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YOUTH MINISTRY IN 2020 AND BEYOND: THE MENTAL HEALTH OF GENERATION Z, THE IMPACT OF COVID-19, AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR YOUTH MINISTRY IN AMERICA

by

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Submitted to the School of Honors Committee

in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for University Honors Scholars

Southeastern University

2021

Dedication

To my wonderful family, who have supported me through every topic-change and near mental

breakdown resulting in the culmination of this paper. Mom, Dad, and Emily, this thesis would

not have happened without you. And to my fiancé, Colton, your heart for Generation Z and

approach to youth ministry inspire me every day. It is because of people like you that research

like this can happen. Thank you for being my encouragers, cheerleaders, and occasionally tough-

loving coaches. Each of you have played an essential role to the completion of this thesis and I

could never thank you enough for your love and support.

Acknowledgements

Abstract

Generation Z is a generation that is completely unique to the ones before it. However, this also means that Generation Z also has its own unique challenges from the generations that came before. This thesis examines who Generation Z is, explores Generation Z's struggle with mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and loneliness. In light of those issues, this thesis seeks to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected and continues to affect Generation Z's battle with mental health. The purpose of this thesis is to identify and define these issues and understand how youth pastors can meet the specific mental health needs of Generation Z in a world after 2020. Social distancing, quarantine, and COVID-19 exposed and, in some cases, amplified many mental health struggles that Generation Z was already facing before 2020, but youth pastors can continue to reach adolescents by focusing on clarifying their identity, building a supportive community, and communicating Biblical truth.

KEY WORDS: Generation Z, youth ministry, teens, adolescents, mental health, Generation Z and mental health, mental health in adolescents, stress, anxiety, loneliness, identity, community, social media, biblical truth, COVID-19, COVID, coronavirus, pandemic

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the past few years, Generation Z has become a hot topic of research and conversation, as they are a completely unprecedented generation in many ways. Many of them cannot remember a time before they had access to a smartphone. Most of Generation Z was born after the terror attacks on the United States of September 11, 2001. They have lived through times of social and civil unrest. From their use of technology and social media, to their unparalleled diversity, to their interest and investment in social issues. Unfortunately, Generation Z has also been marked with their distinctive struggle with mental health issues, particularly those of loneliness, stress, and anxiety. In many ways, Generation G has become labeled and identified by the obstacles they face. Now, in a post-2020, post-pandemic world, many of the issues and characteristics of this extraordinary generation have been magnified. The need for peace, joy, and, ultimately, Jesus, has never been clearer than it is in the lives of Generation Z. Now that they are grappling with the realities and aftermath of a worldwide pandemic on top of preestablished conflicts within their lives, this thesis seeks to answer one question: How can youth pastors and youth leaders more effectively reach the adolescents that make up Generation Z for Christ in light of their struggles with mental health, especially as a result of COVID-19 and social distancing?

Definitions of Terms

Generation Z: This term and this generation will be described in more detail within the Review of Literature, but as a brief introduction, Generation Z is the popular name for the current generation of adolescents and emerging adults.[1] While the exact dates occasionally vary, most

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[1] Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens through the Twenties.," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 5 (2000): 469.

researchers agree that anyone who was born between the year 1995 and the year 2010 can be classified as a member of Generation Z. This generation is uniquely known for their attachment to technology, their unprecedented diversity, and the many obstacles they face in terms of mental, emotional, and spiritual health.[2] Occasionally within this study, the words "adolescents," "youth," or "emerging adults" are used in reference to Generation Z.

iGen: This alternative nickname for Generation Z references their attachment to technology, particularly to their cell phones (hence the little "i"). It was coined by Jean M. Twenge in 2017.[3] Generation Z has been known for their rapidly increasing involvement with technology and social media usage, as it has become a staple part of their culture.

Nones: This term, used by James Emery White, refers to the findings that when questioned about their religious affiliations, members of Generation Z are increasingly choosing to classify themselves as "none of the above."[4] This shows us that Generation Z is becoming not only increasingly non-Christian, but increasingly nonreligious.

Digital Natives: This term is used in reference to any person or group of people who has grown up around and/or using technology. All of Generation Z was born after the invention of the internet. Most do not remember a time before they had a smartphone and a laptop instantly accessible to them. Many members of Generation Z regularly use technological devices in their schools, work, and personal activities. Thus, virtually every member of Generation Z is a digital native.

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[2] James Emery White, *Meet Generation Z: Understanding And Reaching The New Post-Christian World*, Illustrated edition. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2017), 15.

[3] Jean M. Twenge, *IGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy--and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood--and What That Means for the Rest of Us*, Reprint edition. (New York: Atria Books, 2018), 2.

[4] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 21.

