and phone interviews conducted by George Barna.

Religiosity Effects and Adolescents

In studying the status of adolescent health in the United States, sociologists often speak of the impact of “religiosity effects” on adolescent attitudes and actions (Regenerus, Smith, and Fritsch 2003, 7). This section will set out a working definition of religiosity and its component parts, and then will identify general effects of religious behavior on the psyche of adolescents.

Defining Religiosity

Religiosity is a widely used but rarely defined concept. As Leonard Moffitt notes in his book *Religiosity: A Propensity of the Human Phenotype*, “It runs the gamut from emotional commitments, psychological and parapsychological experiences,

religious-based anxieties and escapes from anxiety, to ritualistic activities, transcendent values/aspirations, and even to self-centered ‘insurance’ against bad luck, devils, or natural catastrophes” (Moffitt 1997, 3). Furthermore, religiosity is a universal conception, a “seemingly universal yearning among humans” (Moffitt 1997, 3). Moffitt goes on to note:

For whatever the reasons/factors/forces, religious activity of one sort or another has occupied and continues (even in this supposedly secular era) to occupy a central spot in human affairs, especially in the functioning and cogency of our community systems. We can make this observation even in professedly atheistic societies where nominally irreligious ideologies and rituals fill the same niche. (Moffitt 1997, 1)

Manifestations of religiosity, though very difficult to assess or measure, range from “cathartic outpourings in prayer . . . to honoring symbolic representations of deities whether as medals worn or statutes and stained glass windows displayed” (Moffitt 1997, 3). The demonstration of religiosity is as varied or more so than the proliferation of formal religious systems themselves.

Discussions about religiosity encompass a myriad of intricate and interrelated issues. Among the most prominent topics religiosity addresses are: religious participation, conceptions of divinity, religious orientation, ideas about fertility, salvation, creation and operation of the physical world, and “sociocultural spinoffs” (cultural artifacts, artistic expression, etc.) (Moffitt 1997, 56-75). For the purposes of this study, however, discussion was limited to religiosity as it pertains to religious participation, beliefs, and practices of adolescents.

Religiosity Effects and Adolescents

One consistent theme in the literature that has been extensively documented over the last thirty years is the relationship between religiosity and youth outcomes. One recent review of the literature by Mark Regnerus provides a broad base for examining the so-called “religiosity effects” on adolescents.

Regnerus begins his review of the literature on religiosity and adolescent health by noting, “Researchers continue to document psychosocial influences of religion on the physical and emotional health and behaviors of U.S. youth and adults” (Regnerus 2003, 1). Regnerus discovered a positive relationship in the literature between adolescent religiosity and physical health, well-being, and multiple health behaviors such as diet, exercise, and sleep habits. He concludes that “religious expressions and behavior during adolescence promotes long-term physical well-being” (Regnerus, Smith, and Fritsch 2003, 13). Furthermore, Regnerus found a number of studies which supported a positive relationship between various measures of religiosity and healthy self-concept, the development of “prosocial” competence, educational expectations and academic progress, moral development, gender role development, and civic virtue (Regnerus, Smith, and Fritsch 2003, 13-25).

Regnerus’ review of the literature also uncovered a substantial frequency of studies on the relationship between adolescent religiosity and delinquency. He concluded that a majority of studies (beginning in 1969) support the notion that a high degree of religiosity is negatively correlated with a myriad of delinquent behaviors, including juvenile crime, drinking, drug and substance abuse, tobacco, and sexual activity (Regnerus, Smith, and Fritsch 2003, 26-39).

Another relatively recent survey of the germane literature made similar observations concerning the effects of religiosity on adolescent behavior. Laura Lippman, Erik Michelsen, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain presented a Child Trends Brief report to the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services entitled, "Indicators of Child, Family, and Community Connections: The Measurement of Family Religiosity and Spirituality." In their report, the authors comment on the linkage between youth religiosity and youth outcomes. Religiosity has been linked to mental health, social connections, the development of morality and altruism, ego strength of the will, and positive self-esteem. The authors also draw attention to the mitigating strength of religiosity on negative behaviors such as drug use, smoking, drinking, gambling, and risky sexual activity. Finally, the authors point out how increased levels of religiosity can foster more pro-social behavior, defined as the connectedness of individuals and families and the broader society (Lippman, Michelsen, and Roehlkepartain 2004, 3-4).

Other contemporary research confirms a positive correlation between adolescent religiosity and subsequent healthy behavior, development, and attitudes. King, Elder, and Whitbeck conducted a four-year (grades 7-10) longitudinal study on white rural families from eight agriculturally dependent counties in Iowa. This study, which was part of the Iowa Youth and Families Project, collected and analyzed data on 365 families with youth in a farming community social context, measuring various components of religiosity (church attendance, involvement in church activities, felt religiosity, and religious identity). The authors concluded that the more religiously involved adolescents were during high school, the more these students demonstrated peer

and academic competence. Furthermore, religiously involved farm adolescents were less likely to associate with delinquent youth and were more capable of securing prosocial values, such as respect for parents and a sense of responsibility (King, Elder, and Whitbeck 1997, 447).

Another landmark research study on adolescent religiosity was conducted by Peter Benson. The study, which he later called “The Troubled Journey,” is a composite portrait of public school students (grades 6-12) in 111 communities representing 25 states in America. The study was part of a larger project known as RespecTeen, a national program sponsored by Lutheran Brotherhood. Benson’s research included an incredible sample size of 46,799 middle and high school students. The study demonstrated that the “asset” of church involvement was associated with preventing such at-risk behaviors as depression/suicide and deviant sexuality, as well as promoting resiliency in situations where youth have experienced sexual abuse, physical abuse, parental addiction, and single parent homes. In addition, Benson reported that church involvement was one of the top eight factors related to positive behaviors such as care for others’ needs, educational commitment, and healthy self-esteem. Church involvement scored a correlation of -0.28 in relation to at-risk behaviors (Benson 1993, 71-92).

Another recent study involving a nationally representative sample of high school seniors revealed supporting evidence for the relationship between religiosity and adolescent health. This study by Wallace and Forman found that relative to their non-religious peers, religiously engaged adolescents were less likely to participate in behaviors that compromised their health (i.e., carrying weapons, getting into fights, drinking and driving). Conversely, active religious participants were more likely to

engage in behavior that promotes their personal welfare (i.e., proper nutrition, exercise, and rest). The data further concluded that these trends were not influenced by demographic factors, nor were they short-lived outcomes. Religiosity and adolescent health were discovered to be positively linked over an extended period of time (Wallace and Forman 1998, 721-41).

Christian Smith has been the most prolific writer on the subject of adolescent religiosity, providing readers with a scholarly sociological framework for interpreting the effects of religiosity on adolescent behavior. In regard to the so-called “religiosity effects,” Smith states clearly and unabashedly,

Several decades of social scientific studies have shown that religion is often a factor in the lives of American adolescents, influencing their attitudes and behaviors in ways that are commonly viewed as positive and constructive. Across a number of areas of concern, various measures of religiosity are typically associated with a variety of healthy, desirable outcomes A systematic review of the literature on religion and youth reveals notable patterns of religious influences among American adolescents. (Smith 2003, 17)

In his brief but broad treatment of the literature related to religion and youth, Smith points out that religiosity has been frequently inversely correlated with juvenile drug, alcohol, and tobacco use, as well as delinquency and suicide ideation. Religion has also played a factor in nurturing physical health, positive self-concept, higher family involvement and religious values, and greater political and civic involvement. Smith wisely summarizes this section by noting his hesitancy of labeling these adolescent behaviors as “pro” or “good” (because these categories are dependent on larger moral frameworks derived from theological and philosophical frameworks); however, most people could agree in general that it is good for youth to avoid drug use, alcohol (in excess), delinquency, and pre-marital promiscuity (Smith 2003, 18).

In addition to pointing out the traditional positive outcomes of religious involvement and youth outcomes, Smith makes a significant contribution to the area of adolescent religiosity in his discussion of “theorizing religious effects.” Smith suggests nine connected factors, clustered underneath three major categories, as a potential grid or framework for interpreting the effects of religion in the lives of American youth. What follows will be a brief and concise summarization of Smith’s model for understanding the constructive force of religion in the lives of adolescents.

The three larger dimensions are as follows: (1) moral order, which encompasses moral directives, spiritual experiences, and role models; (2) learned competencies, including community and leadership skills, coping skills, and cultural capital; and (3) social and organizational ties, which are comprised of social capital, network closure, and extra-community skills. By moral order, Smith intends to communicate those normative ideas and concepts which provide absolute guidelines for issues of right and wrong, good and bad, true and untrue. These moral absolutes are not merely subjective preferences or sociological constructs; rather, they are believed to exist apart from peoples’ desires and are received by divine or supernatural revelation. In other words, the religious moral order into which adherents are inducted supercedes and serves to provide adolescents with normative bearings and frameworks for making sense of the world and acting according to a universal, undeniable law of justice, order, and truth (Smith 2003, 20-22).

“Learned competencies” refer to those life skills and knowledge passed down in the teachings and practice of religion that contribute to fortifying adolescents’ well-being and improving their chances of living a profitable life. Smith outlines three

specific learned competencies that can be acquired from religion: community and leadership skills, coping skills, and cultural capital (socially distinctive tastes, skills, knowledge, and practices implicit in American culture). Each of these skills is transferable to other contexts outside of the religious community and significantly enhances an adolescent's opportunity for well-being (Smith 2003, 22-24).

“Social and organizational ties” are networks of relationships afforded to youth through religious involvement. These ties include social capital (transgenerational network ties with older adult members in the religious community), network closure (dense networks of relational ties who can provide parents and significant other authority figures with information in order to discourage negative behavior and encourage positive youth outcomes), and extra-community links (linkage to national and international religious organizations that serve to broaden youth's awareness and involvement with the world around them). Smith argues that these social and organizational ties are unique to religion in that they offer transgenerational contact where youth are typically stratified by age-graded characteristics (Smith 2003, 25-27).

Patterns of Adolescent Religiosity

In this section the religious practices, beliefs, and service/youth ministry attendance of adolescents will be surveyed. Special attention will be given to the emerging trends of religiosity with respect to high school seniors and early college students, especially the patterns of Southern Baptist students where this data is available.

Religious Service Attendance

Earlier studies in the patterns of youth religious service attendance revealed a steady decrease in the general direction of the numbers. Potvin, Hoge, and Nelsen demonstrated how separate studies conducted in 1951 (stratified sample of 2,500 high school students) and 1975 (national sample of 1,121 teenagers) charted a significant decrease in weekly service attendance among high school students. Total service attendance during this period fell from 69% to a lackluster 44%, with each of the three measured religious traditions (Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish) experiencing a similar decline (Potvin, Hoge, Nelsen 1976, 4). This data, however, is not necessarily generalizable since the study was not longitudinal – it only took snapshots of students in two different time periods. Furthermore, this data lumped all Protestants together in the same mold, failing to account for differences between conservative and mainline denominations.

In another study, researchers at UCLA conducted a three-year project called “Spirituality in Higher Education,” which attempted to track the spiritual beliefs and practices of college freshmen through their junior year. The researchers surveyed 3,680 undergraduates attending 46 private and public universities and colleges across the country from the years 2000 to 2003. Their findings supported the hypothesis that students become less engaged in weekly church activities across the board over the course of their collegiate years: religious service attendance dropped sharply from 52% reporting “frequent” attendance before the freshman year to a mere 29% by their junior year. Interestingly enough, students who attended an “evangelical college” were found to

attend church more frequently and read sacred texts more often than students at non-evangelical institutions (Astin 2004, www.spirituality.ucla.edu).

Recent research into the religious service attendance patterns of youth has yielded significantly more optimistic data. Gallup telephone interviews conducted with 500 high school students in September of 1988 revealed that 41% of students attended Sunday School on a regular basis, and a full 36% of students attended some kind of youth ministry. A similar study conducted three years later, July of 1991, showed a remarkable improvement: this time, 48% of teenagers surveyed (sample size of 513) attended church or synagogue in the last seven days. Gallup polls seem to indicate, however, that religiosity significantly declines as students get older. In the same 1991 survey, Gallup data showed that religious service attendance dropped from 55% (ages 13 to 15) to 39% (ages 16 to 17), and then the percentage dips to 36 for college lowerclassmen (Gallup 1992, 33-42). It should be pointed out, however, that Gallup's sample size for these questions is relatively small and represents national trends, not the specific trajectories of different denominations or theological traditions.

The Barna Research Group conducted similar studies in 1991. Utilizing telephone interviews of 710 teenagers aged 13 to 18, Barna found that in a typical week 29% of teenagers attended a church youth ministry and 50% attended a church worship service. Data varied significantly, however, within these categories: the church attendance numbers fell from 55% at ages 13 to 14 to 45% at ages 17 to 18, while those attending a youth ministry or Sunday school fell from 33% at ages 13 to 18 to 20% at ages 17 to 18. Barna also found that church size and regional differences played a factor in adolescent religiosity, with students from larger churches (100 or more) and the

South/Midwest areas of the country being more likely to attend on a weekly basis (Barna 1991, 13).

The most recent and comprehensive attempt at measuring youth religiosity is the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). From July 2002 to March 2003, the NSYR conducted a national, random telephone survey of 3,290 U.S. teenagers between the ages of 13 to 17, followed by 267 in-depth interviews with a subsample of telephone survey respondents. Their study is one of the few to include both major American religious traditions as well as minority religions such as Mormonism and Judaism. According to the data, 40% of teens reported attending religious services at least once a month, and 52% attended at least 2 to 3 times per month. The most actively involved teenagers were from the Mormon tradition (76%), followed by the Conservative Protestant category, with 70% of its affiliates self-reporting attendance of at least 2 to 3 times per month. The least actively involved students were those from Judaism, with 18% of Jewish teens reporting attending synagogue at least 2 to 3 times per month (Smith and Denton 2005, 37).

When it came to youth ministry participation, 38% of all U.S. teens reported being currently involved in a religious youth ministry. In addition, 69% of teens surveyed have been involved in a religious youth ministry at some point in their lives. Of those currently involved, 26% attend at least once a week, 6% attend 2 to 3 times a month, 4% attend about once a month, and 2% attend a few times a year (Smith and Denton 2005, 51). Southern Baptist teens attend youth ministry significantly more than the national average: 55% of SBC teens are currently involved in youth ministry, and 69% of regular church-attending SBC youth participate in youth ministry to some degree

(Schwadel and Smith 2005, 16). The research also confirms a gradual decline in religious service and youth ministry participation between ages 13 and 18, though not as drastic as previous numbers have indicated: from 54% (2 to 3 times a month at age 13) to 51% (at ages 16 to 17) in service attendance, and from 39% (at age 13) to 35% (at ages 16 to 17) in youth ministry involvement (Smith and Denton 2005, 280).

Religious Beliefs

The religious beliefs of young people have been the focus of most opinion polls and research studies conducted in the last fifteen years on adolescent religiosity. Barna's study of teens who consider themselves to be Christian demonstrated the following: 89% believe there is a personal God who watches over us and can be reached by our prayers, 86% believe Jesus Christ physically rose from the dead and reappeared on earth, 64% believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible, 74% believe that Satan is real and can affect daily life, and 58% believe that the Christian church is relevant for their lives today (Barna 1991, 49).

Roehlkepartain and Benson analyzed survey data collected from a three-year Search Institute study of more than 11,000 adults and youth in 561 congregations. Their analysis revealed that 97% of youth studied believed that God is loving, but only 32% believed that God punishes people for their actions. Forty-three percent of the youth confirmed that Scripture is God inspired, 79% held that God is active in individuals, and 67% believed that Christians should tell others about Jesus. Among the more interesting data, the research discovered some non-traditional religious beliefs: 26% believed in astrology, 20% thought they could communicate with the dead, and 16% believed in reincarnation after death (Roehlkepartain and Benson 1993, 33-45). Schwadel and

Smith's research yields a more comprehensive picture of the beliefs of young people by denomination. Eighty-five percent of all teens surveyed in their research believe in God, while 96% of SBC teens hold to a belief in God. Of those who believe in God, only 68% of all teens believe God is a personal being involved in people's lives today, as compared with 75% of SBC youth. Fifty percent of all teens definitely believe in life after death, while 60% of SBC youth affirm the same. Seventy-three percent of all teens believe in judgment day, while 88% of SBC youth hold that same idea. Lastly, Schwadel and Smith found that 51% of all teens report faith being very or extremely important in shaping their daily lives, as compared to 72% of SBC youth who see faith as an important component of their lives (Schwadel and Smith 2005, 21-29). Smith makes a keen observation in summarizing the religious beliefs of today's youth:

We suggest that the de facto dominant religion among contemporary U.S. teenagers is what we might call "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism." The creed of this religion, as codified from what emerged in our interviews, sounds something like this:

1. A God who exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die. (Schwadel and Smith 2005, 21-29)

Religious Practices

The data for this section will be exclusively drawn from NSYR data, since it is the most recent and cross-denominational available. Statistics from NSYR research show that 32% of Protestant teens read their Bible at least once week, with 48% of attending SBC teens reading their Bible regularly. A full 60% of Protestant youth pray alone at

least a few times a week, as compared with 75% of SBC teens (the highest among any denomination). When it comes to sharing their faith with non-Christians, 54% of Protestant teens express their beliefs at least some of the time, while 56% of SBC teens engage in evangelism. Fifty-three percent of all Protestant teens report participating in religious conversations with their families, with 61% of SBC teens reporting the same. Finally, a mere 30% of Protestant teens engaged in volunteer or community service, while only 32% of SBC teens contributed time to service projects (Schwadel and Smith 2005, 31-40).

Retention

Effective assimilation and retention of resident members is one of the top concerns of any institution, be it the church or a rotary club. In the latter half of the twentieth century, however, social scientists and church growth advocates turned their research efforts towards the church and how successful the institution is at keeping the proverbial back door closed. Retention in modern America has come to be viewed as a multi-faceted, multi-complex phenomenon that has more sources and mediating factors than a simple spiritual explanation. Currently, a review of the wide swath of literature available to the sociologist and educator would yield such varying predictors as psycho-social, socio-political, socio-economic, and psycho-pathological explanations for why people do or do not remain involved in a particular religious tradition.

This section focused on three major topics in the precedent literature that are relevant to post-youth ministry retention: religious socialization/transmission, religious switching and alienation, and institutional retention as seen in colleges across America. The purpose of this section was to identify factors that correlate with effective

retention of adolescents in the institutions at which they are engaged over a long period of time.

Religious Socialization/Transmission

Sociologists of religion have long been enamored with theoretical explanations and frameworks for understanding how religious institutions and families successfully “socialize” young people into the culture of the church. This section will cover the major theoretical models of religious socialization/transmission, and will seek to delineate the critical factors or indicators associated with adolescent religious commitment.

Five major models of religious socialization are available in the sociological literature. The first model, known as social learning theory, underscores the importance of socialization, modeling, and reinforcement through parents, teachers, and significant other youth workers (Berger 1967; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1993). Second, the subcultural model views socialization as a voluntary choice contingent upon selection of social ties (Fischer 1982; Olson 1993). The third model, rational choice theory, posits socialization as a kind of intellectual exercise where one performs a cost/benefit analysis on the strengths and weaknesses of identifying with a particular religious tradition (Greeley 1989; Sherkat and Wilson 1995). Fourth, the cultural broadening theory explains the loss of religious commitment as a consequence of intellectual growth and cross-cultural learning (Berger 1967; Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1993). Finally, emancipation theory explains why adolescents reject their parents’ faith (Erikson 1968). Each of these theoretical models is summarized in Carol Lytch’s work on high school seniors (Lytch 2004, 211).

In 2004, researcher Carol Lytch undertook one of the few known qualitative studies on religious loyalty and identity among high school seniors, studying active ministry participants at three different denominational churches in Louisville, Kentucky. Her goal was to “describe patterns that emerge in teen religious identity and loyalty. I seek to understand why and in what ways teens decide to embrace the tradition handed down by their religious community” (Lytch 2004, 2). Lytch’s research identifies five key variables in religious loyalty as it applies to teenagers growing up in a church: church attendance, prayer and/or Bible reading, knowledge of the religious tradition, religious experience, and religious rituals. The highest degree of loyalty was attained by those students who were simultaneously socialized and had consistent religious experiences. Lytch also found a strong correlation between the influence of parents and teens’ religious loyalty. Parental variables she found important in faith transmission were (1) parent church attendance, (2) a warm family climate, (3) a parent/teen social network, (4) Christian symbols, rituals, and practices in the home, (5) family participation in the same congregation, and (6) a nonchaotic parenting style (Lytch 2004, 149).

Other researchers have examined church retention in a more long-term fashion. Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens (1993) performed an interview study of 500 young adults from 33 to 42 years old who grew up in Presbyterian churches. The purpose of their research was to test the importance of specific determinants of church involvement. They discovered that in their sample of Presbyterian congregations, only weak support existed for the influence of positive parent-child bonds on the church involvement of young adults (ages 33-42). The authors write, “The effects of childhood social learning during childhood and youth apparently wear down under the pressure of later influences.”

(Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1993, 253). The strongest predictors of post-youth ministry church involvement were religious beliefs and adult experiences, such as number of children, divorce, and moving far away from one's childhood home. It should be noted that the research concluded that childhood socialization is an important determinant in forming religious beliefs, which in turn have a significant impact on church involvement as a young adult (Hoge, Johnson, and Luidens 1993, 253).

Drawing on data from the National Survey of Children, Gunnoe and Moore (2002) assess various predictors of youth religiosity in an attempt to identify key factors in religious development. Gunnoe and Moore conclude that the best predictors of youth religiosity were ethnicity and peers' church attendance during high school, with t-value scores on the regression analysis of 5.52 and 4.87 respectively (Gunnoe and Moore 2002, 620).

Erickson's analysis of nine hundred 16 to 18 year olds as part of a Search Institute study on adolescent religious development and commitment found three primary factors shaped early development of religious commitments. First, he suggested that parental influence is mediated through a consistent religious message, parental religious activity, and encouragement of an adolescent's home religious behavior. Second, he explained that formal religious education is central to adolescents' formation because during this period of their lives they begin to think deeply about their own religious beliefs and commitments and to make permanent decisions that will guide them for the rest of their lives. Third, he concluded that peer influence is exerted in four ways: through the transmission of sub-group norms regarding the acceptability of religious

faith, through modeling appropriate behavior, through discussions of important issues, and through social activities provided at the church (Erickson 1992, 137-40).

Scott Myers, in his research of 471 parents in 1980 and their adult offspring in 1992, goes so far as to suggest, “One’s religiosity is largely determined by the religiosity of one’s parents” (Myers 1996, 858). The results of his study indicate that three sets of variables aid the socialization process – parental religiosity, quality of the family relationship, and traditional family structure (Myers 1996, 858).

A cursory examination of the literature, though not exhaustive by any means, seems to indicate there are (at least) three intervening variables in religious socialization: parental religious beliefs, commitment, and practice; effective formal religious education; and peer influence through the establishment of religious norms and social identification.

Religious Alienation and Switching

One curious research area discovered in the current literature review that has received little attention is the topic of religious alienation and switching. While a mass of both past and contemporary research exists on factors influencing religious socialization, very little conceptual or empirical work has been undertaken on what mitigating factors might lead to alienation and drop out among later adolescents. The value of such an undertaking could serve to bolster a more comprehensive conceptualization of ministry retention, as the absence of factors leading to alienation may increase effectiveness in retaining current participants.

