A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CHURCH
RETENTION RATE OF CHRISTIAN HIGH
SCHOOL GRADUATES

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Doctor of Philosophy

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Travis William Kaiser
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APPROVAL SHEET

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CHURCH RETENTION RATE OF CHRISTIAN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

Travis William Kaiser

Read and Approved by:

_______________________________________
Brian C. Richardson (Chair)

__________________________________________
Troy W. Temple

Date _____________________________
To my wife, Mary Julia,

And our children, Will, Ellie Claire, Daniel, and Laine

You have gone beyond the call of duty to help me reach this goal.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

| LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS                        | vii   |
| LIST OF TABLES                                | viii  |
| PREFACE                                      | x     |

## Chapter

1. **RESEARCH CONCERN** ........................................... 1  
   - Introduction to the Research Problem .................. 1  
   - A Research Gap ........................................... 4  
   - Research Purpose ......................................... 6  
   - Research Questions ...................................... 7  
   - Delimitations to the Study ............................. 7  
   - Terminology ............................................... 8  
   - Research Assumptions .................................. 10  
   - Procedural Overview ................................... 10  

2. **PRECEDENT LITERATURE** ..................................... 12  
   - The Role of the “One Another” Church ................ 12  
   - Defining a Young Adult: Who Am I? .................... 16  
   - Protestant Schooling in America ..................... 27  
   - Young Adult Retention Research ....................... 42  
   - Profile of the Current Study .......................... 61  

3. **METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN** ............................... 63  
   - Research Question Synopsis .......................... 63  
   - Design Overview ........................................ 64
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samples and Delimitations</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of Generalizations</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumentation</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedures</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compilation Protocol</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demographic and Sample Data</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings and Displays</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation of the Research Design</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths of the Research Design</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses of the Research Design</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Purpose</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions from Research Questions</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Implications</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Applications</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Limitations</td>
<td>122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Research</td>
<td>123</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Appendix**

1. CORRESPONDENCE WITH PRINCIPALS | 127 |
2. YOUTH MINISTRY RETENTION QUESTIONNAIRE | 129 |
3. DESCRIPTION OF EXPERT PANEL | 134 |
4. EMAIL TO EXPERT PANEL | 135 |
5. INSTRUCTIONS FOR EXPERT PANEL | 136 |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Appendix</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. ASSOCIATION OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS INTERNATIONAL STATEMENT OF FAITH</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. CORRESPONDENCE WITH PARTICIPANTS</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. THANK YOU LETTER TO PRINCIPALS</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCE LIST</td>
<td>140</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACSI</td>
<td>Association of Christian Schools International</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FJYA</td>
<td>Faith Journey of Young Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCES</td>
<td>National Center of Educational Statistics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YMRQ</td>
<td>Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Criteria of categorizing levels of youth ministry commitment</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Criteria of categorizing levels of current ministry commitment</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Demographic information for survey participants (N = 309)</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Frequency percentages for levels of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Chi-Square ($\chi^2$) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for independent covenantal Christian high school graduates (N = 68)</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. One-way ANOVA: Youth ministry commitment and church involvement for independent covenantal Christian schools</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Chi-Square ($\chi^2$) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for independent open admission Christian high school graduates (N = 84)</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. One-way ANOVA: Youth ministry commitment and church involvement for independent open admission Christian schools</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Chi-Square ($\chi^2$) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for church-related covenantal Christian high school graduates (N = 86)</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. One-way ANOVA: Youth ministry commitment and church involvement for church-related covenantal Christian schools</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Chi-Square ($\chi^2$) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for church-related open admission Christian high school graduates (N = 71)</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. One-way ANOVA: Youth ministry commitment and church involvement for church-related open admission Christian schools</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Chi-Square ($\chi^2$) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for Christian high school graduates (N = 309)</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. 4 X 3 ANOVA: Type of youth ministry commitment level category and church involvement across Christian high school categories (N = 302)</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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Travis William Kaiser

Florence, Kentucky
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Parents have struggled for decades with the decision of where to send their children to school. In recent years, with the increase of private education options combined with increased problems in public high schools, the decision is more complicated than ever (Flannery 2010; Shaw 2011). Christian parents have a more difficult time trying to decide between a public education that is free of cost and a private Christian education that may stretch their budget. Money aside, the goal for most Christian parents is to see their children spiritually mature. What if students from Christian schools drop out of church just as often as students from other types of schools? We are forced to ask: is it worth paying for an education with a religious environment if the spiritual outcome is not different?

**Introduction to the Research Problem**

As parents send their high school graduates off to college they wonder how their students will survive. Have they done enough to train them? Did they have them involved at the right church? Did they send them to the right high school?

It is assumed that Christian parents, seminaries, churches, and youth pastors all share the same desire for young people, which is to see them grow into spiritually mature adults. With that mutual goal, the next step is to evaluate the process of getting students to that point. A crucial part of this process is successfully launching students from high school into college as they continue to spiritually mature. This “launch” occurs in the home, school, church, and home. For a high school the criterion is graduation rate (Pinkus 2006; all4ed.org). In the home, success is seen over a long period of time and in this
specific situation will be considered by how the student transitions to college life (Schultz 2003, 59-76). For a local church, the focus shifts to the youth ministry since this is the church ministry most closely connected to high school students.

The evaluation of a youth ministry can be viewed from several different angles. Recently, the most popular evaluation tool among researchers has been the retention rate of Christian high school students once they enter their college career. Those paying close attention to the world of Christian youth ministry are using this retention rate to determine if current models of youth ministry are effective (Baucham 2007, 9-12, 176-82; King 2006, 11; Reid 2004, 42-44; Wright 2007, 17-20).

Currently there are two main studies that have stirred up discussion about the church retention rate of Christian students during their college careers. The first is a study completed by Wes Black, professor of student ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. The study lasted over two years and evaluated factors that influenced Christian teenagers who remained in church during their teenage years and continued to do so in their young adult life. Factors that led to inactivity were also studied (Black 2006, 19).

Black used the statistic that “88% of the children raised in evangelical homes leave the church at the age of 18, never to return” (Black 2006, 19). This percentage became widely known at the Southern Baptist Convention in 2002, when the Council of Family Life shared the data (Black 2006, 19). This figure is much higher than the one that T. C. Pinkney, the 2nd Vice President of the Southern Baptist Convention at that time, gave to the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee in 2001. In less than a year before the 88% statistic was shared, Pinkney had found that 70% of teenagers involved in church youth groups stop attending church within two years of their high school graduation (Pinkney 2001).

LifeWay Research completed a second study in 2007. Their “Church Dropout Study” revealed that 70% of formerly active Protestant youth leave the church for at least
one year between the ages of 18 and 22 (LifeWay Research 2007, www.lifeway.com/lwc/mainpage). LifeWay’s approach to the study was an online survey that could be filled out by Protestant denominational youth.

In Brandon Shields’ 2008 study, he points out three major flaws of these two studies. First, a “polluted pool” of all Protestant youth was used. At the time of the study, denominations that were plateaued or declining, such as the Presbyterian Church, were lumped together with growing denominations such as conservative Southern Baptist Churches (Shields 2008, 9-10). Since then, the Southern Baptist Convention has been in decline while other denominations, such as the Assemblies of God and the Church of God (Cleveland, TN), have been increasing in membership (Pew Forum 2007; Kwon 2008; Roozen 2011; Linder 2008-2012).

A second flaw, according to Shields, was a “bad definition of involvement.” Both of the previous studies used bi-monthly church attendance as a way to define “regular attending” students. Many youth pastors would consider a student who attends twice a month to be simply a prospect (Shields 2008, 9-10). This is the most significant problem and it led Shields to create levels of church involvement to help clarify the topic of church retention.

A third flaw was the failure to consider the reliability of the students’ memory in regards to their own attendance patterns. In both studies, students self-reported their church attendance while in college. Shields points out that without the verification of attendance with church records or through conversations with youth pastors, it is possible that memories are flawed. It is also plausible that these students had irregular attendance before entering high school or they were never a regular part of a church (Shields 2008, 9-10).

In light of the flaws that Shields unravels in the two most important studies on the topic of church retention, other resources stating similar statistics are even less trustworthy. For example, in his book *The Present Future*, Reggie McNeal quotes Dawson
McAlister as saying, “90% of kids active in high school youth groups do not go to church by the time they are sophomores in college” (McNeal 2003, 4). McNeal does not even give a reference for the McAlister quote in his book, yet it is stated as fact. It is probable that this statistic could have sprouted from a meeting Jay Strack held with denominational leaders, parachurch workers, and youth pastors in the early 1990s. It was in this meeting that Strack expressed from his personal observation that about 90% of young people were leaving church after high school (Shields 2008, 5).

McNeal and McAlister are not alone in perpetuating this questionable statistic. In Shields’ research, he also discovered that the statistic reported by the SBC Council of Family Life could be traced back to Family to Family by Victor Lee and Jerry Pipes. In this book Lee and Pipes quote the 88% statistic. The footnote for the statistic claims the data is based on the experiences of Jay Strack and other national top youth ministry leaders (Lee and Pipes 1999, 124).

A Research Gap

It is clear from the history of church retention statistics that more solidified research needs to be pursued. Scott Stevens, the former Director of Student Ministries at LifeWay, stated in response to the LifeWay study, “There have been precious few accurate studies of this issue, with many leaders quoting anecdotal reports to bolster their personal opinions” (Stevens 2007, http://blogs.lifeway.com). This leads some to conclude that in years prior to the previously mentioned studies, the majority of the remarks about church retention for graduates have been nothing more than hypothetical musings and guesses concerning the truth of experiences (Calloway 2006; Lee and Pipes 1999, 24; McDowell 2000).

A second compelling reason this research needs to be pursued is to understand better the influence of Christian schools on the spiritual lives of high school students. Of the resources focused on Christian schools, the majority of them deal with procedures, training, or administration from an educational perspective. An internet search of
dissertation abstracts revealed that among the more than 200 dissertations on Christian schools, fewer than fifteen deal directly with the spiritual lives of the students. Daniel Lambert used a Delphi study in 1999 to research the needs of youth ministry in North America. He asked over 60 youth ministry scholars to determine what aspects of youth ministry could benefit the most from systematic research. The results revealed that experts believed the greatest need was for scientific study in three main areas:

1. Longitudinal studies on teen faith after youth group
2. The impact that specific relationships have on teenagers
3. Qualities of effective ministries whose students are most likely to remain active in the cause of Christ beyond high school (Lambert 1999, n.p.)

Two of the top three topics deal with the spiritual lives of students post high school, which further validates the need for more research in the field of high school Christian education and its connection, if any, to church retention after graduation.

A third reason to pursue research in this area comes from the 2007 LifeWay “Church Dropout Study.” In the data analysis, they indicated that 51% of “other Christian school” students dropped out of regularly attending church for at least one year or more during their college career (age 18-22). This number is marked as being statistically significant from the total dropout rate of 70% among the study’s sample population. However, with only 93 respondents in the LifeWay study, it is impossible to make generalizations as to the types of Christian high schools the students attended. In light of the flaws Shield’s found in the “Faith Journey of Young Adults” and the LifeWay research, he states, “There (is) a need for purposive research into the relationship between different levels of youth ministry involvement and subsequent church involvement as a young adult” (Shields 2008, 15). Even though the LifeWay study included Christian school students as part of their study there were too few respondents in order to make claims that could be extrapolated to a broader audience. Therefore, more research needs to be developed in order to gain a clearer picture of what is really happening among conservative,
evangelical Christian high school students when they enter college.

A fourth reason to pursue this research is found in the expected outcomes of Christian schools. As a schooling option, Christian schools allow parents to find a context that supports their own philosophical, religious, and pedagogical beliefs. Within the Christian school movement there are independent Christian schools (those not associated directly with a church or denomination) (McKinley 2009), church-related Christian schools (those directly connected with a church or denomination) (McKinley 2009), covenantal Christian schools (those who only allow Christian families to enroll) (Lee 2006, cherokeechristian.org), and open admission Christian schools (those who enroll other faiths or backgrounds) (Lee 2006, cherokeechristian.org). In one of the largest Christian school studies, the Cardus Education Survey, the researchers state,

On philosophical grounds, these approaches (covenantal and non-covenantal) clearly have ramifications on how discipleship should be undertaken within the school program. We wonder if these schools are producing graduates with distinctly different affinities and dispositions. (Pennings et al., 2011, cardus.ca)

If Christian school philosophy has an impact on teenagers carrying a robust faith into college, teachers, principals, and parents would want to know.

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to examine the post high school church retention rate of Christian high school students in light of the claim that 70 to 90% of youth ministry participants leave the church after graduating high school. The participants are Christian school graduates from various philosophies of Christian education who were involved in a high school youth ministry. These philosophies included: schools directly associated with a church or denomination (church-related), schools not directly associated with a church or denomination (independent), schools that only allow Christian families to enroll (covenantal), and schools who are open to enrolling other faiths or backgrounds (open admission). I attempted to determine if there was a
correlation between the graduates of ACSI Christian schools with different philosophies and the church dropout rate of those students in college.

**Research Questions**

The following questions will help to guide the analysis of this study:

1. What relationship, if any, exists between independent, covenantal Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church while in college?

2. What relationship, if any, exists between independent, open admission Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church while in college?

3. What relationship, if any, exists between church-related, covenantal Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church while in college?

4. What relationship, if any, exists between church-related, open admission Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church while in college?

5. What relationship, if any, exists between different levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and current local church involvement for Christian school graduates?

**Delimitations to the Study**

This study was delimited to those students who were currently seniors in college or were young professionals from the high school graduating class of 2009. These students had more recent experiences with youth ministry programming rather than someone who had already graduated from college. Delimiting to seniors enabled the students to offer more honest self-reporting about the experiences these students had in their high school youth ministry, while also allowing them four years of college life to evaluate their commitment to a local church.

The study was also delimited to conservative evangelical Christian schools that are members of the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). Choosing schools associated with one accrediting agency helped remove some loose variables of the study, such as significant views in theology and the overall quality and functioning of
the school. Using only one agency helped to make the study more significant.

This study was also delimited to Christian schools with a graduating class size of forty or more people. In order to have access to enough students for the study, Christian schools with larger class sizes help ensure adequate study samples.

Finally, the study was delimited to those students who had some level of commitment to their youth ministry program during their high school career. In order to fulfill the purpose of this research, students must have been involved in their youth ministry and attended an independent or church-based Christian school. Students with no involvement in church during their high schools years were not included in the study.

**Terminology**

In order for there to be clarity in this study the following terms and definitions are provided:

*Adolescent.* “Adolescence is the period of growth between childhood and adulthood” (Rice and Dolgin 2002, 1). This time frame can be further subdivided into early adolescence, usually ages 11-14, middle adolescence, ages 15-19, and late adolescence, age 19 until 25 (Rice and Dolgin 2002, 1; Sherrod, Haggerty, and Featherman 1993, 217-26; Steinberg 2011, 9-10).

*Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI).* This accreditation organization began in 1978 through the merger of three associations: The National Christian School Education Association, The Ohio Association of Christian Schools, and the Western Association of Christian Schools. It was not very long before several other associations joined this group. Headquartered in Colorado Springs, ACSI has 18 regional offices worldwide, serves over 5,300 schools in approximately 100 countries (over 3,300 in the United States) with enrollment of nearly 1.2 million students (National Center for Educational Statistics, nces.ed.gov/surveys/pss; Association of Christian Schools International, www.acsi.org). In the United States, ACSI is the largest Protestant accrediting agency and the second largest of all religious school accrediting organizations,
second to the National Catholic Educational Association. Their programs and services are
created to support early education through higher education (ACSI 2007, www.acsi.org).

Church-related Christian school. For the purpose of this study, church-based
Christian schools are those that are affiliated with a particular denominational church.
The school may or may not share buildings or grounds with the church but they do share
the same philosophy and mission. In this study these schools were started by a local
church and are considered a ministry from that particular congregation (McKinley 2009).

Covenantal Christian school. This term refers to those schools which strive to
enroll only Christian families. The school may either be church-based or independent. In
many cases a Christian family is usually defined as “having at least one parent who is a
professing Christian, but there is no requirement for the child to be a professing
Christian” (Lee 2006, www.cherokeechristian.org). It is possible for some covenantal
schools to have more strict requirements for enrollment. Some of these schools require
that both parents have a Christian testimony or that the entire family, including the
children, professes to be Christians (Eckel 2009, 61-74).

Independent Christian school. For the purpose of this study independent
Christian schools are those that are self-governed and not under the leadership of a local
church. In many cases these schools are not tied to a particular denomination (McKinley
2009).

Open Admission Christian school. These schools “enroll students/families
from any faith or background in the hope that they will be exposed to the gospel and one
day turn to Christ” (Lee 2006, www.cherokeechristian.org). Typically, there is an
understanding between the school and families with children who attend, that the school
is free to teach from the Bible to Christian and non-Christian students (Lee 2006,
www.cherokeechristian.org). The term “missional-based school” is also used in the
literature to describe the philosophy of these types of schools and will be considered
synonymous with “non-covenantal” (Beerens 2011, 3-5).
Retention. In this study, the term refers to the process of assimilating post-youth ministry participants into the church after graduation from high school.

Youth ministry. Senter and Benson write,

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.

(Senter and Benson 1987, 16)

Wesley Black defines youth ministry as “the work of the total church that emphasizes the spiritual development of young people, adults who work with youth, and parents of youth” (Black 1991, 26). It is understood from these definitions, and for the purpose of this study, that youth ministry is executed intentionally in order for adults to impact the adolescent world with the gospel and help foster them into becoming spiritually mature adults. For this research, youth ministry will only include youth work under the support of the local church as the study will look at church involvement both in high school and during college.

Research Assumptions

The following assumptions underlie this study:

1. The Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire (YMRQ) is a reliable and validated research instrument used in previous research on church dropouts.

2. Spiritual maturity is a complex process of both natural and supernatural factors. There are some factors that can be tested and others that cannot.

3. College seniors and young professionals have the ability to accurately report their experiences in high school youth ministries.

Procedural Overview

Data was collected from the class of 2009 from various types of conservative Christian high schools using an adaptation of the Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire (YMRQ) (see Appendix 2). The questionnaire asked questions concerning graduates youth ministry commitment, current education status, general demographic information,
and current church involvement.

Data was collected from the students primarily through a web-based survey. I received demographic information for 2009 graduates from the participating schools. The majority of students were contacted via email with an internal link to the online survey. Students who could not be reached by email were contacted through mail. A total of 309 useable surveys were obtained for this study.

Once the surveys were completed, the data was assigned numerical values so it could be categorized. Statistical tests were run to determine if a correlation exists between involvement in youth ministry during high school, the type of Christian school attended, and the current level of church involvement.
CHAPTER 2
PRECEDEDENT LITERATURE

The Bible is very clear that Christians should “not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (Heb 10:25). It has always been God’s plan that as a person trusts in Christ and begins their relationship with Him that they would also be engaged with His bride, the church (Acts 2, 20; Eph 2; 1 Cor 12; 1 Tim 3; 1 Cor 14). The Scriptures are clear that if a person loves God they should also love the church (Matt 16:18; Eph 5:21-30; 1 John 5:1; Rev 19, 21). Yet, in many churches there seems to be a revolving back door that lures late adolescents to “pull the escape hatch” and leave that which they have known (Powell and Kubiak 2005, 51). It is always a crucial issue when anyone leaves the church where they have been known. Adolescents are not immune from this experience. There has been interest in young adult church retention for decades, which has intensified in recent years as more research has been offered to the academic world. This chapter explores a biblical foundation for church involvement, reviews youth ministry models, and examines the latest studies on church involvement of late adolescents as well as models of Christian schools.

The Role of the “One Another” Church

The Bible is full of “one another” verses. These are directives given to the church, usually by Jesus, on how Christ followers should engage each other. Christians are given examples of corporate prayers, congregational singing, and the Lord’s Supper, all of which are intended to be experienced with other Christians (Isa 56:7; Ps 100; Col 3:16; 1 Cor 11). It is within the context of the church that discipleship and growth in
spiritual maturity takes place (Titus 2; 2 Tim 2). A connection to the local church provides encouragement, support, an atmosphere for spiritual growth, and a place for people to use their gifts, talents, skills, and abilities. There is clear, biblical support for the church’s role in nurturing the faith of adolescents as explained in the following section.

**The Church’s Role in Building Community according to the Bible**

The church is God’s chosen and primary means by which He has set forth to accomplish His purposes. The church is of utmost importance to God, as it is the church for whom Christ died. It is so important that the One who “has the name above every name” has been and is the Head of the church (Phil 2; Eph 5; Col 1:18). The church is the body of Christ and it exists to do His work in the world (Mims 1997, 99). The value of the church to God was shown when the Father allowed His Son to give up His life for the church. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, readers see the analogy that the church is like a body where believers are the arms, legs, and feet. There is only one who can serve as the Head and it is Christ. As the Head of the church it is intended that Christ has preeminence in all things. If God would value the church this much it mandates that His followers would place equal value on being dynamically connected and participating in a local church.

Even though the church is made up of individual believers, it is the organization as a whole, the local and universal church, through which God’s will is accomplished. Since the day of Pentecost, God has emphasized the importance of believers being connected to the local church. In 1 Peter 2 the church is deemed as “living stones” being fitted together into a spiritual house and in Colossians 2 the apostle Paul uses the language of sinews and joints as the building blocks designed to be connected to one another. In Ephesians 4, the apostle Paul describes how God uses people in different ways as He has called them to serve. In even more vivid exposition from Colossians 2:19, Paul
admonishes and splayed open the source for Christian “nourishment.” He depicts how Christians, the body, are “knit together by joints and sinews” under the headship of Christ. Paul unfolds the means, in graphic detail, of God’s plan for believers to be built up, edified, and strengthened: lives are to be interwoven and interconnected as the primary means of producing spiritual health and growth.

The Bible calls believers to do more than merely exist with one another. In Acts 2, the believers gathered daily to fellowship and spur one another on toward good deeds. The “one another” verses mentioned previously ask that believers would: “live in harmony” (Rom 12:10); “accept each other” (Rom 15:7); “serve one another” (Gal 5:13); “be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph 4:2); “submit to one another” (Eph 5:21); “teach and admonish one another” (Col 3:16); “be kind to one another” (1 Thess 5:15); “spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Heb 10:24); “confess your sins to each other” (Jas 5:16); and “offer hospitality to one another” (1 Pet 4:9). These verses describe what it is should be like to be the church—to actually do life together rather than just co-exist. Mark Dever distills the “one another” verses by equating the church as the “appearance of the gospel”. He goes on to say, “Take away the church and you take away the visible manifestation of the gospel in the world” (Dever 2007, 836). Boldly, Dever makes the argument that local church is, in fact, the proof of the gospel.

**Unity in the Church: The Church and the Power of “One”**

Of all the descriptors that can be given to the church, there is none more powerful than the characteristic of unity. For in unity, the “eye and the ear,” the “joints and the sinews” work in tandem, not in opposition (1 Cor 12; Col 2). Unity of the local church embodies and mimics the loving triune fellowship, the one God in three: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The church is to be one because the God who designed it, loves it, and gave Himself up for it (Eph 5:25). According to Acts 4:32, it is unity that is the ultimate marker of who the church is and reflects a unified, triune God. Therefore,
any dismemberment or division is a perversion of what could be and should be as pertaining to the church and the Lord.

The apostle Paul wrote much on the topic of unity. In Ephesians 4 he expressed, “There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:4-6). In 1 Corinthians 1, he contends that believers should be unified because of their unity in Christ. The “one body” analogy is not only used in 1 Corinthians 12 but Paul references it again in Romans 12. Then in Galatians 3:27-28, Paul makes it clear that all Christians are in Christ regardless of their ethnic heritage. Paul’s admonitions were really a reflection of Christ’s heart for the church as He taught that there is one flock and in His prayer for the church to be one (John 10:16, 17:21).

**The Pulse of the Church Alive**

Jesus declared in Matthew 28:18-20,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.

As stated previously, the church has been called upon as the organization to accomplish the will of God. The church is also the environment for truth to be discovered for spiritual maturity. The church simply has one mission: to make disciples (Matt 28; Setch 2000, 22-51).

This mission has implications for the church, for those who are without a relationship with Christ, and for the adolescents this researcher seeks to study. The church has been commissioned to do the “ministry of reconciliation” which starts by seeking those who are far from God but includes helping those who already know Christ to continue to mature in their spiritual journey (2 Cor 5:11-21). Gene Mims comments, “The church is a kingdom agent, the bridge between a gracious God and lost humanity” (Mims 1997, 101). The goal for the church is to make disciples and the participle “go”
indicates that as the church continues its mission there should be a continual effort to make disciples.