World beneath: This term, coined by Chap Clark in his book *Hurt 2.0* describes the place where adolescents go to be themselves, discover their identity, and feel a part of a community outside of adult oversight or supervision.[5] This idea suggests that many adolescents live a secret double life amongst other adolescents and outside of their parents' knowledge. It is in the world beneath that adolescents will experiment with and test out their identities, roles, and overall understanding of themselves and the world around them. The world beneath is carefully designed by adolescents to feel safe.[6] It is a place where they seek to find identity, belonging, and autonomy. Perhaps social media has become the new location of the world beneath for many members of Generation Z.

Spiritual health: For the purposes of this paper, the spiritual health of an adolescent can be defined as the level of engagement with church, with personal spiritual disciplines, and their understanding of the application of the Gospel to his or her life.

Youth Group: Within this paper, the term "youth group" refers to a religious function designed to cater to adolescents, usually in the form of a weekly service. These services usually involve a sermon or "talk," some form of discipleship or small group, and a group game or activity.

Pandemic: Mirriam-Webster defines a pandemic as "an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affects a significant proportion of the population: a pandemic outbreak of a disease."[7] By this definition, the COVID-19 virus can certainly be classified as a pandemic. There is no question whether or not this virus significantly affected many people across the globe, including the members of Generation Z. It should be noted that some quotes within this paper use the words "pandemic," "virus,"

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[5] Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 46.
[6] Ibid., 49.
[7] "Definition of PANDEMIC," accessed March 17, 2021, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pandemic.

"coronavirus," "covid," and "COVID-19" interchangeably. Within the context of this paper, each

of these words refers to the time during the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus in the year 2020.

Now that a general understanding of the basic terms and vocabulary of this thesis has

been established, we can move forward to understand how to effectively reach Generation Z for

Christ. But first, we must gain a more in-depth understanding of who Generation Z is.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The year of 2020 has introduced a wide array of unprecedented challenges, obstacles, and uncharted territory to a generation that is already known for being unique. Even after putting their distinctive difficulties aside, it is clear to see that Generation Z is one of a kind. James Emery White, author of *Meet Generation Z*, defines this advancing generation as "the freshman class of 2015," or, more simply put, anyone born between 1995 and 2010.[8] This generation, unlike any one before, has experienced all in one lifetime a lifestyle and culture dominated by the Internet and social media. They have endured numerous stressors including the aftereffects of the recession of 2008; a war on terror; a rise in gun violence; a very public dispute on sexuality, gender, and other social issues; and now, in 2020, the outbreak of COVID-19 accompanied by civil unrest.[9] To make matters even more difficult in terms of their mental and spiritual health, Generation Z is growing up in an increasingly post-Christian world.[10] Bearing all of these things in mind, it comes as no surprise that while Generation Z is known for being constantly connected to social media, they are also becoming infamous for being a uniquely stressed, anxious, and lonely generation.[11] Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, Generation Z was being faced with an uphill battle for their mental and spiritual health.

Now, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on the mental health of Generation Z, youth pastors have much to consider. In order to reach Generation Z in a way that is truly effective in helping them to come to a place of healthiness, wholeness, and holiness,

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[8] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 37.
[9] Ibid., 39.
[10] Twenge, *IGen*, 120.
[11] Alice Youngblood, "Barna Takes: Peace for an Anxiety-Ridden Generation," *Barna Group*, last modified October 14, 2019, accessed April 15, 2020, https://www.barna.com/anxiety/.

youth pastors must first take into account what makes Generation Z who they are, the many mental and emotional health struggles they face, and how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed or even amplified these difficulties.

Generation Z: An Unprecedented Generation of Youth

In order to understand the mental health challenges that members of Generation Z are facing today, the characteristics and nuances of this inimitable generation must first be explored. Dr. Jean M. Twenge, a leading voice in Generation Z research paints this portrait of them, "They are born after 1995. They grew up with cell phones, had an Instagram page before they started high school, and do not remember a time before the Internet. They are iGen."[12] Twenge and many other researchers refer to Generation Z as "iGen," as a reference to their interconnectedness and reliance on the Internet and social media.

Unlike the generations that came before them, Generation Z is a generation of digital natives. Digital natives are mainly distinguished by being raised around and with technology, primarily on the platforms of the Internet and social media.[13] In fact, as can be seen below in Figure 1, the overwhelming majority of members of Generation Z own a smart phone.[14]

DEVICE OWNERSHIP
% who personally own the following
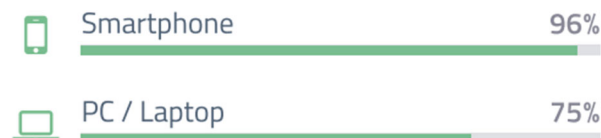
Smartphone 96%

PC / Laptop 75%

FIGURE 1

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[12] Twenge, *IGen*, 2.

[13] Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1," *On the Horizon* 9, no. 5 (January 1, 2001): 1–6.

[14] *Gen Z: Examining the Attitudes and Digital Behaviors of Internet Users Aged 16-20*, Summary Report (London, 2017), 5, https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hubfs/304927/Downloads/GenZ-Summary-Report-Q2-2017.pdf.