A Review of the Literature

In a brief review of the social science literature, Hadaway and Roof pointed toward a clear trend in increasing apostasy (defined as moving from religious affiliation to “none”) between the periods of 1960 to 1965 and 1965 to 1978. These authors cited a number of studies which attempted to explain the phenomenon of apostasy in various denominations. In one of the earliest attempts to measure apostasy, Roof and Hadaway (1977) suggested the following profile for religious “switchers”: younger, predominately male, educated, committed to the “new morality,” less happy, and exhibiting less satisfaction with American institutions (Roof and Hadaway 1988, 33).

Black’s Faith Journey of Young Adults

By far the largest research effort to date exploring the issue of post-youth ministry retention was conducted by Wes Black and his research team in 2006. *The Faith Journey of Young Adults* research effort pioneered by Black purposes to “determine factors that influence adolescents who are actively involved in church during their teenage years to remain active in their young adult years as well as the factors that influence others to become inactive” (Black 2006, 19). The critical findings of this study are seminal in the quest to begin outlining the contours of the phenomenon of post-youth ministry retention and dropout.

Black’s study utilized a two-pronged methodological approach: first, employing a 60-item quantitative survey, Black formulated categorical questions clustered around the standard factors influencing young adult religious involvement in the literature base: family influences, adolescent religious practices, young adult religious practices, relationship influences, and young adult developmental factors (Black 2006,

22). Using Chi Square statistics, Black noted 24 significant findings from the quantitative surveys. Black draws attention to several of the most important in his article:

1. Relationships – “The church participation and spiritual depth of young adult friends is one of the strongest links to whether or not a young person is active in church beyond the high school years” (Black 2006, 26).
2. Mentoring – “The model of faith seen in the lives of Christian adults turns out to be closely related to future church attendance” (Black 2006, 27).
3. Family Influences – “Attendance of both mothers and fathers was important, with the attendance and spiritual depth of mothers edging out the attendance and volunteer leadership of fathers in importance” (Black 2006, 27).
4. Discipleship and Spiritual Depth – “Those who attended less than twice per month during their teenage years appear to be the ones most likely to drop out following high school graduation” (Black 2006, 28-29).

Furthermore, Black posed two questions at the conclusion of the quantitative study for both active and inactive adults: “Why do you think young adults attend/do not attend church?” For active young adults, a deep abiding faith was listed as the number one reason for attending church; conversely, inactive young adults believed that most young adults attend church out of a routine habit acclimated from their younger years. As for reasons why young adults do not attend church, there was a consensus for the top reason among both groups: turned off by Christians who are fake (Black 2006, 31-32). Black’s study yielded over 1300 usable surveys for data tabulation and analysis.

The second part of Black’s research methodology included one-hour qualitative group interviews. Thirteen groups were active young adults (n=198) and eleven groups were non-active young adults (n=72). The questions included in the interview protocols ranged from categories such as relationships to the role of faith in young adult lifestyles (Black 2006, 23).

Black's analysis of the qualitative interviews produced the following reasons, in order of statistical significance, why active young adults attend church: (1) relationships; (2) deep personal faith; (3) parents' influence; (4) meaningful church experiences. On the other side, the non-active young adults listed the following reasons, in order of statistical significance, for not attending church: (1) Church has lost appeal of value; (2) turned off by previous experiences; (3) lifestyle choices and friendships (Black 2006, 34-37).

Black summarized the report on his findings with the following implications for youth and family ministry:

1. Scope of youth ministry – define youth ministry to include ages 7 through 24.
2. Discipleship – teach the basic concepts of biblical Christianity.
3. Relationships – help adolescents develop basic personal skills.
4. Meaningful Involvement – teach youth how to select and get intimately involved with a local church outside of their home church during college.
5. Mentoring – develop strong mentoring programs.
6. Moving Teens Toward Adulthood – help teenagers understand the transition to adulthood that is about to occur.
7. Parenting Style – equip parents to adjust their parenting style as adolescents mature and age.
8. Spiritual Leaders in the Home – teach parents how to be spiritual leaders in the home.
9. Acceptance – develop a loving and supportive environment for young adults.
10. Intergenerational Approach – enhance intergenerational activities between strong Christian adults and emerging adults (Black 2006, 43-44).

Gallup Unchurched American Surveys

Using data from the Gallup Unchurched American Survey, Perry (1970) summarized their analysis of people who had ceased attending the church they were raised in. They listed the following reasons for apostasy: (1) Objections to the teachings of the church; (2) personal decision to stop attending the church they grew up in; (3) the church was viewed as irrelevant and unhelpful; (4) the lifestyle of the respondent was unsuited for continued involvement in their church (Roof and Hadaway 1988, 34).

Hoge's Five Types of Dropouts

Even more germane to the current research, Hoge (1981) surveyed both younger and older adults raised in the Catholic church in attempt to catalogue factors leading to church dropout. Among his findings, there were several items of note. Hoge found that younger respondents tended to emphasize rebellion against family pressure to attend and the feeling that the church was irrelevant as prominent reasons for leaving the church. From his research with Catholic dropouts, Hoge postulated a taxonomy of five "types" of dropouts:

1. Family-tension dropouts: these people experienced high levels of tension over religious issues, and rebelled as soon as possible once they left home. This category encompassed the largest number of dropouts under the age of 22 at 52%.
2. Weary dropouts: these are the people who found little or no motivation for attending Catholic church. Weary dropouts comprised the largest number of all dropouts at 31%, and of those over the age of 23 at 39%.
3. Life-style dropouts: these people objected to Catholic moral teachings and hesitated to participate in confession. Life-style dropouts represented 23% of all dropouts, and was second at 25% of dropouts over the age of 23.
4. Spiritual-need dropouts: these people felt that the Catholic church was not meeting their deepest spiritual needs. Spiritual-need dropouts included only 7% of all dropouts in Hoge's study.

5. Anti-change dropouts: these people resisted the changes in the Mass and their parishes since Vatican II. Anti-change dropouts accounted for 7% of all dropouts, and not surprisingly this category had zero effect on those under the age of 22 (Hoge 1981, 96).

In his conclusion, Hoge noted that “the major facilitating events that precipitated dropping out were leaving home (for the young) and conflict with a priest (important for all age groups)” (Roof and Hadaway 1988, 35).

***LifeWay Research’s Study
of Church Dropouts***

The most recent study conducted on young adult church involvement was instigated by LifeWay Research earlier in 2007. Surveying 1,023 young adults ages 18 to 30 from April of 2007 to May of 2007, LifeWay hoped to find a statistic on exactly how many of these young adults dropped out of church for any period of time after high school. Their criteria for inclusion was that “eligible respondents attended a Protestant church regularly (twice a month or more) for at least a year in high school” (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007). Church “dropouts” were defined as those who stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22.

According to their research, LifeWay found that “70 percent of young adults ages 23-30 stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between ages 18-22” (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007). Of those 70 percent who chose to depart church for a season, only a mere 20 percent agreed that they “planned on taking a break from church once they finished high school” (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007). Interesting, however, was the fact that “about two-thirds of those who leave do return at some level.” Those that did return came back primarily because of encouragement from

others, a sense of calling from God to return, or due to life changes and life events such as having children (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007).

LifeWay's research provided several reasons behind the phenomenon of retention and dropout. According to the study, 97% of dropouts pointed to life changes or situations as the reason they left the church:

1. "I simply wanted a break from church." (27%)
2. "I moved to college and stopped attending church." (25%)
3. "Work responsibilities prevented me from attending." (23%)
4. "I moved too far away from the church to continue attending." (22%)

Another 58 percent of church dropouts indicated a church-related issue as the primary reason they dropped out, including a feeling that the church seemed hypocritical and a sense of feeling disconnected from the church (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007).

On the other hand, LifeWay also examined the attitudes of those who remained involved in a Protestant church through ages 18 to 22. The top two reasons they listed for staying connected to the ministry of the church related directly to a feeling of relevance: "Church was a vital part of my relationship with God" (65%) and "I wanted the church to help guide my decisions in everyday life" (58%) (www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage 2007).

NORC Surveys

Following their literature review, Hadaway and Roof continued their analysis of apostasy by integrating data from the National Opinion Research Center's (NORC) General Social Survey, which combines the 1972 to 1985 series. What they discovered, while not surprising, contained some penetrating implications for young adults and

apostasy. First, they demonstrated the effect religiosity has on levels of apostasy: “It is no surprise that those who go to church less, who have unorthodox religious beliefs, and who pray less and exhibit less interest in religion are much more likely to become apostates” (Roof and Hadaway 1988, 41). Second, the issue of religious heritage became a prominent factor in apostasy. For those families where the parents were regular church attenders, apostasy rates were fairly low; conversely, if the parents forced their children to attend church but failed to attend regularly themselves, apostasy rates were found to be very high (Roof and Hadaway 1988, 41-42).

Third, the self-reported reasons youth espoused for leaving the church were very telling. Among the reasons listed, youth cited “they left because they were no longer required to attend church by their parents . . . because of objections to church teachings, lack of help or relevance, sheer boredom, and conflict of various types” (Roof and Hadaway 1988, 45). Roof and Hadaway conclude their study with the following keen observation: “Apostasy has increased rather dramatically over the past 25 years . . . the increases have affected young adults more than any other generation” (Roof and Hadaway 1988, 44).

Religious Alienation

In addition to these early research efforts, several studies have focused researchers’ attention on the plausibility of religious alienation. First, Smith et al. (2003) analyzed data from the 1996 Monitoring the Future Project and a 1995 National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health, garnering a sample size of over 120,000 students from public middle and high schools in America. They present descriptive statistics on four measures of youth attitudes of alienation toward religion to determine if

the classical stereotype of “youth alienation” from traditional church structures is indeed prominent among today’s youth. Their conclusions are somewhat surprising in that they directly contradict the prevailing conventional wisdom and theoretical conjecture of the past fifty years (Nelson 1969; Kimball 1970; Barna 1995; Hersch 1998; Zoba 1999; Beaudoin 2000; Davis 2001; Rabey 2001). Smith et al. suggest that frequency distributions of the MTF data reveal American 12th graders who express alienation toward religion to be very small. Seventy percent of the sample held religious beliefs similar to their parents, 49% list religion as doing a “good” or “very good” job for the country, 41% would like to see religion exert more influence in society, and 39% say that they believe they will give money to church or religious organizations in the future. Smith’s conclusions cast looming doubt on the degree to which American youth are alienated from religious organization’s either in attitude or actual practice (Smith et al. 2003, 126-27).

Dudley and Laurent (1989) explored the relationship between alienation from religion and selected variables among church-related adolescents. Their sample comprised 390 high school students who attended three Protestant youth conferences. The conclusions drawn from the study supported Smith’s assertion that the majority of youth should not be considered alienated from religion: the mean score per item was statistically insignificant at 2.09. However, the most intriguing gleanings from the study were the variations in the scores on what specific facets of religion seemed to alienate youth the most. Dudley and Laurent concluded that boredom and lack of relevance of the church, uninteresting sermons, and a failure to find close, primary relationships were the primary aspects of religion that alienated youth from religion. Furthermore, multiple

regression analysis revealed eight variables that made a significant contribution to understanding alienation: church involvement, relationships with and perceived sincerity of the pastor, media influence, peer influence, self-esteem, parental compliance with church standards, and belief in doctrines of the church (Dudley and Laurent 1989, 418).

In 1994, Altemeyer and Hunsberger surveyed nearly 2,000 freshmen psychology students at both the University of Manitoba and Wilfrid Laurier University in Canada. "Amazing apostates," the phrase they used to describe students who grew up under intensive religious training, were difficult to locate: only 1.4% of their random sample turned out to be amazing apostates, and the research team had to screen a total of 4,000 students from multiple universities to locate a final sample of 58 (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 27). Among their findings, a profile of potential apostates emerged: men were more likely than women to turn away from their childhood religion; Catholics lost more youth than any other faith; the amazing apostates began questioning their beliefs at an early age (12.5); they dumped their childhood faith because they felt intellectually compelled to take such a step (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 210-12). Surprisingly, the authors make the following introductory remarks in reflecting upon the research's major implications for Christianity:

You can make a pretty good prediction of how much a university student, raised as a Christian, will still accept Christianity if you know how much the family religion was emphasized while he was growing up. For example, in the study under discussion, about 80 percent of the students raised Christians said they were still Christians, while the other 20 percent were now "nothing." The biggest difference we could find between these two groups appeared in how much the home religion had been stressed. Parents of those who had "kept the faith" emphasized religion twice as much as the parents of those who had become apostates. (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 11)

Religiosity and Apostasy

Caplovitz and Sherrow, utilizing data from the 1961 NORC, ran a series of quantitative tests centered on two religious questions asked of Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant graduates from the University of Chicago. The respondents were asked which religion they had been raised in, and then subsequently what religion they were currently affiliated with. According to the authors, NORC made it possible for the first time to examine apostasy using the research methods of social science. Based on their review of precedent literature available at the time, Caplovitz and Sherrow identified two foundational pillars for religious affiliation: a commitment to religious beliefs and practices (religiosity), and a sense of kinship with a religious social group or community (communality). The thrust of their research, then, was to test certain factors that might undermine these pillars against religiosity and apostasy to find the primary causes of religious apostasy. The four factors, or “germs” as they called them, tested were poor parental relations, the symptoms of maladjustment or neurosis, a radical political orientation, and intellectualism (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977, 181-82).

Among their findings, Caplovitz and Sherrow were able to construct a path analysis correlating germs to religiosity and apostasy. The strongest correlation (measured by a Pearson coefficient) among the variables existed between religiosity and apostasy (.51). Religiosity, to no surprise, is a critical predictor of apostasy. Furthermore, the four germs served to undermine one’s religiosity in various ways, thus indirectly contributing to apostasy. Caplovitz and Sherrow demonstrated that the strongest coefficients undermining religiosity were radicalism (.22) and maladjustment (.13), while the weakest coefficient was poor parental relations (.06). The researchers

summarize, “Only religiosity is an overwhelming determinant of apostasy, but the other germs have their impact, first in undermining religiosity and then in generating apostasy in the absence of religiosity” (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977, 183-85).

Other findings of note from this study included the similarities and differences between the religious orientations of the college graduates. For instance, “a striking finding of the study was that whatever determined apostasy in one religion had the same effect in the other religions” (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977, 185). In other words, the same factors affected Jewish apostasy as Catholic and Protestant apostasy without regard for specific functional or theological nuances. Also, the researchers noted that the most significant difference between apostates in the different faiths was that Jewish college graduates were much more likely to demonstrate characteristics of the “germs” of apostasy than the other two religions (Caplovitz and Sherrow 1977, 185). At least for this research, the faith communities of Catholicism and Protestantism were more effective at setting their students up for long-term success and retention.

Religious Alienation among Conservative Churches

One final study of note dealing with this issue of religious disaffiliation or alienation investigated religious disaffiliation among conservative Protestant churches. This research was the only substantive research dealing with conservative churches, as much of the literature base chronicles the factors spurring attendance growth in conservative churches (Kelley 1972; Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1973).

Using data from the NORC 1972 to 1985 series, Nelson and Bromley discovered that over 26% of Conservative Protestants (those raised with this religious

affiliation) switched or dropped out of this commitment as adults. They also found that of those who defected from conservative churches, the largest proportion were switching to mainline Protestant churches (Nelson and Bromley 1988, 54-57). While this data certainly maintains a place in the literature base, the obvious weakness of the research lies in its failure to account for the effects of religiosity in church dropout. Instead, the researchers relied on a nebulous definition of “childhood denominational preference” to categorize previous religious activity.

Religious Alienation and the Current Study

In concluding this section, it is apparent that the majority of studies on religious alienation and switching attempt to quantify this phenomenon by examining surveys and other static data on “religious preference.” In doing so, they usually compare the religious preferences of one’s childhood with one’s current religious affiliation and run the numbers accordingly. Furthermore, a large number of studies that point to large numbers of apostasies seem to leave out key distinctions in the data pools such as theological commitments, denominational affiliations, and intensity of religious involvement as defined internally by the institution under question.

The results of the literature survey seem to draw mixed conclusions. On the one hand, there is little doubt in the previous research that apostates emerge in every religious category, regardless of how intensive one’s childhood religious training might be. However, the frequency with which this phenomenon of apostasy or dropout occurs is the subject of continuing debate. While some studies suggest that the number is alarmingly high, the same studies by and large reflect broader trends in social science

research regarding churches as a categorical group. Conversely, when theological and philosophical differences are taken into account, it appears that conservative churches keep a larger share of their members than mainline or more liberal denominations. Thus, more purposive research needs to be carried out with different age groups and levels of commitment to determine the exact nature and extent of this retention.

Institutional Retention

Colleges and universities across America are incessantly involved in studying retention patterns and effective strategies for their students. The goal of this section was to mine a few germane articles in the hope of discovering some intervening factors that could prove useful in explaining the underlying motivations of collegiate student retention.

Tinto's Student Integration Model

Two theories have provided a benchmark framework for analyzing and interpreting factors leading to student retention and dropout. Rooted in Durkheim's (1961) theory of suicide, Tinto's "Student Integration Model" originally emphasized sixteen important predictors of student retention at college institutions (Tinto 1975, 95). Most importantly, Tinto emphasized academic integration (academic performance) and social integration (participation in college life) as the two most important predictors of college persistence (Tinto 1975, 95). Although Tinto provided only a theoretical framework, subsequent research validated or modified most of his predictors (Munro 1980; Pascarella and Chapman 1983; Pascarella and Terenzini 1983; Nora 1987).

Bean's Student Attrition Model

Similarly, Bean's "Student Attrition Model" suggested that student persistence was a result of a student's background, academic variables, environmental variables (employment and finances), and social integration. While it is true that most of these predictors are out of the control of the institutions, at least one of the top predictors (social integration) can be facilitated and encouraged by institutions aware of this phenomenon. Bean's theoretical model highlights the role of social structures in facilitating college students' commitment ("institutional fit") to an institution (Thomas 1998, 1-2).

A cursory review of the literature reveals a significant proliferation in the study of college retention over the past twenty-five years; however, most of the research is an attempt to either validate or modify Tinto and Bean's work. Their findings were useful for the current study in that they underscore the importance of integrating various social, institutional, and personal factors in predicting and encouraging persistence in institutional settings.

Institutional Retention in Christian Higher Education

In addition to these foundational theories, further research into the area of institutional student retention has emerged in recent years. In one study, the researcher measured the self-reported attitudes and perceptions of full-time college freshmen at a Christian university in order to ascertain the impact of these attitudes on student retention. The conclusions drawn from this study revealed a significant relationship between several self-reported attitudes and a tendency to persist in the university:

perception of the quality of extracurricular activities, higher ACT scores, frequency of church attendance, and a strong conviction concerning personal values (Fleenor 2003, 88-92). While Fleenor's research tended to validate most of the precedent literature base, he demonstrated that the retention still remains an organic process involving social, psychological, and spiritual factors.

Late Adolescent Development

One last section that needed to be addressed in the precedent literature is the area of late adolescent development. Social scientists in the latter half of the twentieth century dedicated a significant amount of resources to the study of adolescent development. This section will provide the reader with a brief overview of the most prominent theories regarding late adolescent development, followed by a summary of literature devoted to integrating these theories with the spiritual development of the same demographic. The purpose of this brief review was to demonstrate how some aspects of development may be correlated with retention or drop out of late adolescents in a ministry context.

Models of Late Adolescent Development

This section will cover briefly the prominent developmental models of Robert Havighurst, Erik Erikson, James Marcia, David Elkind, and William Perry.

Robert Havighurst

Robert Havighurst's theory of developmental tasks suggests that adolescents need to acquire certain skills, intellectual competencies, and attitudes (part of what he calls "tasks") in order to properly develop and move upward towards more complex

tasks. Mastery of subsequent adolescent tasks results in maturity, while failure to master certain tasks may result in anxiety, social outcasting, and an inability to function as a mature adult. One of the tasks relevant to the current study is the need for adolescents, especially late adolescents, to achieve emotional independence from parents and other adults. Many times, what is viewed as rebellious and subversive behavior is simply an attempt by the maturing adolescent to establish personal identity and emotional independence apart from an interdependence on parents or other authority figures (Havighurst 1976, 2-7). Researchers supporting the emancipation theory of socialization and alienation from religion have used Havighurst's model as theoretical support and justification for their research (Dudley and Dudley 1986; Dudley and Laurent 1989, 409).

Erik Erikson

Another prominent theorist of adolescent development was Erik Erikson, whose ego identity psychosocial view has been widely used to explain the adolescent's quest for maturity. Erikson amended Freud's theory of psychosexual development, describing eight stages of human development. Each "stage" has a psychosocial task which must be mastered, followed by one of two outcomes: conflict resolution leads to further development, while conflict persistence results in identity damage and regression (Erikson 1980, 21-22). Erikson was the first to discuss the idea of "psychosocial moratorium," an intermediary period between childhood and adulthood where role experimentation allows older adolescents to be free from adult commitments. This moratorium, he suggests, is a normal stage of adolescent development and should result in a firm adult commitment of identity and confidence in one's niche in society (Erikson 1980, 119-20).

James Marcia

James Marcia, in his work with older adolescents in college, posits four stages in identity development: (1) identity diffusion, where youth lack a commitment to a particular belief or vocational system; (2) identity foreclosure, where youths' commitment to goals and beliefs is informed by other people; (3) moratorium, in which youth are actively weighing options that result in identity formation; (4) identity achievement, in which youth make a firm commitment to a set of beliefs and priorities and consequently resolve the identity dilemma (Marcia 1966, 551-58).

David Elkind

In regard to moral and ethical reasoning, the works of David Elkind and William Perry are particularly helpful. Elkind discusses the adolescent's journey from concrete to more abstract levels of moral reasoning, where the idealism of youth causes them to criticize the "apparent hypocrisy" of institutions and authority figures such as parents, teachers, and religious mentors. Older adolescents then move out of conventional levels of moral orientation into the pluralism of society's complex and often divergent opinions on social, moral, and ethical issues. In the midst of such a milieu, late adolescents are forced to make increasingly more complex judgments about the world and their own subjective experiences become paramount in the development of moral and ethical choices (Elkind 1984, 23-43).

William Perry

William Perry identified three basic levels of moral development for college students: dualism, relativism, and commitment. College students enter the university

believing there is absolute truth and falsehood, and they tend to look to authorities to define these moral imperatives (dualism). Next, the diversity of opinions present in most universities drives the adolescent towards confusion, incoherency, and a contextualization of knowledge and solutions to given problems (relativism). Finally, the thoughtful adolescent emerges from college with a “commitment in relativism,” or understanding that while there may be multiple perspectives in epistemological matters, some commitments are more “right” than others (Perry 1970, 57-176). Perry’s model has interesting implications for ministry retention in college freshmen: the extent to which they successfully confront, analyze, and forge a renewed commitment to their childhood faith could largely predict church involvement through the college years and into early adulthood.

Finally, Chap Clark, in a brief survey of adolescent development literature, identified the fundamental goal of adolescence as “individuation,” defined as the process of becoming one’s own. Clark points out three key tasks of individuation – identity, autonomy, and reconnection. Each task answers a question, as illustrated below:

1. The task of discovering identity, in answer to the question, *Who am I?*
2. The task of accepting responsibility for one’s life, or achieving *autonomy*, in answer to the question, *Do I matter?*
3. The task of *reconnecting* in appropriate ways to others in community, in answer to the questions, *How do I relate to others?*

Clark concludes his discussion of late adolescent development with this proposal for those who work with this age group: “Treat them like adults but lead them like adolescents” (Clark 2001, 55-57).