As His disciples, therefore, the church should have an expectation of being equipped to do this work on a daily basis, regardless of the situation or the consequences endured (Schultz 1998, 86). Scripturally, the primary means by which believers will find strength and encouragement to accomplish God’s will during difficult times is within the context of the church community. Understanding the purpose statement of the church is vital to gaining a proper perspective of the value of being involved with a local church.

For the late adolescent who is disengaged, the consequences of exiting the fold are significantly heightened and exacerbated. Not only will a disengaged believer miss out on the discovery of truth, but they also miss the opportunity to become equipped, be centrally on mission with, personally developed from, and obedient in fulfilling the will of God (Frazee 2001, 36-39).

**Defining a Young Adult: Who Am I?**

If there is to be a clearer understanding of what is happening with young adults and the church, one must be able to identify “young adults.” According to Rice and Dolgin, adolescence is “the period of growth between childhood and adulthood” (Rice and Dolgin 2001, 1). They go on to identify three stages of adolescence: early adolescence (ages 6 to 11), middle adolescence (ages 12 to 18), and late adolescence (ages 19 to 25). It is the focus on this latter stage (ages 19 to 25) that drives the conversation surrounding church retention.

Besides “late adolescence,” this stage of life is commonly referred in two other traditional ways, “extended adolescence” or “transition to adulthood” (Brown 1980; Coleman 1974). The focus of those studying this life stage, using the traditional terms, usually centers on what young people are becoming rather than what they are. The researchers utilize the traditional markers of adulthood such as leaving the home, marriage, parenthood, and finishing education. Researchers therein attempt to explain the
factors influencing their decisions to move into adulthood.

According to Jeffrey Arnett there is a new novelty in the field of sociology that goes beyond the two traditional identifies, this new stage is known as “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2004, 13-15). Arnett coined this identifier in his pursuit to define young adults as a group. This stage of emerging adulthood is not considered “adolescence.” Although this stage is not considered “adulthood” per se, there is greater freedom, little parental control, and identity exploration that separates this phase of life from the traditional idea of adolescence which ends around the ages of 18 to 20 (Arnett 2004, 17-21). The traditional transitions that mark adulthood, as previously mentioned, are now found lacking in the majority of people in this particular stage. Arnett’s work is based on hundreds of interviews with people 18 to 25. His work identifies socio-cultural factors that have radically reshaped the landscape of this age group.

Models of Youth Ministry

According to Roehlkepartain, youth ministry is a vital part of church ministry today. Ministry to adolescents, from birth through their college years, is a crucial part of the life of any church that desires to reach entire families rather than segmented age groups. From a survey taken of families who were joining churches that were growing at rapid rates, the primary factors that contributed to attracting people to church were revealed. According to parents, youth ministry ranked among the top determining factors for why people joined the church. In fact, the majority of families (4 out of 5) noted the church’s youth ministry as a “very important” factor. Though preaching was the most important factor, youth ministry haled as second as the primary reason people joined their current church (Roehlkepartain 1989, 7).

Youth ministry is a relatively new concoction of society. For centuries, there were only two categories for age demographics: childhood and adulthood. The apostle Paul highlighted this when he said, “When I was child, I used to talk as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man I put aside childish things” (1 Cor 13:11).
It was not until around 1900 that a term was derived to describe what is now known as the teenage years, the ‘transition period’ from childhood to adulthood (Savage 2007, xv). Merton Strommen, Karen Jones, and Dave Rahn call “adolescence” a “sociological phenomena” that was taking place at the beginning of the twentieth century. They go on to say that youth ministry history cannot be understood without it (Strommen, Jones, and Rahn 2001, 23). His statement was based on prominent work from psychologist Granville Stanley Hall.

In 1905, Hall published *Adolescence* and is credited with being the founder of adolescence psychology (Adams and Berzonsky 2003, xxii). Thomas Hine acknowledges Hall’s contribution to the history of youth culture:

> 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)

Jeffrey Arnett also attributes Hall with significantly shaping the idea of adolescence and therefore, developing the foundation for the future development of work among young people. Arnett claims that Hall “anticipated a surprising number of findings of modern psychology” regarding young people (Arnett 2006, 196.) Arnett goes on to explain that, “a century after the publication of Adolescence, many of Hall’s insights still seem valid, many of his conclusions have endured, and he continues to be regarded as the founder of a field that now includes thousands of researchers around the world.” (Arnett 2006, 197).

Hall’s ideas became widely accepted and recognized as “American educators sought to address these unique and specific need through the creation of the universal public high school” (Scroggins 2004, 23). The launching of these schools and the offering of compulsory education created a launch pad on which youth culture could develop. As new jobs were being created to work with adolescents in education and psychology, a consensus developed that adolescents were their own people group. It was the acceptance of mandatory high school, however, that solidified this view of youth.
Strommen, Jones, and Rahn explain the connection between the creation of high school and delaying of adolescence:

In 1875 the United States Supreme Court allowed tax money to be spent on high school education. This assured that nearly all young people would extend their adolescence from puberty through high school graduation. By 1918 every state in the union had established compulsory attendance laws requiring students to attend high school through at least 16 years of age, thus delaying teenagers’ entrance into the workforce. (Strommen, Jones, and Rahn 2001, 82)

Hine also highlights the role of the public high school as a key to adolescents delaying adulthood:

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)

The existence of public and private high schools has been on the American scene since the early 1800s. One has to be careful not to assume that the high school experience was a normal part of adolescent life from the start. High school education was slow in coming but has now become part of the American experience of growing up. Hine gives a glimpse of what this would have looked like:

This widespread acceptance of the idea of high school was very, very slow in coming. . . . The first public school opened in Boston in 1821, but New York City didn’t open one until more than seventy years later. . . . The idea of high school for all took hold only after World War II, a bit more than fifty years ago. . . . During much of the nineteenth century, there were probably more teenagers working in mines than attending high school. (Hine 1999, 139-40)

A gateway for youth ministry now had relevance and context. It was the American high school that generated what is known today as “youth culture.” The role of the high school has not only affected youth culture, but also how the church has responded to adolescents. Today, one sees many youth ministries that separate their students based upon their school grade or even the geographic location of the school itself. Churches minister to students as their own demographic with specialized approaches and with resources set aside for that purpose. These approaches are expressions of the different philosophical viewpoints with which youth ministry can be established and with which
“making disciples” can be contextualized.

**Doug Fields’ Purpose Driven Youth Ministry.** In 1998, Doug Fields wrote *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* as a way to show that churches need to be intentional about planning and evaluating student ministry. He wrote in response to years of program and activity-driven student ministries that Fields’ found lacking in helping students spiritually mature. He tried these models of youth ministry in his early years as a youth pastor only to find himself exhausted and frustrated (Fields 1998, 27-33). This experience led him to articulate a project built on the shoulders of Rick Warren’s famous work, *The Purpose Driven Church*.

Fields writes that a purpose driven youth ministry is built on the five purposes of the church given by God in the Scriptures: evangelism, worship, fellowship, discipleship, and ministry. According to Fields, a healthy youth ministry will evaluate everything based upon these five categories. The programming of purpose driven youth ministry will coincide with one of the five purposes. Fields connects the target audiences of a program with the level of commitment it requires from a student. The image he uses to explain this concept is five rings of concentric circles, each representing one of the five purposes and the level of commitment. Regarding this diagram Fields concludes,

> The circles provide us with an identification, not an identity. We are careful not to assign a “value” to a student based on commitment level. . . . The purpose of the circles is not to isolate students, but to recognize commitment levels so we can enhance growth by being more strategic in our program design. (Fields 1998, 93)

Fields’ contribution to youth ministry, through his philosophy and eventually the publishing of his book, left a great mark on youth ministry in America (Jackson 1998, youthministryinstitute.org). His approach is broad enough that it can be applied in a variety of church environments and it brings a sense of balance as a model of youth ministry.

**Mark Devries’ Family Based Youth Ministry.** Even though the purpose driven model of youth ministry has been widely applied, there have been other youth ministry practitioners and experts that have added some helpful correctives to the gaps in
previous models. As modern-day families continue to self-destruct, churches find themselves in a difficult tension: to be the church but yet not replace the role of the parent in the primary role of discipleship (Kostenberger and Jones 2010, 15-20; Exod 13; Deut 6). In the midst of this crisis Mark Devries writes in his popular book Family-Based Youth Ministry, calling for a new paradigm of student ministry: one that involves the whole family rather than what happens in “traditional youth ministry.” In traditional youth ministries, the church diminishes the role of the parent and promotes the “isolation of teenagers from the adult world and particularly from their own parents” (Devries 2004, 21). Devries calls for a more wholistic approach leveraging the family. Merton Strommen, a leader in youth development and religious research, agrees with Devries: “Congregations with a sense of family, in partnership with families that are close to one another and close to God, will raise young people who have a committed faith in God” (Strommen and Hardel 2000, 185).

Churches are made up of families; therefore, churches will only be as strong as the families that make up the local church. In this model of youth ministry, every effort needs to be made to strengthen the spirituality of families. More than fifty years ago Frank Gaebelein observed, “Once the home with grace at meals, family prayers, and loyalty to the church, could to a significant degree be counted upon to provide children with spiritual heritage” (Gaebelein 1995, 8). Even as early as Exodus 13 the Bible explains how fathers should train their sons. In Deuteronomy 6, the Scriptures provide clarity in how families were intended to function as the means of rearing family: “You shall teach your children . . . as you sit in your house . . . as you walk . . . mark [commandments] on your doorposts and gates.” Families (parents) have the onus to provide the constructs of a spiritual heritage as the church guides, exhorts, encourages, and admonishes. The family is the fulcrum by which the church leverages adolescent discipleship most effectively. Yet, as the family wars to remain intact (in the face of divorce, financial strains, parenting failures, spiritual warfare, etc), the church adapts and responds into the breach.
The relationships in the family cannot be underestimated: “Close family relationships are important because faith is formed through personal, trusting relationships,” says Strommen (Strommen and Hardel 2000, 37). As a solution, Devries exhorts the nuclear family and the extended Christian family to collaborate and interweave their efforts in their approach to influence the next generation (Devries 2004, 18). To this extent Devries states,

The family ministry model is driven primarily by a desire to empower families. . . . One of the key assumptions behind this kind of ministry is that the real action of the Christian nurture of children and youth takes place not in youth programs or even in the church but in families. (DeVries 2004, 174)

Devries harkens the church to “train the trainers,” meaning that the church should equip families to teach and reach their children.

DeVries does not stand alone in his critique of the previous models and the attention given to a family ministry model. Steve Wright and Chris Graves add, “Some parents and churches unfortunately view student ministry . . . as a spiritual drop-off service best left to the professionals” (Wright and Graves 2007, 47). This model seeks to reverse that trend by encouraging parents to be restored to their role as key disciplers to their children rather than passing that responsibility to the church. Strommen, Jones, and Rahn encourage this type of reversal:

This is a necessary development for a number of reasons, not least is the importance of parents in the spiritual development of their children and youths. Increasingly, there is awareness that faith is best ignited in the home and that parents are best situated to shape the faith lives of their children. (Strommen, Jones, and Rahn 2001, 168)

Just as Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, advised Moses to raise up other men so that Moses could govern the Israelites more effectively and prudently, so the church becomes more prudent and effective by focusing on raising up families to reach their own adolescents as well as other young people (Exod 18).

**Congregational youth ministry: A means and an end.** The model of congregational youth ministry centers on the whole church family serving to impact
teenagers (Nel 2001, 4-7). The significance of everyone’s role cannot be underestimated. According to Steve Reeves, “The emerging church desperately needs the example and counsel of older, wiser members . . . and the energy, passion, and fresh thinking of the young. A congregation committed to this can actually see Scripture lived out (Titus 2)” (Reeves 2012, christianstandard). Proponents of this model value youth as coequals in the ministry of gospel work, rather than viewing young people as an immature resource until they turn into adults (Nel 2001, 6-7). Young people in this situation are not seen as “weaker members,” but valued members, all functioning together for Kingdom purposes within and without. In this perspective, young people are even seen as a critical group of the church body and not as only a means to reaching their parents.

Linked to Paul’s “sinews and joints,” the interconnectivity and mutual interest between generations becomes highly valued. Regular interaction and partnership with church members of all ages is not only wanted and useful in this model, it is vital. Stephen Haymond explains the crucial relationship that has vanished: “The missing link is one that is virtually non-existent in the youth culture of today, including youth ministries: the link of generations” (Haymond 1998, 4). He is not the only one who believes that youth being cut off from older generations will stunt their spiritual growth. Strommen, Jones, and Rahn give a glimpse of what happens if this exchange among the church body is removed:

Youth raised in the church can come to the time of high school graduation without having entered into the intergenerational life of a congregation. As such, they feel little loyalty to their congregation, little involvement in her mission, and little feeling of obligation to support its work. (Strommen, Jones, and Rahn 2001, 169)

Integration among the generations should no longer be a “happenstance” but a “have-to” in order for the church to flourish and function optimally in the years to come.

The goal of congregational youth ministry is to help young people build as many relational bridges with as many other generations as possible. After studying young people for sixteen years, Overholt and Penner concluded that relational connections between multiple generations is crucial to society at large and in smaller contexts like the
church: “Part of the role of being a bridge between the adult and youth worlds includes creating places where relationships between generations can be built. Without intergenerational connections, society suffers” (Overholt and Penner 2002, 151). Those who espouse a congregational youth ministry model view it as a solution to the church retention problem. Haymond writes, “Influence, and heart involvement of godly Christian parents and other Christian adults would increase their integration as godly adults into the life of the church” (Haymond 1998, 4-5). There is more at risk than just trying to keep young people in church. This approach is a concerted effort to help young people mature spiritually as well as to take ownership of what God is doing in their local expression of the body of Christ. It becomes both a means and an end for spiritual maturity.

**Experiential youth ministry.** Over the last decade there has been a rise in the attention given to what is commonly known as contemplative or experiential youth ministry. There are several authors who hold to this philosophy of youth ministry, but Mike King describes his viewpoint well when he writes, “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). The proponents of this philosophy use imaginative prayer, *lectio divina*, liturgy, and pilgrimages (all couched in church tradition and medieval Catholicism) to create environments where young people can experience the presence of God (King 2006, 98-165; Jones 2003, 18).

Mike Yaconelli, one of the most popular advocates for this philosophy, oversaw an experiment that tested a “new way of youth ministry” in fifteen churches from a variety of backgrounds and settings (Yaconelli 2007, 258). This was a way for Yaconelli to push back on what he considered an isolated, hyperactive, and overly structured form of youth ministry found in most churches. His research led to several conclusions:
The great secret we uncovered within our work was that youth leaders and youth have souls, and despite the conventional wisdom, these leaders and youth don’t need Christian rock bands, or amusement parks, or clever curricula. The secret we discovered is that what they need and desire is God. (Yaconelli 2007, 258)

Yaconelli promotes that reading and teaching about spiritual practices are helpful, but experience is the only way for them to be fully known.

Michael Hryniuk suggests,

Programs, activities, and events all have a place in this journey of ministry with youth. But what is most essential is the quality of presence we bring as ministers who know who we are and whose we are. When we are full of the knowledge of our own identity as God’s beloved children, then we can freely trust that we are enough and that the Spirit of Christ is working in us and through us to name and claim them as God’s own. (Hryniuk 2007, 73)

Hyrniuk further agrees with Yaconelli about experiencing God when he writes,

Rather than focusing solely on how to “fill the space” with pizza or dogma at a Sunday night youth group, we shift our attention to the deeper question of how to “create space for God” in the daily lives of young persons through the disciplines of the spiritual life. (Hryniuk 2007, 61)

Kendra Creasy Dean is another proponent of this philosophy whose greatest challenge to local churches is to exhibit a sense of passion about worshipping God. Her concern is if the church is not a place where people are stirred to their core being, then young people will chase the false passions of the world:

Unless Christian theology retains a central place for the Passion of Christ—and unless the Christian community engages youth in practices that identify with Jesus’ suffering love—youth looking for something “to die for” will, inevitably, look elsewhere. In the absence of a Christian vocabulary of passion, youth will turn to the broader society to interpret their passions for them, where consumer culture is only too happy to oblige. (Dean 2004, 53)

Yaconelli is clear when describing how difficult it is to have a youth ministry that carries the philosophy he espouses in his writing. He understands that it takes a long process in order to get the desired result of this style of youth ministry:

I think it’s important to admit that contemplative youth ministry is probably the most difficult approach to youth ministry a church could undertake. In the distracted and fractured culture in which children and youth are being raised, it is becoming increasingly hard to find adults who have the time and willingness to be present to God and young people. (Yaconelli 2007, 249)

The experiential youth ministry model has some concerning issues when it comes to historical, orthodox Christianity. The aforementioned authors, particularly Dean
and Yaconelli, emphasize an almost mystical spirituality found in practicing the “presence of God” (Yaconelli 2007, 84). In his book *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Yaconelli gives very little biblical support for this practice but instead relies heavily on monastic tradition without giving concrete descriptors of what this experience should entail (Yaconelli 2007, 83). Furthermore, the examples given of those who “experienced Jesus” in the Scriptures are void of connecting those experiences to the entirety of the Word of God. By handling these portions of the Bible so loosely Yaconelli opens the door for people to interpret their circumstances however they would choose without regard of the authority of God’s Word.

A final issue with this style of youth ministry is false assumption that Jesus bailed on organized religion. Yaconelli posits that preaching or “word heavy youth ministry” is boring and that if Jesus were around today that He would spend all of His time with those outside of the temple. A closer look at the Bible would actually support the complete opposite of those conclusions. The Scriptures give plenty of examples of Jesus preaching as well as the disciples (Matt 4-7; Mark 1:14; Luke 4; Acts 2; Mark 16:20). Not only did Jesus and His disciples preach the Word but they also participated in worship at the temple “as was custom” (Luke 4:16; Luke 2:39-52; Matt 12; Mark 1:21). Jesus challenged those portions of the church that were not God honoring but He never divorced Himself from the church (Matt 21:12-13; John 10:11). Contemplative youth ministry offers some innovative practices but the lack of biblical support make those ideas difficult to embrace.

**Commonality among youth ministry.** The previously mentioned models of youth ministry are in no way an exhaustive description of the youth ministry landscape. Amongst each of the models lives a certain continuum in which each individual church has the methodological freedom to express itself. Brian Richardson, in discussing different youth ministry models, shares,

As a church considers what model of youth ministry it should use, it is important to
remember that what is best for one church in a given community is not necessarily best for another church. Instead of copying a particular youth model because it worked somewhere, a wiser approach is to respond to the specific needs of the young people in our church or community. (Richardson 2000, 10)

The models do share some overlapping core values that are pertinent to this research. First, there is a common value placed on the role of spiritual adults engaging in the lives of young people. This is no surprise as the Scriptures give the foundation for this type of interaction as found in 1 Timothy and Titus 2. A second commonality is the intentional purpose of each model to help young people moved forward in accordance with a set of core values: “For a youth program to be well balanced, able to accomplish the purpose for which it was designed there must be some type of formal or informal programming that will meet the needs of students at each [level of commitment]” (Robbins 2004, 504).

There is another connection point for all models of youth ministry found in the platform from which they all exist—youth culture. Youth culture is consistently changing and churches must work hard to understand the current worldview shaping the ideas and decision of young people. Among the myriad of variables that create what is known as “youth culture” there is no greater contributor than the local high school (Hine 1999, 138-57).

**Protestant Schooling in America**

The idea of Christian schooling has been a part of American history for a very long time. Oftentimes considered a personal and private matter, education is never mentioned in the Constitution of the United States (Basham, Merrifield, and Hepburn 2001, 6). In the early days of America, schooling would have been practiced first at home and, as highly religious people, the education given by the Pilgrims was Christian in nature (Gordon and Gordon 1992, 379-81). Parents were usually the ones to give instruction, but occasionally a tutor would be employed for private lessons. Since more formalized schooling had not yet been established, the early settlers taught in their homes. Even as community schools were first being formed as one-room schoolhouses,
they were almost always under the leadership of the church, spiritually focused, and maintained a more private setting (Loria 2002, educationrevolution.org).

The early foundation for American education had Christian beliefs as its compass and Biblical morality as its purpose. Throughout the colonial period, Protestant churches established day schools for their children and charity schools for children of the poor (Curran 1954, 6-15). The intention of the colonists was for education to foster a strong, religious life in the hearts of students (Schindler 1987, 18). Many Protestants believed elementary schools did not need the oversight of any particular denomination because “their role was to prepare young Americans for participation in the broadly Christian civilization toward which all evangelicals were working” (Handy 1971, 102).

As the first two Great Awakenings occurred, education gained an even clearer focus—that everyone in America would gain the skills to read the Bible. All of the schools realigned themselves in order to make their chief aim a reality. Lierman states,

Three hundred years ago, Christian education and character education could be synonymous to education. Moral growth was viewed as the driving force in the initial establishment of American schools. The colonists believed that personal encounter with Scripture ensured individual salvation and ethical citizenship. (Liermann 1999, 6)

The morality taught at that time was clearly the result of authority from which it was derived: “The Bible served as the primary textbook for reading and the daily lessons reinforced a commitment to moral codes of behavior based upon the Scripture” (Algera and Sink 2002, 163). Most Protestant denominations supported public education up until the late 1800s (Kaestle 1983; Kruashaar 1972; Sherrill 1932). The overwhelming support came because, at the time, public education held to their belief system and was seen as a catalyst towards a Protestant America (Tyack 1966, 447-69; Smith 1967, 679-95; Carper 1978, 141-61). Directly from the school a student would receive moral teachings and a basis from which to learn ethics: yet this is hardly true today (Ewing 1993, 125-28; Swanson 2012, 14-18).

According to Basham, Merrifield, and Hepburn, compulsory education was the norm during the 1870s. The classroom was slowly being influenced by the government as
the industrial revolution developed. It was apparent even in small things like the bell ringing for classes to change which mimicked to the bell ringing in the workplace to signify the end of one shift and the start of another. As compulsory education gained popularity, home schooling and community-based private schools also continued to grow. However, because there was still a lingering Protestant influence in the schools, most American students attended some type of government, institutionalized education during the time leading up to World War II and beyond (Basham, Merrifield, and Hepburn 2001, 3-4).

In the early twentieth century, Protestantism gradually declined in its ability to shape American culture and the public school system (Noll 1992, 307-13). James Hunter argues,

In the course of roughly thirty-five years (1895-1930), Protestantism had been moved from cultural domination to cognitive marginality and political impotence. The worldview of modernity had gained ascendancy in American culture. (Hunter 1983, 37)

To the decline of Protestant influence was the rise of Darwinism, humanism, and religious pluralism. Leo Pfeffer stated, “Secular humanism is a cultural force which, in many respects, is stronger in the United States than any of the major religious groups or any alliance among them” (Pfeffer 1977, 211).

In light of this, the 1960s saw home education and private schools regain popularity as a legitimate option to compulsory education. Those that did not want to join the movement resorted to pushing theistic symbols and perspectives into the public schools (Carper and Layman 2002, 504). For example, the teaching about intelligent design, the hanging of the Ten Commandments, and voluntary religious activities on campus were all attempts to keep Protestant influence in the public school (Carper and Layman 2002, 504). In other instances, Protestants stirred up textbook controversies such as those that occurred in Mobile, Alabama, and Hawkins County, Tennessee, during the 1980s (Bates 1993 16-22; Glenn 1987, 28-47). John Holt, a teacher and humanist, who was also supported by the libertarian left, sparked this new push for options to compulsory education. Holt gave strong leadership with his outspoken style. He accentuated the
decentralizing of education and more autonomy for parents (Basham, Merrifield, and Hepburn 2001, 7-8). This concept, sometimes referred to as “unschooling” (or “deschooling”), paved the way for the rise in the Christian school movement (Ray 1999, 3-4). With the disenchantment of the secularization of public education and a resurgent evangelical faith, the 1960s sparked a phenomenal increase in the number of Christian schools (Carper and Hunt 1984, 83-90). Protestant “culture warriors” were on the move.

During this same period of time, the government pushed biblical authority even further from the school through three Supreme Court decisions. Collectively, these three rulings removed almost all religious influences from government run schools. In 1962, the Supreme Court Case Engel v. Vitale placed a ban on recited prayers being required in public schools, which was previously common in the public schools. The next year, 1963, witnessed the case Abington School District v. Schempp, which prohibited voluntary prayer in schools. The third case was the famous Murray v. Curlett, which effectually removed Bible reading from state schools. As the government forced the desegregation of schools as a response to the civil rights movement, along with students being pulled from their community schools, it is believed that public schools became weaker from the perspective of Christian parents (Algera and Sink 2002, 163-65). As the control of government grew in the public school system, major shifts occurred. Many evangelical Christians pulled their children out of the public arena, creating a high demand for another option and thus fueling the contemporary Christian school movement.

**Why Protestant Christian Schools**

Protestant Christian schools are in existence to nurture the Christian point of view through the world of education and to provide a substitute to public education and other private school institutions (Rose 1988, 70-75). Many Christian school administrators and faculty have claimed that the Protestant faith cannot be maintained within the public school system (Wagner 1990, 119-22). David Noebel, author of *Understanding the Times*, says that Christianity has been
deliberately, some would say brilliantly, erased from America’s educational system. The direction of America’s education can be seen as a descent from Jonathan Edwards (1750) and the Christian influence, through Horace Mann (1842) and the Unitarian influence, to John Dewey (1933) and the Humanist influence. (Noebel 1991, 13)

As stated previously, a systematic shift away from Protestant Christian values in the school classroom has already occurred and is occurring in the legal system. The mass acceptance of plurality has led to greater numbers of people who hold to different attitudes and convictions held by Protestant Christians that once infused public schools (Menendez 1994, 239-40). A. A. Hodge was able to foresee this downfall in public education:

I am as sure as I am of Christ’s reign that a comprehensive and centralized system of national education, separated from religion, as is commonly proposed, will prove to be the most appalling engine for the propagation of anti-Christian and atheistic unbelief... It is capable of exact demonstration that if every party in the State has the right of excluding from the public schools whatever he does not believe to be true, then he that believes most must give way to him that believes least, and then the that believes least must give way to him who believes absolutely nothing, no matter in how small a minority the atheists or the agnostics may be. It is self-evident that on this scheme, if it is consistently and persistently carried out in all parts of the country, that United States’ system of national popular education will be the most efficient and wide instrument for the propagation of atheism which the world has ever seen. (Hodge 1887, 30-36)

Therefore, the Protestant Christian school specifically meets the needs of Protestant parents and students if they are seeking a religious component to their education that affirms their spiritual beliefs.

Ken Smitherman, former president of ACSI, gives five elements that parents can expect to be provided through the Christian school. First, parents can expect everything about the school to be focused around the Truth (Smitherman 1999, 1). The Bible, as God’s Word, is taught as the foundation for all truth. Students will learn they are valuable as creatures made in the image of God and that others have worth because of this truth. Students will also have the opportunity to hear the truth of the gospel and will be encouraged to trust in Christ as their Savior as well as grow in their knowledge of God through Bible study.

The second element parents can expect is Biblical integration (Smitherman
All curriculums adhere to some value system. In the Christian school, that system is based on the Bible. Curriculum alone cannot build successful adults. It must be combined with the influence of those who are living out that value system (Letterman 2001, 280).

A third element is a Christian staff (Smitherman 1991, 1). The school should be full of Christian adults from the administration down to the staff who are committed to knowing Jesus and modeling Christ-like behavior. Students will observe the lives of teachers and should see that their faith is an essential part to how they live. The former Yale University president Timothy Dwight said,

> Education ought everywhere to be religious. . . . Parents are bound to employ no instructors who will not educate their children religiously. To commit our children to the care of irreligious persons is to commit lambs to the superintendence of wolves. (Dwight 1819, 127-18)

A fourth element is the potential in Christ (Smitherman 1991, 1). The highest objective for a Christian school is to help a student become all that they can be in Christ—both in the present and as they prepare for the future. Unlike the public school system, Christian schools bring clarity to life as every aspect of learning is focused through the eternal perspective of life in Christ (Smitherman 1991, 1). As students begin their search for significance, the Christian school provides a conducive environment to learn of Christ’s love for them and begin to follow what He desires for their lives.

The fifth critical element is solid organizational practice (Smitherman 1991, 1). Christian schools are expected to be biblically-based not just from a mere statement of faith but also in the development and implementation of policies and procedures. Christian schools are also unique in that many times there are ways for parents to be involved in the organization from volunteer positions to being a school board member. These roles serve to build stronger bonds between the schools and the parents of students.

**Association of Christian Schools International**

The Association of Christian Schools International was founded in 1978 with
the merger of three associations: The National Christian School Education Association; The Ohio Association of Christian Schools; and the Western Association of Christian Schools. It was not long before four other associations joined the ACSI. The association first held office in La Habra, California, in the former building of the California Association of Christian Schools. As the association grew, more space was needed and in 1994 the headquarters were moved to Colorado Springs (ACSI 2007, acsi.org).

Today, ACSI has 28 regional offices worldwide as their reach has expanded into international territories. Currently, ACSI has an enrollment of over 5.5 million students from over 24,000 schools in 106 countries. They provide services and resources to assist Christian schools from early education through higher education. ACSI is a 501c3 nonprofit and is overseen by an executive board of 36 members (ACSI, acsi.org).

**ACSI membership.** Schools that are members of ACSI hold to a common statement of faith, which is characteristic of other Christian school associations (Wagner 1990, 14). The statement does not represent any particular denominational stand, other than what can be called Protestant. The statement of faith, however, limits the membership (see Appendix 6). Any school willing to ascribe to the statement of faith can become a member of ACSI.

Membership does not guarantee certification for any school. Before a school is certified by ACSI, it must conduct a self-study and undergo a certification process much like that which public schools experience under other accrediting agencies, such as the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). In order for a school to be a member of ACSI, they must hold to specific standards and levels of academics. Teachers in ACSI schools must be certified through ACSI, and they may also hold state teaching certificates, which many do in order to further validate their teaching credentials (ACSI annual report, acsi.org).

**Models of Christian education.** As the American culture has morally
declined the philosophies in school systems have become blatantly counter-biblical in their approach. The following statement from John Dunphy represents this approach:

I am convinced that the battle for humankind’s future must be waged and won in the public school classroom by teachers who correctly perceive their role as the proselytizers of a new faith: A religion of humanity that recognizes the spark of what theologians call divinity in every human being. There teachers must embody that same selfless dedication of the most rabid fundamentalist preacher, for they will be ministers of another sort, utilizing the classroom instead of a pulpit to convey humanist values into wherever subject they teach, regardless of education level—preschool, daycare, or large state university. The classroom must and will become an arena of conflict between the old and the new—the rotting corpse of Christianity, together with its adjacent evils and misery, and the new faith of humanism, resplendent in its promise of a world in which the never-realized Christian ideal of “love thy neighbor” will finally be achieved. (Dunphy 1983, 26)

Humanism and relativism have not only made their way into education but have achieved a “lofty” and “enlightened” status (Eidsmoe 1997, 123-43): “Faith in the moral autonomy of individuals has resulted in a society that has lost its moral moorings” (Van Brummelen 1994, acsi.org). Christian schools must observe closely how they are preparing their students for living in a degenerating society.

Historically, there have been three approaches to Christian school education. According to Jan Bentley, one of those is the triumphalist model. This model came into existence from the belief that scientific reasoning was superior to religious ways of understanding (Bentley 2001, 2). The Christian triumphalist assumed that “the prevailing intellectual culture was hopelessly flawed by reason of its secular assumptions. Its naturalistic materialism would eventually lead to its self-destruction. Christianity, however, being true, would endure and triumph” (Hughes and Adrian 1997, 263-69). Learning is therefore viewed as subjective to faith rather than as supportive of it.

A second approach is the value-added model which takes a neutral position towards culture. It assumes that sacred and secular knowledge are never in conflict (Clark 1946, 208-10; Hughes and Adrian 1997, 272-75). They never change each other but can add to one another. A school functioning under this model may pray at the beginning of the day but the Bible and God are rarely referred to. The Bible may be part of the curriculum but is not applied to other areas of study. Ronald Chadwick accurately describes
these schools: “Much of Christian education in the past has been secular education with a chocolate coating of Christianity” (Chadwick 1990, 28-30).

The third approach is the integration model. This model assumes that secular knowledge can be flawed and outcomes often distorted (Hamilton and Mathisen 1997, 261-83). Christian assumptions can bring clarity to a subject, just as the secular can add to the revealed knowledge of Christianity. Each is in need of the other (Hughes and Adrian 1997, 270-75). This shifts the focus towards a student’s worldview and philosophy of life, combining to become the educator and pupil’s most influential tool. Chadwick adds, “The term Christian has always referred to a worldview based on the Bible. Christian education cannot be based on a man-centered philosophy that is not consistent with Christianity” (Chadwick 1990, 29). This model upholds the Bible as the basis for all teaching, learning, and curriculum:

Historically, many Christian schools have started with fine motives and objectives, but these have not been conveyed to successive generations of parents. Before long such schools lose their vision and integrity, and have often degenerated into exclusive clubs, which do no better job of preparing students for the real world than do modern public schools. (Edlin 1994, acsi.org)

**The Current Christian School Movement**

The Christian School Movement is alive and well. For example, ACSI currently serves 5,500 member schools in approximately 106 countries. They are responsible for an enrollment of nearly 1.2 million students. Christian schooling outside of North America is growing at a rapid rate. The area experiencing the greatest growth is known as the global south and encompasses Africa, Southeast Asia, India, Latin America, and Oceania (Renicks 2010, acsi.org). As local churches grow and demand for Christian education rises, there is corresponding growth in the number of Christian schools (Renicks 2010, acsi.org).

In the United States, there are over 5 million students in almost 34,000 private schools. The number of teachers employed to lead those students has increased by almost
100 thousand in the last 10 years. There are currently over 450,000 teachers in private schools in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics 2009, nces.ed.gov). The global numbers along with the large numbers of students, teachers, and faculties connected to the Christian school easily argues that this option to public education has sustainability.

**Covenantal Christian schools.** For a covenant to be in a place two parties have to come together for a common purpose. In covenantal education, Christian schools and Christian parents have agreed to partner together for the training of young people. Some would argue that this is most effective partnership for Christian education (De Jong 1977, 19; Lee 2006, cherokeechristian.org; Pethtel 2011, digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/education_theses).

This philosophy of Christian education has often been given skewed labels that often erroneously stigmatize the educational aims of the covenant education model. Some refer to covenant education as “closed-admission” schools. However, the term “closed-admission” puts more emphasis on who is excluded rather than who is included (Eckel 2009, 61). Another term used to refer to this philosophy is “discipleship-oriented” schools (Hilgeman 2010, 47-49). According to Eckel, covenantal schools enroll only students who satisfy church or denominational standards set by the individual school. Covenantal schools do not allow non-Christian families to be a part of their education process. As a general standard, families of enrolling students must have at least one parent that is a professing Christian and that the family, by virtue of that one parent, be active members of a church of like practice. Their approach assumes that peers and educators have a major influence; thus, by limiting enrollment students can have the maximum Christian influence. Covenantal schools do desire to play a role in the discipleship process, but the school is not limited to only the realm of Biblical discipleship. The goal of a well-formed covenantal school is to not only train a student in the spiritual disciplines but to also equip a student to think Biblically in every facet of life, including life within and beyond
Covenantal education espouses that it offers three unique elements to Christian families in the realm of Christian education—wholeness, meaning, and coherence. Rather than being disjointed, like that of its public education counterparts, or how many “cultural” Christians live a covenantal education presents life in such a way that Christianity is interconnected, affecting all parts of life (Pearcey 2004, 295-323; 2 Cor 5:17-20; Col 1:15-20). A second distinction of covenantal education is how it establishes meaning by answering the “why” to life’s hardest questions (Eckel 2009, 78). This not only creates an academic and spiritual rigor of “cause and effect,” it threads a cohesive meaning to all parts of life. Yet, a third variance is coherence. As covenantal education provides wholeness and meaning, it also brings unification to all of life. It draws the needed unity between heaven and earth, supernatural and natural. Just as the phrase “heavens and earth” means to include “everything,” here Christians are intended to see the unity of Truth knitting together from “alpha to omega” what which would be otherwise disparate, fractured, and chaotic understandings of humanity (Ibid, 78).

Open-admission Christian schools. Open-admission Christian schools are designed to offer a Christian education both to Christian and non-Christian families. Just as biblically-based as covenantal schools, open-admission schools look to partner with families as they abide to follow the commands of the Lord to teach their children truth as well as those families who do not have this as their aim (Deut 4:5-8, 6:1-9, 20-25, 11:1-11). Here, the intent is to teach and train from a biblical perspective, engaging and influencing both Christian and non-Christian students to take hold of Truth as it presents the best answers to explain life. In doing so, they push Christian students to grasp their faith with a deeper conviction and can potentially convert lost students to salvation. The conversion of lost students is one of the primary goals of evangelistic schools in addition to any social or academic goals. As long as students and their parents agree to adhere to the standards of the school and are willing participants in the religious and biblical
teaching, students’ spiritual background is not the final determining factor in their enrollment. If the school is independent, it refers students to churches and encourages families to attend church. If the school is church-related, an effort is made to encourage students and parents to attend the sponsoring church (McKinley 2009).

The selection of students is an arduous task and leadership must be fully equipped to balance the influence of non-Christians students in the classroom. Yet, open-admission schools believe that by allowing non-Christians into their schools, they have an opportunity to reclaim culture (Fisher 2009, 48-49). Part of this vision is becoming a reality as Christian schools have seen an increase in attendance over the last four decades to secondary enrollment of 1.38 million students in 2010 (NCES 2010, nces.ed.gov). As Christian students and non-Christian students alike are leaving public education for a more robust educational experience, open-admission Christian schools are positioned to make a deep cultural impact (Palmer 2011, A1). They engage as Christ engaged the world—Christ who “became flesh and pitched His tent among us” (John 1:14) and that “while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). These schools exists so that all students may enter and have the potential to know Christ personally.

While both types of schools exist, there will always be questions about the wisdom of each type of school. There are those who will argue that, as one of its aims, the Christian school should reach out evangelistically to nominal or non-Christian students, thereby broadening the base of prospective students to maintain enrollment numbers. Those who hold to the covenantal prospective argue that the focal point of Christian schools is to serve as partners with Christian parents as they train their children; therefore, students who themselves or their family are not members of a church do not fit within the purposes of the school (Baker 1979, 17-18). Seemingly, one implies “do what is optimally effective for discipling” while the other insists on “not missing the opportunity that avails itself for casting the broad net of evangelism.”

**Definition of protestant Christian school.** To understand the Protestant
Christian School further, Deuink and Herbster bring clarity between the idea of Christian education and the actual school:

Christian education and the Christian school are not the same. Christian education is the process of helping our students become conformed to the image of Christ. The Christian school is a place designed to give students a large part of their Christian education. Most Christian day schools begin at kindergarten and stop at the twelfth grade. (Deuink and Herbster 1984, 12)

The school has the responsibility to design the process in which students will most effectively learn while also being transformed into greater Christ-likeness. Christian schools go about this task by providing an academic education framed by the Word of God (Gaebelein 1954, 34). This is the only reason the Christian school exists. James Deuink makes this clear: “No student should be required to receive a second-rate education in order to have a Christian education. But no student should have his faith undermined in the process of receiving a quality academic education” (Deuink 2010, bjupress.com).

Choosing from among the various educational options is a task that every parent must make. Particularly for a Christian parent, it can be a very difficult decision. Parents must decide between the two positions that Christian schools create: to place one’s children in a public school so they can be “salt and light” or to have the children grounded with sound, Christian influences. Christian schools also wrestle with those same options and must choose their philosophical stance. Christian schools can either choose to teach students from Christians families, commonly referred to as “covenantal” Christian schools, or they can choose to open enrollment to lost students, a philosophy known as “open admission” (Fry 2011, christiannewsreports.com).

In light of culture, Protestant Christian schools uniquely establish and maintain a culture consistent with a Protestant Christian worldview. Religion in the Protestant Christian school refers to and includes biblical teachings and in some cases denominational doctrines into the curriculum. According to Smith and Meier, it is no surprise that religion is said to be the major reason families consider enrolling their children in Protestant Christian schools (Smith and Meier 1995, 312).
**Independent Christian schools.** Independent Christian Schools are educational institutions that are not connected to a particular church or denomination. In the United States, approximately 37% of Christian schools are independent (Woodcock 2009, acsi.org). The typical independent school is organized as a nonprofit religious organization whose board is made up of parents or community leaders (Woodcock 2009, acsi.org).

Jeff Woodcock, former headmaster of Santa Fe Christian Schools, believes there are three advantages to the independent Christian school. The greatest advantage is the opportunity to clearly focus on the mission of the school. As Bruce Lockerbie writes, “The primary and only legitimate reason for a school’s existence as a school is to be a place of academic instruction where Jesus Christ lives in those who teach and learn” (Woodcock 2009, acsi.org). A clear focus is valued as those schools that are affiliated with churches struggle with creating their own identity while the ministry of the church can blur their mission.

A second advantage to independent Christian schools is their freedom to manage their own mission (Baumann 2011, 213-46). As with any partnership there are times when both parties have to give up something in order to comply with one another. In the case of church-related Christian schools, there can be conflict between the school and church or between the pastor and the administration of the school. Overall, for independent schools, there is less political behavior, fewer divided loyalties, and freedom to control their own budget. There may also be greater freedom in recruiting school board members (Woodcock 2009, acsi.org).

A third advantage is the school’s ability to market itself (Woodcock 2009, acsi.org). Without the marketing of the rest of a church’s ministries, the school can more clearly state their mission and vision. Marketing is used to create community interest in the school so that it may prosper and develop. One could see that the opinion of the community towards a church would also be projected onto the school. If that opinion is
negative, it becomes a very difficult hurdle for the school to overcome. Therefore, an independent school, detached from a particular local church, may have a broader community appeal (Woodcock 2009, acsi.org).

**Church-related Christian schools.** Church-related Christian schools are those schools that are owned and operated by a sponsoring church (Wells 2009, acsi.org). In some instances the school is located on church property while other times it has its own location. David Wells claims, “The combined influence and ministry of the home, church, and Christian school on our children and young people is immeasurable” (Wells 2009, acsi.org).

In comparison to independent Christian schools, there are a few advantages that church-related Christian schools offer. The greatest benefit of a church-related school is the special cooperation that is possible between the church and the school as they mutually support parents when they train their children. A second advantage is that the mission of the church is expanded and becomes more effective, especially for those who are called to teach and are then recognized as professionals in full-time Christian service (Wells 2009, acsi.org). In their roles, teachers function as an extension of the church in their ministry endeavor. The final advantage of the church-related Christian school is the legitimacy that the school earns as a spiritual ministry when under the spiritual and organizational covering of the sponsoring church.

**The product of Christian education.** As with all endeavors, there are particular goals and accomplishments each organization is pursuing. This applies in the world of education as well, especially Christian education. The aim of Christian education is “a born-again Christian who is purposefully pursuing Christ-likeness in himself and others” (Olinger 2010, bjupress.com). Furthermore, Christian education should produce a person that becomes a-critical thinker, enjoys learning, continues education through life, and acquires the intellectual and character-based tools to do well
at whatever God has called him or her to do within the context of his or her God-given
talents, gifts, skills, and abilities (Olinger 2010, bjupress.com).

Young Adult Retention Research

As mentioned previously, much of the polemics surrounding this topic have
come anecdotally and the statistics referenced come with great variety. Furthermore,
these statistics tend to be utilized casually and consistently enough that the numbers are
often communicated as truth. Ron Luce estimates that 80% of students raised in a
Christian home drop out of church after graduation (Luce 2005, 21). On the other hand,
Mark Matlock says that the statistic ranges from 54 to 84%, depending on whose
numbers you use (Matlock 2006, 79). With such broad discrepancies, it is fortunate there
has been some recent research in this area that builds a foundation for the current study.

Foundational Young Adult
Retention Research

One of the major studies that looked into the topic of church retention came in
the late 1970s and was based upon the 1978 Gallup poll that surveyed Americans who
were not engaged in church. David Roozen suggested that roughly 46% of American
church attenders would stop engaging with the church at some point in their lives. A
“dropout” was defined as anyone who stopped attending church for two or more years.
According to Roozen, the most likely time for Americans to stop attending church is
during their teenage years. He concluded that peer pressure, the church lacking relevance,
and parents slowly freeing their children into adulthood were pertinent factors for
teensagers separating from the church (Roozen 1980, 427).

Roozen determined that previous studies left much to be desired since they
were mostly qualitative in nature and/or they were very limiting in their age groups or the
span of time they covered. His conclusion was that the dropout rate remained constant
from the 1930s through the 1950s. Roozen also said there was significant rise in church
disengagement during the 1960s and it was met with a small decline in the 1970s. He also
deduced that upwards of 80% of those who dropout of church will reengage with the church depending on the age of the participant. The age demographic with the highest rate of reengagement included those between 25 and 34 years of age (Roozen 1980, 427).

During this time, the decrease of membership in Protestant churches was connected to the absence of young people in those church environments (Hoge and Roozen 1979, 315-333). Roof and McKinney led a large study on American mainline religion that showed 59% of Americans not connected with a local church were under the age of 35. They also found that upwards of 80% of people who had disconnected from their church were below the age of 45 (Roof and McKinney 1987, 58-60). The Roozen study provided insights to retention over several decades but his research, along with Roof and McKinney’s study, points to a general problem of young people staying connected to the church.

**Recent Young Adult Retention Research**

In the last couple of decades, much attention has been given to the church dropout phenomenon. In 2002, O’Connor, Hoge, and Alexander conducted a longitudinal study that studied 16 year olds and then surveyed them a second time at the age of 38. The participants shared that 79% of them had become inactive with the church during early adulthood. The majority of them (61%) had done so by the time they were 21 years of age. The research further showed that more than half of the respondents (58%) returned to church starting in their mid twenties up until around age thirty (O’Connor, Hoge, and Alexander 2002, 725-727).

A UCLA study showed the decrease in church attendance as dropping from 52% to 29% by the time a student finished college (Wright and Graves 2007, 19-20). David Wheaton shared that 50% of students quit on their faith after four years of college (Wheaton 2005, 14). To make matters worse, Barna found that 33% of teenagers say that the church will not play a role in their life after they leave home (Barna 2001, 136).
Carol Lytch—choosing church. In wanting to hear directly from the age demographic themselves, Carol Lytch sought to engage high school seniors in a qualitative study asking about their participation in the life of the local church. Her ten-month research involved interviewing 83 teenagers and their parents. Participants came from three different types of congregations: Catholic, evangelical, and mainline Protestant. They also had to show faithful engagement with their churches through what was deemed as regular attendance. As of result of her work, Lytch claimed that there were three compelling characteristics that draw young people to church, “a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning, and opportunities to develop competence” (Lytch 2004, 25). Her investigation led to a discovery of what Lytch calls “religious styles”:

1. Conventionals: these are students who have a strong attachment to their family connections both in the home and church, hold tightly to traditional social values and the authority of their religious traditions, rest firmly in the assurance of spending eternity in heaven, view marriage and starting a family as a rite of passage, and they allow the Bible, and Jesus as a model, to guide their moral choices.

2. Classics: these students highly value their relationships with parents but the intimacy of their friendships is more important, are open to moderate social views, struggle with the tension of who to be around their Christian and non-Christian friends, seek the blessing of their family as they transition into adulthood by taking more responsibility, and are guided mostly by the Christian tradition but believe it can be reformed.

3. Reclaimers: these students find strife in their family relationships and are closest to their non-Christian friends, refuse to be tagged with a social stereotype, hold strong beliefs in God’s forgiveness and see Him as the Rescuer, carry a sense of being thrown into adulthood too early so they feel they have already experienced their rite of passage, and measure morality based upon thwarting immorality and trusting in second chances.

4. Marginalizers: these students hold a close identity with a select group of friends, accept the belief system of the church but they don’t really pay attention to them, have a strong trust in self and believe success is built from within, tend to be high achievers and success oriented, and they make moral choices based upon the needs of the community without regard to religious motivation.

5. Customizers: these students view their parents on the same level as their peers, seek an individualistic style that is attractive to the crowd, have a laissez faire approach to the institutional church, desire personal rites of passage as the means to validate their commitments, and base morality on giving extra effort and showing compassion toward the needy.

6. Rejeters: these are students who seek others with the same philosophy or worldview, attune their apparel and attitudes to represent their value system, hold to a high standard for friendship, are connected to the local church but reject the teachings of the
church, measure maturity by rejecting pop culture and materialism, and see morality as understanding the needs of the world but responding by taking action in their local communities.