Emerging Adulthood

In reviewing the literature on the transition from adolescence to adulthood, the researcher uncovered an entirely novel field of sociological research. In the 1980s, sociologists began to realize that a significant portion of academic effort and resources had been poured into studies involving younger adolescents and developmentalism. However, little or no attention was being given to the complexities of the older adolescent population, particularly those who were moving on to college before entering the workforce and assuming traditional roles of adulthood. Traditionally, this “transition to adulthood” had been investigated either as part of the larger process of extended adolescence or as a precursor to adulthood. No effort was made, until recently, to study this period of time as a distinct “life stage” entailing its own unique characteristics, transitions, and events. The purpose of the following section was to examine in detail the stage of life now identified as “emerging adulthood,” summarizing for the reader its primary theoretical and research foundations as outlined in the precedent literature.

Emerging Adulthood as a Distinctive Life Stage

A debate has been raging among social scientists in the last half century over the issue of categorizing students once they have graduated high school and begun their journey towards adulthood. Many new terms and concepts have been created in attempt to construct a comprehensive taxonomy for this transitory “phase,” which typically encompasses those in the age range of 18 to 30 years old. Some sociologists and cultural commentators of the last few decades began speaking of this period of time as “extended adolescence” or “youthhood.” In this nuanced understanding of the pre-adulthood

dilemma, late teens and twenty-somethings are still categorized as adolescents. However, they are unable to make a fully-orbed transition to adulthood due to a series of cultural phenomena which hinder the once fluid process of development. As one writer summarizes:

They're going to school longer, delaying marriage and children, job-hopping and apartment-swapping. They're also moving back home after college to save money, traveling to faraway places to work and generally taking "me" time to decide what they want their futures to be It's the harbinger of a basic transformation of adulthood The traditional adulthood of duty and self-sacrifice is becoming more and more a thing of the past. (Jayson 2004)

Another term that has been offered to describe this unique time of life has been the word "adulolescents," otherwise previously referred to as young adulthood. People utilizing this verbiage typically ascribe some basic form of adult status to those in the gap between adolescence and adulthood. Sociologists describing this phenomenon take it one step further than the traditional categories of "extended adolescence" – adulolescents can refer to someone in their 20s or 30s who has not fully realized the economic and psychological independence necessary to achieve full adulthood. Fueled by rising costs of living, enormous amounts of college debt, aspirations for higher levels of education, and an outright refusal to accept the classical roles of family, adulolescents are those students who move back in with their parents subsequent to college graduation and continue to accept material support as their primary source of income and security. Recent census and survey data reveal that as many as 60% of college students will fall into this category after graduation (Tyre 2002).

The term that has come to be the most commonly accepted, however, is that of "emerging adulthood." The concept of emerging adulthood, coined by Jeffrey Jensen Arnett in the 1990s, is largely accepted by contemporary sociologists as a distinctive

stage of life commensurate with childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Arnett carefully and intentionally delimits emerging adulthood from other life stage taxonomies, stating:

This period is not simply an ‘extended adolescence,’ because it is much different from adolescence, much freer from parental control, much more a period of independent exploration. Nor is it really ‘young adulthood,’ since this term implies that an early stage of adulthood has been reached, whereas most young people in their twenties have not made the transitions historically associated with adult status – especially marriage and parenthood – and many of them feel they have not yet reached adulthood. It is a new and historically unprecedented period of the life course, so it requires a new term and a new way of thinking. (Arnett 2004, 4)

This might seem bold to interject a new life course theory into the plethora of existing literature on developmentalism; however, Arnett’s research has thoroughly pervaded much of contemporary discussions on the subject (see Mortimer and Larson 2002; Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005; Crouter and Booth 2005; Grossmann, Grossmann, and Waters 2006). Furthermore, other social scientists have noted similar cultural redefinitions in terms of the transition to adulthood as a distinct stage of life (Breunlin 1988; Carra and Marta 1995; Scabini and Rossi 1997; Iacovou and Berthoud 2001; Scabini and Lanz 2006).

Arnett’s theory is based on hundreds of interviews with so-called emergent adults, those between the ages of 18 to 25 (Scabini and Lanz extend it to 28 to 30) who have not yet accepted the traditional roles of adulthood. Arnett believes emergent adulthood is more than a transitory phase of late adolescence or young adulthood – it deserves its own life phase. As will be discussed later, socio-cultural factors (delay of marriage and parenthood, the rise of the university, the phenomenon of returning home) have so transformed the landscape for this demographic that a new, separate period of life can and should be identified and researched. As Arnett explains, “Calling it the ‘transition to adulthood’ narrows our perception and our understanding of it, because that

term distracts us from examining all of the changes happening during those years that are unrelated to the timing of transitions such as marriage and parenthood” (Arnett 2004, 20).

Now that the basic concept of emerging adulthood has been outlined and distinguished from other historically accepted stages of life, the researcher will now turn to the socio-cultural trends of the twentieth century that so radically altered those graduating from high school and leaving for college.

Twentieth-Century Trends that Shaped Emerging Adulthood

Emerging adulthood is not a universally accepted, normative stage of life. In fact, emerging adulthood can only exist in a certain socio-cultural milieu with the right sets of circumstances. Prior to the twentieth century (and specifically the Industrial Revolution), emerging adulthood did not exist in terms of an identifiable stage of life. However, massive cultural forces were at work in the twentieth century which combined to literally revolutionize the 18 to 30 year age demographic. These changes, though subtle and seemingly innocuous if investigated as separate events, have produced seismic shifts in the family unit and consequently the culture at large. Three trends will be examined in this section as to their contribution to the rise of emerging adulthood: the postponement of marriage and parenthood, the rise of the university as the focal point of the adolescent/emerging adult experience, and the return of emerging adults to the parental household before “going out on their own.”

The Delay of Marriage and Parenthood

The retreat from marriage and parenthood over the course of the last fifty years is virtually unparalleled in modern history. In 1950, the median age of marriage in the

United States was slightly above 20 for women and 22 for men. The next twenty years saw relatively little change, rising precipitously to about 21 for women and 23 for men. However, since 1970 the numbers have inflated at a staggering pace: a 2000 census revealed the average age of marriage was 25 for women and 27 for men (Arnett 2004, 4).

The cultural sources for this radical shift in attitude towards the historical idea of marriage are multivariate and complex. At the turn of the twentieth century, the ages for marriage and childbirthing were relatively late due to fluctuating economic conditions (Great Depression, World War II, and the shift to industrialization). Most young men were attempting to find work in factories, saving every penny with the hope of one day getting married and starting a family. The prevailing attitude towards marriage and parenthood during this period was overall a positive one, but limited due to the economic constraints of the pre-World War II era (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005, 48).

Following World War II, however, the United States surfaced as the world leader among industrialized nations, and economic prosperity and independence soon followed suit. The post-war economic boom led to the emergence of the “middle-class man,” one who either after returning from war or as a result of the war enjoyed a new sense of economic opportunity. The resulting marriage and parenthood surge was quite astounding – the age of first marriage dropped sharply, and with it came more children and larger families (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005, 48).

This brief period of family-centered attitudes and living was quickly eclipsed by shifting values and societal paradigms in the decades following the 1960s. A dramatic spike in the average ages of marriages and parenthood followed closely on the heels of the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, which nearly disintegrated the sexual mores

and taboos of previous generations. People reaching the age of emerging adulthood during these decades refashioned normative patterns of sexual behavior, inserting extremely liberal views of free sexual expression and the rise of cohabitation. The invention of the birth control pill accelerated this cultural shift, giving near complete autonomy to couples by allowing them to engage in an uninhibited premarital sexual relationship while minimizing many of the consequences usually associated with such behavior. Cohabiting percentages rose exponentially beginning in the early 1960s – from less than 30% (1963 to 1972) to over 67% (1983 to 1994) of couples living together before marriage. Free from much of the moral and physiological baggage of previous generations, people began to tolerate and even promote a protraction of marriage in favor of a committed, loving nonmarital relationship (Arnett 2004, 5).

Gender roles. The morphing of gender roles has also had a significant impact on the delay of marriage. The post-World War II economic boom became the seedbed for an explosion of female enrollment in colleges and universities, growing from about 8% of twenty year olds in 1950 to 56% of the undergraduate population in recent years. More and more young women of the twenty-first century are finding satisfaction in pursuing personal and occupational goals through post-secondary education, and the statistics suggest they are succeeding in large numbers: women now equal men in obtaining law degrees and nearly equal them in obtaining medical degrees (Arnett 2004, 7). The reality of these statistics makes it obvious that young women in today's culture need not be in any hurry to fulfill traditional role expectations of being a wife and mother.

Altered self-perceptions. Arnett also advances another interesting theory regarding the rise in the typical ages of entering marriage and parenthood. According to him, there has been a fundamental altering of young people's views on the meaning and value of "becoming an adult and entering the adult roles of spouse and parent" (Arnett 2004, 6). In his estimation, young people of the 1950s were enthusiastic about the thought of "settling down" into the traditional adult roles of spouse and parent because all they had known during their formative years was upheaval, war, and economic instability. Furthermore, most of these emerging adults expected to have reasonably large families, and so needed to get a head start on the process while they were still young. Conversely, the emerging generation of today views marriage and the family

not as achievements to be pursued but as perils to be avoided Most of them do want to take on all of these adult obligations, and most of them will have done so by the time they reach age 30. It is just that, in their late teens and early twenties, they ponder these obligations and think, 'Yes, but *not yet*.' (Arnett 2004, 6)

Attitudes towards parenting. Regarding parenthood, many of the contributing factors toward the delay of marriage apply consistently to patterns of delay in having children. Changing gender roles, the pursuit of higher education, and the increase of premarital cohabitation all play a part in discouraging the acceptance of traditional roles at an early age. There is, however, a deeper and more essential transformation occurring in the hearts and minds of young couples in the 21st century – even committed married ones. A clear trend towards childlessness and even a blatant hostility towards children have developed in the last twenty years for some upwardly mobile, socio-economically advantaged couples.

Albert Mohler, a well-known conservative cultural analyst, cites an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* article featuring couples who have deliberately chosen to forego parenthood. In this article, the couples interviewed cite a variety of factors to substantiate their argument, including time, finances, and issues of convenience. According to the article, the couples represent “a growing number of couples across the country for whom kids don't factor in the marriage equation.” The article references a precipitous decline in birthrates as a whole: an historically unprecedented 43% drop in birth rates since 1960. The *AJC* piece furthermore pointed out that many couples are banding together to form organizations for couples who have purposefully chosen against having children. Organizations such as “No Kidding” are becoming more and more popular as social outlets for childless couples (Mohler 2003).

More recently, *New York Times Magazine* writer Christopher Caldwell discussed a phenomenon known as “age-qualified” housing, what he terms “childproofing.” According to real estate experts, these communities are the hottest trend in the residential housing market. Capitalizing on the Fair Housing Act of 1988, age-qualified housing includes golf courses and other amenities for the middle-aged without the nuisance of children. According to Caldwell, “the age segregation of old folks’ homes is supposed to be a concession to medical necessity, not a perquisite that can be marketed to perfectly healthy people annoyed by the din of kickball” (Caldwell 2006, www.nytimes.com). Clearly, many emerging adults are becoming increasingly pessimistic towards the idea of children, especially when they hinder the attainment of personal life goals.

The Rise of College Life

There have been two phases of socialization in American history pertaining to young people. The first, known as the “work phase,” encapsulated the pre-Industrial Revolution period in American history. The work phase developed in the context of a primarily agrarian society, where economic constraints forced young people into work roles as soon as they were physically mature enough to handle the work load expectations of their specific job. During this period, the economic vitality of the family was dependent upon workload sharing among immediate family members, even at the cost of education or schooling considerations. “Socialization of the young during this period was a relatively simple process. Youth merely had to emulate the actions of parents” (Brown 1980, 12).

The second phase of socialization, occurring since the Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century in America, is known as the “schooling phase.” In this process,

Compulsory formal schooling, emphasizing cognitive learning skills, was viewed as a sine qua non for successful performance in the adult world of work. Institutional primacy for the school was ensured through the passage of a series of child labor laws and minimum wage standards. As a consequence, the school replaced the home and the workplace as the dominant socializing force in the lives of maturing youth. (Brown 1980, 12-13)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, industrialized nations like the United States led the push for universal education for students of all ages. Working from the educational philosophies of men like William James and John Dewey, “the American system has steadily changed its character from elite to mass, first at the elementary level in the nineteenth century, then at the secondary level in the first half of the twentieth century, and now in higher education in the years since World War II” (Coleman 1974, 76).

Industrialization, urbanization, and the rise of an economic middle class have contributed

to a surge in enrollment since the early twentieth century, from only 4% of the age group 18 to 21 in the early 1900s, to about 15% in 1940, to over one-third by 1960, to now approximately two thirds of the population who actually enter college in the year following high school (Coleman et al. 1974; Arnett 2004).

Education and the “American dream.” The rise of the university has been dramatic and pivotal for today’s emerging generation, supplanting for most students the influence once held by institutions such as the church and family unit. Students now understand that a college education is a near prerequisite for the so-called “American Dream,” with studies consistently revealing that number of years of college education is positively correlated to socio-economic measures such as higher income and occupational status (Arnett 2004, 120). A college degree is the panacea for emerging adults, providing the key that will unlock any door to their future hopes and dreams. Also, college life is a more normative experience for students in the United States than almost any other industrialized nation. According to Arnett, “No other country in the world has a system of higher education as open and extensive as the United States, with more than 4,000 colleges, universities, and community colleges” (Arnett 2004, 120). While in places like Europe and Japan access is restricted to the society’s academic elite, the university is relatively accessible for any student with the means and motivation to apply. This trend has been accelerated in the last fifty years due to mass education and the opening of public universities in every state.

Criticisms of higher education. Despite the fact that enrollment rates have reached an all-time high in the United States, critics of higher education are quick to

point out that less than half of freshman continue on to graduation, and only one-third of 25 to 29 year olds have obtained a bachelor's degree. The university experience, for most emerging adults, is a time of unparalleled freedom and exploration. College is a time when many students "may look forward to the nonacademic pleasures of college life: meeting a variety of new people, dating a variety of new people, falling in love, making new friends, getting drunk, running their own lives independently of their parents" (Arnett 2004, 122).

Four types of college students. During this unique period of life, students chart a variety of courses as they attempt to navigate their way through the perils and pressures of college life. Clark and Trow have identified four student "subcultures" at work in today's university. The *collegiate* subculture involves sororities, fraternities, dating, drinking, sports events, and heavy campus life. Students engaging in this subculture perform the bare minimum in terms of school work and academics, and take on a main objective of fellowship and partying. The *vocational* subculture takes a serious view of academics and college education, preferring to utilize this time to pursue the skills and expertise necessary to obtain a better job after graduating from college. These students, like the collegiates, resist professors' encouragements to engage more deeply in ideas, but do so because they are working 20 to 40 hours a week to support their educational objectives.

The third subculture, *academic*, probably fall the most in line with the educational mission of the university. These students study hard, complete their assignments on time, and engage profoundly in the ideas and knowledge presented in class lectures. The academic subculture usually gets the most from their classroom

experience. Finally, there exists a *rebel* subculture, who like the academics are thoroughly connected with ideas presented by their professors. However, these nonconformists are aggressive in their rejection and skepticism of the ideas promulgated in class. This subculture is consistently inconsistent – they may or may not actively participate in the class workload depending on the material’s appeal to their preferences and their particular affinity for the professor (Clark and Trow 1966, 17-70).

In summary, the college experience has been a major contributor to the rise of emerging adulthood as a distinct phase of life. Since most students regard a bachelor’s degree as a non-negotiable, many emerging adults are inclined to postpone traditional adult roles to pursue this “golden key” to the American Dream. During this time of virtually unlimited and unfettered freedom and exploration, students encounter a variety of opportunities and challenges that force them to reevaluate or reinforce their assumptions, biases, and previously held ideas about the world and their own personal value system (Arnett 2004, 138). The college experience, then, offers students a unique time for personal growth, while simultaneously opening them up to significant opportunities for personal, psychological, intellectual, and moral failures and regression if they are not grounded.

The Return to the Natal Household

Considering the increasing hype surrounding continued education in American society, it should come as no surprise that more and more emerging adults find themselves returning to their natal household during or subsequent to their college years. In an article entitled “Bringing up Adultolescents,” journalist Peg Tyre discusses this relatively novel trend. According to the 2000 census, almost 4 million people between

the ages of 25 and 34 live with their parents. Furthermore, an online survey from MonsterTRAK.com, a job-search firm, revealed that 60% of college students plan on living at home after graduation. This so-called “scaffolding,” as some experts label it, flows naturally from parents’ well-intentioned desires to provide a safety net and competitive edge for their kids before they hit the real world. Tyre discovered a multitude of hyperinvolved parents – some invested upwards of \$40,000 in an attempt to give their kids the leverage they needed to succeed. “The Me Generation,” says the article, “has simply turned into the Mini-Me Generation” (Tyre 2002).

Journalists and cultural commentators are not the only ones beginning to take note of this alarming trend. Sociologist Ted Mouw from the University of North Carolina studied longitudinal data from a national survey and noticed some interesting patterns not available in a mere cross-sectional look at the data. For instance, while 53% of men age 22 did not live with their parents at the time of the original survey, a full 16% of these 22 year-olds will return to their parents’ households sometime before age 35. Surprisingly, even at age 27 the return rate for both men and women is about 10%. It is not until ages 28 (men) and 26 (women) that 75% of both genders finally complete the transition out of the natal household (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005, 258-60).

Paths to adulthood. Among those emerging adults who have the highest rates of residence with parents of origin, sociologists have devised three “paths” to adulthood that people usually follow. The first group, called educated singles, involve those with long-term schooling and subsequently high rates of education. Approximately 61% of educated singles hold bachelor’s degrees, and most of these occupied high-status

employment positions – 58% held jobs with status rankings higher than the midpoint of the prestige scale developed by these sociologists. Educated singles spend a majority of their time (over 20 hours per week) pursuing “physical activities, skill-oriented activities, and hedonistic activities,” while conversely spending only a scant amount of time in household/family activities – 67% spent less than 20 hours a week. This group clearly demonstrates upwardly mobile tendencies; however, they live at home with their parents but see little value in meaningful family relationships.

The second group of emerging adults living with their parents is called working singles, distinguished by their commitment to career-oriented employment. This group earns significantly higher incomes than the others (\$593 per week compared to the average of \$471), and works an average of 42 hours per week. Overall, working singles hold stable jobs with a moderate amount of prestige, and as a group spend a significant amount of time in family activities (49% engage in over 20 hours per week). Also, this group was the most likely to live with their parents (72%).

The final group, labeled the slow starters, work fewer hours and earn less than the other groups (about 30 hours and \$370 per week respectively). According to the authors, “Most had reached their mid-twenties with little education, they were still living with their parents, had unsatisfactory romantic relations, and were either not working or holding jobs with poor pay and prospects.” In other words, they had neither assumed the traditional roles of adulthood nor did they hold much promise for succeeding in those roles once the time came to assume such roles (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005, 335-39).

Material assistance for emerging adults. One final note should be added to this section on emerging adults and the natal household. Previously, this researcher mentioned Tyre's article concerning parents that provided vast amounts of financial support to their children who had returned to the household after leaving to pursue a college education. Richard Settersten and his colleagues at the MacArthur Research Network recently published the first broad-based study into the amount of material assistance given by families to their children during the transition to adulthood (ages 18 to 34 for their research purposes). On average, the amount of assistance received over the entire seventeen-year period is \$38,340 (including both those who lived independently and dependently). This amount figures in direct financial assistance, housing assistance, food at home, and college expenses. The amount of assistance naturally decreases with age: \$3,499 per year during ages 18 to 20; \$2,323 during ages 25 to 26; and finally \$1,556 by 33 to 34. On average, emerging adults who do not live independently receive between \$4,500 and \$5,000 per year from their parents (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005, 404-5).

The emphasis on "average" is critical because the disparities in parental income yield dramatically different results in terms of material assistance over the emerging adulthood life course. When family income levels were separated out and measured independently, the resulting figures were astounding: youth in the bottom two quartiles receive approximately \$25,000 on average from ages 18 to 34, while the top 25% of household incomes receive nearly triple that amount, or \$70,965. In addition, children from wealthier families were more likely to stay in the parents' home longer and receive more assistance towards a college education. In their concluding remarks, the

authors make the following observations: “The implicit assumption of this study is that familial assistance is key to a successful transition. The evidence from many studies, including ones in this volume, implies that children from more advantaged families have more successful transitions” (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005, 415). They go on to note that the financial assistance in and of itself may not be the determinant cause; it may only be a small contributing factor in a larger mechanism of familial transmission. Regardless, the statistics found in this study are revealing: families are funneling large amounts of their time and resources into their children at later and later time intervals.

Aspects of Emerging Adulthood

Sociologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, in his seminal work on emerging adulthood entitled *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*, outlines five main aspects or characteristics of this life stage development: identity explorations, instability, self-focused, feeling in-between, the age of possibilities. The following section will examine in greater detail the delineating features of each of these characteristics, incorporating where possible similar research and studies performed previously by social scientists.

The Age of Identity Explorations

One of the most critical components to Arnett’s theory of emerging adulthood is this concept of identity exploration. According to Arnett,

It is the time when young people explore possibilities for their lives in a variety of areas, especially love and work. In the course of exploring possibilities in love and work, emerging adults clarify their identities, that is, they learn more about who they are and what they want out of life Emerging adults have become more independent of their parents than they were as adolescents and most of them have

left home, but they have not yet entered the stable, enduring commitments typical of adult life, such as long-term job, marriage, and parenthood. (Arnett 2004, 8)

Arnett suggests that no other age grouping (including adolescents) has the combination of freedom, resources, time, and absence of classically defined adult roles to engage in such an intensive self-exploration as emerging adults. These emerging adults enjoy personal and social freedoms unparalleled by any generation since the Industrial Revolution swept through America in the late nineteenth century. Financially, the majority of students today still function under the umbrella of their parents' fiscal responsibility, allowing many to live in apartments, graduate school with little or no debt, and make significant purchases (cars, houses, entertainment, etc.) without the constraints of a full-time job. Recent statistics indicate that while 70 to 80% of students work sometime during their college years, close to 60% of these students work 20 hours or less per week on average (American Council on Education 2006, 7).

As for students' time usage, the research suggests that emerging adults possess a noteworthy amount of discretionary time. Among those ages 18 to 34, these young adults devote an average of 4.5 hours per day to paid work and education, 3.4 hours to housework and child care, 5.8 hours to leisure, and 10.2 hours to personal activities such as bathing, sleeping, and eating (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005, 155-56).

Love and work. The data clearly substantiates the notion that emerging adults are uniquely positioned, even more so than adolescents, to purposefully involve themselves in a period of identity exploration. During this journey of identity, emerging adults begin to solidify for themselves ideas and perspectives, particularly in the areas of love and work, that will provide a conceptual grid for them to work from for the rest of

their lives. As it relates to love, emerging adults have a tendency to pursue deeper levels of intimacy as they attempt to answer the question, “What kind of person would suit me best as a partner through life?” Moving beyond the uncertainty and shallowness of their adolescent years, emerging adults engage in a process of learning what qualities they might want in a potential mate, while at the same time gaining the ability to see themselves from others’ perspectives – what others find both attractive and unattractive (Arnett 2004, 9-10). Furthermore, emerging adults have shed previously held social mores concerning gender roles and sexuality, allowing them to experience new forms of socially acceptable relationships (cohabitation, premarital sexual relations, no-commitment dating) without the classical responsibilities of courtship, marriage, and parenthood. These cultural shifts allow emerging adults an unprecedented moratorium on love commitments, usually resulting in more romantic partners and a widespread hesitancy to enter the bonds of marriage (Arnett 2004, 94-95).