7. The Lost: these students have lacked the necessary positive relationships with family and friends to feel socially connected, take to extreme clothing and are socially awkward, display their insecurity by taking risky chances and expressing disjointed values, they do not understand a clear difference between adolescence and maturing as an adult, and they demonstrate no pattern of moral decision making. (Lytch 2004, 136-137)

Lythc summarized her research by noting that one of the most important factors affecting the church attendance of young people was what she identified as “‘personal autonomy’, with its guiding motto, ‘I choose to go to church’ rather than ‘I must go to church’” (Lytch 2004, 5). This discovery offers a possible explanation for why some young people do not attend church. Additionally, Lythc acknowledged that churches can use young people’s autonomy to their advantage since it may foster ownership of their faith rather than blind acceptance of the religious traditions of their parents. Not surprisingly, Lythc’s work pointed to the invaluable role of parents in the spiritual formation of youth. (Lytch 2004, 200).

**Barna Group—twentysomethings.** The alleged rate at which young adults are leaving the church has brought enough attention to produce several additional large studies. These recent studies are now shaping the conversation of how to approach this issue. Barna Group was responsible for conducting one of the largest studies on twentysomethings and their engagement with the church. In 2006, the research company concluded a five year long process of interviewing more than 22,000 adults and 2,100 teenagers in twenty-five different surveys. In recent years, this study piqued the interest of many and led to further research in the field of young adult church retention. The Barna research team observed that “the most potent data regarding disengagement is that a majority of twentysomethings—61% of today’s young adults—had been churched at one point during their teen years but they are now spiritually disengaged” (Barna Group 2006, barna.org). Spiritual disengagement was defined as a lack of active church attendance, prayer, and regular Bible reading.
In a broader look at the study, the Barna Group also pointed out that most twentysomethings identify themselves as Christians (78%). This is just slightly lower than the 83% of teenagers that consider themselves to be Christian. Interestingly, the study highlighted that 70% of twentysomethings asserted if they “cannot find a local church that will help them become more like Christ, then they will find a people and groups that will, and connect with them instead of a local church” (Barna Group 2006, barna.org). This is a staggering insight into the lives of young adults unraveling an underestimation of the significance of the church in their spiritual development. This pitfall mentality easily explains why the research found that young adults are likely “to attend special worship events not sponsored by a local church, to participate in a spiritually oriented small group at work, and to have a conversation with someone else who holds them accountable for living faith principles” (Barna Group 2006, barna.org).

**Black’s Faith Journey of Young Adults.** Wes Black contributed a longitudinal study called the Faith Journey of Young Adults (FJYA), which involved interviews with 1,362 young adults and included both group settings and individual questionnaires. The participants included those who were actively engaged in church and those who had disassociated with a local church. Black’s motive for conducting the study sprung from the understanding that, “simply attending church or youth activities during the teenage years is not a clear indicator of faithful discipleship” (Black 2006, 43). The goal for Black was to understand the factors that contribute to young adults attending church or avoiding church with the hope of providing practical insight to parents and churches (Black 2006, 22-23).

The study was conducted in a two part series. The first part of the research was quantitative in nature and surveyed all 1,362 participants. The second part consisted of 270 participants who were interviewed in smaller groups. The environments for the surveys consisted of churches and college campus ministry locations. Specifically, the colleges included Baptist universities and secular state institutions. The respondent pool
was comprised of students and non-students (Black 2006, 22-23).

From the quantitative portion of his interviews, Black found the following reasons for why young adults attended church: relationships, habit from when they were young, and mentoring (Black 2006, 26-31). He also interviewed young adults who were inactive at church and discovered reasons for their inactivity. Some of these reasons included claims that the church had lost appeal because of “fake Christians”, lack of previous involvement, and lifestyle choices and friendships (Black 2006, 31-34).

The second half of the study included qualitative group interviews with 270 participants. The results of the interviews suggested relationships, a strong faith, the influence of parents, and meaningful church experiences as reasons for why young adults stay engaged with the local church. Those who were no longer active church attenders listed the following reasons for disassociation: the church losing its appeal and value, bad previous experiences, lifestyle choices, and friendships as the reasons for disassociation (Black 2006, 35-37).

These key factors highlighted by Black seemed to have a powerful effect on the church attendance of young adults. The underlying assumption of the study was that spiritual depth and church attendance are interrelated. Spiritual maturity fosters greater engagement with the church, which leads to a deeper level of Christian maturity and the cycle continues to feed itself. Black specifically pointed out areas in need of attention in the student ministry world, “Youth ministry must do a better job of discipleship – teaching the basic, Biblical concepts of Christianity, instilling a love and appreciation for intergenerational church relationships, building a personal commitment of faith in the lives of teenagers and helping adolescents internalize their faith” (Black 2006, 43).

At the end of a two-year study, Black claimed that 80% were leaving the church (Black 2006, 19). As a result of the findings from the study, Black provided implications for student ministry, family ministry, and adult ministry in order to reverse the trend. For student ministry he suggested increasing the scope of ministry until the
early 20’s, emphasizing discipleship, relationships, mentoring and allowing students meaningful involvement. For family ministry, Black suggested helping teens move toward adulthood, helping parents adjust their parenting style as their children grow, and helping parents understand their role as the spiritual leaders of their home as beneficial factors. Finally, he encourages young adult ministries to create accepting environments, provide legitimate and meaningful opportunities for involvement, and intergenerational opportunities for young adults to interact with older adults in a variety of settings (Black 2006, 43-44).

LifeWay Research—18-22 year olds drop out of church. In 2007, LifeWay Research conducted another large study on the church involvement of young adults. They found “70% of young adults ages 23-30 stopped attending church regularly for at least a year between the ages of 18-22” (LifeWay 2007, lifeway.com). In the survey, over 1,000 young adults ages 18 to 30 were included in order to understand why they stopped attending church. Participants were identified as those who had attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year in high school. The study defined those who stayed engaged with church as anyone who attended a Protestant church two or more times a month for at least a year during high school. Those who were considered dropouts were categorized as those who quit attending church for at least a year between 18 and 22 years of age (LifeWay 2007, lifeway.com).

Their research gave reasons to help explain why some young adults stayed engaged with the local church while others disconnected. The majority of young adults dropped out of church due to life changes. The biggest life change factor reported was one that was self-imposed - students claimed that they wanted a break from church (27%). Other contributors were identified as follows: the move to college kept them away (25%), their work was keeping them from attending (23%), or they moved too far away for reasons other than college (22%).

In regards to this study, 30% of the participants remained in church. The
majority of this group reported that relationships were the main reason they stayed connected. First, they viewed church as an important part of their relationship with God (65%). Second, they desired to have the church’s help in navigating the decisions of everyday living (58%). Brad Waggoner, Vice President of research and ministry development at LifeWay, writes, “Relationships are often the glue that keep people in church or serves as the attraction to begin attending again following a period of absenteeism. Many people are deeply influenced by friends and loved ones” (LifeWay 2007, lifeway.com).

On a positive note, LifeWay discovered that among those who dropped out of church as young adults and are now ages 23-30, 35% are connecting with a local church two or more times per month. Additionally, another 30% are attending but at a less consistent rate. Thus, almost two-thirds of those who were considered “dropouts” as young adults do return to the church to some degree. The primary reason given for the return to church was strong encouragement from other people toward those who had dropped out. Encouragement from parents and family members ranked as the highest factor (39%), while encouragement from friends and colleagues was a key component for young adults returning to church 21% of the time. Together, half of those who returned did so because of the influence of family or friends. Other reasons included a personal desire to return (34%) and a sense that God was calling them to return to the church (28%) (McConnell 2007, lifeway.com).

Fuller—The College Transition Project. The Center for Youth and Family Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary launched the College Transition Project in 2009. The goal of the project was to determine if there are programmatic and relational characteristics of successful student ministries, as evidenced by former students who have transitioned well into college. The study contained four different research initiatives. There was an initial study of 69 youth ministry graduates that served as a pilot group. Then, two different three-year longitudinal, quantitative studies were given to former
student ministry participants during their first three years in college. Finally, 45 youth
ministry graduates participated in qualitative interviews sometime between two and four
years after they had graduated high school (Powell and Clark 2011, 193-194).

The longitudinal study had a sample of 227 high school seniors from all across
the United States. The participants were mostly Caucasian, with median grade point
averages ranging from 3.5 to 3.99, attended larger churches (800+ members), and
predominately came from intact families where mom and dad were both present in the
home (Powell and Clark 2011, 194).

The research team began by developing strategic networks by diving the
United States into four quadrants: Southwest, Northwest, Southeast, and Northeast. The
research team identified churches of different sizes, denominations, and ethnicities to
provide diversity in the research. Churches were only allowed to participate if they
employed full-time student pastors. The student ministry staff of each participating
church was responsible for recruiting students to engage in the research. In order to be
eligible, students had to be at least eighteen years old and have intentions of going to
college once they graduated. Data started being collected in October 2006 and lasted a
couple of years until the qualitative interviews were completed (Powell and Clark 2011,
195-196).

The College Transition Project team concluded that 40 to 50% of teenagers
who graduate from a local church or student ministry will not carry on with their faith
once they go to college (Powell and Clark 2011, 15). The team also drew some
conclusions concerning the variables that led to this phenomenon. Once identified, those
variables were used to provide resources for parents and churches to help young people
transition into the next season of maturity. The research did find that there were certain
qualities that helped make the transition to college life easier and could make it more
successful from a spiritual perspective. Some of these characteristics included possessing
a Christian worldview, the ability to articulate the Christian story in a way that shows it
has been internalized, a focus on the community around you, involvement in a small
group that is doing life together, and having adult mentors, especially parents. (Powell
and Clark 2011, 152-190).

**Martinson, Black, Roberto—Exemplary Congregations.** In 2010, a
different type of approach was taken with the Study of Exemplary Congregations in
Youth Ministry. Martinson, Black, and Roberto asked if it was possible to determine
characteristics of churches that attract and nurture young people who are committed to
Christ. The study identified 131 “exemplary congregations” who were attracting young
adults and had a substantial number of them who were committed members. The research
procedures included surveys, interviews, and visits to the different churches. The study
possessed both quantitative and qualitative elements and included representation from
seven different denominations.

Researchers created a list of characteristics of the congregations that were
successfully developing the faith of young adults. Four different components that affected
student ministry were used as parameters for the forty-four characteristics that the team
discovered. The categories were as follows: congregational qualities, student ministry
qualities, family faith, and leadership in the congregation (Martinson, Black, and Roberto
2010, 260). Examples of the positive characteristics of student ministries included the
consideration of life issues, a deep focus on Jesus Christ, an environment that cares for
young people, strong planning and organization, and development of quality relationships
(Martinson, Black, and Roberto 2010, 262). The authors were quick to mention that the
characteristics are not prescriptive in nature but are purely descriptive of the
environments they studied where churches had a dynamic student ministry.

A main idea behind this research was that passing on a robust Christian faith to
young adults cannot be attributed to one singular characteristic, but rather it is cultivated
by the culture of the entire church. The researchers support this claim by offering specific
implementations for each of the four overarching components. By offering such practical
advice, the authors produce a pattern of student ministry that provides a process of “welcoming, instructing, equipping, and sending” (Martinson, Black, and Roberto 2010, 136). This process was the common goal of those student ministries studied in the research. The discipling of young people was described as “deepening their relationship with Jesus, helping them understand the Christian faith better, applying their faith to daily life and serious life choices, and sharing their faith with others” (Martinson, Black, and Roberto 2010, 254).

The findings of the Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry study supported previous claims about student ministry in a local church context. The most important insight that the study brought to light was the value of multigenerational relationships that are authentic and healthy. This was the distinguishing characteristic of churches who did a good job of passing on a robust faith to the next generation. This discovery highlights what researchers have claimed as a foundational building block of healthy student ministry, that relationships are at the very core of ministering to youth (Root 2007, Senter 2010). The study also found that family, especially parents, plays an important role in how young people take hold of their Christian faith. This is yet another common theme that is found in student ministry literature in the last several years (Devries 2004; Clark 1997). This research is important as it gives credibility to the ongoing role that the local church plays in the spiritual vitality of the youngest generations.

**Shields—conservative Southern Baptist megachurches.** In 2008, Brandon Shields conducted a study to examine the local church dropout rate for young adults who were associated with conservative Southern Baptist churches. Shields contacted twelve Southern Baptist megachurches asking for contact information for students who had graduated out of their student ministries prior to 2008. In order to clarify the broad nature of retention research published in recent years, Shields created a four-category system to describe how significant students were engaged with the church during their high school
years and to assist in classifying their church involvement as young adults. He created the Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire as the means to collect and categorize participants’ church involvement (Shields 2008).

After surveying 279 participants in the quantitative study, Shields discovered that 88% of students who graduated out of a Southern Baptist megachurch stayed connected to a local church as they transitioned into their young adult years. Moreover, it was reported that 70% of the survey respondents had never dropped out of church during the ages of 18 to 22. Those students who were identified as having the highest engagement with the local church expressed a retention rate of 93%. This research was a pivotal breakthrough to begin countering the myth of the staggering dropout statistics (Ibid).

Smith and Snell—Souls in Transition. The National Study of Youth and Religion was started in 2001 by a team of researchers led by Christian Smith. The first phase of the study surveyed 3,290 teenagers ranging in age from 13 to 17 years old. The second step to the research involved personal interviews with 267 of the original participants. The results of that research were published in a book called Soul Searching produced by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton. In 2009, Smith and Patricia Snell completed the third piece of research based on interviews with 230 participants from the first study. Their results were published in a book, Souls in Transition, which shared the religious practice and beliefs of those participants who were ranging in age from 18 to 23 years old.

Utilizing a mixed methods approach, Smith and Snell discovered some revealing information regarding religious and non-religious young adults. In the five years that had passed from the previous study, one quarter of mainline Protestants identified themselves as ‘not religious’. One out of ten nonreligious teenagers classified themselves as conservative Protestants. The study highlights the amount of religious switching takes place among young adults. The mainline Protestants in the earlier study
that defected either became more conservative or not religious. In every religious group, at least half and sometimes more continued to stay in their religious tradition as they transitioned into young adulthood (Smith and Snell 2009, 110-111).

Regarding retention rates, the study includes findings for a broad spectrum of religious groups from conservative Protestants to Latter Day Saints. Only 13.5% of the participants attended a religious service one a week while 6.8% attended more than once. If the 10.6% that attended 2-3 times a month were included with the previous groups then the study shows that one third of those surveyed attended religious services regularly. Unfortunately, 35% reported that they never attend a religious service. The final third claimed to attend religious services anywhere from a few times a year to once a month.

Smith, in this attempt to be clear with his reporting, says, “if attending services only a few times a year or less is counted as “not attending,” then well over half of all emerging adults (54.6%) are religious service non-attenders” (Smith and Snell 2009, 112-113).

There are other key findings worth noting. This research complimented what previous literature has shown, in that parents still hold significant influence in the shaping the religious lives of young adults (Smith and Snell 2009, 246). Students who were surveyed expressed a deep desire to have better relationships with their parents (Ibid, 344). Aside from parents, the influence of other adult believers played a key role in developing the religious maturity of young people, namely older religious adults who attend the same church. Important to this study, the research showed the importance of those educational institutions that combine religious views with overall goal of learning. This combination adds another sphere of influence to encourage young adult church retention (Ibid, 226-249).

**Cardus Education Survey—Phase 1.** As an organization, the goal of Cardus, a Canadian educational think tank, is to help renew the social architecture of North America based upon the foundation of “2,000 years of Christian social thought” (Pennings et al. 2011, 40). In 2011, Cardus conducted a research project that randomly
surveyed over 2000 individuals in North America. The respondents were surveyed over a
two-year period through the collaboration of five different research teams. Out of the
initial pool of participants, 873 students attended a public school, 124 respondents had
mainly attended a conservative protestant or ‘Christian school”, 283 had attended a
Catholic school, 109 had a nonreligious private school background, while 82 were home
schooled. Phase one of Cardus’ work was to examine the relationship between the
motivations for providing Catholic and Protestant schooling in North America and compare
them with the outcomes in spiritual formation, engagement with the culture, and academic
development (Pennings et al. 2011, 5). The second part of the web-based survey included
a sample of those participants who were identified as “private school graduates” and
therefore, did not include those who attended a public school. The respondents were also
limited to the ages of 23-40 years even though the initial sampling included those who
were 49 years of age. Due to small sample sizes in all school categories with the
exception of Catholic school graduates, the survey responses were weighted in order to
allow the comparison of each school category (Pennings et al. 2011, 44-45).

The research showed that Protestant school graduates held the highest views
that divorce, premarital sex, and cohabitation are morally wrong. Of the school types,
only Protestant and homeschool backgrounds proved to have a positive impact on
students believing in absolute truth and unchanging moral standards. In the spiritual
disciplines, Protestant school graduates prayed and studied their Bibles more than their
peers. Financially, compared to their peers, Protestants also gave more to churches,
religious organizations, and charitable organizations. Furthermore, Protestant school
graduates volunteered more in church ministries, mission experiences, and relief trips
over public school, Catholic, homeschool, or non-religious private school graduates.
Compared to public school graduates, Protestant school graduates had more children,
made at an earlier age, had a lower divorce rate, and tended to be more grateful for
their possessions. Overall, Protestant graduates were more likely to graduate from
college, attend more years of higher education, attend a religious university, and attend a more selective university (Pennings et al. 2011, 5-6).

The Cardus Education survey has a significant place in the field of Christian education research. The study possesses sound methodology and is comprehensive in nature. Since the school categories were weighted based upon population and demographic factors in addition to the fact that the respondents were pulled from a random sampling, the research seems to provide a representative sample. However, as with any study, there are limitations that exist. The original sampling pool included those who were between the ages of 23 and 49 while the second round of surveys included those between 23 and 40 years of age. At worst, the outcomes of the study are shedding light on what was happening in Christian education 30 to 40 years ago, and at best, 10 to 25 years during the second tier of research. Also, the research team did not explicitly determine how long the participants attended a Christian school or for which grades Christian school graduates attended a Christian school. It is possible that a research participant could have only attended a Protestant or Christian school for a year or two and, even though it was not the school they attended for the longest period of time, their responses would be credited to that school category. Finally, the research team admitted to the small sampling size and that the “tests of statistical significance take into account the sample size” (Pennings et al. 2012, 63). A larger sample size could take the trends found in the study and may actually validate them as statistically significant.

**Cardus Education Survey—Phase 2.** Since the first report in 2011, the Cardus Religious Schools Initiative has produced two more studies. In 2012, the research team released a study on the community involvement of non-government school graduates in Canada. The study highlighted that those who attend Separate Catholic, Independent Catholic, Independent Non-religious, Evangelical Christian, or religious home education were equal to and in some cases out performed graduates from public schools when it comes to profitable and significant civic engagement (Pennings et al. 2012, 63).
The survey included those who were 24 to 39 years old and had graduated from a secondary school of the various types mentioned above. The data was weighted for each school category based on sample size and then weighted a second time for consideration of demographic information.

The data reported that graduates from non-government schools were less likely to be divorced, were more engaged in the affairs of their communities, provided more volunteer hours, and were more heavily focused on the needs of their neighbors than their public school counterparts. These graduates were more inclined to seek education with an end goal of advancing their careers rather than just the pursuit of high-level degrees. They also reported positive feelings about their school experiences, including how their schools prepared them for life after high school. Overall, graduates of evangelical Protestant schools were just as involved in their communities and added value to their communities as their public school equivalents.

Cardus Education Survey—Phase 3. The third portion of the Cardus study was produced in the summer of 2014 and was titled *Private Education for the Public Good*. The study involved 1,500 young adults that ranged from 24 to 39 years of age. Cardus used a third party company to draw a representative sample comprised of 500 public school graduates. These graduates served as a standard by which the 1,000 graduates from private schools and home schools, both faith-based and non-religious could be compared. The participants completed a half-hour survey that yielded information on their school history and experiences, family life, religious and spiritual involvement, and political and civic commitments. Once the data was compiled they were able to make comparisons between public school graduates and those from a variety of private and Christian school options (Pennings et al. 2014, 38-39).

The research showed that private school graduates possessed a greater feeling of satisfaction from their high school experience. They also reported higher scores to indicate perception that their high school prepared them for their transition into college.
and their future careers. Those who graduated from non-religious private school were the most satisfied with their educational experience (65% stated they were highly satisfied) in comparison with all of the other educational backgrounds that only reported a 46% high satisfaction rate. Interestingly, on questions regarding education, private schools showed to be just as strong in science as their public school peers. Graduates from Catholic schools reported taking more math and science classes than their correlating public schools graduates. However, students who graduated from evangelical Protestant schools participated in just as many math and science classes as their public school counterparts (Pennings et al. 2014, 15-28).

The results revealed that 77% of non-religious private school graduates, 75% of Catholic school graduates and 64% of Protestant school graduates finished college. Comparatively, only 57% of students from public schools graduated from college. Of all of the different school backgrounds, those who had attended a non-religious private school were more likely to receive a professional or doctoral degree (Pennings et al. 2014, 18-20).

Protestant private school graduates attended “less selective colleges and universities” and were more inclined to study humanities subjects compared to graduates from Catholic and non-religious schools. Researchers discovered that Protestant graduates were willing to personally sacrifice in order to engage in careers that are not highly valued in the eyes of culture, including education, social work, and general health care. In terms of participation in society, all graduates reported equal interest and engagement when it came to charitable donations and volunteering. Accordingly, all graduates were equally likely to study a foreign language and take an active role in politics by taking advantage of the opportunity to vote (Pennings et al. 2014, 22-24).

Overall, this study was out to disprove the notion that private schools have an “isolationist effect” on their students, meaning school environments hold graduates back from being engaged in society at a deep level after graduation. The research simply
proved that this is not the case. The authors noted, “the evidence shows that private schools and public schools do not differ significantly when it comes to involvement in civic life” (Pennings et al. 2014, 29). In what seems to be a successful boost for private education, their graduates not only were just as involved in civic life as public school students but also reported that their high school experience was positive and that it helped them successfully launch into their adult lives (Pennings et al. 2014, 29-30).

In the Cardus survey, it is unfortunate that the Christian school participant breakdown is unknown to the reader. In the format published for public consumption, the 1,000 Christian school respondents are represented in each school category: Catholic, Protestant, non-religious private, and homeschool. However, Cardus does not reveal how many participants from each school background were represented in the total. If the participant numbers were aiming to mimic the participant pool of the first Cardus study in 2011 (124 participants), the Protestant school group leaves much to be desired. In the first study, Cardus willingly admitted that there were “small sample sizes of all but the Catholic sector” (Pennings et al. 2011, 45). Again, in the second and third studies, the researchers did not differentiate for how long a student needed to attend a particular type of school in order to be associated accordingly.

Another critique of this research is the amount of time that has passed since these graduates were actually attending school. The upper age limit for the study was 39 years of age, which means a significant time lapse exists making the reported answers a description of education twenty to thirty years ago. Just as significant, this study did not inquire about the spiritual practices of the participants during their time in high school or college but sought to only ask about spiritual practices in the last twelve months. The data can be compared against other identified groups among the participants but a stronger inquiry would allow for the students spiritual practices to be measured against their own spiritual development or lack thereof. Furthermore, this study does not investigate the differences that exist between different types of Protestant churches. Protestant
denominations that have been in steady decline are not differentiated from those that are plateaued or from those that are possibly growing.

All three of the Cardus studies are very important to the Christian school movement. They provide one of the largest studies ever produced on the details of Christian school graduates. The studies were so meaningful that ACSI produced a 25-page response paper discussing their appreciation for the work and providing their feedback. Proponents of Christian education will continue to look to Cardus for their continued efforts in supporting and encouraging growth in their educational niche. Yet, their studies lack responses from participants recalling recent history and take a much larger perspective of Christian education. The current study will provide answers to the gaps found in Cardus’ work.

There is enough research in the past few years to raise legitimate concern about what is happening to young adults as they head to college. In 2001, T. C. Pinkney made a presentation to the Southern Baptist Executive Committee that the church was losing 70% of graduates (Pinkney 2001, exodusmandate.org). This research was accomplished in-house and seems closer to other research results. In 2006, Josh McDowell found a similar statistic of 69% of high school students leaving the church after receiving their diplomas (McDowell 2006, 13). Robert Wuthnow alarmingly adds, “The portion of young adults who identify with mainline Protestant denominations is about half the size it was a generation ago (Wuthnow 2007, 214). In light of the varying percentages, there seems to be agreement on the fact that research on young adult retention is worthwhile.

The onslaught of statistics is overwhelming, seemingly bleak, and often lacks the foundation to be defended. Yet in spite of the sobering numbers, LifeWay noted a glimmer of hope. Of the 70% they found leaving the church during college, only 51% were leaving if they had graduated from a Christian high school. Their research did not make sweeping generalizations as to why Christian high school graduates were statistically significantly different, but there was a notable difference that invites
examination and attention. Despite obvious limitations (93 respondents) of the LifeWay study, is it possible that the philosophy and support of the Christian school plays an important role in the church retention of young adults?

**Profile of the Current Study**

The review of existing literature on the topic of church retention shaped this study in various ways. First, there must be some attention given to the phenomenon of students who regularly attended church in high school, but leave the church as they enter their early years of college. The gap may not be as wide as once believed. Nonetheless, there is a gap, and it deserves to be addressed. In order to discover why an age demographic precipitously disengages from the provision and protection of the church must be given greater study. Otherwise, the church will continue to “limp” unaware and be coaxed into believing this is normative or acceptable for believers in the Body of Christ.

Second, very little research has been done on the spiritual vitality of Christian school students or the different philosophical approaches of Christian secondary schools. As stated previously, if the goal of Christian education is to produce students who are pursuing Christ-likeness, then this research will help Christian schools evaluate their ability to pass on a robust Christian faith. The current research will seek to examine the relationship between levels of commitment to a youth ministry during high school and current levels of church ministry involvement as young adults.

Third, the most significant recent research on religious school graduates is the Cardus Education survey. The sampling pool for the study interviewed participants between the ages of 23 and 49 while the second round of surveys included those between 23 and 40 years of age. Clearly, the time gap between the participants time in high school until the execution of the survey is far too long. The current study interviewed young adults who were very recent graduates or who were about to finish their college degrees in the near future. This study will provide a more accurate picture of Christian school
young adult involvement with the church.

The importance of the Cardus survey cannot be underestimated. However, the researcher read through several dissertations pertaining to Christian education and found the majority of them focused on curriculum, school leadership, or classroom development (Bryant 2008, Clagg 2011, Edelmann 2006, Husemann 2006, Vinson 2001, Wood 2008). The same is true for the Cardus surveys. A portion of their work is dedicated to the spiritual lives of students but the majority focuses on cultural engagement and academic development. The current study will dig deeper into the spiritual lives and practices of Christian school graduates.

Fourth, this study has garnered a greater pool of respondents than Shield’s, LifeWay, and the first Cardus Education study. The number of participants for each specific school category has only been provided for the first Cardus study. In comparison to the Cardus study, the definitions of Christian schools in this study are more narrowly defined. At the time of this publication, the researcher was unable to find another dissertation that compared the four types of Christian schools for any research topic. In addition, this research compares church activity both during and after high school, while the Cardus study only looked at a snapshot of what religious school graduates were doing at the time of the interview.
CHAPTER 3
METHODOLOGICAL DESIGN

This chapter explains the methods that were used in this study to examine the relationship between the level of involvement in high school youth ministry, Christian high school background, and current church involvement of college students. The research was used to examine the claim that 70 to 90% of young adults who regularly attended church while in high school will drop out once they go to college. This research is a replication study of the work that Brandon Shields accomplished in 2008 looking at the church retention of high school graduates (Shields 2008). Using the Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire (YMRQ), this research study applied the same instrument to Christian high school graduates from the class of 2009 who attended four different types of Christian high schools: covenantal independent schools, covenantal church-related schools, open admission independent schools, and open admission church-related schools. This chapter describes the methods that were used to employ the YMRQ in order to compare youth ministry involvement with the type of Christian high school attended.

Research Question Synopsis

The following questions were used to guide the collection and analysis of data for this study:

1. What relationship, if any, exists between independent, covenantal Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church?

2. What relationship, if any, exists between independent, open-admission Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church?
3. What relationship, if any, exists between church-related, covenantal Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church?

4. What relationship, if any, exists between church-related, open admission Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church?

5. What is the relationship, if any, exists between different levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and current local church involvement for Christian school graduates?

**Design Overview**

Permission was granted from ACSI to contact principals from the four types of Christian high schools. A letter was sent electronically to each principal explaining the research along with the request for alumni information (see Appendix 1). In some cases, the principals asked if they could contact the students on my behalf. The schools that preferred this method felt that it protected the integrity of the school and would give an impression to their alumni that the school had not mishandled their contact information. In other cases, the schools provided contact information for their 2009 graduates. I used the demographic information of the alumni to make an appeal for the research and requested their participation with the YMRQ questionnaire. I contacted the potential participants via email explaining the research and provided a link to the electronic survey.

I gathered data using the Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire (YMRQ) developed by Brandon Shields (see Appendix 2). Data was gathered from students in the class of 2009 that graduated from four different Christian high school backgrounds: covenantal independent, covenantal church-related, open-admission independent, and open-admission church-related. The instrument is a combination of closed form responses using a four-point Likert scale and was created by Shields to assess the dropout rates of young adults from Southern Baptist churches during their college career. The questions asked for their personal demographic information, their youth group involvement during high school, the experiences and environment of their Christian school experience, and their current level of church involvement. The online survey should have taken no more
than 10 minutes to complete. Once the surveys were completed, I analyzed the data for any relationship between youth ministry involvement, type of Christian school attended, and current church involvement. The findings are presented in chapter 4 while chapter 5 records the conclusions.

**Population**

For the purpose of this study, the population was students in the class of 2009 that graduated from an ACSI accredited covenantal independent, covenantal church-related, open admission independent, and open admission church-related Christian high school. The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that there were 36,584 graduates from conservative Christian schools in 2009, the latest numbers provided by NCES for specific grades. This total represents all conservative Christian schools of which ACSI is included (NCES 2009, nces.ed.gov/surveys). The number of graduates from ACSI affiliated schools is smaller than this, but NCES does not separate their numbers by accrediting agencies. There are few resources that keep updated statistics on private Christian schools and therefore it is difficult to determine the exact number of students that are represented from each philosophical category of Christian schools among the total population.

Once the data was collected from the participants it was then entered into a database for analysis. A Chi-Square test and one-way ANOVA were used to explore the correlation between youth ministry commitment and current levels of church involvement among Christian high school graduates. For the purposes of this study, the current levels of involvement were categorized as no involvement, low involvement, moderate involvement, and high involvement.

**Samples and Delimitations**

I surveyed graduates from the class of 2009 from specific ACSI high schools that fit into each of the categories: covenantal independent, covenantal church-related,
open admission independent, and open admission church-related. The total sample of schools were represented in 37 states. I requested participation from 206 ACSI member schools. After making contact twice with each school, I was able to secure 13 participating schools. For the purpose of this study, each school was considered a study site. The number of graduates at each study site varied. The stated goal for the number of surveys was 400 respondents—100 per Christian school category. A total of 309 surveys were completed. Four surveys were thrown out for incomplete information leaving a total of 309 usable surveys. With this time lag study there were certain difficulties that did arise, including students who had moved or whose contact information was inaccurate, and made it difficult to obtain the desired information. I used the information provided by the schools to call, email, and, leveraged social media to gather the needed information.

This study was delimited to those students who graduated high school in 2009. These students have more recent experiences with youth ministry programming rather than someone who graduated college many years ago. Delimiting to recent graduates enabled the students to have more honest self-reporting about the experiences these students had in their high school youth ministry.

The study was also delimited to conservative evangelical Christian schools accredited by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). Choosing schools associated with one accrediting agency will helped to remove some loose variables of the study such as significant differing views in theology, philosophy of education, and the overall quality and functioning of the school. Using only one agency helped to make the study more significant.

There are many Christian schools that are small in size. For this reason, this study was also delimited to Christian schools with a senior class size of 40 or more. In order to have access to enough students for the study, Christian schools with larger class sizes helped to ensure an adequate number of participants.

Finally, the study was delimited to those students who had some level of
commitment to their youth ministry program during their high school career. In order to fulfill the purpose of this research, students must have been involved in their youth ministry and attended an independent or church-related Christian school. Students who had no involvement in church during their high schools years were not included in the study.

**Limitations of Generalizations**

The findings from this research may not necessarily generalize to students graduating from Christian schools that are not conservative in their theology, or to those students graduating from schools accredited by other Christian school accrediting agencies. They might not generalize to ACSI schools located outside of the United States. The findings can be generalized and apply directly to those students graduating from ACSI accredited Christian high schools that are independent or church-related, covenantal or open admission located within the United States.

The results of this study cannot be generalized to those students who did not choose to participate in the study. This research presents the information provided by those who willing chose to respond to the invitation provided by the researcher. Multiple variables may exist for why those invited chose to decline participation. Any assumptions made of this group would lessen the value of this research project.

It seems possible that Christian educators and families will benefit from this study in order to help students mature in their faith as they transition into late adolescence. I cannot claim that the results will be generalizable beyond the parameters of the study but hopefully the results will spur deeper investigation into research of this kind. This study will provide a platform for research to be explored in other parts of the United States and around the world pertaining to Christian schooling.

**Instrumentation**

I adapted the YMRQ (see Appendix 2) so that it included “Christian school” language. The YMRQ consists of closed form responses in a Likert-scale format in order
to examine the possible relationship between the level of involvement in high school youth ministry, Christian high school background, and current church involvement. In Shield’s research he used the idea of “falsification,” a way of testing scientific theories, in order to test the hypothesis that “70 to 90% of actively involved high school youth ministry participants drop out of church after graduation” (Popper 1959, 33; Shields 2008, 115-16). This study attempted to put that hypothesis to the test by further examining the graduates of Christian high schools. Quantitative data was gathered through the YMRQ to support the falsification of the hypothesis.

In order to have structure for understanding the youth ministry commitment levels of participants, Shields combined the work of several authors into a “funnel of youth ministry commitment” (Shields 2008, 47-48). A wide range of youth ministries employ some type of programming based upon the varying “interest levels of the students [they] are trying to reach” (Clark 2001, 118). This “funnel” will serve as a guide to categorize participants’ commitment to youth ministry while they attended high school. The four levels of the funnel include: disengaged prospect, normative attender, enthusiastic follower, and engaged disciple (Shields 2008, 47-48).

The YMRQ is comprised of 45 close-ended questions and includes the categorical measures of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement along with demographic information such as age, gender, current religious affiliation, and type of high school attended. Questions 1 through 15 measure the degree of youth ministry commitment by examining both intrinsic and extrinsic indicators as a means of gauging how the young adult felt about the church during their high school career. The responses to these questions helped to categorize the participants into one of the four levels of youth ministry commitment based upon their response to the Likert-type items ranging from 1 (I tend to strongly disagree) to 4 (I tend to strongly agree) (Shields 2008, 124).

Questions 16 through 29 consider the background of participants by asking questions related to age, education, current religious affiliation, employment during high
school, and type of high school attended (Shields 2008, 124). This data was used in comparison against participants’ youth ministry commitment during high school and their current level of church involvement to see if any statistically significant relationships exist.

The last section of questions, 30 through 45, measured the current levels of church involvement using similar questions to those found in the first section of the questionnaire. Shields claims, “Structuring the survey in this manner facilitated more accurate comparisons between the levels of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement” (Shields 2008, 125).

Table 1. Criteria for categorizing levels of youth ministry commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Youth Ministry Commitment</th>
<th>Criteria for Inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1—Disengaged Prospect</td>
<td>Score of 15-25 on youth ministry commitment questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2—Normative Attender</td>
<td>Score of 26-37 on youth ministry commitment questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3—Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>Score of 38-49 on youth ministry commitment questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4—Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>Score of 50-60 on youth ministry commitment questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Criteria for categorizing levels of current church involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Current Church Involvement</th>
<th>Criteria for Inclusion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level 1—Zero Involvement</td>
<td>Rating of “1” in response to question 39 on the survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 2—Low Involvement</td>
<td>Score of 13-27 for current church involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 3—Moderate Involvement</td>
<td>Score of 28-42 for current church involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level 4—High Involvement</td>
<td>Score of 43-56 for current church involvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The YMRQ was tested for face validity by using a panel of experts to examine the instrument for its ability to address youth ministry commitment and current church involvement. The expert panel consists of three Christian education experts, Bill McKinley, Steve Whitaker, and Brian Rose, and three youth ministry experts, Chris Blanton, Steve Wright, and John Steen (see Appendix 3). The panel of experts were chosen based upon their experience, education, and current position, and were asked to provide their feedback on the survey instrument (see Appendix 4). The panel unanimously agreed on the face validity of the instrument (see Appendix 5). The YMRQ has been proven reliable by the Cronbach Alpha statistic. It measured at a score of .90, well beyond the reliability requirement of .80

**Procedures**

Before the schools could be contacted requesting the demographic information of their 2009 graduates, permission needed to be given by ACSI. Due to the organizational size of ACSI and the many requests they receive for permission to study their member schools, it took several attempts to secure permission for this study. Once permission was granted, ACSI was very generous to provide a specific list of every member school that fit the boundaries of this study along with a letter of recommendation from the Vice President of Academic Affairs, Derek Keenan. The ACSI generated list provided a main contact, street address, phone number, and email address for each member school. The only information not provided by ACSI is whether the schools followed an open admission or covenantal policy. In order to assess what type of admission policy the schools followed, I accessed available school websites and read through the admissions policy, parent handbook, or webpages that explained the schools’ purpose statement. In situations where the school website did not offer this information in a clear manner, I called the school to ask them to identify their admission policy.

A letter was drafted that explained the nature of the research and requested the help of the principals from ACSI member schools. The letter was presented to the
Southern Baptist Theological Seminary’s Dissertation Committee and Research Ethics Committee for approval. Once approved, I sent the letter via email to the principal of each school requesting access to their historical contact information for the graduates of 2009. For those schools that did not respond to the initial request, a phone call was made to garner a greater response. A third attempt to reach principals was made via email by resending the invitation to participate. On many occasions, I was handed off to office assistants or to some type of alumni relations personnel. Most of the correspondence with participating schools took place between myself and other office staff.

There were a several schools that reported that they would not be participating in the research project. One school reported that they had already fulfilled their quota of research requests for the year. Another school stated that it was against their school policy to provide their alumni information to non-school personnel and that they never send out non-school requests. Yet, a few principals said it would be too difficult to assimilate the information. The majority of schools that declined simply did not have a graduating class in 2009. They were large schools but were in the middle of transition from a K-8 school into a K-12 school.

Overall, 13 schools agreed to participate in this study. I received the demographic information for 2009 graduates from four schools. Three of those schools included a partial list of emails. Every student who had a valid email addressed received a letter explaining the research and requesting his or her participation. Students who did not have a listed email were mailed a hard copy of the participant letter to the address given by the schools (see Appendix 7). Nine of the schools chose to contact their 2009 graduates on my behalf. All of the schools confirmed that there was an email sent to potential participants that contained the letter created by me asking for their participation (see Appendix 7). One school chose to use social media as a secondary follow up and included a link to the survey.

The instrument was made available via an online survey tool called Survey
Monkey and every student was directed to the survey by a link provided in the participant letter. To bring forth greater participation and elicit a quick response, all participating young adults were made aware that in exchange for their time they would be entered into a drawing for an iPad mini.

Once the survey period ended, the data was gathered from Survey Monkey and downloaded into an Excel file. The data was first separated by the four different types of Christian high schools. I used the numerical values associated with the survey questions to categorize the responses of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement as explained in the previous tables. For each of the Christian school categories, a retention statistic was created by taking the total number of students with a current church commitment of low to high and dividing that number by the total respondents in that Christian school category. The analysis also included a Chi-Square Test for Independence to explore if any of the categorical information gathered were significantly related to participants current level of church involvement. One-way analyses of variance were also employed among Christian school categories and with all of the participants to determine any significant relationships. Once the process was completed, I sent a letter to the participating principals to thank them for providing the much needed information to accomplish this research and reminded them that they will receive a copy of the results (see Appendix 8).
CHAPTER 4
ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This research sought to examine the claim that the majority of students leave the church after their high school graduation. I considered the past youth ministry involvement of Christian high school graduates during their high school years and compared it to their current level of church involvement ranging from disengaged prospect (very little church involvement) to engaged disciple (very active in the life of the church). This chapter explains the compilation of data, explores the applicable statistical analysis of the findings, and provides an evaluation of the research design (Shields 2008, 48).

Compilation Protocol

To gain access to the sample of participants, I secured the approval from ACSI to contact principals from their member schools requesting contact information pertaining to the graduates of 2009. Four schools sent their demographic information in order to contact their 2009 graduates. Once this information was received, participants were contacted by email with a letter stating the purpose of the research and providing a link to the YMRQ survey. Those students without an email listed were mailed a hard copy containing the same information (see Appendix 7). Nine of the schools preferred to contact their own students in order to protect the privacy of their students and to potentially yield a larger number of respondents based on the schools’ relationship with the students.

The YMRQ survey instrument was hosted by www.surveymonkey.com, an online survey website. Once the survey deadline was met, the data was exported into an Excel spreadsheet. A total of 314 surveys were started, with N=309 participants actually completing the survey. The four incomplete surveys were discarded leaving a final
sample size of N=309 useable surveys.

The data was exported from Excel and ran through SPSS software 22.0. The YMRQ was coded with numerical values for the purpose of categorizing and running statistical analyses. Assigning numerical values to the appropriate questions allowed for statistical analyses. The demographic questions were assigned arbitrary values so statistical tests could be applied to those units of data. Once the data was entered into a SPSS 22.0 data file, the data was examined for entry error and missing variables. Descriptive statistics were conducted on the sample demographic variables. Once these analyses were completed, statistical analyses were ran to determine if a relationship existed between different levels of youth ministry commitment and current levels of church involvement for graduates of Christian high schools.

Two types of statistical analyses were conducted on the study data. The first type of statistic was the Pearson chi-square test of independence, which is used when the research questions involve an independent variable that is categorical and a dependent variable that is categorical (Pedhazur and Schmelkin 2013, 18-19). As both the independent and dependent variables are categorical -- and thus do not have means or standard deviations -- the chi-square test of independence is a non-parametric statistic (Pedhazur and Schmelkin 2013, 464-469). The Pearson chi-square tests of independence were conducted with the categorically coded independent variable of type of Christian high school and the categorically coded dependent variable of level of current church involvement.

The second type of statistic was a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) test. ANOVA tests are conducted to address research questions that have identified (a) the independent variable as having more than two categories and (b) the dependent variable as being continuously coded (i.e., as an interval or ratio variable). The one-way -ANOVA statistic is a parametric statistic, as this statistic calculates mean score differences in the dependent variable across independent variable categories (Pedhazur and Schmelkin 2013,
A significant one-way ANOVA indicates that one or more independent variable categories have significantly different (i.e., either significantly lower or significantly higher) dependent variable mean scores as compared to one or more other independent variable categories. The one-way ANOVAs were conducted with the categorically coded independent variable of type of Christian high school and the current church involvement, the dependent variable, which maintained its original interval scoring.

**Demographic and Sample Data**

The survey collected demographic information on every participant. The participant was asked to submit date of birth, marital status, church attended during high school, current religious affiliation, education level, and hours worked during high school. The demographic data is exhibited with descriptive statistics.

**Demographics for Research Participants**

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the study sample of participants ($N = 309$). Of the 309 participants, 203 (65.7%) were female and 106 (34.3%) were male. The percentage of 65.7% females and 34.3% males in this study were significantly different from the percentage of 59.5% females and 40.5% males in the study by Shields (Shields 2008, 135), $\chi^2(1) = 4.92$, $p = .027$. The mean age of the participants was 23.36 years ($SD = 0.74$), and students ranged in age from 20 to 25 years of age. The two largest age groups were 23-year olds ($n=140$, 45.3%) and 24-year olds ($n=135$, 43.7%). The majority of participants were single ($n = 277$, 89.6%).

The majority of participants ($n = 234$, 75.7%) in this study had received a bachelor’s degree. Almost a fifth of the participants received a high school diploma or GED equivalent ($n = 57$, 18.4%). Of the remaining participants, 15 (4.9%) received an associate’s degree, and 3 (1%) received a degree from a technical or trade school. The majority of participants ($n = 218$, 70.5%) graduated from a public university, while 66 (21.4%) graduated from a Christian university. Of the 309 participants, 128 (41.4%) were
currently working on a graduate degree. With regard to numbers of hours employed per week during their senior year in high school, the majority of participants \( (n = 164, 53.1\%) \) did not work at all; however, over a quarter of participants \( (n=89, 28.8\%) \) were employed during their senior year and worked between one and nine hours per week.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>65.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>20 years old</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21 years old</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22 years old</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>8.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>23 years old</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>24 years old</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>43.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>25 years old</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>89.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Level of Education</td>
<td>High School Diploma/GED</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>18.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Technical or Trade School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Associate’s Degree</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bachelor’s Degree</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>75.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of College Attended</td>
<td>Public university</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>70.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian university</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-Christian private college</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Catholic university</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Did not attend college</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently Working on</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>41.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>58.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours per Week Worked in</td>
<td>0 hours</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>53.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Year</td>
<td>1-9 hours</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>28.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10-20 hours</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 20 hours</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Demographic information for survey participants \( (N = 309) \)

Frequency percentages were calculated for Christian school, youth ministry commitment, and current church involvement categories (see Table 4). The majority of participants attended a church-based covenantal Christian high school \( (n = 86, 27.8\%) \), followed by \( n = 84 (27.2\%) \) participants who attended an independent open admission
Christian high school, $n = 71$ (23%) participants who attended an church-based open admission Christian high school, and $n = 68$ (22%) participants who attended an independent covenantal Christian high school. With regard to youth ministry commitment level categories, the largest number of participants were categorized as Enthusiastic Followers ($n=144$, 46.6%), followed by as Engaged Disciples ($n=93$, 30.1%), Normative Attenders ($n=65$, 21%), and Disengaged Prospects ($n=7$, 2.3%).

Regarding current religious affiliation, the majority of participants ($n = 124$, 40%) identified themselves as Southern Baptist followed by those who identified themselves as “other” ($n=136$, 43.8%). The most common affiliation for those who marked “other” identified themselves as non-denominational ($n=113$, 36.6%). Smaller numbers of participants identified as Presbyterian ($n=25$, 8.4%), Methodist ($n=13$, 4.2%), Episcopal ($n=4$, 1.3%), Agnostic ($n=4$, 1.3%), and Roman Catholic (3, 1%). Interestingly, of the seven participants in the Disengaged Prospect category, 3 (42.8%) identified as non-denominational, 2 (28.6%) as Southern Baptist, and 2 (28.6%) as Christian.

The precedent literature has suggested 70% to 90% of young people left the church after high school (Barna 2001, Pinkney 2001, Black 2006, McDowell 2006, LifeWay 2007, Wright 2007). However, results in this study of ACSI Christian school graduates countered that notion if students attended a Christian high school. Over a third of ACSI Christian school graduates in this study ($n = 121$, 39.2%) never stopped attending church after high school. Additionally, 138 (44.6%) of participants stopped attending church after high school for a year or less. Only 50 participants (16.2%) stopped attending for more than a year.
Table 4. Frequency percentages for levels of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High School Christian School Category</td>
<td>Independent Covenantal</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Church-Based Covenantal</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>27.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Independent Open Admission</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>27.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Church-Based Open Admission</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>23.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Ministry Commitment Level</td>
<td>Disengaged Prospect</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>21.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>48.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Religious Affiliation</td>
<td>Other religion</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>43.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Southern Baptist</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Presbyterian</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodist</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Roman Catholic</td>
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<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Episcopal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baptized Member of Church</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>86.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How Long Stop Attending Church from 18-22</td>
<td>Never</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>39.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than 1 year</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6-12 months</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3-5 months</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>16.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1-2 months</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Other religious affiliation included non-denominational, Protestant, Assembly of God, Baptist, Reformed Southern Baptist, Reformed Evangelical, Church of Christ, Lutheran, Christian Missionary, and Christian

Findings and Displays

The research questions for this study sought to challenge the claim that Christian school students seem to have a high dropout rate from church after high school graduation (Shields 2008, 139-40, Lifeway 2007, Black 2006). A series of Pearson chi-square ($\chi^2$) tests of independence were conducted with participants who attended four different types of Christian high schools. In these analyses, the independent variable was a categorical variable of youth ministry commitment, with commitment categories being Disengaged Prospect, Normative Attender, Enthusiastic Follower, and Engaged Disciple.
The dependent variable was a categorical variable of current church involvement, with categories being zero, low, moderate, and high involvement. However, no participants were placed in the zero church involvement category, and as such, this category is not included in the analyses or results. Unfortunately, three of the four surveys that were discarded appear to have fit the zero church involvement category but were left incomplete.