Work is another area where emerging adults experience more intensive identity searching. The primary question they ask here is, “What kind of work am I good at?” In the process of taking on a variety of job opportunities and educational majors during their college years, emerging adults begin to reach an understanding about their innate abilities, passions, and career-orientation. Simultaneously, they also discover what they are not gifted at and possibly even redirect previously held notions about their career path. Both failure and incremental successes are common during these tenuous years, but all in all these opportunities reinforce a deeper sense of identity and consciousness (Arnett 2004, 10).

Religious beliefs. One last area where emerging adults undergo an immense self-exploration is that of ideology or religious beliefs. Their worldview, or grid for making sense of ultimate meaning in the world, comes under intense scrutiny during the emerging adult period. Ideas and religious beliefs held with even deep conviction during the adolescent years will get seriously challenged during the collegiate experience as young adults from different cultures, ethnicities, and ideologies converge in a public university setting. However, by the time the college years are complete, most emerging adults will have at minimum a basic framework for answering life's ultimate questions of existence and purpose. Recent surveys concerning the religious beliefs of emerging adults reveal a significant amount of diversity: 22% claim agnostic/atheist; 28% deist; 27% liberal believer; and 23% conservative believer (Arnett 2004, 167). Along with an increasing diversity in beliefs, Arnett suggests in his research that during the emerging years students cast off their childhood religious roots and explore other alternatives. Arnett concludes that exposure to new ideas, coupled with an overwhelming desire for independent decision-making, drives students away from their faith of origin during this life stage. Emerging adults are not content with the religious beliefs transmitted to them or forced on them during their adolescent years, choosing instead to form their own deliberate opinions on matters of faith and religious commitment. Although many will seek out other religious opportunities during this period of identity exploration, research suggests that they will eventually resume religious activities once they get married and begin having children (Arnett 2004, 176-77).

Precedent literature in the area of identity is proliferous with regard to adolescents, and the prevailing wisdom is that the adolescent period remains the primary

time for identity crisis and exploration (see Erikson's stages of identity). Arnett argues against this notion, claiming that Erikson's idea of psychological moratorium is much more prominent today than fifty years ago with emerging adults. Arnett suggests that the majority of identity exploration takes place from 18 to the mid-20s, and that most adolescents fail to achieve a true sense of identity during the formative teenage years (Arnett 2004, 8-9).

The Age of Instability

While emerging adulthood is certainly a period for exploring one's deepest desires and beliefs, it is also an extremely unstable time. According to Arnett,

Emerging adults know they are supposed to have a Plan with a capital P, that is, some kind of idea about the route they will be taking from adolescence to adulthood, and most of them come up with one. However, for almost all of them, their Plan is subject to numerous revisions during the emerging adult years. (Arnett 2004, 10)

These revisions, as Arnett terms them, serve a meaningful purpose in the lives of emerging adults: "They learn something about themselves and hopefully take a step toward clarifying the kind of future they want" (Arnett 2004, 11). This clarification step does not minimize the effects of instability, however. Most of the students Arnett surveyed (58%) reported that their high school years were less stressful and difficult than college. The increased responsibilities, financial pressures from paying bills, and gnawing questions of identity merge as legitimate, serious stress points causing many college students to feel the squeeze of immense instability (Arnett 2004, 220-21).

An example of this seemingly chaotic period is the frequency with which emerging adults change their residence. Starting at age 18, the rate at which people move trends upward, peaking around the mid-20s and falling off drastically afterwards (Arnett

2004, 11). This statistic reveals the uncertainty of living situations during the college years, fluctuating as students remain in the dark as to where they will call home from one year to the next. Moving out of the house, finding new friends, cohabitating with boyfriends and girlfriends – all can affect the rates of moving and all illustrate for the reader the instability of the emerging years.

The Self-Focused Age

Possibly no other life stage offers a virtual carte blanche of decision making autonomy than that of emerging adulthood. Arnett writes, “There is no time of life that is more self-focused than emerging adulthood It is only in . . . emerging adulthood that there are few ties that entail daily obligations and commitments to others” (Arnett 2004, 12-13).

The fact that emerging adults are so centered on themselves is not necessarily a negative quality. As Arnett notes, “There is nothing wrong about being self-focused during emerging adulthood; it is normal, healthy, and temporary. By focusing on themselves, emerging adults develop skills for daily living, gain a better understanding of who they are and what they want from life, and begin to build a foundation for their adult lives” (Arnett 2004, 13). Ultimately, the arduous process of self-absorption and immersion leads the emerging adult through a journey of self-discovery and self-sufficiency, where they begin to feel comfortable and competent to call their own shots and live with the consequences.

The Age of Feeling In-Between

Prior to the language of emerging adulthood becoming common verbiage, the period of time between adolescence and adulthood was usually called the “transition to adulthood.” Emerging adults are like nomads, too old and instilled with too much freedom to be considered adolescents, but still unwilling to completely assume the full responsibilities commonly associated with adulthood. Most emerging adults resonate with this feeling of “in-between,” acknowledging that they are on a journey towards adulthood but also that they have not arrived and are not planning to do so anytime soon.

In interviews with emerging adults, 60% of respondents said they feel entirely like an adult, while a full 37% said they feel only somewhat like an adult most of the time. However, according to the researchers in this particular study, they found that the degree to which a student feels like an adult varies across different situations and contexts. For instance, while only 42% of emerging adults feel completely adult-like around their parents, 67% feel the same way while at work and 76% feel completely like an adult when it comes to taking care of their house. The context criterion adds another dimension to the complexities of self-identified factors affecting the perceived transition to adulthood, suggesting that emerging adults feel varying degrees of adulthood depending on the current life situation they find themselves in (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005, 232-34).

Arnett also deals with self-perceived adulthood, with the thrust of his research on the topic of emerging adulthood being driven by this idea that students’ ideas about adulthood are incommensurate with traditional objective markers of this transition. Arnett comments, “When asked whether they feel they have reached adulthood, their

responses are often ambiguous, with one foot in *yes* and the other in *no*” (Arnett 2004, 14). Only 40% of those Arnett surveyed felt they had definitely achieved adulthood, while 60% described their feelings on the matter as “yes and no.” This statistic reverses itself beginning at age 26 through 35, with almost 90% of people aged 36 and over reporting that they have reached the full measure of adulthood. The question still remains, however, why so many emerging adults feel incapable of assigning themselves the status of full-fledged adult. It seems counter-intuitive even to suggest that an eighteen or twenty year-old would not call themselves an adult. What is driving this ambiguity about life stage status?

Perceived criteria for adulthood. Arnett answers, “The reason so many emerging adults feel in-between is evident from the criteria they consider to be most important for becoming an adult. The criteria most important to them are gradual, so their feeling of becoming an adult is gradual, too” (Arnett 2004, 14-15). Arnett’s research with emerging adults in the United States, regardless of region or cultural background, has consistently revealed three primary criteria for adulthood. These criteria are individual and subjective, and stand alone from any roles or traditionally defined objective categories such as marriage, parenting, or work. The criteria are:

1. Accept responsibility for yourself.
2. Make independent decisions.
3. Become financially independent.

Notice that these self-perceived markers of the transition are process-oriented and involve a great deal of subjectivity. This explains why many emerging adults indeed feel “in-between” emerging adulthood and adulthood. The criteria most students set for

themselves happen in a gradual manner, rather than all at once. For instance, it is very difficult to categorize oneself as an adult (within these parameters) if one is living at home, accepting substantial financial support from the natal family, and are still unable to decide completely for oneself what direction one's life is going to take.

Accepting responsibility refers to the ability to manage the consequences of one's behavior instead of blaming others when life is difficult. Ninety-three percent of emerging adults felt this criterion was a necessary part of becoming an adult. The extent to which a person is willing to take on their own consequences, admit their mistakes, and deal with the implications (either good or bad) ultimately gives emerging adults a sense of accepting the mantle of adulthood (Arnett 2004, 210).

The second criterion, making independent decisions, entails the belief that "to be considered an adult a person has to use independent judgment in making the decisions, small and large, that come up in the course of daily life" (Arnett 2004, 210). Eighty-one percent of emerging adults believe this to be a critical component on the journey towards adulthood. Independent decision making is really about bringing one's critical faculties to bear, apart from outside mediating influences, on the plethora of decisions that surface in daily living. These decisions can be as small as what to eat for breakfast, or as large as uprooting and moving to Africa to join the Peace Corps. Judgments concerning career path, post-college education, love, morality, ethics, and religious ideas should be made from an intentional, self-reflective effort on the part of the individual. Assumptions handed down or inherited from one's family or other authority figures should be reevaluated utilizing these newfound critical skills, and anything that is not tested is not worth believing (Arnett 2004, 210-11).

The third most important criterion to emerging adults is the pursuit of financial independence. Eighty-one percent of people surveyed identified financial freedom as a necessity to becoming an adult. Emerging adults “believe they need to make enough money to ‘pay the bills’ on their own before they can be considered fully adult” (Arnett 2004, 212). Students want to feel like they can pay their own rent, car insurance, grocery bills, and in general sustain themselves financially in order to finally cut the strings of dependency with their family of origin.

Underlying all of these individual criteria for adulthood is the fact that what defines the completed transition to adulthood, at least in terms of self-perception, is absolute independence from parents. Accepting responsibility, making independent decisions, and becoming financially self-sustaining all assume a disconnecting from one’s parents and an establishing one’s own sense of autonomy and self-reliance. For many emerging adults, this process begins at moving out of the house. As Arnett says, “It is not just the moving out itself that is important as a marker of adulthood, but the way moving out requires emerging adults to take on new responsibilities, make independent decisions, and become more independent financially” (Arnett 2004, 212). Moving out, then, becomes a sort of rite of passage that thrusts emerging adults into the adult world.

The Age of Possibilities

“Emerging adulthood is the age of possibilities, when many different futures remain open, when little about a person’s direction in life has been decided for certain. It tends to be an age of high hopes and great expectations, in part because few of their dreams have been tested in the fires of real life” (Arnett 2004, 16). The idealism and naiveté of emerging adults allow them an extremely broad scope of opportunities and

innovative thinking, partly because most of them have yet to face the brutal facts of a life filled with realism and seemingly chaotic circumstances. Separated from their parents but still unconnected with a family or adult obligations, emerging adults see the world as their playground and the possibilities for prosperity and success unlimited. Arnett summarizes, “Even amid the world’s problems, emerging adults persist in believing they will be able to carve out some measure of happiness for themselves and those they love” (Arnett 2004, 227).

Emerging Adulthood Research and Ministry Retention

In reviewing the literature, it is evident that the field of emerging adulthood is in a seminal stage as far as detailed empirical research is concerned. While the theoretical foundations have been established by Arnett, Settersten, and a few others, more data needs to be pursued before any conclusive and sweeping generalizations can be observed about society at large. What is clear from the research, however, is that a new phase of life is beginning to take shape, a product of massive cultural, political, social, and ideological changes embedded in the fabric of the American landscape over the last half century. The seeming unwillingness of emerging adults to accept traditionally held objective markers of adulthood such as a career, marriage, and parenthood, coupled with the rise of the university as the primary post-secondary context for life-shaping, have forged a distinct period of life with its own characteristics and understandings.

Further research is needed to completely understand the radical changes that students undergo between adolescence and adulthood. It was the goal of this researcher

to examine in greater detail the religious commitments of emerging adults. By understanding the trends in church attendance and involvement between adolescence and emerging adulthood, the hope is that religious institutions will be able to influence greater religious retention among post-youth ministry students.

Spiritual Development

Spiritual development in the late adolescent can run the gamut from relative stability to absolute chaos and rejection. Keeley points out in his research of college students that college freshman were more oriented toward spontaneity, newness, and change (Keeley 1976). Spiritually speaking, this inclination toward change and upheaval poses a significant challenge to religious institutions, especially those where traditionalism and maintenance of the status quo are salient characteristics.

John Westerhoff describes two major styles of faith prominent in adolescence: “affiliative faith” and “searching faith.” Affiliative faith is characterized by an attachment to one’s childhood community of faith, religious emotions, and sense of authority gained through the acquisition of the Christian narrative and symbols from one’s childhood religious experience. Searching faith, more common in older adolescents, describes the process whereby adolescents begin to establish a faith that is their own. During this period of “searching,” adolescents commonly criticize, critique, and question the religious tradition handed down to them by parents and religious authorities. Furthermore, they may decide to explore other faith alternatives in an effort to validate their own childhood experiences. The results of this process, if successfully navigated and reaffirmed, are a deeper understanding and more intense practice of the faith of one’s childhood (Anderson 1995, 169).

James Fowler labels the first stage of adolescent faith as both “conventional” and “synthetic.” Early adolescent faith is conventional in that it reflects the beliefs, values, and opinions of parents and religious authority figures. This faith is also synthetic in that it is relatively unexamined and invalidated intellectually. Although it is unexamined, this faith is still very real and personal to the adolescent and involves deep emotional investments. Older adolescents, on the other hand, experience a sense of religious disequilibrium and dissonance which causes them to reflect on their own beliefs. During this period, late adolescents consciously internalize their religious beliefs, integrating these beliefs into a coherent system of values and lifestyle commitment (Fowler 1981, 151-73).

This overview of the literature related to spiritual development was not intended to be exhaustive or generalizable to every late adolescent in every religious context, for it would be foolish and overly mechanistic to think that spiritual development is monolithic or uniform. Rather, this section was an attempt to note general patterns of spiritual development as outlined by some of the major contributors to this area of thought.

Profile of the Current Study

This review of the literature shaped the current study in several ways. First, a review of the germane literature revealed a substantive gap in the area of ministry retention. While retention has been the subject of numerous religious and institutional studies, very little attention has been given to the specific phenomenon regarding the retention of high school seniors graduating from dynamic youth ministries in theologically conservative churches. Many researchers and practitioners have lamented

this ministry gap, but only a relative few have attempted to produce a comprehensive statistic that will definitively signal success or failure for the modern paradigm of youth ministry. This research study determined to address this oversight.

Second, the literature review provided a theoretical framework for measuring youth ministry commitment during the high school years. Previous theorists hypothesized no less than five different levels of ministry commitment – a substantial divergence from previous research utilizing the “twice-a-month” attendance measure. The current research study sought to examine the relationship between these different levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and current levels of church ministry involvement as young adults.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

This chapter outlined the methods which were used in this study to examine the claim that 70 to 90 percent of actively involved youth ministry participants drop out of evangelical churches after high school.

Research Questions Synopsis

The following questions directed the collection and analysis of the data for the current research study:

1. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 1 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently committed to a local church?
2. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 2 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently involved with a local church?
3. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 3 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently involved with a local church?
4. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 4 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently involved with a local church?
5. To what degree, if any, are demographic variables significantly related to levels of youth ministry commitment and current local church involvement?
6. What is the relationship between different levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and level of current local church involvement?

Research Design Overview

The methodological design for this study entailed an approach called “falsification” developed by Karl Popper in the 1950s. Popper attempted to provide parameters for testing and corroborating scientific theories, one of which was the idea of “falsification.” According to Popper, any scientific theory or hypothesis must be subjected to rigorous logical and empirical testing before it can be accepted as supported. The purpose of such testing “is to find out how far the new consequences of the theory – whatever may be new in what it asserts – stand up to the demands of practice” (Popper 1959, 33). Popper proposed that there are only two types of empirical results from practical or technical experimentation: positive decisions or negative decisions. If the experiment produces a positive decision, or is verified, then the theory can be temporarily supported. Repeated positive decisions, in turn, lead to “corroboration” (Popper 1959, 33).

On the other hand, “If the decision is negative, or in other words, if the conclusions have been *falsified*, then their falsification also falsifies the theory from which they were logically deduced” (Popper 1959, 33). According to Popper’s principle of falsification, if just one observation does not fit with the proposition, then the theory is considered not valid generally and must be revised or rejected. The best example of falsification, made famous by Popper, is that of the “white swan.” Popper proposed that if “all swans are white,” then just one counter-example of a black swan would falsify this proposition and thus facilitate more theory building and hypothesizing (Popper 1959).

The intent of this research was to examine the hypothesis that 70 to 90% of actively involved high school youth ministry participants drop out of church after

graduation. While little empirical research exists to this end, the claim that a majority of students drop out of church after high school has had a profound impact on the theory and practice of youth ministry in recent years. Youth ministry professionals and practitioners alike are calling for sweeping reforms and paradigm shifts based on largely anecdotal and experiential evidence cited by prominent youth evangelists and youth ministry experts.

For these reasons, the need for documented empirical data on the phenomenon of youth ministry retention and dropout has never been greater. Questions need to be raised, students need to be interviewed, and the cries for change need to be investigated, altered, dismissed, or validated. The research undertaken by this writer was exploratory, as it will provide future researchers with a starting point for a more comprehensive and robust examination of youth ministry retention and its implications for youth ministry and youth culture at large. Surveying young adults from twelve different youth ministry backgrounds yielded a cross-section of data that falsified the drop out statistic for a specific population – committed students from theologically conservative churches. Since this claim was found to be deficient for one subset of youth ministries, then the broader theory that youth ministry is not working must necessarily be rejected or revised.

In order to subject this drop out claim to the rigors of falsification, quantitative data was gathered through the administration of the YMRQ online survey developed specifically for the current research. Young adults who graduated from the sample churches were garnered from church email lists, collegiate email groups, personal referrals, Facebook online groups, and MySpace networks. Next, research participants were placed into categories based on their self-reported level of youth ministry

commitment during their high school years in order to make comparisons to their current level of church involvement.

Youth ministry commitment was measured by a cumulative self-reported score which was dependent on the young adult's recollection of high school experiences (both intrinsic and extrinsic) with their youth ministry (see Table 2). The goal here was not to box these young adults into a pre-packaged participation scheme, but simply to attempt to quantify levels of high school youth ministry commitment for further comparisons. The levels, then, could be conceived as emerging profiles rather than strict categories.

In the original design for this study, another dimension of commitment, youth ministry attendance, was going to include Sunday School attendance figures to verify the self-reported data. It was the hope of this researcher that this more objective data would serve as a corrective to previous research which relied solely on memory to ascertain adolescent involvement with a church's youth ministry programs. This ideal scenario became problematic and was eventually removed, however, since almost every SBC church contacted did not keep an individual's Sunday School attendance history. More of this surprising phenomenon will be discussed in chapter 5.

The four levels of youth ministry commitment, which are grounded in the germane youth ministry literature, along with the corresponding criteria are displayed in Table 1. It should be noted that the literature review provided absolutely zero quantifiable measures for youth ministry commitment as it relates to the prevailing funnel model of youth ministry (i.e., statistical measures for quantifying student involvement).

In order to provide further face validity to both the YMRQ instrument and the levels of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement, an expert panel

(see Appendix 6) was invited to give feedback (see Appendix 7). Each of the expert panel participants had extensive experience working in the area of youth ministry. These seasoned professionals were asked to comment on the proposed scales and measures of commitment ascertained from the precedent literature, and the panel unanimously supported the various components of the survey (see Appendix 8).

Table 1 explained the self-reported measures that were used to assess more subjective aspects of youth ministry commitment. To accomplish this task, survey responses were assigned a “point” value that corresponds to the four levels of youth ministry commitment (1, 2, 3, or 4) and current church involvement (zero, low, moderate, or high). Survey responses were provided in descending value from four points down to one point (i.e., the first response exemplified a Level 4 commitment and the last response exemplified a Level 1 commitment).

Table 1. Criteria for categorizing levels of youth ministry commitment by self-reported measures

Level of Youth Ministry Commitment	Criteria for Inclusion
Level 1 – Disengaged Prospect	Score of 15-25 on self-reported measures for youth ministry commitment
Level 2 – Normative Attender	Score of 26-37 on self-reported measures for youth ministry commitment
Level 3 – Enthusiastic Follower	Score of 38-49 on self-reported measures for youth ministry commitment
Level 4 – Engaged Disciple	Score of 50-60 on self-reported measures for youth ministry commitment

For example, if a respondent marked the answer “3-4 times a month” for question 1, he or she would receive four points towards their youth ministry commitment

level score. A cumulative “youth ministry commitment” total was obtained by adding up the response scores for questions 1 through 15 (see Appendix 4) and then assigning the respondent to a level according to the measures outlined previously.

Current levels of involvement were broken down into four categories: zero involvement, low involvement, moderate involvement, and high involvement. The measures used for categorizing respondents in this section likewise utilized self-reporting, since it was assumed that research participants would be truthful in reference to their current level of church involvement. A cumulative score derived from questions 31 through 45 (see Appendix 4), in a manner consistent with the process for ascertaining youth ministry commitment, aided in the categorization of research participants. Surveys with incomplete responses in this section (i.e., scores of less than 13) were discarded.

Table 3 explains the criteria that guided this process.

Table 2. Criteria for categorizing levels of current church involvement

Level of Current Church Involvement	Criteria for Inclusion
Level 1 – Zero Involvement	Self-reported rating of “1” in response to question 40 on the survey
Level 2 – Low Involvement	Score of 13-27 on self-reported measures for current church involvement
Level 3 – Moderate Involvement	Score of 28-42 on self-reported measures for current church involvement
Level 4 – High Involvement	Score of 43-56 on self-reported measures for current church involvement

Finally, a retention statistic was procured from the research and the drop out hypothesis was falsified for this particular subset of conservative Southern Baptist megachurches. While this did not provide a conclusive, universally applicable picture of

youth ministry, it did cast serious doubts on the veracity of previous statistics and the notion that youth ministry needs to undergo a massive shift in philosophy and practice. The retention statistic will be discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

Population

The population for this study was former youth ministry participants from conservative Southern Baptist megachurches in America.

Samples and Delimitations

A purposive sampling method was employed to answer the stated research questions. In purposive sampling, “people or other units are chosen, as the name implies, for a particular purpose” (Leedy and Ormrod 2001, 219). For this research, the “purpose” represented by the sample selection was the identification of dynamic youth ministries who met the inclusion criteria outlined below.

To accomplish this purpose, the researcher contacted each of the 112 SBC megachurches in the ACP database that had identifiable youth ministry structures. Using the ISYP instrument (see Appendix 3), the researcher selected a group of twelve churches that met the criteria for a dynamic youth ministry (see Table 3). The sample group is listed in Table 3 below.

The inclusion criteria were critical for this research, as each was carefully selected for an intentional purpose in the scope of the study. Sample churches had to meet the following four criteria to be considered for inclusion. First, each church had to be conservative in its theological beliefs. While many churches in the Southern Baptist fold might call themselves “conservative,” this term was reserved for the purposes of this

research to those churches confessing to traditional and orthodox beliefs concerning the inerrancy of Scripture, the Trinity, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and the essentials of the Gospel.

Table 3. Sample dynamic youth ministries

<i>Location</i>	<i>Church Name</i>
Brandon, FL	Bell Shoals Baptist
Richardson, TX	First Baptist Richardson
Wichita Falls, TX	First Baptist Wichita Falls
Louisville, KY	Highview Baptist
Hoover, AL	Hunter Street Baptist
Rockwall, TX	LakePointe
Plano, TX	Prestonwood Baptist
Raleigh, NC	Providence Baptist
Houston, TX	Sagemont Baptist
Birmingham, AL	Shades Mountain Baptist
Sugar Land, TX	Sugar Creek Baptist
Louisville, KY	Valley View Baptist

Second, the youth ministry infrastructure had to be “age-graded,” meaning they had an separate middle school (or junior high) and high school ministries with appropriate resources, staff, budgets, etc. The rationale for this criterion was that it seemed to be the baseline model practiced by most Southern Baptist churches in America.

The third criterion included the “dynamic” nature of the youth ministries selected for study. For the current research study, the comparison churches exhibited the following qualities of a dynamic megachurch youth ministry: (1) a youth pastor with tenure of at least five years; (2) engagement in intentional and systematic evangelism and discipleship, as evidenced by programs such as mission trips, camps and retreats, and

ongoing small groups (regardless of the structure). The literature review underscored time and time again the critical nature of relationships in the development of religious commitment, and so it was hypothesized that churches with higher levels of youth ministry staff tenure would see higher levels of student retention. Furthermore, tenure in a successful environment was an indicator of the youth pastor's competencies in sustaining a healthy youth ministry structure and motivating students to buy-in to events and programs designed to facilitate spiritual maturity.

As for the second component of this dynamic criteria (programs), it must be conceded that simply offering a lot of "activities" is no guarantee of effectiveness or ministry success. However, going back to the literature review, a critical component of a developing teenager's religious identity was the powerful connection made to rituals, traditions, symbols, and relationships that point them to deeper spiritual realities. In dynamic youth ministries, each of these aspects were accomplished regularly through evangelistic and discipleship-focused programs such as mission trips, summer camps, retreats, and small group environments. Consequently, the sample youth ministries studied for this research saw abnormally high levels of baptisms and participation during the high school years.

In order to maintain a degree of significance and scope for the research, a target response of at least 300 survey participants was desired for statistical analysis. However, a total of only 279 total usable surveys were completed online because 37 surveys had to be discarded as the survey respondents reported their primary youth ministry affiliation as a church other than one of the sample churches.

Limitations of Generalization

The data collected for this research study falsifies the claim that a majority of evangelical young adults leave the church after high school graduation. The discovery of this “black swan” case is certainly generalizable to the retention discussion at-large.

As a result of the purposeful delimitations of the research population and sample, however, the specific data gathered in this study from the sample churches will not necessarily generalize to the following groups:

1. Southern Baptist churches that do not hold to conservative theological beliefs.
2. Churches of differing size stratum, including relatively smaller or medium-size churches.
3. Young adults who were actively involved in youth groups that did not possess a tenured youth pastor, did not engage in intentional and systematic evangelism and discipleship, does not employ an age-graded philosophy of ministry, or were comprised of demographic variables which differed from those demonstrated in this research study.
4. Young adults who graduated high school either before or after the years reported for this study.
5. Finally, the data from this research will not necessarily generalize to non-Southern Baptist adults who attended churches from the myriad of denominations across the United States.

Research Instrumentation

The instrumentation used for this study was the Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire (YMRQ), developed specifically for this research by the researcher. The YMRQ (Appendix 4) was an instrument comprised of 45 structured (closed-ended) questions pertaining to two categorical measures, youth ministry commitment and current church involvement, as well as demographic information including age, gender, type of high school attended, level of education, and current religious affiliation. The rationale

underlying the development and use of the YMRQ was that it best met the specific purposes and stated objectives (retention and involvement comparison) of the current research better than other more generic instruments available.

Questions 1 through 15 measured the degree of youth ministry commitment by questions pertaining to both extrinsic indicators (church attendance, program involvement, small group participation, etc.) and intrinsic indicators (personal fulfillment, relationships with leaders, perceptions of spiritual growth, etc.) intended to assess the amount of “buy-in” the young adult felt during high school. The idea of extrinsic/intrinsic religiosity was first developed with the Religious Orientation Scale (Allport 1950; Allport and Ross 1967) and later refined by Gorsuch and McPherson (1989) into a 14-question instrument. Modifying Gorsuch and McPherson’s revised scale, the current study combined self-reported attendance questions (each with four possible “forced” responses) with a series of Likert-type responses ranging from 1 (*I tend to strongly disagree*) to 4 (*I tend to strongly agree*). Furthermore, each response reflected the four levels of youth ministry commitment and assisted the researcher in categorizing the research participants for use in statistical analysis.

Questions 16 through 30 provided the researcher with demographical information relating to age, marital status, employment during high school, degree of education completed, and other similar background information. The purpose of obtaining such data was to compare it against the levels of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement in effort to uncover statistically significant relationships that could be useful both in this study and for future research in the area of retention.

Finally, questions 31 through 45 measured current levels of church involvement using basically the same questions as in questions 1 through 15 (with some minor modifications). Structuring the survey in this manner facilitated more accurate comparisons between the levels of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement.

The reliability of the YMRQ was measured using a simple Cronbach's Alpha statistic. The results of this statistical measure revealed a score of .89, which was well above the necessary reliability threshold of .80.

Research Procedures

Prior to the collection of data for this study, permission to conduct the following research was obtained from the youth pastors by way of an initial phone call requesting their participation. Due to the busyness of most megachurch youth pastors, a great deal of correspondence took place with administrative assistants and interns. The researcher contacted LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville, Tennessee, to request access to the Annual Church Profile (ACP) database of Southern Baptist Churches. This database generated a significant amount of information and statistics including contact information, worship and Sunday School attendance figures, and baptism reports. In order to assess whether or not the youth ministry met the inclusion criteria, several methods of information collection expedited the process of sifting through the ACP database: (1) youth ministry websites – a plethora of information, including the youth pastor's bio, contact information, church beliefs, and the youth ministry's programmatic offerings, were available online; (2) email correspondence – a simple "yes" or "no" to the criteria questions seemed to be a favorable and time efficient option for busy youth

pastors; (3) direct phone contact – a majority of this researcher’s time was spent on the phone with youth pastors and their assistants.

Following this initial phone call and after obtaining the approval of both The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary’s Dissertation Committee and Research Ethics Committee, the researcher then mailed a letter (Appendix 1) formally requesting their permission to contact their former students, seeking a copy of their senior class rolls from the year 2000, and thanking them for their willingness to participate in the study. Unfortunately, upon closer examination of their records and in the process of gaining appropriate approval from executive staff members, the sample youth ministries were either unable to produce or prohibited from releasing individual attendance and contact information for graduated students. This situation resulted in both an opportunity and a modification in procedures. On the one hand, it was an opportunity in that the difficulty of obtaining attendance data suggested that much of what has previously been published in terms of a “dropout statistic” was virtually unsubstantiated and speculative. Outside of a longitudinal study (which is currently being undertaken at Fuller Seminary), there is no way to empirically justify the dropout numbers quoted in contemporary youth ministry literature.

On the other hand, this realization also presented a small procedural challenge: without contact information, how would young adults be secured for the research? In consultation with the researcher’s dissertation committee, a new method of identifying and surveying youth ministry graduates from the sample churches was forged. Instead of phone interviews, it was concluded that a two-pronged approach of identifying and surveying young adults from the sample churches would be most effective. First, a

church email invitation (Appendix 2) was constructed and sent to each of the sample churches for distribution to their collegiate and young adult ministry email lists, as well as former students that the youth pastors still had personal contact with. The email invitation proved extremely effective in that it could be customized by each church to reflect their own culture and communication standards, while still including the essential elements of the research study.

Second, the researcher utilized free online social networks such as Facebook and MySpace, which are becoming increasingly popular communication vehicles for churches across the country, to identify church-affiliated groups (i.e., “I attended LakePoint Church”). This method proved advantageous in locating young adults who were displaced geographically or had switched churches, but still felt a strong identification with peers and youth leaders from their high school youth ministry. A more concise version of the church email invitation was posted on group message boards and messaged to individual group members requesting their participation in the research.

Once the researcher and sample churches obtained a pool of target young adults, participants were directed to complete an online version of the YMRQ survey instrument hosted through Survey Monkey (via a survey link). The advantage of using Survey Monkey was that it immediately archived survey responses and had the capability to export the data into SPSS for data tabulation and analysis. The first wave of email invitations was sent out in late February 2008, mostly by the administrative assistants to email addresses they were able to track down. The second push was made personally by the researcher on Facebook in early March, and this resulted in doubling the number of responses. The third wave of emails was sent out in April, with a brief reminder and

encouragement to participate in the study for those who had not yet taken the time to fill out the 10 to 15 minute online survey. A fourth set of emails was sent out, using Survey Monkey, to everyone who had completed a survey asking them to refer a friend. This “snowball” method garnered a large number of older and geographically diverse graduates. Finally, a last contact was made with each of the youth pastors in May reminding them that the survey deadline was approaching at the end of the month.

Once the survey deadline expired, the survey responses were downloaded into the software program SPSS, where each response was assigned a numerical value used to delineate the sample according to the categories of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement in keeping with the protocol detailed above.

Once the respondents were categorized and assigned to a level of youth ministry commitment, the first wave of statistical analysis was conducted. From the data, the researcher obtained a simple retention statistic by totaling the number of students at a given youth ministry commitment level who have a self-reported current church involvement level of low or higher – and then dividing that number by the total n for that youth ministry level. Additionally, a frequency count was given for the total youth ministry commitment sample in each level to determine more specifically the degree to which young adults are currently involved with church (zero, low, moderate, or high). This retention statistic was completed for each of the four levels of youth ministry commitment.

The second component of statistical analysis included a number of tests using SPSS. Since the measures used in the survey involved categorization and subsequently continuous data, the researcher conducted a coefficient of determination test to assess the

percentage of shared variance between the two measures of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement. This test helped the researcher determine the effectiveness of the way in which the data was broken down into categories.

In addition, a Chi-Square Test for Independence and t-test were employed to compare the categories of commitment and involvement, demographic data, and the continuous data garnered from the surveys. The purpose behind these statistical tests was to determine if certain demographical information or youth ministry commitment levels were significantly related to a young adult's current level of church involvement. The *alpha value* required for these tests was at .05 or below for all variables. The *alpha value* implies a 5% chance of rejecting the null hypothesis (that, for example, youth ministry commitment and current level of church involvement are unrelated and independent of one another) when it should have been accepted.

The procedures outlined in this section for obtaining and analyzing survey data proved effective in enabling the researcher to answer the six stated research questions and objectives. Once the research was completed, the researcher sent a final letter (Appendix 5) to the youth pastors involved in the study thanking them for their permission and participation and promising them a copy of the research results.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

The current research study sought to investigate the claim that a majority of evangelical youth ministry graduates drop out of church after high school. To test this theory properly, the researcher examined various levels of youth ministry commitment and subsequent young adult levels of church involvement. The germane findings and statistical data were summarized and analyzed in this section.

Compilation Protocols

Initially, the researcher sent an email invitation (see Appendix 2) to each of the sample churches with a link to an online version of the YMRQ utilized to collect the pertinent data necessary for analysis. The sample churches then customized the email invitation in accordance with their own communication standards, keeping the email content intact, and proceeded to send the invitation to email groups from their databases that were most likely to contain high school graduates from the years 2000 to 2007 (college ministries, young singles groups, etc.). This “relay” of communication was something requested unanimously by the participating churches as a means of protecting the confidentiality of members’ contact information.

A second wave of invitations to participate in the research was issued via online social networking portals such as Facebook and MySpace. The researcher identified social groups affiliated with the sample churches and, after getting the

appropriate permissions, messaged each of the group members with a link to the online survey. This contact method proved to be the most effective means of communicating with younger adults, especially those who had moved away from their home churches.

An online web survey service, www.surveymonkey.com, was employed to host and administrate the YMRQ instrument for the current research study. Following the expiration of the May 31, 2008, completion deadline, the survey data was compiled using the appropriate tools available through Survey Monkey. A total of 316 surveys were completed online, which exceeded the desired response rate of 300 usable surveys. Incomplete surveys were counted only if the skipped question fell into the demographical section; otherwise, the incomplete surveys were discarded. Additionally, a total of 37 surveys could not be included in the data analysis phase because the survey participants marked "other" for the high school church affiliation question. Since the stated purpose of the research was to examine the commitment levels of students who affiliated with the sample churches, these surveys were excluded for statistical analysis, bringing the total number of surveys to 279.

Finally, the data was exported directly into the SPSS software program again through Survey Monkey's own database management tools. The development of a research codebook (see Appendix 4) was necessary to further explicate the measures constructed for this research and to chronicle precisely how each question was assigned a particular numeric value. For some questions, such as those found in the demographic section, a nonnumeric value had to be assigned to certain data to allow for statistical tests to be conducted across the data.

Upon the completion of data entry and categorization, a variety of statistical measures were employed to determine what relationship, if any, existed between the four levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and the current levels of church involvement for young adults from the different churches. Additionally, a retention statistic was computed for both the subsets of individual levels and the categorical set of youth ministry commitment. The results of the statistical analysis were presented in this chapter through the use of figures and other visual aids as necessary.

Demographic and Sample Data

In this section, demographic data was explained with respect to three sample groupings: (1) the sample youth ministries, (2) the individual research participants, and (3) the subcategories of persistors and dropouts. A separate survey emailed to the local church youth pastors (see Appendix 3) allowed the researcher to collect some basic information such as youth pastor tenure, programmatic activities, ministry budgets, and staff dynamics. The church profiles were used initially to delineate the churches that met the dynamic criteria; however, this information was also used to gain a more comprehensive picture of the similarities and differences among the sample churches. Demographic information garnered from the YMRQ instrument included items such as age, gender, type of high school attended, and education level completed for the individual research participants.

Demographics for the Sample Youth Ministries

Demographic data collected from the sample churches included questions about the youth pastor's tenure, the youth pastor's longevity at his current church,

whether or not the church adhered to an “age-graded” philosophy, offered youth ministry activities, number of paid high school staff, volunteers, and operating budget. Table 4 summarized the data collected from the sample youth ministries, with a detailed explanation of the findings following the table.

Also, the size of the churches (measured by average Sunday School attendance for 2007) included in this study ranged from approximately 900 (Valley View) to 17,500 (Prestonwood), with the average for the entire group at 3,700.

Table 4. Demographic summary for the sample youth ministries

<i>Category</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std Dev.</i>
Yrs at Current Church	142	11.83	5.13
Yrs in Youth Ministry	228	19	6.47
Paid High School Staff	59	4.92	1.98
High School Volunteers	835	69.58	65.06
Total Students	4675	389.58	524.78
Total Operating Budget	\$1,042,485	\$104,249	\$67,412

Youth Pastor Experience

The longevity of the youth pastors at the sample churches formed part of the dynamic criteria for the current research study. The rationale for including this criterion was the importance of sustained relationships in the spiritual development of young people that was echoed in study after study in the precedent literature.

Youth pastors from the sample churches had a total of 142 years of experience working with teenagers in their current local church settings. The average stint at their current church was 11.8 years, which is more than three times the average tenure of four years reported in the literature base. First Baptist Church of Richardson’s youth pastor

had the longest tenure at 23 years, while Sugar Creek's youth pastor had been at his church the least amount of time at five years.

Furthermore, these youth pastors possessed a total of 228 years in the field of youth ministry. On average, these youth pastors have been ministering to students for 19 years. First Baptist Church of Richardson's youth pastor has been in the field the longest at 33 years, while Sagemont's youth pastor was the least experienced at 12 years.

Youth Ministry Philosophy and Activities

Another primary criterion for inclusion in the current research study was the necessity of promoting an age-graded ministry philosophy, where young people of different ages are broken down into age groups specifically designed to facilitate targeted evangelism and discipleship. Each of the sample churches in this study adhered to an age-graded ministry philosophy, and consequently had an identifiable and separate high school ministry.

With regard to the ministry activities offered by the sample churches, the program calendars looked very similar in terms of events and purposes. Every church offered Sunday School, camps and retreats, small groups, leadership training, and mission trips for high school students. All of the churches except Sugar Creek offered a traditional Wednesday night service, and about half of the churches regularly engaged in evangelism training and/or visitation.

Youth Ministry Resources

The sample churches employed a total of 59 paid staff members (full-time or part-time) to work with their high school students. On average, the churches had 4.9 paid

staff members working on their high school ministry team. Highview and Prestonwood employed the most high school staff members at 8, while Sagemont employed the fewest with 1 paid staff member. Interestingly, the ratio of paid staff members to high school students was approximately 1:79.

As for volunteers, the churches recruited a total of 835 volunteer leaders to assist them in ministering to their high school students. The average number of volunteers working with each high school ministry was 69.6. Prestonwood possessed the most volunteers at 250, while First Baptist Richardson had the fewest at 20 volunteers. The ratio of volunteers to high school students in the sample churches was 1:5.

The operating budgets (not including staff salaries) for each of the churches was obtained to examine the amount of financial investment the churches were making in their respective youth ministry departments. A total of \$1,042,485 was budgeted in 2007 for the sample churches, with an average of \$104,249 budgeted per church for youth ministry efforts. The largest reported youth ministry budget was approximately \$250,000, and the smallest amount budgeted was \$27,640.

Demographics for Research Participants

The demographic information requested from the participants included data such as age, gender, type of high school attended, and education level completed. As shown in Table 5, the demographic results indicated that the majority of the respondents were female (63.1%) and single (85.3%). While the ages of the respondents ranged from 18 to 33 years, the largest group was 20-year olds (24.4%), followed by 21-year olds (20.2%), 22-year olds (14%) and 19-year olds (10%). Most of the participants attended public high schools (68.1%), with 18.3% attending Christian high schools and 11.5%

attending home school. With regard to the highest level of education, most respondents (61.3%) reported that they completed high school or had an equivalent of a GED, while 21.9% claimed to have Bachelors degrees and 13.3% have Associates degrees. When asked how many hours per week the participants were employed during their senior year of high school, most (39.1%) reported to have worked between 10 and 20 hours per week, with 20.8% having worked between 1 and 9 hours per week, and 15.1% having worked more than 20 hours per week. The data also showed that 25.1% did not work during their senior year of high school.

In addition, the frequency percentages were computed for the categorized data for youth ministry commitment and current involvement (see Table 6). From the results, most of the participants (65.5%) were Engaged Disciples and 27.2% were Enthusiastic Followers. However, with regard to current involvement in youth ministry, while 50.7% reported high levels of involvement and 35.5% reported moderate involvement, 12% declared that currently they have zero involvement in a local church.

Finally, this study replicated the LifeWay Research question which asks, "How long, if at all, did you stop attending church from ages 18 to 22?" The results from the YMRQ survey for conservative SBC churches contradicted what was discovered in the cross-denominational study conducted by LifeWay – 64.9% (N=181) of all sample participants reported "I never stopped attending church." Furthermore, 13.6% stopped attending for 1-2 months and only 9% stopped attending for more than one year (see Table 7). Among the persistor group (those who reported active levels of current involvement with a local church), 70.8% (N=172) said that they never stopped attending church between the ages of 18 and 22.

Table 5. Demographic findings for the survey respondents (N= 279)

Variable:	Valid N	Percentage
<i>Gender:</i>		
Female	176	63.1
Male	103	36.9
<i>Age:</i>		
18 yrs	1	0.4
19 yrs	28	10
20 yrs	68	24.4
21 yrs	56	20.1
22 yrs	39	14
23 yrs	20	7.2
24 yrs	24	8.6
25 yrs	13	4.7
26 yrs	17	6.1
27 yrs or more	13	4.7
<i>Type of High School Attended:</i>		
Public school	190	68.1
Home school	32	11.5
Christian school	51	18.3
Parochial/Catholic school	2	0.7
Non-Christian private school	2	0.7
Other	2	0.7
<i>Highest Level of Education:</i>		
High school or equivalent GED	171	61.3
Technical or trade school	7	2.5
Associates (2 year undergraduate degree)	37	13.3
Bachelors (4 year undergraduate degree)	61	21.9
Masters	3	1.1
Doctorate	0	0
<i>Hours per week Employed:</i>		
0 hours	70	25.1
1-9 hours	58	20.8
10-20 hours	109	39.1
More than 20 hours	42	15.1
<i>Marital Status:</i>		
Single	238	85.3
Married	39	14
Divorced	2	0.7

Table 6. Frequency percentages for levels of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement

Variable:	Valid N	Percentage
<i>Youth Ministry Commitment:</i>		
Level 1 – Disengaged Prospect	1	0.4
Level 2 – Normative Attender	19	6.8
Level 3 – Enthusiastic Follower	76	27.2
Level 4 – Engaged Disciple	183	65.6
<i>Current Involvement:</i>		
Level 1 – Zero Involvement	33	12
Level 2 – Low Involvement	5	1.8
Level 3 – Moderate Involvement	98	35.5
Level 4 – High Involvement	140	50.7

Table 7. Church dropout levels between ages 18 to 22

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1-2 months	38	13.6	13.6	13.6
3-5 months	17	6.1	6.1	19.7
6-12 months	18	6.5	6.5	26.2
More than 1 year	25	9.0	9.0	35.1
I never stopped attending church	181	64.9	64.9	100.0
Total	279	100.0	100.0	

Demographics for Persistors and Dropouts

Once the data analysis was completed, the survey participants were categorized by both their level of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement. Participants were then further divided into one of two categories for retention analysis purposes – those who stayed involved after high school (persistors) and those who reported zero involvement with church currently (dropouts). The results showed that there were 243 persistors and 33 dropouts. While there appeared to be similar percentages among the demographic variables, a few interesting items included the age characteristics, type of high school attended, type of college attended, and baptism statistics (see Table 8).

Age Characteristics

The results showed a fairly even distribution of ages for survey participants, with the largest number being 20 years old (N=68). In the persistor group, older participants (26 years or more) tended to show the highest levels of retention (11.1%; N=27) in comparison to the dropout group (6.1%; N=2). For the dropouts, age 21 (30.3%; N=10) appeared to be a significant turning point after which the number of dropouts declined precipitously.

Type of High School Attended

As demonstrated in Table 8, the results showed that public school (70%; N=170) and home school (11.9%; N=29) students tended to have the highest retention rates in comparison to their own subgroups. Conversely, Christian school students seemed to be the most likely to drop out (39.4%; N=13). This statistic was very

surprising because much of the precedent literature implied that the type of school attended does indeed have an impact on a person's long-term spiritual preparedness. However, this demographic data indicated that the public school and home school students were slightly more likely to persist than the survey participants who attended a Christian school.

Type of College Attended

The demographic outputs for the entire sample revealed that 58.1% attended a public university, 26.5% attended a Christian university, 5.4% attended a non-Christian private school, 2.5% did not attend college, and 1.8% attended a parochial or Catholic university. The results from the data analysis, however, demonstrated a higher incidence of dropouts among public university students (66.7% of all dropouts; N=22) than any other subgroup. In fact, those who attended a public university were three times as likely as the next highest subgroup, Christian university students (18.2%; N=6), to report zero involvement with a local church as a young adult. While correlation tests did not demonstrate a high level of significance between this variable and the other measures, it was still interesting to note the disproportionate number of public university students who failed to report active involvement with a church at the time they participated in the survey.