In chi-square tests of independence, the null hypothesis is that the independent and dependent variables are independent of one another: that is, they are not significantly related to one another. Pearson chi-square tests of independence were run to within each of the four Christian high school groups to determine if the frequencies/percentages of participants across the two categorical variables of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement were significantly dependent on, or significantly correlated with, each other.

The research questions explored youth ministry commitment and the current church involvement of Christian high school graduates. The first question examined those students from independent covenantal Christian schools and their current church involvement in light of their youth ministry commitment. The second question examined the retention status of independent open admission Christian graduates based upon their youth ministry commitment. In the third research question, a retention percentage for church-related covenantal Christian school students was obtained. The fourth research question examined the church retention rate of church-related open admission Christian school graduates based upon their involvement in youth ministry. Finally, the fifth question addressed the different levels of youth ministry commitment as compared to the current levels of church involvement to inspect any relationship that may exist in the data. The dependent variable of retention rate was gauged by the numbers/percentages of participants across current church involvement.

**The Dropout Confusion**

As previously expounded on, the numbers from previous studies concerning
young adults leaving the local church vary greatly. Upon completion of the Barna, Wes Black, and LifeWay studies the influential institutions involved with their work were able to financially empower the marketing of their results. Strong marketing capabilities provided an avenue for these statistics to hit mainstream media of Christian circles. It was not long before the notion that evangelical churches were losing 70 to 90% emerged in student ministry literature, was promoted at youth ministry conferences, and was even espoused in sermons by pastors. The combined momentum of these influences cannot be underestimated, as the shocking statistics created a sense of alarm within the church.

If the average individual struggles to understand the statistics and methodology of the different studies utilized, one could be easily overwhelmed with the seemingly bleak numbers of those who are staying connected to the church. Essentially, the church had heard some statistics but poorly used them. This led to an immediate attack on student and young adult ministry. It was for this reason that Mike Yaconelli said, “The curtain must be pulled back if we are to keep young people involved in the church and if we are to renew our congregations, we first must acknowledge that many of our current forms of youth ministry are destructive” (Yaconelli 1999, 2). Josh McDowell adds, “I sincerely believe unless something is done now to change the spiritual state of our young people – you will become the last Christian generation” (McDowell 2006, 11). Both Yaconelli and McDowell were only responding to what the statistics seemed to say.

It was not long before others followed with their critiques. Voddie Baucham, in Family Driven Faith, clearly says that any church that age segregates their ministries participate in an unbiblical model, “While I believe the vast majority of those who shepherd segregated portions of congregations are well meaning and would never presume to replace parents in their biblical role, I believe the modern American practice of systematic age segregation goes beyond the biblical mandate. I believe it is a product of the American educational system, and in some instances it actually works against families as opposed to helping them pursue multigenerational faithfulness” (Baucham
2007 178). As described in chapter 2, various student ministry authors had written about their preferred style of ministry to teenagers. Even though there were different programming styles the emphasis was on creating programming specific for teenagers. Doug Fields, former student pastor at Saddleback Church, helped to popularize the age segregated model of youth ministry through his book *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*. Once the dropout statistics were produced, Baucham used it as his chance to make a striking statement about student ministry. Baucham stated, “Let me be clear…There is no such thing as ‘biblical’ Youth Ministry” and the reports seemed to support it (Baucham 2007, 179-182).

In 2008, Shield’s finished his research and proved through the rule of falsifiability that if any portion of a statement can be proved false then it calls the whole of it into question. His research showed that youth ministry graduates from Southern Baptist megachurches were retained at a rate of 88% (Shields 2008, 158). In the same way, the Cardus Education study showed that Protestant Christian school graduates maintained a long-term commitment to the church (Pennings, et al. 2011, 19). These studies call into question the defining terms of the initial young adult church retention research. Specifically, what does it mean for a young person to be considered a ‘part’ of a local church? This detail alone could be the reason for the strong overreaction to the early literature, churches questioning the legitimacy of student ministry, and confusion over which numbers are closer to the truth of the situation.

In order to clarify which retention statistics provide the most accurate picture of young adult interaction within the church, further investigation is needed to determine if researchers and student ministry practitioners are using the same language. Practitioners in student ministry make a delineation between a student that is a prospect, an average attender, and one that is part of the core leadership team. In the Wes Black and LifeWay studies, a student was considered to be a part of the church if they attended two or more times a month to any church function. Student pastors could potentially consider a
student who shows up twice a month a “prospect”. In cases where the student’s attendance is infrequent, it is conceivable that the student pastor lacks a strong relational connection to know the spiritual maturity level of the student. The church would never want to claim a lost person as one who is a “committed” member of the family of God and yet, in two of the largest surveys on retention a student is considered a “part” of the church based on an alarmingly minimal attendance requirement. Nevertheless, what previous research has deemed a “committed student”, student pastors are calling those same students “prospects”. Generally, these are the types of students that a youth pastor is requesting an adult volunteer to follow up with, in order to maintain some type of consistent contact and move that student into a deeper relationship with the local church.

Ed Stetzer, Vice President of LifeWay’s Insights Division with the responsibility of overseeing their research department, highlights how people can miss understanding the statistics correctly.

LifeWay Research data shows that about 70% of young adults who indicated they attended church regularly for at least one year in high school do, in fact, drop out – but don’t miss the details. Of those who left, almost two-thirds return and currently attend church (in the timeframe of our study). Also, that dropout rate is from all Protestant churches – evangelical and mainline (Stetzer 2014, christianitytoday.com).

He is exactly right. In order for researchers, pastors, parents, and church members who have concern for this topic to be on the same page, everyone needs to pay attention to the details. It is interesting that seven years later the research team that conducted the study and helped set off some of the alarm has modified their stance. LifeWay now states, “the primary ‘drop’ in church attendance among evangelical youth didn’t appear to be a complete ‘drop’, but rather a hiatus” (Stetzer 2014, christianitytoday.com). The study reported that some students did return to the local church. Instead of LifeWay highlighting this point they allowed the main focus of the research to rest on the grim retention statistics. This is no small detail and while it has taken seven years for the researchers to come to this conclusion, the misunderstood statistic has had time to spread far and wide. Stetzer goes on to say, “The quote often sounds like this: ‘86% of
evangelical youth drop out of church after graduation, never to return’. The problem with that statement (and others around that number) is that it’s not true” (Stetzer 2014, christianitytoday.com).

Two other details that are worth bringing to attention are: (1) student ministry vernacular and (2) the types of churches surveyed. The most significant detail in all of the studies on church retention is how the researchers define what it means for a young person to be considered part of the church. In the Black study and LifeWay study, students were considered to be part of the church if they attended at least twice a month to any church activity. In a 2002 Gallup survey, teenagers were asked if they had attended church in the past seven days to determine if they were “churched” (Gallup 2002, gallup.com). The Barna study in 2006 considered a young person to be “churched” if they had attended church regularly for at least two months at any point during their teen years (Barna 2006, barna.org). Given the nature of research, every study must have parameters and clear definition of terms in order to ensure the research has meaning. However, when trying to describe certain phenomenon in student ministry via research, one would think it would be most reasonable to use the common language of those who are the actual practitioners.

It appears that the researchers behind the retention rate studies borrowed language from student ministry culture but then changed the definition. A student attending any church event twice a month is “in” according to researchers but according to student ministry practitioners those students would be considered “prospects” in most cases. Doug Fields calls these kinds of students “crowd” students (Fields 1998, 89). They were once unfamiliar with the church but because of the influence of students who are involved with the church, they have been invited and have attended a church event. Fields goes on to say, “If we can get students excited about regularly attending one of our weekend services, we have a great opportunity to draw them into the rest of our ministry” (Fields 1998, 89). This offers a clear description of someone who is on the fringe of a student ministry and needs some attention to become more committed in their
engagement with the church. Timothy Paul Jones, author and Associate Vice President at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, clearly states, “When I was a youth and children’s minister, twice-a-month kids were in my “strong prospect” file – not in my “regular attender” file” (Jones 2012, christianpost.com). At best, these students may already have a personal relationship with Christ but if they are unchurched it is more likely they have not made this spiritual commitment. In cases where the later is true, the church cannot lose something that it never “had”. This may explain why we are faced with the dilemma of this false positive picture of students leaving the church.

Due to the changing definition of what it means for a young person to belong to the church, Jones explains how this could contribute to confusion. He states, “With such disparate definitions of what it means to be involved in a church, even the best research designs are bound to produce a variety of results” (Jones 2012, christianpost.com). For the sake of this study, the best way to align the language of research so that it most closely matches the terms used by student ministry practitioners, is to label those participants that were identified as “moderate involvement” or “high involvement” as those who are connected with the church. The characteristics of the “low involvement” category describe a person who has very little interaction with the church (sparse worship attendance, not a church member, never or rarely attends a small group, never or rarely engages in the spiritual disciplines, and does not serve). Those participants identified as such fit a definition that practitioners would consider being on the fringe of the church and will not be considered as committed at a significant level. A more meaningful retention statistic will be gained by using this approach.

Secondly, since the 2007 LifeWay study, there must have been enough mention of declining, plateaued, and growing denominations included in the research that Stetzer felt like he should elaborate further in his recent article, Dropouts and Disciples: How many students are really leaving the church (Stetzer 2014). In plateaued and declining churches students may have already made decisions to leave those churches when the
surveys were generated. If they continued to attend church, it is plausible that they started participating in a denomination that was not included in the study. If this were the case, then these students would actually be inflating the ‘dropout’ statistic. Unless a warning is sent, the average person hearing that a majority of students are leaving the church is left without the correct context to interpret the numbers. Stetzer’s call to mind the details is significant for a correct handling of the information.

The importance of this study cannot be underestimated. There has been much attention given to the broad landscape of young people and their relationship with the church post high school. Even the largest studies lacked a significant number of Christian school respondents in order to make statistically significant conclusions. Also, this is the first study to investigate the subcategories of Christian schools. The Cardus study, as large as it was, only segregated Christian schools as Protestant Christian schools or Catholic schools. In addressing another gap of previous research, the age of the participants in this study allowed for a more realistic report of their experiences during high school, and more importantly during their time after graduation. Finally, this study brings greater clarity to use of retention both for research and for those who actively serve with teenagers or young adults.

**Research Question 1: Independent Covenantal Church Retention**

The first research question led the researcher to examine if any significant frequency/percentage differences emerged between youth ministry and current church involvement categories for participants who attended an independent, covenantal Christian high school (n=68). The data was examined in two ways. Data was first analyzed via a chi-square test of independence to determine if significant differences in current church involvement emerged across youth ministry commitment categories. The second analysis of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine
if current church involvement mean differences emerged across youth ministry commitment categories.

Results from the chi-square test of independence examining differences between youth ministry commitment level category and current church involvement category was significant, $\chi^2(6) = 29.82, p < .001$ (see Table 5). There were significantly more participants who identified as engaged disciples in the high church involvement category (n=12, 92.3%) than there were participants who identified as normative attenders (n=4, 23.5%), and enthusiastic followers (n=16, 43.2%). The retention rate for this subset was gauged by adding the percentages for moderate and high levels of current church involvement.

**Retention Statistic**

For the study sample, 68 respondents were categorized as independent, covenantal Christian high school graduates. This was the smallest group of Christian schools available in the sample (N=68). The statistical analysis determined a retention rate of 82.4% for graduates of independent, covenantal Christian high schools. The individual retention rate for each level of current church involvement is shown in Table 5.

The result from the one-way ANOVA was significant, $F(2,64) = 13.45, p <.001$ (see Table 6). For those participants who attended an independent covenantal Christian high school ($n = 68$), there were significant differences on church involvement across the three youth ministry commitment level categories. Tukey post hoc tests determined that engaged disciples (n=13) had a significantly higher church involvement mean score ($M=48.62, SD=4.29$) as compared to enthusiastic follower ($n=37, M=39.35, SD=8.63$) and normative attenders ($n=17, M=31.94, SD=11.10$).
Table 5. Chi-square ($\chi^2$) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for independent covenantal Christian high school graduates (N = 68)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</th>
<th>Current Church Involvement</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low involvement</td>
<td>Moderate involvement</td>
<td>High involvement</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged Prospect</td>
<td>Count</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
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<td>0.0%</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td>Count</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>29.4%</td>
<td>23.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>Count</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>48.7%</td>
<td>43.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>75.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
<td>23.9%</td>
<td>55.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>Count</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Count</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>35.3%</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $\chi^2(6) = 29.82, p < .001.$
Table 6. One-way ANOVA: Youth ministry commitment and church involvement for independent covenantal Christian schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Christian High School</th>
<th>Youth Ministry Commitment Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent Covenantal</td>
<td>67*</td>
<td></td>
<td>13.45</td>
<td>2.64</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>31.94</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>39.35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>48.62</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The one person who was classified as a disengaged prospect was removed from analysis

Summary of Research Question 1 Findings

The data collected resulted in a total number of 68 respondents from independent, covenantal Christian schools. Results from the chi-square test of independence and the one-way ANOVA were both significant. Almost 100% of participants who identified as engaged disciples were placed in the high church involvement category, a percentage that was significantly higher than the other youth ministry commitment category percentages. Engaged disciples also reported a significantly higher church involvement mean score when compared to normative attenders and enthusiastic followers.

Research Question 2: Independent Open Admission Church Retention

The second research question led me to examine if any significant frequency/percentage differences emerged between youth ministry and current church involvement categories for those participants who attended an independent, open admission Christian high school ($n = 84$). Pearson’s Chi-square test and an analysis of variance (ANOVA) were ran to determine if a significant relationship existed between the variables and to gauge if individual differences among levels of current church involvement may have accounted for variance in the data.
Results from the chi-square test of independence examining differences between youth ministry commitment level category and current church involvement category was not significant, $\chi^2(6) = 10.88, p = .092$ (see Table 7). While not significant, the percentage of engaged disciples in the high church involvement category (n=18, 64.3%) was higher than the involvement percentages for disengaged prospects (n=1, 25%), normative attenders (n=3, 21.4%), and enthusiastic followers (n=17, 44.7%) in the high church involvement category.

The result from the one-way ANOVAs was significant, $F(3,80) = 3.60, p = .017$ (see Table 8). For those participants who attended an independent open admission Christian high school (n=84), there were significant differences on church involvement across the three youth ministry commitment level categories. Tukey post hoc tests showed that engaged disciples (n=28) had a significantly high church involvement mean score (M=42.57, SD=8.40) as compared to disengaged prospects (n=4, M=38.00, SD=9.66), normative attenders (n=14, M=31.93, SD=12.02), and enthusiastic followers (n=38, M=37.76, SD=10.40).

**Retention Statistic**

For the study sample, there were 84 respondents in the independent open admission Christian school subset (27.2% of the total sample). The statistical analysis determined that the retention rate was 83.2% for graduates from independent open admission Christian schools. The individual retention rate for each level of current church involvement is shown in Table 7.
Table 7. Chi-square ($\chi^2$) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for independent open admission Christian high school graduates ($N = 84$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</th>
<th>Current Church Involvement</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low involvement</td>
<td>Moderate involvement</td>
<td>High involvement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged Prospect</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>25.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>35.8%</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
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<td>45.1%</td>
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</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>20.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
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<td>32.1%</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
</tr>
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<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
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<td>% of Total</td>
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<td>10.7%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Count</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>16.8%</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>46.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $\chi^2(6) = 10.88, p = .092$
Table 8. One-way ANOVA: Youth ministry commitment and church involvement for independent open admission Christian schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Christian High School</th>
<th>Youth Ministry Commitment Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>p</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent Open Admission</td>
<td>Disengaged Prospect</td>
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<td>38.00</td>
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<td>.0017</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
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<td>31.93</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>37.76</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>42.57</td>
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</table>

**Summary of Research Question 2 Findings**

The data collected resulted in a total number of 84 respondents from independent open admission Christian schools. The result from the chi-square test of independence was not significant, thus indicating that youth ministry commitment categories did not significantly differ with regard to differences on current church involvement frequencies/percentages. However, the result from the one-way ANOVA was significant. A significantly higher church involvement mean score was seen in the engaged disciple category as compared to the disengaged prospect, normative attender, and enthusiastic follower categories.

**Research Question 3: Church-Related Covenantal Church Retention**

The third research question led the researcher to obtain a retention statistic for those participants who attended a church-related covenantal Christian school (n = 86). The retention rate for the participants who attended a church-related, covenantal Christian high school was calculated by adding the percentages for low, moderate, and high levels of current church involvement. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Pearson’s Chi-square test were run to determine if a significant relationship existed between the variables and to gauge if individual differences among levels of current church involvement may have accounted for variance in the data.

**Retention Statistic**

For the study sample, there were 86 respondents in the church-related
covenantal Christian school subset (27.8% of the total sample). The statistical analysis determined that the retention rate was 79.1% for graduates from church-related covenantal Christian schools. The participants who were categorized as church-related covenantal Christian school graduates embodied the largest subset of participants (N=86). The result from the chi-square test of independence that tested if significant differences emerged between youth ministry commitment level category and current church involvement category was significant, \(\chi^2(6) = 22.94, p = .001\) (see Table 9). There was a significantly higher percentage of engaged disciples (n=15, 60.0%) who were in the high church involvement category than there were disengaged prospects (n=0, 0.0%), normative attenders (n=3, 16.7%), and enthusiastic followers (n=14, 34.1%) in the high church involvement category. In addition, a significantly higher percentage of disengaged prospects (n=2, 100%) were in the low church involvement category as compared to normative attenders (n=8, 44.4%), enthusiastic followers (n=5, 12.2%) and engaged disciples (n=3, 12.0%) in the low church involvement category. Moreover, there were significantly higher percentages of enthusiastic followers who had moderate and high church involvement, 55.3% and 34.2% respectively, than disengaged prospects who had moderate church involvement (0.0%) or high church involvement (44.4%) and normative attenders who had moderate church involvement (0.0%) or high church involvement (16.7%).

For those participants who attended a church-related covenantal Christian high school (n = 86), a one-way ANOVA was conducted with the independent variable of youth ministry commitment, measured categorically, and the dependent variable of church involvement, measured continuously (with a higher score denoting higher church involvement). As there were only two participants in the disengaged prospect category, they were removed when the one-way ANOVA was conducted. The result from the one-way ANOVAs was significant, F(2,81) = 6.75, p = .002 (see Table 10). For those participants who attended a church-related covenantal Christian high school but were not in the disengaged prospect category (n=84), there were significant differences on church
involvement across the three youth ministry commitment categories. Tukey post hoc tests showed that engaged disciples (n=25) had a significantly higher church involvement mean score (M = 41.92, SD=10.36) as compared to enthusiastic followers (n=41, M=38.29, SD=9.37).

Table 9. Chi-square ($\chi^2$) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for church-related covenantal Christian high school graduates (N = 86)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</th>
<th>Current Church Involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged Prospect</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>44.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $\chi^2(6) = 22.94, p = .001.$
Table 10. One-way ANOVA: Youth ministry commitment and church involvement for church-related covenantal Christian schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Christian High School</th>
<th>Youth Ministry Commitment Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church-Related Covenantal</td>
<td></td>
<td>84*</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>2.81</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td></td>
<td>18</td>
<td>30.61</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td></td>
<td>41</td>
<td>39.29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
<td>41.92</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The two participants classified as disengaged prospects were removed from analysis.

Summary of Research Question 3 Findings

Among church-related covenantal Christian school graduates, 60.0% of those who identified as engaged disciples were placed in the high church involvement category, a significantly higher percentage than that of disengaged prospects, normative attenders, and enthusiastic followers. Engaged disciples also reported a significantly higher church involvement mean score as compared to disengaged prospects, normative attenders, and enthusiastic followers. Church-related covenantal Christian school graduates were highly engaged with their youth ministries during high school and continued this pattern of involvement into their young adult years. According to the data, their engagement with the local church actually improved as they aged.

Research Question 4: Church-Related Open admission Church Retention

The fourth research question led me to obtain a retention statistic for participants who attended a church-related open admission Christian school (n=71). Data was first analyzed via a chi-square test of independence to determine if significant differences in current church involvement emerged across youth ministry commitment categories. The second analysis of a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to determine if current church involvement mean differences emerged across youth ministry commitment categories.
**Retention Statistic**

For the study sample, there were 71 respondents in the church-related open admission Christian school subset (23% of the total sample). The statistical analysis determined that the retention rate was 87.3% for graduates from church-related open admission Christian schools. The result from the chi-square test of independence was significant, $\chi^2(4) = 45.78, p < .001$ (see Table 11). There were no disengaged prospects in the group of participants who attended a church-related, open admission Christian high school. There was a significantly higher percentage of engaged disciples ($n=16, 84.2\%$) who were in the high church involvement category than there were normative attenders ($n=1, 5.9\%$) and enthusiastic followers ($n=9, 25.7\%$) in the high church involvement category. In contrast, a significantly higher percentage of normative attenders ($n=8, 47.1\%$) were in the low church involvement category as compared to enthusiastic followers ($n=1, 2.9\%$) and engaged disciples ($n=0, 0.0\%$) in the low church involvement category.

As there were no participants in the disengaged prospect category, this category was not used when the one-way ANOVA was conducted. The result form the one-way ANOVA was significant, $F(2,68) = 41.45, p < .002$ (see Table 12). For those participants who attended a church-related open admission Christian high school but were not in the disengaged prospect category ($n=71$), there were significant differences on church involvement across the three youth ministry commitment categories. Tukey post hoc tests showed that engaged disciples ($n=25$) had a significantly higher church involvement mean score ($M=41.92, SD=10.36$) as compared to enthusiastic followers ($n=41, M=38.29, SD=9.37$) and normative attenders ($n=18, M=30.61, SD=11.12$).
Table 11. Chi-square ($\chi^2$) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for church-related open admission Christian high school graduates (N = 71)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</th>
<th>Current Church Involvement</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low involvement</td>
<td>Moderate involvement</td>
<td>High involvement</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>47.1%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>88.9%</td>
<td>22.2%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>11.3%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>24.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>35</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>71.4%</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>11.1%</td>
<td>69.5%</td>
<td>34.6%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
<td>84.2%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>26.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>71</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>12.7%</td>
<td>50.7%</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $\chi^2(4) = 45.78, p < .001.$

Table 12. One-way ANOVA: Youth ministry commitment and church involvement for church-related open admission Christian schools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Christian High School</th>
<th>Youth Ministry Commitment Level</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church-Related Open Admission</td>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>39.69</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>47.58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Summary of Research Question 4 Findings**

The last set of sub-group analyses were conducted with the sample of N = 71 church-related open admission Christian school graduates. As seen in the results for the first and third research question, results were significant for this group of graduates. A higher percentage of engaged disciples were in the high church involvement category as compared to normative attender and enthusiastic followers. Engaged disciples also had a significantly higher church involvement mean score as compared to the church involvement mean score for normative attenders and enthusiastic followers. All of the respondents who reported that they attended a church-related open admission Christian school remained engaged in a local church as young adults. The statistical analysis acknowledged a significant relationship between the current levels of church involvement and the youth ministry commitment for this subgroup, suggesting that there is some relationship between youth ministry commitment during high school and local church involvement as a young adult.

**Research Question 5: Relationship of Variables**

The fifth research question addressed the group of Christian high school graduates (N = 309) as a whole. The disengaged prospects commitment category was removed from analyses due to the small sample size (n = 7), reducing the sample to N = 302. The sample was large enough to conduct a 4 (Christian high school categories) by 3 (youth ministry commitment categories excluding disengaged prospects) ANOVA. This type of analysis allowed for the examination of the main effects of type of Christian high school and current church involvement as well as the examination of interaction effects. The independent variables were type of Christian high school, measured categorically, and youth ministry commitment level, measured categorically. The dependent variable was current church involvement, measured continuously (with a higher score denoting higher church involvement). For the (N = 309) participants who attended a Christian high school, there were significant differences between youth ministry commitment level
categories and current church involvement categories, \( \chi^2(6) = 29.61, p < .001 \) (see Table 13). The percentage of engaged disciples with high church involvement (47.3%) was very close to enthusiastic followers with high church involvement (43.4%). Both engaged disciples and enthusiastic followers had a significantly higher percentage of high church involvement over normative attenders with high church involvement (8.5%), or disengaged prospects with high church involvement (0.7%). Moreover, within the moderate church involvement category, there were significantly higher percentages of enthusiastic followers (62.2%) as compared to normative attenders (20.5%), engaged disciples (15.7%), and disengaged prospects (1.6%).