Baptism

Overall, the overwhelming majority of young adults reported that they were baptized members of the church they participated in as high school students (83.2%; N=232). Interestingly, 69.7% of self-reporting dropouts were baptized members of the

Table 8. Demographic profiles for persistors and dropouts

Variable	<i>Persistors</i>		<i>Dropouts</i>	
	Valid N	Percentage	Valid N	Percentage
<i>Gender:</i>				
Female	154	63.4	20	60.6
Male	89	36.6	13	39.4
<i>Age:</i>				
18 yrs	1	0.4	0	0
19 yrs	23	9.5	4	12.1
20 yrs	61	25.1	7	21.2
21 yrs	45	18.5	10	30.3
22 yrs	34	14	5	15.2
23 yrs	19	7.8	1	3
24 yrs	21	8.6	3	9.1
25 yrs	12	4.9	1	3
26 yrs or more	27	11.1	2	6.1
<i>Type of High School Attended:</i>				
Public school	170	70	18	54.5
Home school	29	11.9	2	6.1
Christian school	38	15.6	13	39.4
Parochial/Catholic school	2	0.8	0	0
Non-Christian private school	2	0.8	0	0
Other	2	0.8	0	0
<i>Highest Level of Education:</i>				
High school or equivalent	146	60.1	23	69.7
GED				
Technical or trade school	4	1.6	3	9.1
Associates	31	12.8	5	15.2
Bachelors	59	24.3	2	6.1
Masters	3	1.2	0	0
<i>Hours per week Employed:</i>				
0 hours	61	25.1	9	27.3
1-9 hours	50	20.6	8	24.2
10-20 hours	96	39.5	10	30.3
More than 20 hours	36	14.8	6	18.2

churches where they attended youth ministry during high school. From this statistic the researcher theorized that for those young adults who were “at-risk” of dropping out for whatever reason (low church participation, family dynamics, etc.), baptism was not a strong indicator or trigger for long-term spiritual health and church involvement.

Findings and Displays

The research questions for the current study sought to assess the validity of the claim that a majority of evangelical youth ministry graduates leave church after high school graduation. For the purposes of statistical analysis, each research question was analyzed using cross-tabulations. Cross-tabulations are best used with categorical/nominal data, where the frequencies for each category are tabulated for the variables to be tested. The best measure of the degree of the relationship between the variables is Pearson’s Chi square statistic – computed essentially from differences between observed frequencies and expected frequencies (based on probabilities).

In the first research question, the researcher examined the retention status of sampled participants who met the inclusion criteria for a Level 1 “Disengaged Prospect” with respect to their self-reported commitment during high school. The second research question likewise examined the current levels of church involvement for young adults who exhibited a Level 2 “Normative Attender” youth ministry commitment. In the third research question, a retention percentage was discovered for Level 3 “Enthusiastic Follower” youth ministry commitment. The fourth research question addressed the percentage of students who exhibited the highest level of youth ministry commitment, the Level 4 “Engaged Disciple,” to see to what degree, if any, they were still currently involved in a local church. The fifth research question dealt with the relationship

between various demographic factors and both continuous and categorical data obtained through the surveys in regard to youth ministry commitment and current church involvement. Finally, the sixth research question measured the relationship between different levels of youth ministry commitment and current levels of church involvement to look for a statistically significant pattern in the data.

Research Question 1: Level 1 Commitment Retention

In response to the first research question, the researcher sought to obtain a retention statistic (from the YMRQ) for those research participants who were assigned to the Level 1 youth ministry commitment category “Disengaged Prospect.” The retention rate for the entire subset of Level 1 commitment was computed by adding together the percentages for low, moderate, and high levels of current church involvement. Additionally, a t-test and Pearson’s Chi-square test were also run to determine if a significant relationship existed between the variables and to assess whether or not individual differences among the churches may have accounted for variance in the data.

Retention Statistic

For the study sample, only 1 respondent was categorized as a Level 1 Disengaged Prospect (see Table 9). Admittedly, Level 1 people were the most difficult to track down since the sample churches did not possess current email addresses, contact information, or other identifying information for these marginally involved students. Not surprisingly, this participant also identified his/her current level of involvement with a local church as “zero involvement.” The Disengaged Prospect identified Shades

Mountain Baptist Church as the local church attended most frequently during their high school years.

Since the number of respondents was so low, no statistical analysis could be conducted for this subset of youth ministry commitment. While the current levels of church involvement seemed to support a relationship between the independent and dependent variables, it was impossible to demonstrate any significant statistical findings.

Table 9. Level 1 commitment retention (N=1)

<i>Current Level of Involvement</i>	Valid N	% of Total
Zero Involvement	1	100
Low Involvement	0	.0
Moderate Involvement	0	.0
High Involvement	0	.0

Summary of Research Question 1 Findings

Results demonstrated that the total number of Level 1 Disengaged Prospects was one respondent, and that this person did not subsequently remain involved with a church as a young adult. The researcher was unable to draw any statistical conclusions about the data, however, since the number of respondents was below the required threshold.

Further research should attempt to find more effective methods for identifying and surveying this phantom population. This research found that very difficult.

Research Question 2: Level 2 Commitment Retention

In response to the second research question, the researcher sought to obtain a retention statistic (from the YMRQ) for those research participants who were assigned to the Level 2 youth ministry commitment category “Normative Attender.” The retention rate for the entire subset of Level 2 commitment was computed by adding together the percentages for low, moderate, and high levels of current church involvement. Additionally, a t-test and Pearson’s Chi-square test were also run to determine if a significant relationship existed between the current levels of involvement for the Level 2 commitment group, and to assess whether or not individual differences among the churches may have accounted for any variance in the data.

Table 10. Level 2 commitment retention (N=19)

<i>Current Level of Involvement</i>	Valid N	% of Total
Zero Involvement	4	21.0
Low Involvement	1	5.3
Moderate Involvement	6	31.6
High Involvement	8	42.1
Totals	19	100

Retention Statistic

For the study sample, a total of 19 respondents (6.8% of the total sample) were categorized as Level 2 Normative Attenders. The statistical analysis revealed that the

retention rate was 79% for the entire subset of Level 2 youth ministry commitment. The breakdown for each level of current church involvement is demonstrated in Table 10.

A simple t-test also demonstrated that there was a statistically significant difference between the current levels of church involvement for the Level 2 commitment group ($t=10.913$; $df=18$; $Sig.=.000$). The level of significance for the t-test was equal to .05 or less ($p \leq .05$).

Retention by Church

Table 11 summarized the retention success rates for the Level 2 commitment group by individual church. Among those reporting high levels of involvement, The results revealed that those respondents mostly attended LakePointe (21.1%; $N=4$) and Highview (10.5%; $N=2$). For the levels of involvement within the individual churches, Lakepointe (80%; $N=4$), Prestonwood (50%; $N=1$), and Sagemont (50%; $N=1$) participants reported the strongest ratios of “high involvement.” In addition, those with a moderate or low level of current involvement were more likely to attend Highview (15.8%; $N=3$) and Sugar Creek (10.5%; $N=2$). The results also show that Level 2 dropouts were equally distributed among Bell Shoals (5.3%; $N=1$), Highview (5.3%; $N=1$), Prestonwood (5.3%; $N=1$), and Providence (5.3%; $N=1$).

Pearson’s Chi-square test of the cross-tabulations did not uncover a significant relationship ($Chi\text{-square}=21.692$; $df=18$; $Sig.=.246$) between the levels of youth ministry commitment and churches attended at the .05 level of significance. In other words, the specific church ministry dynamic had no significant impact on how committed or involved young adults were in that specific church as measured by this researcher.

Table 11. Level 2 commitment retention by church

<i>Church</i>		<i>Current Involvement</i>				Totals
		Zero	Low	Moderate	High	
Bell Shoals Baptist Church	Count	1	0	0	0	1
	% of Total	5.3%	.0%	.0%	.0%	5.3%
Highview Baptist Church	Count	1	0	3	2	6
	% of Total	5.3%	.0%	15.8%	10.5%	31.6%
LakePointe Church	Count	0	1	0	4	5
	% of Total	.0%	5.3%	.0%	21.1%	26.3%
Prestonwood Baptist Church	Count	1	0	0	1	2
	% of Total	5.3%	.0%	.0%	5.3%	10.5%
Providence Baptist Church	Count	1	0	0	0	1
	% of Total	5.3%	.0%	.0%	.0%	5.3%
Sagemont Baptist Church	Count	0	0	1	1	2
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	5.3%	5.3%	10.5%
Sugar Creek Baptist Church	Count	0	0	2	0	2
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	10.5%	.0%	10.5%
Total	Count	4	1	6	8	19
	% of Total	21.1%	5.3%	31.6%	42.1%	100.0%

Summary of Research Question 2 Findings

Overall, the statistical analysis for the second research question revealed a significantly high rate of retention across the entire subset of Level 2 Normative Attenders (79%, N=19). This means that a solid majority of young adults who were classified as Normative Attenders have managed to maintain at least a low level of involvement with their local church as young adults. The t-test also indicated that there is a significant relationship between young adults who exhibited Level 2 commitment to their youth ministry during high school and their corresponding current level of involvement with a local church. The data analysis did not find a significant degree of association between current levels of involvement and the different churches attended by sample participants, which eliminated individual church dynamics as a potential mediating factor in relationship to the variables.

Research Question 3: Level 3 Commitment Retention

In response to the third research question, the researcher sought to obtain a retention statistic (from the YMRQ) for those research participants who were assigned to the Level 3 youth ministry commitment category “Enthusiastic Follower.” The retention rate for the entire subset of Level 3 commitment was computed by adding together the percentages for low, moderate, and high levels of current church involvement. Additionally, a t-test and Pearson’s Chi-square test were also run to determine if a significant relationship existed between the current levels of involvement for the Level 3 commitment group, and to assess whether or not individual differences among the churches may have accounted for any variance in the data.

Retention Statistic

Sample participants categorized in the Level 3 youth ministry commitment group comprised the second largest subset among the four levels (N=75). Data analysis for this group demonstrated a retention rate of 80% for the entire subset, with the largest portion of respondents indicating a moderate (44.0%; N=33) or high (34.7%; N=26) current level of church involvement (see Table 12). A simple t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference among the four levels of current church involvement for the Level 3 commitment group. The t-test showed that there was indeed a statistically significant difference ($t=24.474$; $df=74$; $Sig.=.000$) at the .05 level of significance.

Table 12. Level 3 commitment retention (N=75)

<i>Current Level of Involvement</i>	Valid N	% of Total
Zero Involvement	15	20.0
Low Involvement	1	1.3
Moderate Involvement	33	44.0
High Involvement	26	34.7
Totals	75	100

Retention by Church

Table 13 illustrated the retention status for the sample churches with Level 3 youth ministry commitment respondents. Highview had the greatest share of Level 3 committed young adults (30.7%), followed by Providence (21.3%), Prestonwood

(10.7%), Sagemont (9.3%), Lakepointe (8.0%), Bell Shoals (5.3%), First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls (4.0%), and several others at the 2.0% level. The results also pointed to Highview (24%; N=18) and Providence (16%; N=12) as possessing the most moderate and high levels of current church involvement, while Sagemont (42.9%; N=3), Sugar Creek (50.0%; N=1) and Shades Mountain (50.0%; N=1) demonstrated the highest percentage of zero commitment dropouts in comparison to their own total number of Level 3 respondents. As with the Level 2 commitment subset, Pearson's Chi-square test of the cross-tabulations showed that there was not a significant association between the levels of commitment and churches attended (Chi-square=27.382; df=30; Sig.=.603) at the .05 level of significance.

Summary of Research Question 3 Findings

The third research question sought to ascertain to what degree young adults who reported a Level 3 commitment to their youth ministry during high school were still involved with a local church ministry. According to the surveys, a retention rate of 80% was reported for those currently involved at either a low, moderate, or high level. Interestingly, the Level 3 "Enthusiastic Followers" tended to report an all-or-nothing approach to church as young adults. During their high school years, their commitment to their youth ministry and church was fairly high in terms of spiritual habits, church attendance patterns, and feelings of commitment as measured by the survey. As adults, however, this group tended to polarize at either end of the involvement spectrum – 20% reported no involvement as an adult, while approximately 79% of the sample participants reported involvement at the highest two levels, moderate and high.

Table 13. Level 3 commitment retention by church

<i>Church</i>		<i>Current Involvement</i>				<i>Totals</i>
		<i>Zero</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>High</i>	
Bell Shoals Baptist Church	Count	0	0	0	4	4
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	.0%	5.3%	5.3%
First Baptist Church of Richardson	Count	0	0	1	1	2
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	1.3%	1.3%	2.7%
First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls	Count	0	0	2	1	3
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	2.7%	1.3%	4.0%
Highview Baptist Church	Count	5	0	13	5	23
	% of Total	6.7%	.0%	17.3%	6.7%	30.7%
LakePointe Church	Count	1	0	3	2	6
	% of Total	1.3%	.0%	4.0%	2.7%	8.0%
Prestonwood Baptist Church	Count	1	0	2	5	8
	% of Total	1.3%	.0%	2.7%	6.7%	10.7%
Providence Baptist Church	Count	3	1	8	4	16
	% of Total	4.0%	1.3%	10.7%	5.3%	21.3%
Sagemont Baptist Church	Count	3	0	1	3	7
	% of Total	4.0%	.0%	1.3%	4.0%	9.3%
Sugar Creek Baptist Church	Count	1	0	1	0	2
	% of Total	1.3%	.0%	1.3%	.0%	2.7%
Shades Mountain Baptist Church	Count	1	0	0	1	2
	% of Total	1.3%	.0%	.0%	1.3%	2.7%
Valley View Baptist Church	Count	0	0	2	0	2
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	2.7%	.0%	2.7%
Total	Count	15	1	33	26	75
	% of Total	20.0%	1.3%	44.0%	34.7%	100%

Further statistical analyses supported the hypothesis that there was a significant relationship between young adults who exhibited Level 3 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school and current levels of commitment to a church. In other words, participating in a youth ministry during high school at the “Enthusiastic Follower” level had some impact on church ministry participation as an adult. The direction and strength of this relationship will be dealt with in research question six. Also, there was not a significant degree of association between levels of commitment and the different churches attended by the sample participants.

Research Question 4: Level 4 Commitment Retention

In response to the fourth research question, the researcher sought to obtain a retention statistic (from the YMRQ) for those research participants who were assigned to the highest degree of youth ministry commitment – the Level 4 category “Engaged Disciple.” The retention rate for the entire subset of Level 4 commitment was computed by adding together the percentages for low, moderate, and high levels of current church involvement. Additionally, a t-test and Pearson’s Chi-square test were also run to determine if a significant relationship existed between the current levels of involvement for the Level 4 commitment group, and to assess whether or not individual differences among the churches may have accounted for any variance in the data.

Retention Statistic

The total number of survey participants classified as a Level 4 Engaged Disciple was 181. This subset made up approximately 38.4% of the total sample group. The retention rate for the entire subset of Level 4 commitment was 92.8%, by far the

highest rate of retention among the four levels of youth ministry commitment.

Furthermore, as Table 14 demonstrated, Level 4 commitment levels corresponded to the highest level of current church involvement (58.6%; N=106). Only 7.2% (N=13) of the 181 Level 4 survey participants reported their current level of church involvement as “zero involvement.” As with the previous analyses, a simple t-test again established a significant relationship between the levels of current church involvement ($t=54.597$; $df=180$; $Sig.=.000$) at the .05 level of significance.

Table 14. Level 4 commitment retention (N=181)

<i>Current Level of Involvement</i>	Valid N	% of Total
Zero Involvement	13	7.2
Low Involvement	3	1.6
Moderate Involvement	59	32.6
High Involvement	106	58.6
Totals	181	100

Retention by Church

Table 15 examined the retention of each current level of involvement for all of the sample churches. The results highlighted Highview (14.9%; N=27), Bell Shoals (7.2%; N=13), and Providence (6.1%; N=11) participants as exhibiting the highest levels of involvement for the entire subset of high involvement. When compared against their own total numbers, Bell Shoals (72.2%; N=13) and Prestonwood (75%; N=10) participants reported the highest levels of current involvement among those churches

Table 15. Level 4 commitment retention by church

<i>Church</i>		<i>Current Involvement</i>				<i>Totals</i>
		<i>Zero</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Moderate</i>	<i>High</i>	
Bell Shoals Baptist Church	Count	2	0	3	13	18
	% of Total	1.1%	.0%	1.7%	7.2%	9.9%
First BC of Richardson	Count	2	0	5	7	14
	% of Total	1.1%	.0%	2.8%	3.9%	7.7%
First Baptist Church Wichita Falls	Count	0	0	3	6	9
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	1.7%	3.3%	5.0%
Highview Baptist Church	Count	5	2	15	27	49
	% of Total	2.8%	1.1%	8.3%	14.9%	27.1%
Hunter Street Baptist Church	Count	0	0	0	2	2
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	.0%	1.1%	1.1%
LakePointe Church	Count	2	0	8	6	16
	% of Total	1.1%	.0%	4.4%	3.3%	8.8%
Prestonwood Baptist Church	Count	1	0	4	10	15
	% of Total	.6%	.0%	2.2%	5.5%	8.3%
Providence Baptist Church	Count	1	0	7	11	19
	% of Total	.6%	.0%	3.9%	6.1%	10.5%
Sagemont Baptist Church	Count	0	0	4	8	12
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	2.2%	4.4%	6.6%
Sugar Creek Baptist Church	Count	0	1	3	8	12
	% of Total	.0%	.6%	1.7%	4.4%	6.6%
Shades Mountain Baptist Church	Count	0	0	7	7	14
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	3.9%	3.9%	7.7%
Valley View Baptist Church	Count	0	0	0	1	1
	% of Total	.0%	.0%	.0%	.6%	.6%
Total	Count	13	3	59	106	181
	% of Total	7.2%	1.6%	32.6%	58.6%	100%

with at least ten respondents. Conversely, the percentage of those reporting zero involvement was highest with First Baptist Richardson (14.3%; N=2) and Highview (10.2%; N=5).

Pearson's Chi-square test of the cross-tabulations showed that there was not a significant association between the levels of commitment and churches attended (Chi-square=22.676; df=33; Sig=.911) at the .05 level of significance.

Summary of Research Question 4 Findings

The overwhelming majority (92.8%) of the survey participants who reported a Level 4 youth ministry commitment remained actively involved in their local church as young adults. Activity levels among those who persisted were extremely high, with 58.6% of the Level 4 subset reporting a "high involvement" level of current involvement with their local church ministry. The statistical analysis also revealed a significant relationship ($t=54.597$; $df=180$; $Sig.=.000$) between the current levels of involvement for the entire subset of Level 4 youth ministry commitment, indicating that there is some relationship between commitment during high school and involvement as a young adult. However, there was not a significant degree of association between levels of commitment and the different churches attended by the sample participants.

Research Question 5: Demographic Factors

In response to research question five, the researcher attempted to determine the potential mediating effect demographic factors such as age, gender, type of high school attended, and marital status might have in triggering youth ministry commitment and cementing current levels of local church involvement among young adults. Using

Pearson's Chi-square tests from cross-tabulations between the demographic variables and levels of local church involvement, the data analysis showed that there were no significant associations at the .05 level of significance. However, further correlational tests demonstrated that measures for current levels of involvement were significantly correlated with two demographic variables. First, the highest level of education completed was positively correlated with current levels of involvement (see Table 16). This meant that as the level of education increased, so did the participant's reported level of current church involvement.

Table 16. Correlation between current church involvement and highest level of education completed

		Current Commitment Levels	What is the highest level of education you have completed?
Current Commitment Levels	Pearson Correlation	1	.144(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.017
	N	276	276
What is the highest level of education you have completed?	Pearson Correlation	.144	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.017	
	N	276	279

Second, the type of high school attended was significantly negatively correlated with the level of current church involvement (see Table 17). An ordinal scale was composed from the YMRQ numbering the type of high school attended in ascending order from "public university" to "other." The negative correlation meant that scores for

current church involvement went up as scores for the type of high school attended decreased to the two lowest numerical values, home school and public schools. This was an intriguing finding because much has been made in the last few decades of the value of Christian education at the secondary level in preparing students to face the challenges of the “real world.” While this data did not necessarily discount that fact, it did suggest that the type of high school attended may not have a significant impact on a person’s long-term involvement in a local church.

Table 17. Correlation between current church involvement and type of high school attended

		Current Involvement Levels	Which of the following types of high school did you graduate from?
Current Involvement Levels	Pearson Correlation	1	-.120(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.047
	N	276	276
Which of the following types of high school did you graduate from?	Pearson Correlation	-.120(*)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.047	
	N	276	279

Summary of Research Question 5 Findings

Overall, the demographic data generated from the surveys showed little significance with respect to youth ministry commitment or church involvement levels. Correlation tests demonstrated a positively correlated relationship between current levels of involvement and the highest level of education completed, which meant that the higher

the level of education achieved, the more likely it was that the respondents would have reported higher levels of current church involvement. Conversely, correlation tests confirmed a negatively correlated relationship between current levels of involvement and the type of high school attended, which indicated that the higher the level of current involvement in a local church, the more likely it was that the respondents would have attended public or home schools.

Research Question 6: Relationship among Variables

Data was gathered for research question six and a Chi Square test for Independence was conducted to determine the nature of the relationships between the independent variable (youth ministry commitment during high school) and the dependent variable (current levels of church involvement). The results showed that these variables were significantly associated (Chi-square=25.877; df=9; Sig.=.002) at the .05 level of significance (see Table 19). Additionally, it was also observed that 88% of survey respondents remained involved with a local church as young adults to some degree, thus in effect reversing the numbers previously suggested in the literature base. Furthermore, the majority of people reported moderate or high levels of current involvement (86.2%; N=238).

Table 18 illustrated the retention figures for the entire set of youth ministry commitment levels. Interestingly, the highest incidence of dropout was observed in the Level 3 Enthusiastic Follower group (N=15; 5.4%), while conversely the Level 4 Engaged Disciple group comprised over half of all young adults who remained involved with church after high school.

Table 18. Retention figures for all levels of youth ministry commitment

<i>Youth Ministry Commitment Levels</i>		<i>Current Involvement</i>				Totals
		Zero	Low	Moderate	High	
Level 1 – Disengaged Prospect	Count	1	0	0	0	1
	% of Total	.4%	.0%	.0%	.0%	.4%
Level 2 – Normative Attender	Count	4	1	6	8	19
	% of Total	1.4%	.4%	2.2%	2.9%	6.9%
Level 3 – Enthusiastic Follower	Count	15	1	33	26	75
	% of Total	5.4%	.4%	12.0%	9.4%	27.2%
Level 4 – Engaged Disciple	Count	13	3	59	106	181
	% of Total	4.7%	1.1%	21.4%	38.4%	65.6%
Total		33	5	98	140	276
% of Total		12.0%	1.8%	35.5%	50.7%	100.0%

Table 19. Chi-square test for independence

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	25.877(a)	9	.002
Likelihood Ratio	22.289	9	.008
Linear-by-Linear Association	16.788	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	276		

(a) 8 cells (50.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .02

Given the occurrence of a relationship between the variables, a t-test was conducted with a level of significance at .05 to determine the statistical significance of that relationship. The t-test results showed that the measures for current church involvement were significantly lower than the measures for the levels of youth ministry commitment ($t=14.613$; $df=275$; $Sig.=.000$). Figure 2 pictured the frequency histogram of the number of respondents for each categorized level of youth ministry commitment (YMC) and the current level of involvement in a local church. As is apparent, the frequency of respondents that were Engaged Disciples and Normative Attenders have decreased with regard to retention, while the frequency of respondents that were Enthusiastic Followers has increased with regard to retention. The frequency of those that had zero involvement also increased. Overall, the figure demonstrated a remarkably high level of current church involvement among the survey participants.