In keeping with the language used in the precedent literature, the data shows that only 17.1% of respondents (N=53) had a low commitment to the local church. In light of the research, this suggests that 82.9% of participants were heavily engaged (worship attendance, practicing spiritual disciplines, and extracurricular activities) with the church. However, the data reveals that all of the survey participants were engaged at some level with the local church as young adults. This number was calculated by adding the low, moderate, and high current church involvement percentages for all respondents. Using the 82.9% statistic, this data from the Christian school graduate subgroup highlights that at least some young adults are not abandoning the church. Not only were students connected with the local church but the majority were engaged at moderate and high levels of involvement (82.9%, N=256).

For all participants, except disengaged prospects, who attended a Christian high school \((n = 302)\), a 4 X 3 ANOVA was conducted with the independent variable of youth ministry commitment, measured categorically, and the dependent variable of church involvement, measured continuously (with a higher score denoting higher church involvement. The purpose of the 4 x 3 ANOVA was to discern if differences in current church involvement existed based on both the type of Christian high school a participant attended and the participant’s level of youth ministry commitment. Results showed from
the 4 x 3 ANOVA are presented in Table 14. The ANOVA corrected model was significant, $F(11,290) = 9.32, p < .001$. When examining the individual effects on the outcome of current church involvement, the variable of youth ministry commitment category was significant, $F(2, 290) = 47.21, p < .001$. Results showed that engaged disciples had a significantly higher church involvement mean score ($M = 45.17, SD = 1.03$) than did normative attenders ($M = 30.34, SD = 1.13$) and enthusiastic followers ($M = 38.77, SD = 0.74$). There were no main or interaction effects.

There was not a significant main effect of type of Christian high school that the participant attended, $F(3, 294) = 1.29, p = .278$. Although not significantly different from one another, the mean current church involvement scores differed across types of Christian high schools. The type of school with the highest current church involvement mean score was the independent covenantal Christian high school ($n = 67, M = 39.97, SE = 1.23$); the type of school with the lowest current church involvement mean score was the church-related covenantal Christian high school ($n = 84, M = 36.94, SE = 1.05$). The independent open admission Christian high school ($n = 80$) had a current church involvement mean score of $M = 37.42$ ($SE = 1.11$). The church-related open admission Christian high school ($n = 71$) had a current church involvement mean score of $M = 38.05$ ($SE = 1.14$).

There was not a significant type of Christian high school by youth ministry commitment level interaction on current church involvement, $F(6, 294) = 1.48, p = .186$. Although the results were not significant, interesting trends occurred across commitment and Christian high school categories with regard to current church involvement. Participants who identified as Engaged Disciples had the highest current church involvement mean scores, regardless of the type of Christian high school they attended. The group ($n = 13$) with the highest current church involvement mean score ($M = 48.62, SE = 2.53$) was the Engaged Disciples who attended independent covenantal Christian high schools group. The group ($n = 17$) with the lowest current church involvement
mean score \((M = 26.88, SE = 2.21)\) was the Normative Attenders who attended church-related open admission Christian high schools group.

Table 13. Chi-square \((\chi^2)\) test of independence: Youth ministry commitment by current church involvement categories for Christian high school graduates \((N = 309)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Low involvement</th>
<th>Moderate involvement</th>
<th>High involvement</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disengaged Prospect</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td></td>
<td>57.1%</td>
<td>28.6%</td>
<td>14.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>0.3%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>9.4%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>21.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>151</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
<td>37.1%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>30.2%</td>
<td>62.2%</td>
<td>43.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
<td>25.5%</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>48.8%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>85</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>23.6%</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>15.7%</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>309</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Youth Ministry Commitment Level Categories</td>
<td>17.1%</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
<td>41.8%</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% within Current Church Involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% of Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \(\chi^2(6) = 29.61, p < .001\).
Table 14. 4 X 3 ANOVA: Type of youth ministry commitment level category and church involvement across Christian high school categories (N = 302)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>$M^2$</th>
<th>$F$</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected Model</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>772.89</td>
<td>9.32</td>
<td>11, 294</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Christian High School</td>
<td>107.05</td>
<td>1.29</td>
<td>3, 294</td>
<td>.278</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Youth Ministry Commitment</td>
<td>7832.06</td>
<td>47.21</td>
<td>2, 294</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of Christian High School by Level of Youth Ministry Commitment</td>
<td>122.41</td>
<td>1.48</td>
<td>6, 294</td>
<td>.186</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Christian High School</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent-Covenantal</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>39.97</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Related-Covenantal</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>37.42</td>
<td>1.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent-Open Admission</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>36.94</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church Related-Open Admission</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>38.05</td>
<td>1.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Youth Ministry Commitment</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normative Attender</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>30.34</td>
<td>1.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enthusiastic Follower</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>38.77</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged Disciple</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>45.17*</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Christian High School</th>
<th>Level of Youth Ministry Commitment</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SE</th>
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*Note. Engaged disciples had a significantly higher church involvement mean score
Summary of Research Question 5 Findings

After running the statistical analysis between the independent variable (youth ministry commitment levels) and the dependent variable (current church involvement) it was determined that the relationship between the two variables was significant. It was discovered that the measures for involvement were lower than the measures for youth ministry commitment. Even though the relationship was not causative, the research did indicate that the level to which respondents were engaged with their youth ministry during high school did impact in some way their decision to stay connected with the local church as young adults. The type of Christian school did not have a significant relationship on the current level of church involvement. However, the Christian school environment did show to have an affect on church involvement. Also, the research does point to the importance of students taking further steps in the discipleship process and engaging with the local church at a significant level.

Additionally, the analysis for the entire sample showed at least some level of engagement with the church. This is a reverse in the numbers shared from previous literature and broader studies, which have expressed that churches are losing 70-90% of students after they graduate high school. Previous literature has included the “low commitment” category as those young adults who have been “retained”. This creates confusion between how a youth ministry practitioner could view a low commitment participant and how professional statistics defines these terms. The more fitting retention statistic for this study is that 82.9% of participants engaged with the church at a moderate or high level as young adults (see Table 13). It is this tension that has led to much of the confusion as described previously in chapter two. In terms of retention, referring to only those who fit the moderate and high involvement categories bridges the interpretive gap between those dealing with professional statistics and those who are youth ministry practitioners. Therefore, for this study, it is a better fit to say that the overall retention rate is 82.9% for Christian school graduates.
Evaluation of the Research Design

The instrument designed for this research was modified to meet the specific objective of exploring the church retention of young adults who had participated in a youth ministry and attended a Christian high school. The YMRQ was adapted from the original version to include “Christian school” language. Once the instrument was adjusted I utilized an online survey website to collect data for the statistical analysis associated with the research questions. The survey was sent to graduates of independent covenantal, independent open admission, church-related covenantal, and church-related open admission Christian schools. The assessment of the research design will cover the strengths and weaknesses of this study. These strengths and weaknesses will assist anyone desiring to replicate the study for future research.

Strengths of the Research Design

First, having been granted access to the ACSI database was a great strength of the research design. The organization is frequently in contact with their member schools, which provided updated contact information for principals and other Christian school personnel. The database allowed me to make efficient contact with over 200 principals and provided a reliable source of contact information, which was conveniently found in one location. ACSI expressed an earnest interest in this research and actively encouraged the participation of their member schools.

Second, Survey Monkey proved to be a vital resource for this research project. The online survey provided a user-friendly format for the researcher and the respondents. The website offered the opportunity to host a survey, allowed people to respond, and with relative ease created real time data analysis. The ability to draw respondents from thirteen schools in six different states was accomplished because of the far-reaching effect of the internet and other online resources, given the technologically savvy nature of the age demographic. Finally, the website allows for the easy transfer of data into an Excel spreadsheet for the purpose of analysis.
The third and final strength was the sample size of Christian school participants (N=309) in regard to previous studies on church retention. The current study amassed a three fold better response of Christian school respondents than the Lifeway “Church Dropout Study” (93 respondents), a six fold better response than Shield’s “Dropout Study” (51 respondents), and a 60% better response than the first Cardus Education Survey (124 respondents). As the precedent literature discussed, much greater research is needed in order to gain deeper insights into the spiritual lives of Christian school students and graduates. This study prepared a wider avenue for future research to reach a more extensive number of students, families, and faculty connected to the Christian school movement.

**Weaknesses of the Research Design**

A weakness of this study was the low number of responses from school principals. A broader response from ACSI principals would have provided a broader base of Christian school graduates to survey. Perhaps, a request that requires a principal to do extra work on behalf of the researcher may have led to the deletion of the email or being disregarded. I believe that an incentive given to the principals may have elicited a greater response. In future research attempts, rewarding principals for being a conduit to vital demographic information may prove to be a worthwhile addition.

Demographic questions for this survey were mirrored from the research instrument (YMRQ) created by Brandon Shields. Other researchers may find that different demographics play a larger role in church attendance. Further research could be undertaken to examine family dynamics, community factors, or church dynamics. For instance, does the style of worship or preaching impact a young adult’s church retention post high school?

It became obvious that many Christian schools lack an organized alumni database. If further research is to be accomplished on investigating the spiritual lives of Christian school students, more schools need to keep an accurate and up to date database. The power of social media was helpful since half of the schools utilized Facebook to
contact their alumni. Accurate alumni information would also benefit the school for potential hiring opportunities, community networking, and creating a pool for fundraising.

Additionally, it would have been advantageous to increase the sample size. The researcher had to turn four schools down because they responded after the survey deadline. Future research could extend the allotted time that the survey is available by a few months up to a year to gain more participants. It would also be plausible to increase the sample size by hiring out someone to handle all of the logistical communication with the schools, especially regarding phone calls and emails for basic protocol of the study. Finally, broadening the range of graduation years could have increased the sample size. Rather than choosing only one graduation year, the inclusion of a range of years for potential participants could have been favorable.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

In this final chapter, the results of the data analysis are explored in order to offer insight that may further the cause of Christian education and ministry to young people. Each Christian school category was assessed for its influence on the current church involvement of youth ministry participants and implications for youth ministry. Evaluation is made about the applications and implications of this research on youth ministry. The limitations of this research are also explored. Finally, suggestions for further research are offered so that others can expand on the knowledge base of this study.

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine the post high school church retention rate of Christian high school students in light of the claim that 70 to 90 percent of youth ministry participants leave the church after graduating high school. The participants were Christian school graduates from various philosophies of Christian education who were involved in a high school youth ministry. These philosophies include schools directly associated with a church or denomination (church-related), schools not directly associated with a church or denomination (independent), schools that only allow Christian families to enroll (covenantal), and schools that are open to enrolling other faiths or backgrounds (open admission). The research determined if there is a correlation between the graduates of various types of ACSI Christian schools with different philosophies and the church retention rate of those students in college. The study serves as a unique approach to the
topic of church retention since it is one of the first to address the different types of Christian school philosophies as a potentially influential factor.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to guide the gathering and analysis of data for the current research study:

1. What relationship, if any, exists between independent, covenantal Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church while in college?

2. What relationship, if any, exists between independent, open admission Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church while in college?

3. What relationship, if any, exists between church-related, covenantal Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church while in college?

4. What relationship, if any, exists between church-related, open admission Christian high school students, their level of youth ministry commitment during high school, and their current commitment to a local church while in college?

5. What is the relationship, if any, exists between different levels of youth ministry commitment during high school and current local church involvement for Christian school graduates?

Conclusions from Research Questions

Following the compilation of completed surveys, the research conclusions were deduced from the analysis of the five research questions. The research findings and conclusions were based on the result of all the completed surveys. The implications for local church youth ministries are provided and are organized in relation to the research questions.

Research Question 1: Independent, Covenantal Church Retention

A thorough exploration through the Christian school literature identified four types of Christian high schools. These categories include schools that are church-related, independent, covenantal, or those that execute an open admission policy. The first high
school type, independent covenantal Christian schools, are those that do not have an affiliation to a particular religious denomination or local church and they choose to only partner with Christian families. Youth ministry commitment was measured 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)” (Shields 2008, 167).

This subgroup had one person in the Disengaged Prospect category. Among these independent covenantal students, there was an increase in the level of involvement with the local church by the time they left college. When examining only those participants who graduated from independent covenantal Christian high schools (N=68), there was a significant association found between youth ministry commitment and current church involvement. Engaged disciples from these schools had a significantly higher church involvement mean score over the other commitment categories. Based on the parameters set in the previous literature, the retention statistic is 82.4% for this school category. This is the best description of retention given that these respondents were involved at moderate and high levels as young adults.

**Research Question 2: Independent, Open Admission**

The second type of Christian high school to be examined was the independent open admission Christian school. Independent open admission Christian high schools are defined as those schools that do not have an affiliation to a particular religious denomination or local church and admit students who have different religious beliefs or backgrounds. This subgroup exhibited a fairly strong youth ministry commitment but the data revealed they were even more involved with the local church as young adults.

The results for this research question revealed that the 84 respondents in this group were mostly “Enthusiastic Followers” (n=38, 45%). For this type of Christian high
school, a retention rate of 83.2% was discovered for those with low to high levels of current church involvement. Those who were retained in this subgroup indicated moderate and high levels of engagement with a local church including small group participation, consistent church attendance, and practicing spiritual disciplines. The majority of participants who graduated from independent open admission Christian high schools fell into the Enthusiastic Follower category but as young adults almost half of them indicated that they were more engaged by being identified as “highly involved” with their local church. As young adults, these participants began serving in leadership roles, practiced regular spiritual habits, and were highly involved with church programs and events.

The findings for this type of Christian high school did not reveal a statistically significant relationship between the youth ministry commitment and current levels of church involvement for independent, open admission Christian school graduates. In basic terms, there was not a connection between the faithfulness of these graduates to their youth ministry and how connected they were to the local church as young adults.

**Research Question 3: Church-Related Covenantal Church Retention**

The third type of Christian school, church-related covenantal, were those schools that had affiliations with a church or denomination that choose to only allow Christian families or students to attend. This subgroup accounted for 28% of all respondents. Almost half of these graduates were identified as Enthusiastic Followers (n=41) meaning they participated in the spiritual disciplines on a regular basis, had some level of participation in a small group, and had moderate involvement with youth ministry programs and events.

Using the parameters of the literature base, a retention rate of 79.1% was established for those participants who were classified as church-related covenantal Christian school graduates. The findings reported that the majority of these graduates
identified themselves as having a moderate (42%) or high (37.2%) level of current church involvement, representing a better definition of a retention rate. These graduates were highly engaged with their youth ministries during high school and continued this pattern into their young adult years. There was a statistically significant relationship between the levels of youth ministry commitment and current church involvement for church-related, covenantal Christian school graduates. Simply put, there seems to be some type of significant relationship between the faithfulness of these graduates to their youth ministry and how connected they were to the local church as young adults. According to the data, their engagement with the local church actually improved as they aged.

**Research Question 4: Church-Related Open Admission Church Retention**

The fourth type of Christian school was the church-related, open admission school. The church-related open admission school has an affiliation with a church or denomination and allows students who have different religious beliefs or backgrounds to attend the school. This subgroup accounted for 23% of the total sample. In high school, these respondents were mostly described as Enthusiastic Followers (49%) followed by an even divide of Engaged Disciples (26%) and Normative Attenders (24%) in their commitment to their youth ministries. As young adults, half (50.7%) of these survey participants were “moderate” or “high” in the current church involvement. This can be interpreted that these respondents are attending church on a regular basis, attending some of the programs and events offered by their local churches, engaging in the spiritual disciplines, and they indicated having close relationships with others at church.

Given the parameters of previous literature, the findings for this research question produced a retention rate of 87.3% for church-related open admission Christian school graduates. Church-related, open admission Christian school graduates stayed engaged with the church as they transitioned into their young adult years. The data
determined that a significant relationship existed between the levels of current church involvement for this type of Christian high school.

**Research Question 5: Relationship between Variables**

The findings for this research question revealed a significant correlation between youth ministry commitment during high school and current church involvement. The data revealed that the type of Christian high school attended did not have a significant role in the current church involvement of the participants. The association between the independent and dependent variables cannot be qualified as causal, however, a relationship still exists. Additionally, the most significant portion of this research is the tension discovered on how these statistics are used and interpreted. Using the same parameters from the previous literature that includes those participants in the low involvement category would give an overall retention rate of 100% for this study. As previously explained, that number is hardly believable and does not provide a clear statement of what is actually happening with young adult church engagement. A clearer expression of the retention rate for this study is 82.9%, which only includes those involved at moderate and high levels of church engagement. This research project showed a strong relationship between Christian school culture and church retention.

The purpose of this study was to determine if the church retention rate among Christian school graduates differed among the four types of Christian schooling options and to investigate the claim that 70 to 90 percent of students were leaving the church after high school. The research did not demonstrate that a difference in the type of Christian school had any kind of relationship with church attendance. A strong argument for rejecting the null hypothesis is that the data showed the majority of graduates who did stay involved in the local church did so at a moderate (41.1%) or high (41.8%) level. These graduates were not simply just casually attending church but were involved in such a way that the local church had some level of priority in their lives.
Research Implications

The findings yielded in this study have implications for Christian education, specifically at the high school level, and for the field of youth ministry. The topic of church retention has received significant consideration over the last decade (i.e., Barna 2001, 2006, Black 2006, LifeWay 2007, Powell and Kubiak 2005, Shields 2008, Cardus 2011, 2012, 2014). Based on the literature review, there has been much written about the world of general Christian education but very little written about Christian schooling and even less written about the spiritual lives of students who attend Christian schools. The majority of literature concerning Christian schooling deals with approaches to administration, how to start a Christian school, or curriculum at large. This literature gap seems inconsistent given that the Christian education literature claims that the aim of such schools is to impact the spiritual lives of students. The focus of this study was to address two important issues: to further clarify the conversation of young adult church retention and to specifically address the spiritual lives of Christian school graduates through the context of differing school philosophies.

The results from this study complement results from a previous study by LifeWay (2007) while partially contradicting results in another study by Shields (2008). According to the 2007 LifeWay study, 70% of college students who were graduates from secular high schools left the church during their college years; however, only 51% of college students who graduated from Christian high schools left the church during their college years. The 49% of college students who continued to participate in their church seen in the LifeWay (2007) study was similar to—even, in some cases, lower than—percentages found in this study. Contrary to the LifeWay study, results from Shields’ (2008) study showed that, among college students who graduated from all types of secular and religious high schools, the group of students with the lowest church retention rate during college were Christian school students with a dropout rate of 39.4% (Shields 2008, 139). In this study, all of Christian school graduates remained connected at some
level (including those who attended less than once a month) to the church during their young adult years and 82.9% did so at a moderate or high level. Furthermore, 39.2% of students indicated that they had never quit attending church. These statistics cannot be extrapolated outside of the boundaries of this study; however, the data identified a segment of young adults who have not left the church in the mass quantities as indicated in earlier studies.

Additionally, the literature review exposed a substantial gap of research pertaining to the spiritual lives of Christian high school students. The empirical research lent itself to curriculum, educational processes, systems and leadership issues. The current study cannot point to causative factors in the spiritual lives of Christian school students, but this study did find that the overwhelming majority of students who were engaged in their youth ministry and also attended a Christian school maintained their church commitment post high school. This research provides valuable support of student ministry discipleship and Christian education where school environments are created to reinforce the teachings of the local church. The triple combination of a Christian family, the local church, and a Christian school environment seems to create a partnership where a robust Christian faith can be passed on to the next generation.

After finding a subset of young adults who reverse the previous research results, there is light shed on the fact that this topic needs more attention. Due to the public nature of Wes Black’s (2006), Barna’s (2001, 2006) and LifeWay’s (2007) retention studies it may take some time for additional studies similar to this to gain a voice in the research world. The earlier studies received much publicity via multiple means of dissemination of results (e.g. through articles, books, conferences, and blogs). Smaller research projects such as Shields’ (2008) study and the current one at hand have proven that the investigative work on church retention rates of young adults is still progressively developing. In one book based on Barna’s early research, Christian educators’ were shockingly told, “What you are doing is not working as it should. It’s not getting through and it’s not doing the
job” (Ham, Beemer, and Hillard 2009, 147). Ideally, each subsequent study will continue to clarify the topic and help prevent inaccurate and damaging conclusions as such. Data on what actually “works” in youth ministry based on the early research results should be treated properly and kept tightly within appropriate boundaries. Also, as with any research, data should only be interpreted with keen consideration of the apparent weaknesses at hand and should be interpreted in conjunction with the other available studies of relevance.

Further investigation needs to be made in the breakdown of teenager and young adult engagement with the church. The most respected religious schooling study to date is the Cardus Education study (2011, 2012, 2014). One downside to the study is the one-sided nature of the survey. Unlike the current study that compared the actions of students during high school and then again when they were in college, Cardus was only concerned with the practices of religious school graduates during their most recent history. Gaining insight into how students were engaging within the church while they were in high school and then having them self-report at the end of their time in college allows for comparison of the organizations themselves, in this case Christian schools. According to the procedures that Cardus has utilized in their first three studies, they can only make comparisons against the participating groups, namely the different types of schools (Catholic, home school, Protestant, public, etc).

This study was the first of its kind to differentiate among the different types of Christian school philosophies. The Cardus study combines all Protestant Christian schools together which is in alignment with the process of other studies regarding Christian schools or church retention. The available literature articulating the differences between the four types of Christian schools is sparse. The chosen philosophy of a Christian school drives the school’s mission – everything from enrollment practices, to how the school influences the community. It is one of the largest identifiers of a school but as a topic it has the least written about it. It appears that the competitive advantage, pros and cons, and theological reasoning for choosing one of the four philosophical types of Christian schools
is a nearly untouched subject in the research world and invites more work in this direction.

Another important implication from this research is the need for Christian schools to improve their ability to maintain updated information on their graduates. Administrators at some of the Christian high schools were unable to provide study recruitment assistance simply because 2009 graduate data was not available. In the age of technology where numerous database systems are readily available, I received the following responses:

1. “Unfortunately, we have just started tracking our graduates and therefore, probably do not have information that is complete enough to pass on at this point.”

2. “I appreciate your pursuit of this study, but unfortunately I don’t have the time to get this information together.”

3. “This study will be very beneficial but unfortunately, we do not have that information and our database would not be very beneficial.”

Administrators at some of the Christian high schools made similar remarks through phone conversations and it is possible that some principals did not respond because this was true for their school as well. The lack of meaningful data on alumni suggested that school administrators were interested in what their students offered them while they were actively attending the school. However, it is possible that the school’s graduates were underappreciated in their roles as alumni. These graduates were not seen as “resources” with the capacity to be contributing alumni, financial supporters, educational advocates, or even as research participants in studies that could provide great benefits to the schools.

Additionally, this disconnect between school administrators and the school alumni was present even among the schools that responded favorably to requests for alumni contact information. Some lists were sent with a mixture of parent and student contact information or included a partial list of email addresses and street addresses. In these cases, the information was not updated to reflect the current culture of technology that could have included email addresses or social media contact information. Interestingly, administrators at two of the participating schools hired alumni relations staff and/or
reorganized their alumni relations office during this research project, indicating that little attention had been given previously in this direction.

The confusion caused by haphazard and less than careful statistic reporting calls for a closer watch by authors, pastors, and public speakers when it comes to the numbers they choose to perpetuate. That is not to say previous research had poor methodology or lacked the support of good research. In some situations, the numbers were unfortunately misapplied and once this occurred, Christian culture began to relish in the alleged grim news. Ed Stetzer provided some solid insight on how we should handle our understanding of statistics when we see or hear them,

To get the whole picture, responsible researchers look at various studies, their methodologies, and their results. We must understand the parts in light of the whole. We should interpret each finding in light of the full study, and interpret each study in light of other studies. We reach bad conclusions when we latch onto one finding of one study, drag it out of context, and proclaim it from the rooftops without knowing whether our interpretation is justified (Stetzer 2010, 34).

One of the best actions that can be taken with the current young adult retention research is to simply understand the context of the information one wants to share.

Finally, another critical implication birthed from this research is the need for clarification of the vernacular related to church retention. As shown in the precedent literature on the topic of church retention, researchers and student ministry practitioners were using the same language but with completely different meanings. In the local church those who are leading (namely pastors and staff) are the ones crafting the language of the organization. One of the ways this research topic began to spin out of control was the lack of attention given to these types of details of the studies. For example, as discussed in chapter four, there has been inconsistent use of what it means for a student ministry participate to be a regular attender. Christian Smith, director of the Center for the Study of Religion and Society, wrote an article on the topic of church leaders misusing statistics. He writes, “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” (Smith 2007, 11). If terminology is more consistent among churches, schools, and researchers, perhaps some of these ‘false alarms’ can be avoided. Hopefully, this study encourages student pastors and others to pay careful attention to the details of the language utilized in a study they plan to share in order to lead their people with clarity and accuracy. Simultaneously, it is only fair to also encourage future researchers to be more clear on the language and definitions they choose to use.

**Research Applications**

In addition to the implications based on the precedent literature, certain applications for Christian educators and youth ministry practitioners became apparent from the findings of this study.

Christian parents, Christian educators, and student pastors should take note of the information on discipleship that is suggested from the results of this study. The respondents showed a strong commitment in the spiritual disciplines prior to going to college. During high school, the majority of students attended Sunday morning youth activities at least once a month (96%), read their Bible at least two to three times a month (87%), prayed at least two to three times per month (89%), and half of the respondents claimed to share their religious faith with others (51%). Perhaps the weightiest implication is that a process of ongoing discipleship that teaches, reinforces and models the spiritual disciplines plays an invaluable role in young people maintaining a healthy connection to the local church. Adults of influence, whether parent, teacher, or youth pastor, need to grasp the importance of helping guide students further down the discipleship funnel.

Consequently, a plan for discipleship must exist in each of the students’ three spheres of influence – home, church, and school. Parents must possess an idea of how they want to teach and train their children to spiritually mature. This is a process the church should be willing to help with and support, however, the impetus and spiritual
Christian Smith and Patricia Snell, Sociology professor at the University of Arkansas, report that the passing on of faith is far from being an accident,

Religious outcomes in emerging adulthood are not random happenstance about which all bets are off after age 18. Instead, they often flow quite predictably from formative religious influences that shape persons’ lives in earlier years. The religious commitments, practices and investments made during childhood and the teenage years, by parents and others in families and religious communities, matter—they make a difference (Smith and Snell 2009, 256).

Parents should prayerfully consider and develop a plan on how to train their children the spiritual disciplines, teach the importance of corporate worship, and model an authentic/transparent relationship with Christ. After studying generations for 35 years, authors Bengston, Putney, and Harris note, “parents have more religious influence than they think” (Bengston, Putney, and Harris 2013, 195). Moreover, it is important to note that a recent Pew Forum study found that of those who are dropping out of church, only 11% say they had a strong faith as a child and were brought up in a house where a dynamic faith was taught and lived out (Pew Forum 2009, 4). The results of this study should help motivate parents to get a discipleship game plan together and pray for its daily implementation in the home.

Closely related, parents need to be aware that the process of discipling is not formulaic in the strictest sense. There are multiple variables involved in helping students spiritually mature, all of which cannot be identified. This research project should simply bring awareness to parents’ understanding of the value of helping connect their adolescent to a local church youth ministry. In the findings, even those students who were involved at the Normative Attender level during high school remained engaged at a high level as young adults. The data clearly indicates the importance of families connecting with a local church as early as possible for the sake of their children’s spiritual lives.

Meanwhile, student ministries should seek to articulate and plan a process for developing the spiritual lives of students. A clear plan of discipleship creates a “three
pronged” (home, church, and school) approach to successfully impacting the students to embrace a deeper relationship with Christ. As Doug Fields, former student pastor at Saddleback Church, points out, “If students are going to maintain their faith over the long haul, they must develop consistent spiritual-growth habits” (Fields 1998, 159). The context for where these students will learn the needed habits is the local church with all of the spiritual wisdom it can muster. Simply, this is the church fulfilling its role as a mentor to younger generations (Titus 2, 2 Timothy 2).

In order for the church to continue thriving into the future, passing on the faith is not only critical, but also necessary. For those interested in seeing the church grow Thom Rainer, President of LifeWay, explains, “I found that many churches that had experienced conversion growth had specifically targeted people below the age of twenty” (Rainer 1997, 168). The strong retention rate of Christian school graduates reveals that at least a portion of young adult culture is still searching for ultimate meaning in life and they are seeking answers from the church. It is important that the church cultivates an environment favorable for young adults to ask the right questions while providing relevant answers for the culture in which they live. Researcher Robert Wuthnow encourages churches to provide the support young adults need. He states, “It (the needed support) will continue to go unrealized as long as congregations invest in youth programs for high school students and assume this is enough. It will also go unrealized if congregational leaders focus on their graying memberships and do not look more creatively to the future” (Wuthnow 2007, 12). The findings of this research should be a healthy warning for churches to re-evaluate their approach of attracting, evangelizing, and discipling young people. Any efforts committed to this type of hard work could very well have dividends for years to come as the spiritual legacy is passed to the next generation.

This study also found that strong relationships with at least one other person in their church who was not a pastor or church staff member played a significant role their commitment to the church. According to study participants, this actually carried more
weight than if participants had a strong relationship with a pastor or leader in their church. These findings should encourage local churches to create environments where these types of relationships can be established and nurtured. Parents could develop this atmosphere in their own homes by hosting families from church, Christian students from their children’s school, or by allowing students to know their house is a welcoming place for teenagers. This information should motivate student ministries to have an emphasis in a relational style of youth ministry and focus on ways to creatively cultivate adolescent relationships across the differing age demographics of the church.

The relatively high retention rate determined by this study should have the church paying close attention to the connection between student ministry and college/young adult ministry. Again, these young adults are not casually attending the church but many of them are engaged with the church at a high capacity. A generous amount of attention should be given to the ongoing ministry to students once they graduate. It has been my experience that churches have the tendency to budget and plan for students in middle school and high school only to have college and young adult ministry far down the list of priorities. This study shows graduates at minimum are interested in staying connected to the church. Survey results also point to a natural spiritual maturation around the college years when many students transition from a consumer to a contributor type role in the church. However, if the ongoing spiritual nurturing and ministry to these students lacks necessary support, the church itself could create a pathway to their departure.

Christian educators should give serious consideration to how they would like students to spiritually develop. The current study, in combination with the results of the Cardus Education survey, is enough evidence that Christian schools tend to produce the type of student they are aiming to create. The narrow focus of this study showed a fairly close retention score across all four school philosophies. Similarly, the Cardus report shares that Protestant Christian schools “choose to more directly infuse faith into all aspects
of school life” (Pennings et al. 2011, 23). Christian school headmasters and principals should take an in-house assessment on how their classes and school culture point students toward Christ. The results from this survey seem to show the emphasis of the school has an impact that reaches beyond graduation.

One cannot assume that Christian school administrators will naturally infuse a faith emphasis into every facet of their school. In order for a Christian ethos to saturate through the organization it must start as a vision from top leadership and trickle down into the classroom. Ideally, this leads to additional training for staff and faculty so that they too embrace the culture of faith integration.

Leading organizations in Christian education, such as ACSI, should encourage the Christian development of school faculty, particularly in the area of handling the spiritual development of their students. In order for Christian development to take place in the classroom, a person who is being led by the Spirit must manage it. School leadership, administration, and the school board are responsible to accomplish the mission of the school by encouraging teachers not only teach, but also model the Christian life for their students. It may seem that this should be included in the stated purpose of the school but each school has a unique set of operational definitions from which they operate. Modeling a Christian lifestyle could carry a very diverse meaning from one school to the next. Organizations like ACSI could assist Christian schools in this area by providing a consistent definition of “modeling” while coaching schools on how to help develop the spiritual maturity of their teachers.

It would be interesting to see what kind of evaluation tools ACSI uses to judge the performance of their schools, especially from a spiritual perspective. If no such measuring tool is currently being employed, it would be my recommendation for ACSI to find an instrument and begin to add spiritual measurements in their school evaluations. The instrument should begin to track those students who have converted to Christianity, number of those baptized, participation in the spiritual disciplines, and church attendance
among other activities. The YMRQ could serve as a foundational questionnaire to guide the process of retrieving this very important information.

Finally, for Christian education to take place it must come from a teacher that is purposefully delivering content from a Christian perspective. Teachers are the ones who create the classroom culture and provide the opportunity for teaching to be accomplished in a Christian manner. From this perspective, the findings of this research could have bearings on hiring practices since teachers are an extension of the administration. Rather than hiring teachers based solely upon educational credentials, experience, or test scores, it would serve Christian schools well to add an element to the process by exploring how the teacher expresses Christian values through their specific subject matter. Basically, a Christian school could promote their theological expectations via their mission statement so all teachers would have a starting point for teaching their material. The implementation of ongoing training to equip teachers on merging their faith in the classroom would also benefit these schools.

**Research Limitations**

In order to contact the prospective sample, I received permission from ACSI, needed principals to agree to share their demographic information for class of 2009, and then needed potential respondents to be convinced it was worth their time to participate. A barrier to gaining more participants was the lack of a proper protocol for keeping updated information on Christian school alumni. I was informed by several schools that they simply lacked the requested information and did not have an appropriate system for retrieving it. In other instances, the schools had the information, but packaging it in a suitable manner proved to be a heavy strain for the school staff and may explain why some principals chose not to respond to the initial request.

There were some limitations with regard to the generalizability of the research findings given that the study was limited to only those schools accredited by ACSI and
under the umbrella of their partnership. Schools may carry accreditations by other agencies but the research may not generalize to schools without an ACSI accreditation. The participating respondents for this study attended schools located within the United States of America. The research may not necessarily generalize to ACSI member schools outside of the United States. Finally, this research was limited to those students who had some level of commitment to their youth ministry program during their high school career. Unintentionally, there were very few “Disengaged Prospects” in the current study. Future research may revise the survey instrument or take a different approach to targeting a sample that will allow for more “Disengaged Prospects.”

**Further Research**

This research was a replication study of Shields’ (2008) investigation of the claim that students from evangelical youth ministries are abandoning the church at a high rate during their college career. This research attempted to produce further evidence that the aforementioned claim is false. The nature of research is that each study adds an additional layer of knowledge to the topic while simultaneously providing another step toward what is unknown. Often times, research will answer some questions but new questions will emerge. As a result, the findings of this study will have compounded value if they encourage others to answer the new questions that have been raised.

A suggestion for future research is to replicate this study among a variety of denominational and theological backgrounds. There have been two studies that examined students from Southern Baptist churches, but expanding the theological terrain in the study would present a more robust perspective (Shields 2008; Sirles 2009). Some would claim that the Cardus research team has come close to this type of study but their work was very broad in how they categorized school types: Catholic, non-religious home school, religious home school, non-religious private, religious private, and Protestant Christian. A study that delves deep in the Protestant Christian school category is strongly suggested.
Another avenue of potential value could be a study that would look at denominations such as Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopalian, et cetera, and compare their results among each other and against the church engagement levels offered in this research. A study of such magnitude may need to be carried out by a research institute due to the potential cost associated with the time and scope.

A second suggestion for further study includes research among all Christian school accrediting agencies in the United States or internationally. This could produce a more comprehensive retention statistic for Christian school students. The lack of research concerning the spiritual lives of Christian school students in the United States is a void that needs to be filled. A unifying study of this nature could very well spur on greater investigation into the lives of Christian school students and create a much stronger argument for this type of education. As parents weigh their options for the type of school they would prefer for their children to attend, offering them grounded statistics of potential spiritual outcomes would be highly beneficial.

A third suggestion for further study is an investigation into relational influences and church involvement during early adulthood. The influence of friends, parents, and mentors in the lives of young adults cannot be underestimated. The current study indicated that relationships within the church were significant. An investigation into mentoring that student ministry participants have received, along with the influence of parents, and the impact of new or childhood friends would prove valuable in gaining insights into church retention. A study including these variables would assess if church engagement is more directly tied to the power of spiritual relationships or based more on other spiritual influences. A qualitative research project or even a mixed methods approach would not only be a good accompaniment to this study but also to the work of the Cardus organization.

A fourth suggestion for further study is an exploration into on-campus collegiate ministries. One piece of information that is consistently missing from studies
on young adult church retention is knowledge concerning the campus ministry landscape. Many high school students have an opportunity to connect with a parachurch ministry but due to the busyness of their school schedule and extracurricular activities, parachurch ministries are limited in how much time they receive from students. A different dynamic is presented when college students are away from home, childhood friends, and their home church. It is plausible that a campus ministry could become a new “family” in terms of the support offered to students who have entered a new environment. Given that the educational schedule of college life leaves more discretionary time than high school, parachurch organizations can offer more connection points to their ministries. This is not a suggestion that a campus ministry is a replacement for involvement with the local church. However, it is conceivable that students who used to have regular engagement with a local church while in high school could “drop out” of attending a local church post graduation because they have found a different source for spiritual engagement in a parachurch ministry. Theoretically, this type of activity could be reported in current studies and mis-categorized as students leaving their faith. Research into this topic would further clarify the spiritual activity of young adults.

A fifth suggestion for future research would be to replicate the study of Christian schools of differing sizes. The variation of school size may impact what schools offer to help students with their spiritual journey and may hinder or help their connection with the local church in the next season of life. Perhaps similar insight could be provided for research involving Christian school students who attended youth ministries in churches of varying sizes.

A final suggestion for future research is to explore if there are any potential negative effects that Christian schools of various types may have on the spiritual future of their graduates. A discovery of this kind could lead to a more successful Christian school atmosphere overall. Organizations like ACSI and others could help produce resources to help Christian schools avoid or minimize adverse factors. The results from this type of
research could potentially effect teaching environments, training for administration and staff, and the decision process for which spiritual factors Christian schools should include in their campus life (i.e. mission trips, discipleship groups, chapel services, etc). Essentially, this could be a groundbreaking study that could open the door to a whole new vein of research.
APPENDIX 1

CORRESPONDENCE WITH PRINCIPALS

Travis Kaiser
Home Address
City, State, Zip Code
Email Address

Month & Day, Year

Principal’s Name
Name of School
School Address
School City & Zip Code

Dear Principal,

I'm conducting a research study that seeks to analyze the church retention rates for Christian high school graduates. The goal of this research is to investigate the claim that a majority of evangelical youth ministry graduates drop out of church after high school. I will be surveying Christian high school graduates 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. Currently, there is research to suggest that 70 to 90% of students disengage from the church when they head to college. After spending ten years in student ministry, I do not believe this to be true and am pursuing this research to see if evidence can prove otherwise.

As a part of this process, I will find a church retention rate for Christian high school graduates in general but will also be looking at individual statistics for independent/covenantal, independent/open admission, church based/covenantal, and church based/open admission schools. In order for me to survey a significant population of students in each category, I need your help. This email serves as a formal request for the contact information (i.e. name, address, phone number, email, etc) of your students from the class of 2009. This information will be kept completely confidential. I have attached a copy of the survey instrument for your viewing.

I know that this will require a portion of your time and I would like to express my deep appreciation for your assistance. Please send me any questions that you may have or points of clarification. I can be reached through email at (email address) or via cell phone at (cell phone number). If there is another person on your staff that has this information, I
will gladly contact them. Hopefully, this should only take a few minutes of your time. If you choose to participate, I will send you a copy of the conclusions of my study as soon as possible.

I believe that this research is very important to the Christian education community and to the local church. Dr. Derek Keenan, Vice President of Academic Affairs for ACSI, also believes in the importance of this research. You will find his letter of endorsement attached below. Once again, thank you for your cooperation and interest in my research. It is my hope that this study will help us better understand how to impact teenagers with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Sincerely,

Travis Kaiser
APPENDIX 2

YOUTH MINISTRY RETENTION QUESTIONNAIRE

Part 1—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 2—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  
   2 = I was somewhat committed  
   3 = I was fairly 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 pt)  2 (2)  3 (3)  4 (4)

Part 3—Please circle the number that most accurately represents your attitudes during high school using the following scale:
   1 = I tend to strongly disagree  
   2 = I was somewhat committed  
   3 = I tend to agree  
   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 4—Please fill in or check the appropriate blanks for each question. Check only one response per question.

16. What is your date of birth? Month _____ Day______ Year 19_____

17. What is your sex? _____Male _____Female

18. What is your current marital status? _____ Single
   _____ Married _____ Divorced

19. Which church did you attend most frequently for youth ministry activities during your senior year of high school? ____________________________

20. Were you a baptized member of the church from your response in question 19?  
   _____ Yes  
   _____ No

21. 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

22. 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)

23. Are you currently working on a degree? _____ Yes _____ No

24. If answer to question 23 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

25. 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

26. Which high school did you graduate from? ____________________________
27. 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

28. 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

29. 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 5**—Please check the response which most accurately describes your current involvement with church. Check only one answer for each question.

30. 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)

31. Are you a member of a church that is local to you? _____ Yes (4) _____ No (1)

32. 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)

33. 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)

34. 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)
35. 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)

36. 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)

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

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

Part 6—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  2 = I am somewhat involved
   3 = I am fairly involved      4 = I am very involved

39. Rate your current level of involvement with church. 1 (1 pt)  2 (2)  3 (3)  4 (4)

Part 7 – Please circle the number that most accurately represents your current attitudes using the following scale:
   1 = I tend to strongly disagree      2 = I tend to disagree
   3 = I tend to agree               4 = I tend to strongly agree

40. I genuinely enjoy going to my church.
   1 (1 pt)  2 (2)  3 (3)  4 (4)

41. My church helps me grow in my relationship with Christ.
   1 (1)  2 (2)  3 (3)  4 (4)

42. 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)

43. I have a strong relationship with a pastor or leader in my church.
   1 (1)  2 (2)  3 (3)  4 (4)

44. I feel comfortable inviting my friends to my church’s activities.
   1 (1)  2 (2)  3 (3)  4 (4)

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

133
APPENDIX 3
DESCRIPTION OF EXPERT PANEL

The expert panel consisted of

Bill McKinley, Founding member of ACSI, helped draft the original by-laws, Member Emeritus for the ACSI Board, Association of Christian Schools International, Colorado Springs, Colorado. Christian education experience of more than 52 years in the classroom and in administration.

Brian Rose, Assistant Head of Schools, The First Academy, Orlando, Florida. Christian education experience of more than 25 years, the majority of those being in administration.

Steve Whitaker, Ph.D, Head of Schools, The First Academy, Orlando, Florida. Christian education experience of more than 23 years, the majority of those being in administration.

Chris Blanton, Youth Pastor, Brentwood Baptist Church, Brentwood, Tennessee. Youth ministry experience of more than 12 years in local church ministry.

John Steen, Youth Pastor, Long Hollow Baptist Church, Hendersonville, Tennessee. Youth ministry experience of more than 24 years in local church ministry.

Steve Wright, Pastor of Discipleship, First Baptist Church West Palm Beach, West Palm Beach, Florida. Youth ministry experience of more than 18 years in local church ministry.
Dear [Expert Panel],

I am conducting a research study that seeks to analyze the church retention rates for Christian high school graduates. The goal of this research will be to survey Christian high school graduates 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 invited you to participate in this study as an expert panelist due to your leadership, training, and research competencies in the field of youth ministry. I am sending 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 this study, you will be receiving a summary of the results.

I know that this will require a significant portion of your time and I would like to express my thankfulness for your valuable input. Please send me any questions that you may have during this process. I can be reached through email at (email address) or via cell phone at (cell phone).

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

Attached you will find the Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire and the Instructions for the Expert Panel.

Thanks,

Travis Kaiser
Teaching Pastor
Florence Baptist Church
642 Mt Zion Road
Florence, Ky 41042
APPENDIX 5
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 retention. 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 youth ministry commitment (questions 30-44):
   a. Are these questions accurate measures of youth ministry commitment 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 Travis Kaiser [email address].
APPENDIX 6

ASSOCIATION OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS
INTERNATIONAL STATEMENT
OF FAITH

1. We believe the Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative, inerrant Word of God (2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:21).

2. We believe there is one God, eternally existent in three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Genesis 1:1, Matthew 28:19, John 10:30).

3. We believe in the deity of Christ (John 10:33), His virgin birth (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23, Luke 1:35), His sinless life (Hebrews 4:15, 7:26), His miracles (John 2:11), His vicarious and atoning death (1 Corinthians 15:3, Ephesians 1:7, Hebrews 2:9), His Resurrection (John 11:25, 1 Corinthians 15:4), His Ascension to the right hand of God (Mark 16:19), His personal return in power and glory (Acts 1:11, Revelation 19:11).

4. We believe in the absolute necessity of regeneration by the Holy Spirit for salvation because of the exceeding sinfulness of human nature, and that men are justified on the single ground of faith in the shed blood of Christ, and that only by God’s grace and through faith alone are we saved (John 3:16–19, 5:24; Romans 3:23, 5:8–9; Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 3:5).

5. We believe in the resurrection of both the saved and the lost; that they are saved unto the resurrection of life, and that they are lost unto the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28–29).

6. We believe in the spiritual unity of believers in our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 2:12–13, Galatians 3:26–28).

7. We believe in the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life (Romans 8:13–14; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 6:19–20; Ephesians 4:30, 5:18).
APPENDIX 7
CORRESPONDENCE WITH PARTICIPANTS

Dear Christian School Graduate,

You are receiving this letter because you graduated from \textit{name of school}. I am conducting some research with young adults who were involved in student ministry during high school and seeing where they are now in terms of their church involvement.

I would like to invite you to participate in this 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 participate, you will be entered to win a new iPad mini!

If you would like to participate, please go to this link: \textit{survey link}. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at \textit{email address}.

I hope you will give serious consideration to this opportunity. Your response will be part of a national effort to help churches more effectively reach students for Jesus and help them grow in their faith. Thanks, and please take the survey as soon as possible. There is only a limited amount of time for this research to be conducted.

Sincerely,

Travis Kaiser
Dear Principal,

I want to thank you for your partnership in my research project. Without your help it would have never been completed. Many of you commented that it was a worthwhile project and I believe that this work will be a catalyst for further investigation into the spiritual lives of young people.

I will be completing my research soon and the results will be published this May. As promised, I have included a copy of the research conclusions. If you have any questions do not hesitate to contact me.

Thanks again for believing in my work and for your partnership.

Sincerely,

Travis Kaiser
REFERENCE LIST

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ABSTRACT

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CHURCH RETENTION RATE OF CHRISTIAN HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES

Travis William Kaiser, Ph.D.
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2015
Chairperson: Dr. Brian C. Richardson

The purpose of this study was to examine the claim that 70 to 90% of youth ministry participants abandon the church after high school graduation. Chapter 1 examines the current statistics related to the church retention of young adults. The research questions used to guide the study are introduced. In order to accomplish the goal of the study, Shields’ Youth Ministry Retention Questionnaire (YMRQ) was used to compare the youth ministry commitment of Christian high school graduates with their current levels of church involvement.

Chapter 2 reviews the critical literature to this study. The issues of the role of church and the calling for Christians to be together, understanding who is defined as a young adult, and Protestant schooling in America are explored.

Chapter 3 describes the process by which the data for this study was gathered. Graduates from the four types of Christian high schools (covenantal independent, covenantal church-related, open-admission independent, and open-admission church-related) were invited to participate in the YMRQ survey. All of the respondents were graduates of ACSI member schools.

Chapter 4 reports the analysis of the data from the completed surveys. The data was analyzed using Chi-Square tests and ANOVA tests to determine the statistical significance between the two variables. For all levels of youth ministry commitment,
these young adults maintained a low to high level of involvement with a church after graduating high school. Bridging the language of statistics and the language of the practice of youth ministry, a clearer retention rate of Christian school graduates is 82.9%. This percentage represents those students in the moderate and high levels of church engagement as young adults.

The final chapter presents the conclusions based on the findings of this study. Any variances in the data and the reasons for their existence are also explored. Based on the results of the research, applications are made for Christian schooling and local church youth ministry.

Key words: Adolescents, Christian high school, Retention, Youth Ministry.
VITA
Travis William Kaiser

EDUCATIONAL
Diploma, Highview Baptist School, Louisville, Kentucky, 1998
B.A., Bellarmine University, 2002
M.Div., Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005

MINISTERIAL
Youth Ministry Intern, Highview Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, 2001-2002
Minister to High School Students, Highview Baptist Church, Louisville, Kentucky, 2002-2005
High School Pastor, Long Hollow Baptist Church, Hendersonville, Tennessee, 2005-2009
Campus Pastor, Long Hollow Baptist Church, Hendersonville, Tennessee, 2009-2012
Teaching Pastor, Florence Baptist Church, Florence, Kentucky 2012-

ACADEMIC
Garret Teaching Fellow, Boyce College, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005-2008