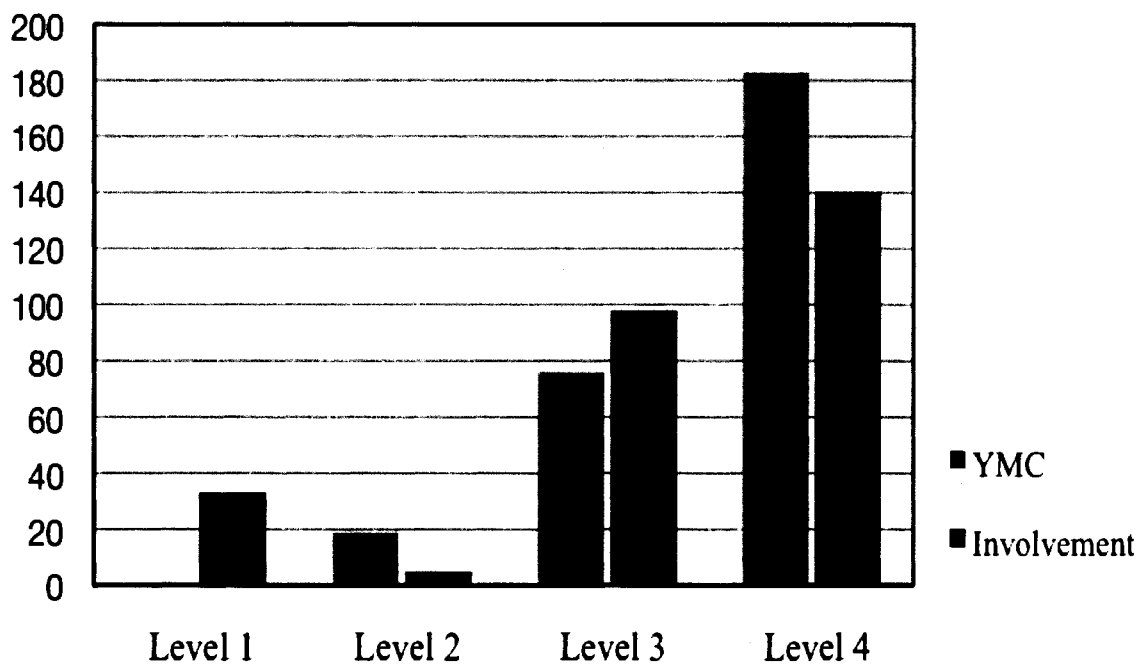


Figure 2. Frequencies for levels of commitment and current involvement

Summary of Research Question 6 Findings

The analysis performed between the independent variable (youth ministry commitment levels) and the dependent variable (current church involvement) demonstrated that there was a significant degree of association between the two. Specifically, it was discovered that the measures for involvement were lower than the measures for youth ministry commitment. This relationship, while certainly not causative in any way, did seem to indicate that the degree to which survey participants were committed to their youth ministry during high school did impact in some way their decision to remain involved as young adults. In fact, there was a linear progression of retention: as survey participants moved up the levels of youth ministry commitment, the corresponding rates of retention moved upward. At the highest level of commitment, the Engaged Disciple, students remained involved at significantly high levels through their college years and into young adulthood.

In addition, the data analysis for the entire set of youth ministry commitment levels provided an overall retention rate of 88% for the sampled participants. This retention statistic directly contradicts previous studies and discussions on the issue of retention, which had estimated that churches are losing up to 90% of their graduates after high school.

Evaluation of the Research Design

The research design employed for the current research study was tailored specifically to the goals and outcomes desired for a thorough investigation of the retention/dropout phenomenon in SBC churches. Given the fact that there was very little precedent research and no comprehensive database to draw upon, the researcher had to

create a survey instrument and construct a research design that would assist in obtaining the best data possible for answering the research questions. The researcher learned a great deal about researching church ministries and survey methodologies. The final section of this chapter reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of the research design.

Strengths of the Research Design

The variety of platforms utilized for survey invitation was a definite strength of the research design. Personal contact with the youth pastors, email invitations, and online social networking venues such as Facebook and MySpace resulted in a relatively large sample size in the absence of a database of youth ministry graduates. The total sample size for this study was just shy of 300 respondents and included a variety of ages and backgrounds, which allowed the researcher to perform appropriate statistical analyses and draw conclusions about levels of significance. In particular, Facebook was extremely effective in contacting older graduates with whom the sample churches had lost contact due to geographical displacement or a change in church membership.

Another strength was the use of Survey Monkey to host online surveys. The ability to deliver surveys online was deemed critical since so many twenty-somethings are adept and comfortable in an online setting. Survey Monkey's functionality was extremely helpful in that it hosted the survey, collected the responses, allowed for real-time summary graphs and data, and provided a simple-to-use format for exporting the data into SPSS for the analysis phase.

The creation and utilization of the levels of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement proved to be extremely valuable in assessing retention rates. Instead of lumping students into a monolithic category, this novel approach to the data

took into account the obvious differences in youth ministry commitment levels in terms of spiritual habits, church attendance, intrinsic perceptions, relational strength, and program involvement. While spiritual growth and development is not an exact science, these nuances will undoubtedly assist future researchers in quantifying and analyzing church retention in a way that is faithful to youth ministry's own objectives.

Weaknesses of the Research Design

Several weaknesses in the research design were retrospectively observed by this researcher. With respect to the structure of the survey, without question the researcher could have obtained a higher response rate by shifting question 16 to the end of the survey. Most of the survey participants who did not complete the survey stopped at this question and did not continue with the rest of the survey. The researcher has theorized that the participants were not comfortable attaching their name to their responses (anonymity, distrust due to bad experiences with online marketers, etc). In future research efforts, simply moving question 16 to the end and making it optional will result, it is believed, in a greater number of responses.

Undoubtedly, it would have been helpful to increase the sample size and geographical scope of the sample churches. If more churches of different sizes from different regions of the country could have been identified as meeting the dynamic criteria, the results and generalizability of the data would have been strengthened.

Finally, it would have been preferable to obtain a better distribution of survey respondents. The results showed an uneven distribution of survey participants from the twelve sample churches and an uneven distribution of respondents across the levels of youth ministry commitment. The research would have provided a more comprehensive

picture if the survey respondents had been distributed evenly among sample churches and if a larger number of Disengaged Prospects and Normative Attenders had been identified and surveyed.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The current research study examined the church retention status of young adults who participated in SBC youth ministries as high school students. The primary goal of such an investigation was either to verify or to falsify the claim made by contemporary youth ministry literature that a majority of evangelical youth ministry graduates drop out of church after high school. In this final chapter, the researcher synthesized the significant findings from the YMRQ and suggested potential applications for youth ministry practitioners and educators. In addition to demonstrating implications drawn from the six research questions, a proposal for future research was offered for those pursuing a similar subject of study.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this research was to undertake a comprehensive study to examine the claim that 70 to 90 percent of actively involved youth ministry participants drop out of church after high school. Much has been made in the field of youth ministry over the course of the past decade with the respect to this so-called “dropout statistic.” Little work has been done, however, either to justify or to refute these statements with empirical data from actual churches. The extent of the influence of this pseudo-statistic cannot be understated – journals have quoted it as fact, authors have used it to support

radical new approaches to family ministry, and churches are beginning to shift their paradigms in large part because of the aforementioned failure rate.

In order to accomplish this stated objective, the researcher undertook a comprehensive study of twelve conservative SBC churches with “dynamic” youth ministries (i.e. a track record of successful, biblically-based ministry) across the United States. Since conservative churches have a documented history of sustained church growth and theological fidelity over the last thirty years, it was hypothesized that the dropout statistic could be falsified for this subgroup of sample churches. The researcher investigated the relationship between differing levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and current levels of church involvement in an attempt to acquire an accurate retention rate. The study, therefore, will serve as a foundational piece in addressing the relative dearth of literature on this subject matter.

Research Questions

The following questions will direct the collection and analysis of the data for the current research study:

1. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 1 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently committed to a local church?
2. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 2 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently involved with a local church?
3. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 3 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently involved with a local church?
4. To what degree, if any, are young adults who exhibited Level 4 commitment levels to youth ministry during high school currently involved with a local church?
5. To what degree, if any, are demographic variables significantly related to levels of youth ministry commitment and current local church involvement?

6. What is the relationship between different levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and current local church involvement?

Research Conclusions

The research conclusions were extrapolated from the findings related to the six research question outlined in chapter four of the current study. These findings emerged from the data compiled and analyzed for the 279 YMRQ survey respondents.

Research Question 1: Disengaged Prospect Retention

A thorough examination of the precedent literature identified five fundamental levels of youth ministry programming designed to target teenagers at different levels of spiritual readiness and growth. For the purposes of this study, the researcher merged these five into four and transformed the categories from levels of programming into “levels of youth ministry commitment.” The first level, the Disengaged Prospect, described the teenager who exhibited marginal characteristics of personal commitment to a local church youth ministry. Youth ministry commitment for this first level was assessed in the YMRQ by both extrinsic measures of religiosity (church attendance patterns, frequency of participation in spiritual disciplines, involvement with programs, etc.) and intrinsic measures of religiosity (feelings of belonging, relationships with key adult volunteers, overall connectedness).

The findings for this research question yielded only one survey respondent whose total score placed him/her in the category of a Disengaged Prospect. Not surprisingly, this person also reported “zero involvement” as his/her current level of church involvement. Due to the low sample number for this category, no statistical analysis could be conducted to test for levels of significance. The researcher discovered

that the methodology employed for the current study made it nearly impossible to track down and survey Disengaged Prospects. The primary reason for this lack of success was that the churches did not maintain any contact information for these marginally involved students. Most churches have switched to computer-based database tracking software in the last decade and, in the process, lost or were unable to find their old data. Other churches purged their data every couple of years due to lack of sufficient storage capabilities on their computer servers. The bottom line is that, for better or worse, most churches in this study were simply not able to maintain contact with Disengaged Prospects, particularly after they graduated from the high school ministry.

Research Question 2: Normative Attender Retention

The second level of youth ministry commitment, “Normative Attender,” described those young adults who represented the average youth ministry attendee. Normative Attenders come to church at least once a month, rarely participate in camps and retreats, engage in spiritual habits less than once a month, and exhibit feelings of being somewhat committed to the youth ministry they were affiliated with in high school.

The findings for this research question demonstrated a total of 19 survey participants who were categorized as Normative Attenders. Of these 19 young adults, a retention rate of 79% was established for a minimum of low current involvement with a church. However, it was also discovered that 73.9% of this subgroup reported moderate or high levels of current involvement with respect to church attendance patterns, engagement in spiritual disciplines, leadership roles, and intrinsic feelings of commitment to their current church. Normative Attenders, as a group, showed the most remarkable increase in their levels of religiosity from teenagers to young adults. While as teenagers

they exhibited low levels of loyalty and participation in youth ministry offerings, as young adults they began attending at least twice-a-month, taking on key roles of service and leadership, and attempting to read their Bibles and pray at least 2-3 times per month.

Statistical analysis conducted for this subgroup revealed a statistically significant relationship between Level 2 commitment measures and current levels of church involvement. Simply put there was an association between how committed Normative Attenders were to their youth ministry and how involved they became as young adults in a local church.

Research Question 3: Enthusiastic Follower Retention

The third level of youth ministry commitment, the “Enthusiastic Follower,” described those survey participants who attended a youth ministry at least twice a month, regularly participated in the spiritual disciplines, attended some camps and retreats, and agreed with YMRQ statements concerning their own feelings of commitment to their youth ministry.

A retention rate of 80% was computed for the 75 survey respondents who were classified as Enthusiastic Followers. Data analysis also showed that the majority of these young adults reported a moderate (44%) or high (34.7%) level of current church involvement. Consequently, this research question revealed that those teenagers who were regularly involved and felt committed to their youth ministry during high school were likely to remain actively involved at relatively the same level as young adults. As with the Normative Attender subgroup, a statistically significant relationship was discovered between the four levels of current church involvement and the youth ministry commitment category of Enthusiastic Follower. While the nature and contours of this

relationship could not be ascertained from the current research methodology, there appeared to be some level of connection between the degree of one's youth ministry commitment and young adult church participation.

Research Question 4: Engaged Disciples Retention

The fourth level of youth ministry commitment, the "Engaged Disciple," described students who were the most committed to their youth ministry during high school years. These teenagers reported attending church 3-4 times per month, participating in most of the camps and mission trips offered, attempting to read their Bibles and pray several times a week, and having a close relationship with key adult leaders in the youth ministry.

The research conclusions for Engaged Disciples showed a retention rate of 92.8% for the 181 remaining survey respondents. Engaged Disciples were the most likely group to respond to the various invitations to fill out the YMRQ survey. Furthermore, those survey respondents who identified themselves as Engaged Disciples reported the highest level of current church involvement (58.6%) – they attended church services 3-4 times per month, engaged in the spiritual disciplines multiple times per week, served in a leadership role of some kind, and felt strongly committed to their local church. Only 7.2% of the 181 Engaged Disciples reported their current level of church involvement as "no involvement."

As with the previous research questions, the statistical analysis established a significant relationship between the levels of current church involvement for Engaged Disciples. The research conclusions herein supported the idea that teenagers who are actively engaged at the heart level (matching extrinsic religiosity measures with intrinsic

attitudes) with their youth ministry tended to remain involved at a high level with church as young adults.

Research Question 5: Demographic Variables

Demographic variables such as age, gender, marital status, type of high school attended, type of college attended, length of dropout during college, location of residence, and church affiliation were tested against both the independent (youth ministry commitment) and dependent variables (current church involvement) to look for statistically significant patterns.

Correlation tests demonstrated that the measures for the two variables were significantly associated with two demographic variables. First, a positive correlation was noted between the highest level of education completed and current church involvement. This meant that as the level of education increased from high school diploma to doctorate, so did the participant's reported level of current church involvement. While this in no way illustrated causation, it could indicate that people who attended the sample churches were more likely to possess higher levels of education.

Furthermore, a negative correlation was discovered between the type of high school attended and current church involvement. The different types of high schools attended were assigned ordinal numbers from 1 (public) to 6 (other) for the purposes of statistical analysis. The negative correlation explained that reported levels of current church involvement increased as the ordinal numbers decreased. Survey respondents who attended a public high school or were home schooled reported higher levels of current church involvement than young adults who attended a Christian school, non-Christian private school, Catholic school, or other.

From these results the researcher concluded that the demographic variables explored in the current study had little or no bearing on either youth ministry commitment or current church involvement. It was interesting to uncover the negative correlation with respect to the type of high school attended, as some leaders in the SBC have argued against public school involvement and for home school or Christian school participation as the best route for long-term faith commitments. This was not the case for the survey participants in this study, with public school students being the most likely to retain their involvement with church post-high school. These statistics should not be used as a smoking gun for the school debate, however, since this study did not examine the factors and dynamics of the public high schools or the families of origin for the survey participants. On the other hand, it did seem to call attention away from the type of high school attended as the locus of this contested debate.

Research Question 6: Relationship between Variables

The data analysis for research question six resulted in a significant association between the independent variable and dependent variable. While the extent and nature of this relationship cannot be ascertained from the available data, nonetheless a relationship was observed between the level of youth ministry commitment during high school and the current level of church involvement for the young adults in this study.

Furthermore, and most importantly for the current study, an overall retention rate of 88% across the levels of youth ministry commitment was observed for the sample churches. Since some critics might argue that retention should not include people who exhibit low levels of current church involvement, it should be noted that 86.2% of the survey participants reported moderate or high levels of current church involvement.

More than half of the sampled young adults (50.7%) were highly involved with their current church.

From this data the researcher concluded that an overwhelming majority of the young adults from conservative SBC churches involved with this study remained involved in a local church subsequent to high school graduation. In addition, these young adults were not just marginally involved – most reported significantly high levels of investment in their current context. Young adults from SBC churches with dynamic youth ministries appeared to be familiar with personal spiritual practices, leadership duties, relationship building, and a number of other church competencies. These competencies, in turn, may have resulted in a kind of “retention capital,” or matrix of spirituality, ability, familiarity, and amicability necessary to enable teenagers to successfully navigate the transition to young adulthood while keeping their faith intact.

This concept of retention capital is similar to ideas promulgated in the precedent literature explaining the positive outcomes of religion in the lives of teenagers (Iannacone 1990; Smith 2003). In this way, it could be theorized that the retention process involves a dynamic interplay where healthy church environments actually provide fertile soil for teenagers to develop the necessary skills for long-term church retention, while simultaneously instilling a pervasive loyalty within those same students.

Research Implications

The implications for the current research study on the discipline and profession of youth ministry were numerous. Based on the literature review, the researcher discovered a significant amount of theoretical groundwork in the areas of retention, religious socialization, religiosity, and disaffiliation or dropout. However, many of the

studies were extremely dated, failed to effectively address the relationship between levels of youth ministry commitment and long-term retention, and rarely differentiated among divergent theological streams of thought such as conservative, mainline, and Catholic. Most sociological endeavors undertaken in the last century lumped these belief systems together under the umbrella of “Christianity.”

Furthermore, a review of the literature revealed a substantive gap in terms of solid empirical research into the phenomenon of post-youth ministry retention and dropout. While several studies have emerged in the last decade that attempted to provide statistical backing to the notion that youth ministry is “dropping the baton” in regard to its graduates (Barna 1991; Pinckney 2001; Reid 2004; Baucham 2007; LifeWay 2007), thorough analysis demonstrated logical, statistical, and analytical flaws in both the research design and the application of the research found in these studies.

First and foremost, the current research study examined and falsified the claim that a majority of evangelical students are leaving the faith after they graduate from high school. Contrary to prior estimations based in the youth ministry literature, this researcher found that 88% of the young adults surveyed remained actively involved in a local church after high school. Also, 64.9% of all sample participants reported, “I never stopped attending church” between the ages of 18 and 22. While these retention statistics cannot be applied in a broad manner to all SBC youth ministries, they did suggest that a segment of churches experience a high rate of success in regard to their youth ministry efforts.

This study cannot point decisively to the causative factors involved in this complicated process of the spiritual development of adolescents and young adults. The

literature review identified a set of factors that converge to form an environment conducive to successful religious transmission (family, peers, church context, etc.). Regardless, this study found that for this particular group of conservative SBC churches with high rates of youth pastor tenure and a biblically-based youth ministry philosophy, the teenagers maintain sustained church commitments into young adulthood. This finding was in keeping with broader trends in the literature relating to conservative churches (Kelley 1972; Bibby and Brinkerhoff 1973).

The discovery of a high rate of retention implied that the discussion on youth ministry philosophy and practice is far from an “open-and-shut” case. Conversely, this statistic calls into question the widely circulated hypothesis that traditional, age-graded youth ministry has been a detrimental approach to evangelizing and discipling teenagers. All of the sample churches “segmented” their students into age groupings, facilitated peer-to-peer interactions, and offered staple youth ministry programs (camps, retreats, mission trips). Youth ministry philosophy may indeed be broken or in need of retooling, but that conclusion certainly cannot be defended with respect to actual empirical data. In recent decades, it has been en vogue for youth ministry critics to extrapolate broader trends from their own observations, experiences, and discussions within their ministry contexts. Observations can be limited and flawed, however, when held up to the scrutiny of solid research.

To that end, the findings from this research highlighted the need for those influencing the field of youth ministry through their publications, blogs, and conferences to be more responsible in their handling of data and statistics. More specifically, evangelical leaders must stop quoting the dropout statistic as if it were a factual data

point generalizable to all youth ministries everywhere. This misuse of statistics amounts to unethical agenda-promoting: people with a cause are using a defined set of statistics (and in some cases bad or non-existent data) then saying more than the research actually says to bolster their case. Researcher Christian Smith addressed this problem bluntly in a recent article entitled “Evangelicals Behaving Badly with Statistics”:

Now, anyone familiar with my own work knows that I am deeply concerned about the lives and faith of American teenagers—I agree there is cause for concern and that many churches need to do a much better job working with youth than they currently do. But I find the misuse of statistics described above appalling. If this were an isolated incident, it might be excusable. But, having been a watcher of evangelicalism for many years, I know that this is not an aberrant case. Evangelical leaders and organizations routinely use descriptive statistics in sloppy, unwarranted, misrepresenting, and sometimes absolutely preposterous ways, usually to get attention and sound alarms, at least some of which are false alarms. The widespread influence of much-cited evangelical pollsters, who do not actually come entirely clean on their methods, does not help matters either. It seems that one of two situations pertains. Either statistically reckless evangelicals are somewhat aware that they are playing fast and loose with numbers. Or they are not, they simply do not know better. Either is unacceptable. In the first case, we are talking about intellectual dishonesty and the distortion of what is true, in the name of promoting truth. In the second, we are dealing with elementary ineptitude, gullibility, and irresponsibility conducted in full public view. This is what orthodox Christianity – assuming that is what evangelicalism is – has to offer the culture? (Smith 2007, 11)

In other words, some evangelicals may have become purveyors of half-truths, ignorance, and even blatant misrepresentation with respect to social science research. The current research findings on dropout in SBC megachurches puts the burden of proof on those promoting unwarranted ideas to undertake their own research and back up their claims with real data. Anything less should be labeled what it is – a poor Christian testimony.

Another research conclusion drawn from the findings was that churches need to do a much better job of maintaining student records, especially in regard to prospects. Phone conversations and email correspondence with dozens of the top SBC churches with the most advanced technology revealed some disheartening observations:

1. “I can barely find the database from last year, let alone 2000.”
2. “We have never kept records for individuals (other than current year); we just keep the attendance totals.”
3. “It would probably be on the old database (prior to conversion), but that information hasn’t been accessible in years. I don’t know of any way to get it.”

A number of large SBC churches either tracked only the total number of students that was necessary to report to the ACP, or dumped their records every few years due to limited storage capacity. While computer storage limitations were certainly understandable, it was surprising to note the common trend among many of these “denominational leaders” in terms of their poor tracking systems for individual students in their ministry. These churches seemed to be only interested in the total ministry statistics, while neglecting patterns and trends over the course of an individual teenager’s youth ministry years that might identify them as at-risk for dropping out. This observation needs to be addressed and remedied if churches are going to do a better job of moving students down the youth ministry funnel of commitment. One church involved with this research study has committed to a complete overhaul in the way they track students as a result of self-reflecting on their lack of data capabilities.

Additionally, this researcher discovered that even the largest of the megachurches with the most sophisticated computer information systems (some with full-time support/data management staffs) were not allowed to release this information – even for research purposes. One person said in an email, “Personally identifiable information is a key word in the Information Systems industry. There are legal and confidentiality issues associated with giving out information that can be traced back to a person . . . I am not authorizing the release of personally identifiable information to you.” There was a

consensus among most churches that they did not feel comfortable releasing contact information that might contribute towards this researcher's efforts. This led to the conclusion that any previous empirical claims of a valid dropout statistic simply cannot be supported with respect to local churches. The reticence of churches to give out key contact information was a major hindrance to the acquisition of data for the current study, and as such prevented this researcher from gaining a more comprehensive picture of the dropout phenomenon. Overcoming this obstacle will be a barrier that future researchers will need to consider before tackling this important issue.

Another critical implication derived from this research was the importance of measuring youth ministry's effectiveness by its own merits. This study was the first of its kind to narrow the parameters of retention from "actively involved" (defined as twice a month) to "levels of commitment" that funnel downward to the highest level of commitment, an engaged disciple of Christ. This delineation was a much needed corrective that will undoubtedly provide tighter contours for the overall portrait of retention and dropout.

Instead of being forced to take credit for "dropouts" that were in reality no more than disengaged prospects, this researcher found that youth ministry retention varies greatly depending on a person's level of participation and commitment. Rates of retention increased in a linear fashion from Normative Attenders (79%) to Enthusiastic Followers (80%) to Engaged Disciples (92.8%). By accounting for the expressed goals and outcomes detailed in the literature (Spader 1984; Robbins 1987), the implication is that future researchers will be able to employ these categories and gain a more accurate assessment of the retention phenomenon. Additionally, these statistics should denote the

importance for both parents and youth pastors of facilitating higher levels of youth ministry commitment during high school.

Surprisingly, an examination of current church involvement levels among youth ministry graduates yielded higher-than-expected data. Frequency percentages showed that 86.2% of survey respondents reported moderate to high levels of current church involvement, with 50.7% indicating they participated at the highest level. Also, 14.8% of the sample reported that they were paid staff members at their current church. These numbers were telling in that they painted a very optimistic picture of just how involved SBC young adults are in their local church settings. Young adults from the sample churches were not just attenders – for the most part they were heavily invested in their churches.

Finally, the findings of this research that young adults who attend public high schools were the most likely subgroup (70%) to remain actively involved as young adults implied that the type of high school a person attends is not a determinative factor in their long-term spiritual growth. The fact is that most of the children from SBC churches are in the public school system – a recent government report indicated that 44.9 million students are enrolled in public schools, which represents 91% of total students enrolled in all schools in America (Shin 2005). This researcher theorized that such extraneous factors may accelerate or exacerbate other more critical dynamics such as family, degree of biblical instruction, crisis experiences, and a myriad of other mitigating factors.

Research Applications

Several potential research applications could emerge from the current study. First, the research data explicated with respect to retention may provide some preemptive

value for those working with adolescents in church ministry. Since higher levels of youth ministry commitment yielded corresponding higher percentages of retention (92.8% at the level of Engaged Disciple), then some of the perceived deficiencies with youth ministry may not be philosophical – the problem might be one of involvement.

Consequently, practitioners can be more proactive in reinforcing those elements of their strategy which promote movement “down the funnel” and in discarding or revising elements that lead to “funnel clogging.”

Second, pastors and church leaders across the country can learn from the philosophies and ministry practices of these sample dynamic youth ministries.

Admittedly, these churches represent a small slice of the total youth ministry enterprise. However, they represent an extremely effective group of churches that are working hard at evangelizing and discipling their young people, and at least some of the results of their efforts can be observed in their high rates of retention (88%). What is it about these unique environments, other than sheer size, that attracts veteran youth pastors (19 years), encourages youth pastors to stay longer (12 years), motivates extremely high levels of student commitment (65.6% of the sample were Engaged Disciples), and ultimately contributes to high levels of church involvement as young adults (50.7%)? Pastors and youth pastors would be remiss to not avail themselves of a phone call, email, or even site visit to these exemplary churches.

Third, youth ministry educators could employ the results from this research in an effort to begin constructing plausible grounded theories that may explain retention on a larger scale. Further testing, replication, and theorizing are needed to gain a comprehensive perspective on this relatively untouched field of research – undergraduate

and graduate institutions training youth pastors provide an excellent environment for conducting such tests and for hypothesizing about such theories. Youth ministry educators could immediately begin testing the statistical relationships discovered in this study to search for more causative relationships between variables. In addition, studies involving the various levels of youth ministry commitment could be performed in an effort to better comprehend what elicits such commitment levels and why these levels are effective in promoting spiritual growth and retention.

Fourth, parents and families reading this research should at least be cognizant of the myriad of factors that converge in the process of discipling their children to become spiritually mature adults. While the conclusions drawn here will by no means be definitive or exhaustive, the results provided by the study could help parents better assess the potential value of a local church's youth ministry to supplement their own strategy for discipling their children. Parents need to vigilantly examine the data produced by this study against their own efforts to provide spiritual nurture for their children. In particular, the high observed rates of retention at the youth ministry commitment levels of Enthusiastic Follower (80%) and Engaged Disciple (92.8%) point to the need for parents to partner with their local church youth ministry in getting their teenagers connected at an early age.

Finally, by empirically falsifying the dropout statistic so ardently supported in the precedent literature, it is the hope of this researcher that perhaps the tidal wave of criticisms aimed at youth ministry over the last decade can be stemmed to some degree. Instead of expending large amounts of energy and resources developing new paradigms or even discarding youth ministry all together, those engaged in youth ministry may be

encouraged to shift the broader conversation to more helpful areas of discussion such as theological considerations, affecting greater levels of youth ministry commitment, and helping families raise mature Christian adults. Abandoning youth ministry in America, in the opinion of this researcher, has been prematurely prescribed and is a missiological mistake – to do so essentially compromises the evangelistic mandate of the church to reach the millions of teenagers immersed in a youth culture that desperately needs large-scale and intentional youth ministry endeavors.

Youth ministry exists, in large part, because youth culture exists. Some churches have chosen to employ an age-graded ministry philosophy as a biblical tool for aggressive cultural evangelism. This research study has demonstrated that, far from co-opting its teenagers to the secular world, these churches have partnered together with their families to see their own teenagers retained without neglecting the mission field across the street at the local public high school.

Research Limitations

This study endeavored to garner a valid retention rate for conservative SBC megachurches. As such, it was beyond the scope of this study to examine causative factors that facilitate or hinder the retention of young adults who attended a youth ministry to any degree during their high school years. The research revealed only relationships and associations, not determinative data. Furthermore, despite the presence of a significant statistical relationship between youth ministry commitment and current church involvement, the researcher was not able to delineate the exact nature of this association or rule out other mediating factors as influential in this process.

The sample churches chosen for this study were conservative SBC megachurches primarily in the South and Southeast regions of the United States. For this reason, the results from the data analysis may not necessarily generalize to other churches from divergent theological traditions, size strata, or geographical locations outside those noted for this study.

Finally, the research methodology employed for this research limited survey participants to young adults who were fairly involved in their youth ministries during high school. Perhaps another research design with a different instrument or one that was not so tied to specific local churches may yield a better sample distribution that includes more Disengaged Prospects and Normative Attenders. The research conclusions shed very little light on the Disengaged Prospects, and therefore not much can be stated about this marginally committed group.

Further Research

The current research study is a pioneer effort to investigate the effectiveness of conservative dynamic youth ministries in retaining their students after high school. At best, this research will serve as a launching pad for future researchers to replicate similar studies in other denominations and cultural contexts.

A possibility for future research would be to perform qualitative ethnographic interviews with cross-sections of different age segments and compare the results, looking for similarities and differences which might lead to a more coherent theory of retention. Instead of categorizing young adults based on pre-determined criteria for inclusion, such an ethnographic approach may allow for more narrative stories to emerge and converge into a tapestry of youth ministry commitment and post-graduation involvement.

A second suggestion for future research includes the pursuit of an empirically based, nationally representative retention statistic. Perhaps using the databases of MTF or NSYR, a research study could attempt to provide the discipline of youth ministry with a scholarly statistic using the youth ministry commitment criteria put forth for this research study. Obviously, this would involve a significant amount of contextualization for different denominations and cultural situations.

A third suggestion for future research would be to utilize the principles and methodology employed in this research study to test other models of youth ministry outside of the “funnel” or “modern” youth ministry paradigm. Many churches do not follow an age-graded philosophy of youth ministry, and more research needs to be conducted into effectiveness levels for these alternative models.

A fourth suggestion for future research could involve replicating the current study in a non-megachurch environment. Admittedly, the dynamics of a megachurch and the surrounding metropolitan areas provide unique socio-cultural factors that may have an impact on retention and dropout. Also, it must be acknowledged that the majority of churches in America are “small churches,” so the megachurch is still somewhat of an anomaly in Southern Baptist life. Smaller-knit communities could potentially facilitate greater levels of retention or, conversely, encourage rebellion and dropout in a completely different way than megachurches. The current research study and YMRQ instrument needs to be tested in multiple church environments before broad-based conclusions can be drawn about youth ministry.

Further research could, finally, investigate the phenomenon of post-youth ministry dropout by the demographic profiles that emerged from this data. Investigations

into age, gender, type of high school attended, socioeconomic status, and any other number of demographic variables would prove extremely valuable in gaining more penetrating insights into the phenomenon of post-youth ministry retention.

APPENDIX 1

CORRESPONDENCE WITH YOUTH PASTORS

Brandon Shields
Home Address
City, State, Zip Code
Email Address

Month & Day, Year

Youth Pastor's Name
Name of Church
Church Address
Church City & Zip Code

Dear Youth Pastor,

Thank you so much for initially agreeing on the telephone to allow me to survey your youth ministry graduates. This letter serves as a formal request for your permission to undertake my research. The purpose of this study is to investigate the claim that a majority of evangelical youth ministry graduates drop out of church after high school.

I have enclosed the survey invitation that I am sending the selected participants, as well as a copy of the survey that will be made available online. I appreciate your involvement in this important research and will send you a copy of the conclusions of my study as soon as possible.

Thanks again for your cooperation and interest in my research.

Sincerely,

Brandon Shields

APPENDIX 2

CORRESPONDENCE WITH PARTICIPANTS

Dear Friend,

You are receiving this letter because you participated in the student ministry at (*Church Name*). A friend of ours, Brandon Shields, is conducting some research with young adults who were involved with our student ministry to see where they are now in terms of their church involvement.

We would like to invite you to participate in his research via an online survey, in which you basically answer a few questions about your youth ministry experience and your current church involvement. The survey will take no longer than 15 minutes, information collected will be absolutely confidential, you will not be solicited as a result of this survey, and your email address will not be given to another party.

If you would like to participate, please click on the following link to take the survey: (*survey link*). If you have any questions, feel free to contact our office at (*Church Contact Information*).

We strongly encourage you to consider this opportunity. Your responses will be part of a national effort to help churches more effectively reach students for Jesus and help them grow in their faith. Thanks for your time and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Youth Pastor's Name/Title

APPENDIX 3

INITIAL SURVEY OF YOUTH PASTORS

Instructions: Please fill in or mark with an "X" the appropriate response for each question. This information will be used for comparison purposes only. When you have completed the survey, please save it and email it to Brandon Shields at (email address).

1. How many years have you been the full-time youth pastor at your current church?

2. How many years have you been serving as a youth pastor?

3. Does your church follow an "age-graded" ministry philosophy (i.e., children's ministry, middle school ministry, high school ministry, etc.)?
 Yes No
4. Do you have an identifiable and separate high school ministry?
 Yes No
5. What regular activities do you offer for high school students for evangelism and discipleship?
 Sunday School
 Wednesday PM
 Camps & retreats
 Evangelism training/visitation
 Small groups
 Leadership training (formal or informal)
 Camps & retreats
 Mission trips
 Other: _____
6. How many paid (full-time & part-time) youth ministry staff do you have for the high school ministry? _____
7. How many volunteer leaders do you have for the high school ministry?

8. How many students do you have in your high school ministry? _____

9. Does your church affirm the 2000 Baptist Faith & Message? ____ Yes ____ No
10. What was your total youth ministry operating budget for 2007? _____

APPENDIX 4

YOUTH MINISTRY RETENTION QUESTIONNAIRE

Part One – Please check the response which most accurately describes your commitment to your youth ministry **during high school**. Check only one answer for each question.

1. How often did you attend Sunday morning youth ministry activities during high school?
 - 3-4 times a month (4 pts)
 - Twice a month (3)
 - Once a month (2)
 - Less than once a month (1)

2. How often did you attend youth ministry activities other than Sunday morning (ex: Sun. PM, Wed. PM, large group events)?
 - At least once a week (4)
 - 2-3 times a month (3)
 - Less than once a month (2)
 - Never (1)

3. How often did you participate in camps, retreats, or mission trips with the youth ministry?
 - I attended **most** of the offered events with my youth group (4)
 - I attended **some** of the offered events with my youth group (3)
 - I **rarely** attended the offered events with my youth group (2)
 - I **never** attended the offered events with my youth group (1)

4. How often did you read your Bible during high school?
 - At least once a week (4)
 - 2-3 times a month (3)
 - Less than once a month (2)
 - Never (1)

5. How often did you pray during high school?
 - At least once a week (4)
 - 2-3 times a month (3)
 - Less than once a month (2)
 - Never (1)

6. How often did you share your religious faith with someone not of your faith during high school?
- _____ Regularly (4)
 _____ Sometimes (3)
 _____ Rarely (2)
 _____ Never (1)
7. How often did you participate in a small group outside of Sunday morning (discipleship group, accountability group, meeting with an adult leader, etc)?
- _____ Weekly (4)
 _____ Monthly (3)
 _____ Rarely (2)
 _____ Never (1)
8. Did you participate in the youth ministry's student leadership team (ministry teams, service group, student council, etc)?
- _____ Yes (4)
 _____ No (1)
 _____ There was not a student leadership team at my church (2)

Part Two – Please circle the number that most accurately describes your level of commitment during high school using the following scale:

1 = I was not at all committed 3 = I was fairly committed
 2 = I was somewhat committed 4 = I was very committed

9. Rate your level of commitment to your youth ministry during high school.
 1 (1 pt) 2 (2) 3 (3) 4 (4)
10. Rate your level of commitment to your church during high school.
 1 (1) 2 (2) 3 (3) 4 (4)

Part Three – Please circle the number that most accurately represents your attitudes during high school using the following scale:

1 = I tend to strongly disagree 3 = I tend to agree
 2 = I tend to disagree 4 = I tend to strongly agree

11. I genuinely enjoyed my youth ministry experience during high school.
 1 (1) 2 (2) 3 (3) 4 (4)
12. My youth ministry helped me grow in my relationship with Christ.
 1 (1) 2 (2) 3 (3) 4 (4)
13. I had a relationship with at least one adult leader in my youth ministry.
 1 (1) 2 (2) 3 (3) 4 (4)
14. I had a strong relationship with my youth pastor during high school.
 1 (1) 2 (2) 3 (3) 4 (4)
15. I felt comfortable bringing my friends to youth ministry activities.

1 (1) 2 (2) 3 (3) 4 (4)

Part Four – Please fill in or check the appropriate blanks for each question. Check only one answer for each question.

16. What is your full legal name? *(If your name has changed since high school, please give your maiden name in parentheses)* _____

17. What is your date of birth? Month _____ Day _____ Year 19 _____

18. What is your sex? _____ Male _____ Female

19. What is your current marital status?

_____ Single
 _____ Married
 _____ Divorced

20. Which of the following churches did you attend most frequently for youth ministry activities **during your senior year** of high school?

_____ Bell Shoals Baptist Church
 _____ First Baptist Church of Richardson
 _____ First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls
 _____ Highview Baptist Church
 _____ Hunter Street Baptist Church
 _____ Lake Pointe Church
 _____ Prestonwood Baptist Church
 _____ Providence Baptist Church
 _____ Sagemont Baptist Church
 _____ Shades Mountain Baptist Church
 _____ Sugar Creek Baptist Church
 _____ Valley View Baptist Church
 _____ Other: _____ (please specify)

21. Were you a baptized member of the church from your response in question 18?

_____ Yes
 _____ No

22. What is your **current** religious affiliation?

_____ Southern Baptist
 _____ Other Protestant (ex: Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist)
 _____ Roman Catholic
 _____ Jewish
 _____ Islam
 _____ Agnostic (you can't know for sure if God exists or not)
 _____ Atheist (God does not exist)
 _____ Other: _____

23. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
- High school or equivalent GED
 - Technical or trade school
 - Associates (2 year undergraduate degree)
 - Bachelors (4 year undergraduate degree)
 - Masters
 - Doctorate
24. Are you currently working on a degree? Yes No
25. If answer to question 22 is yes, then which degree are you currently pursuing?
- Technical or trade school
 - Associates (2 year undergraduate degree)
 - Bachelors (4 year undergraduate degree)
 - Masters
 - Doctorate
26. If you did attend college, did you live at home with your parents during this time?
- Yes, the entire time
 - Yes, part of the time
 - No
27. Which of the following types of high school did you graduate from?
- Public school
 - Christian school
 - Non-Christian private school
 - Home school
 - Parochial/Catholic school
 - Other: _____
28. How many hours per week were you employed during your senior year of high school?
- 0 hours
 - 1-9 hours
 - 10-20 hours
 - More than 20 hours
29. Which of the following types of college did you attend?
- Public university
 - Christian university
 - Non-Christian private
 - Parochial/Catholic university
 - Other: _____
 - I did not attend college

30. How long, if at all, did you stop attending church from ages 18 to 22?

- 1-2 months
 3-5 months
 6-12 months
 More than 1 year
 I never stopped attending church

Part Five – Please check the response which most accurately describes **your current involvement with church**. Check only one answer for each question.

31. How often do you currently attend a church worship service?

- 3-4 times a month (4 pts)
 Twice a month (3)
 Once a month (2)
 Less than once a month (1)

32. Are you a member of a church that is local to you?

- Yes (4)
 No (1)

33. How often do you participate in service projects, mission trips, or similar opportunities with your church?

- I attend **most** of the offered events (4)
 I attend **some** of the offered events (3)
 I **rarely** attend the offered events (2)
 I **never** attend the offered events (1)

34. How often do you attend a small group of any kind outside of Sunday morning (discipleship group, accountability group, small group)?

- Weekly (4)
 Monthly (3)
 Rarely (2)
 Never (1)

35. How often do you currently read your Bible?

- At least once a week (4)
 2-3 times a month (3)
 Less than once a month (2)
 Never (1)

36. How often do you currently pray?

- At least once a week (4)
 2-3 times a month (3)
 Less than once a month (2)
 Never (1)

37. Are you actively serving (at least once a month) as a volunteer or leader in any capacity in your church (small group leader, teacher, greeter, etc)?

_____ Yes (4)

_____ No (1)

38. Are you serving in a church in a paid position? _____ Yes (4) _____ No (0)

39. If answer to question 33 is yes, what is your official title?

Part Six – Please circle the number that most accurately describes **your current level of involvement in church** using the following scale:

1 = I am not at all involved

3 = I am fairly involved

2 = I am somewhat involved

4 = I am very involved

40. Rate your current level of involvement with church.

1 (1 pt)

2 (2)

3 (3)

4 (4)

Part Seven – Please circle the number that most accurately represents **your current attitudes** using the following scale:

1 = I tend to strongly disagree

3 = I tend to agree

2 = I tend to disagree

4 = I tend to strongly agree

41. I genuinely enjoy going to my church.

1 (1 pt)

2 (2)

3 (3)

4 (4)

42. My church helps me grow in my relationship with Christ.

1 (1)

2 (2)

3 (3)

4 (4)

43. I have a relationship with at least one other person in my church who is not a pastor or church staff member.

1 (1)

2 (2)

3 (3)

4 (4)

44. I have a strong relationship with a pastor or leader in my church.

1 (1)

2 (2)

3 (3)

4 (4)

45. I feel comfortable inviting my friends to my church's activities.

1 (1)

2 (2)

3 (3)

4 (4)

APPENDIX 5

THANK-YOU LETTER TO YOUTH PASTORS

Brandon Shields
Address
City, State, Zip Code
Phone Number
Email Address

Month & Day, Year

Youth Pastor's Name
Church Name
Church Street Address
Church City & Zip Code

Dear Youth Pastor,

I want to sincerely thank you for allowing me the opportunity to conduct this research effort with your former students. I truly believe this effort to understand the extent to which students remain involved with a church or discontinue involvement with a church is of vital importance for the future direction of youth ministry. This research is just the beginning of the long journey to understanding this phenomenon.

My research will be finished in the coming months, and the results published by December 2008. I have enclosed a copy of the research conclusions in the form of a research abstract for your review and as a way to say thank-you for your graciousness and cooperation. Please feel free to contact me with any further questions or suggestions.

Thanks once again for your participation in my research.

Sincerely,

Brandon Shields

APPENDIX 6

DESCRIPTION OF EXPERT PANEL

The expert panel consisted of:

David Adams, D.Min, Executive Director, International Center for Youth Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. Youth ministry experience of more than 30 years in both education and local church ministry.

Gary Almon, Ph.D, Associate Director, International Center for Youth Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. Youth ministry experience of more than 20 years in both education and local church ministry.

James H. Scroggins IV, Ph.D, Pastor, First Baptist Church West Palm Beach, West Palm Beach, Florida. Youth ministry experience of more than 15 years in both education and local church ministry.

Troy Temple, Ed.D, Associate Dean, School of Leadership and Church Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky. Youth ministry experience of more than 15 years in both education and local church ministry.

Steve Wright. Youth Pastor, Providence Baptist Church, Wake Forest, North Carolina. Youth ministry experience of more than 15 years in local church ministry.

APPENDIX 7

EMAIL TO EXPERT PANEL

Dear [Expert Panel],

I am conducting a research study that seeks to analyze the dropout rates for SBC megachurch youth ministries. The thrust of this research will be to survey young adults who formerly participated in a youth ministry in an effort to compare their current levels of church involvement against their commitment levels during high school. As a part of this process, I am inviting you to participate in this study as an expert panelist due to your leadership, training, and research competencies in the field of youth ministry. If you accept this invitation, I will send you a copy of the survey instrument to be used in the study as well as instructions stating my expectations for your evaluation. Upon completion of the study, you will be receiving a summary of the results.

I know that this will require a significant portion of your time and express my deepest gratitude for even considering this request. Please send me any questions that you may have before you respond to the invitation. I can be reached through email at (*email address*) or via cell phone at (*cell phone number*).

Once again, thank you for your time and your continued investment in the lives of adolescents worldwide. It is my hope that this research will help us better understand how to reach and keep teenagers with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Serving Him,

Brandon Shields
High School Pastor
Highview Baptist Church
7711 Fegenbush Lane
Louisville, KY 40228

APPENDIX 8

INSTRUCTIONS FOR EXPERT PANEL

Thank you for agreeing to serve as a contributor on this expert panel. Your time and commitment to my research will enable both practitioners and future researchers to better understand the phenomenon of youth ministry dropout. Please evaluate the Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire (YMRQ) in the following ways.

1. Read the instrument carefully, noting the following with regard to questions used to assess youth ministry commitment (questions 1 through 15):
 - a. Are these questions accurate measures of youth ministry commitment for high school students?
 - b. In general, do the responses listed below the questions represent varying degrees of youth ministry commitment for high school students?
2. Read the instrument carefully, noting the following with regard to questions used to assess current church involvement (questions 31-45):
 - a. Are these questions accurate measures of current church involvement for young adults?
 - b. In general, do the responses listed below the questions represent varying degrees of current church involvement?
3. Do the survey questions sufficiently address the issues of youth ministry commitment, demographics, and church involvement?
4. Upon completion of this review, please send your responses to the researcher via email to Brandon Shields (*email address*).

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ABSTRACT

AN ASSESSMENT OF DROPOUT RATES OF FORMER YOUTH MINISTRY PARTICIPANTS IN CONSERVATIVE SOUTHERN BAPTIST MEGACHURCHES

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The purpose of this study was to examine the claim that 70 to 90% of youth ministry graduates from conservative Southern Baptist churches leave the church after high school graduation. In order to accomplish this goal, the researcher compared current levels of church involvement among young adults with their youth ministry commitment levels to look for significant relationships between the two and to obtain a valid retention statistic.

The research design for this study was essentially quantitative. Young adults who graduated high school prior to the year 2008 from twelve Southern Baptist churches were surveyed to gather data regarding their previous youth ministry commitments and current levels of church involvement. Survey data was compiled, coded, and analyzed using a series of Chi-Square tests and t-tests to determine the statistical significance between these two categories. An overall retention rate of 88% was observed for all levels of youth ministry commitment, and over 70% of the survey respondents reported that they never dropped out of church between the ages of 18 and 22.

KEYWORDS: Retention, Youth Ministry Commitment, Drop Out, Church Involvement

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