Whether on a computer or smart phone, Generation Z has a high attachment to technology and social media. In fact, one study of a group of Generation Z adolescents, it was found that over 90% of participants demonstrated an emotional attachment to his or her start device by indicating that he or she would be upset if they were punished by losing access to their device.[15] This study was conducted in 2012 and the attachment of Generation Z to their devices has only grown. It remains to be seen just how much the current circumstances involving the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing have affected this particular attribute of Generation Z. In a 2020 study conducted by Feed, which is a youth ministry initiative by the religious organization OneHope, it was found that two in every three teens report that they are constantly connected online and use the Internet for around 7.5 hours every single day.[16] 7.5 hours is no small amount of time. However, this steep statistic becomes clearer when viewed in light of Chap Clark's "three basic issues of the adolescent journey… identity, autonomy, and belonging."[17] In theory, the Internet and social media can provide Generation Z with all three.[18] Generation Z's excessive usage of smart devices and the internet begs the question: *How is it affecting their mental and spiritual health?*

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[15] Anthony Turner, "Generation Z: Technology and Social Interest," *The Journal of Individual Psychology* 71, no. 2 (Sum 2015): 107.

[16] Feed, A OneHope Initiative, *What We Know About Gen Z: 2020 Research Report*, 2020, 11, https://static.feed.bible/uploads/2020/07/What-We-Know-About-Gen-Z-2020.pdf.

[17] Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 167.

[18] Also, within *Hurt 2.0*, Chap Clark addresses a concept that he calls "the world beneath." This is Clark's term for the place where adolescents go in order to explore their identity in a place where they feel welcomed and a part of a community. The world beneath is often a place that is separate from the adolescents' parents, often hidden away from most adults in their lives. This research on adolescents today was conducted back in 2004, before the rapid rise of social media in the late 2010s. Now, for the adolescent members of Generation Z, who are coming of age in the 2020s, the question is: Where is the new world beneath? Perhaps it is no longer a physical place or group of friends, but rather the connections and friends that adolescent members of Generation Z make on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok. Some parents are out of touch with or unaware of their adolescent's social media activity. With that in mind and the fact that social media is a place where adolescents can freely explore their identity and talk to people from around the globe, it is interesting to wonder if social media is, in fact, the new world beneath for today's adolescents.

One of the most outstanding hallmarks of Generation Z is its rich diversity of cultures and ethnicities. Generation Z is uniquely multiracial. The following table concisely displays the fact that members of Generation Z are experiencing an unprecedented picture of diversity (See
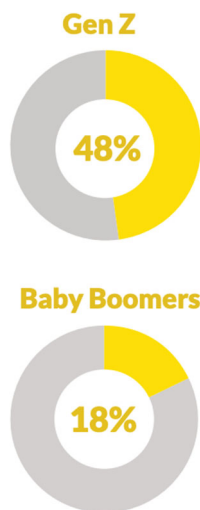
NON-CAUCASIAN POPULATION

Gen Z

48%

Baby Boomers

18%

FIGURE 2

Figure 2).[19] As a whole, Generation Z has never experienced a time without racial diversity and have experienced "a record-setting amount of diversity in their schools, neighborhoods, and activities."[20] Following the immigration reform of 1965 and a steep increase in individuals who identify as multiracial, Generation Z lives among an unprecedented mixture of races, ethnicities, and cultures.[21] This unique exposure to such a wide variety of other perspectives and experiences could contribute to Generation Z's significant tolerance for others and interest in racial and other social issues.

Contrary to some of the popular beliefs regarding millennials, who have sometimes been referred to as "Generation Me," Generation Z seem to have a more outward focus.[22] Due to their constant connection to the information accessible via the Internet and the rich diversity amongst its members, Generation Z tends to be both and aware and tolerant of social issues. Not only is Generation Z aware of these issues, but they tend to do something about them. Beyond speaking about social issues on social media, a study conducted by Barna group shows that 68% of teens participate in volunteer work at least once every few months.[23] Some of the social issues that Generation Z is particularly interested and involved are those

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[19] Feed, A OneHope Initiative, *What We Know About Gen Z*, 5.

[20] Twenge, *IGen*, 243.

[21] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 46.

[22] Jean M. Twenge, "The Evidence for Generation Me and Against Generation We," *Emerging Adulthood* 1, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 11–16.

[23] "The Myth of the Lazy Teen," *Barna Group*, last modified September 2, 2016, accessed December 6, 2020, https://www.barna.com/research/teen-attitudes-toward-service/.

concerning people who identify as being LGBTQA+. The vast majority of the members of

Generation Z were still children when same-gender marriage was legalized in the United States

in 2015. As Generation Z continued to grow, so did their interest in issues involving sexuality

and gender. In fact, race is not the only category in which Generation Z demonstrates diversity.

Research conducted at the UCLA School of Law in 2019 concluded that 1 in 3 participating

members of Generation Z identified as being LGBT.[24] Twenge has found that members of

Generation Z, who have grown up with members of the LGBTQ community being normalized,

to be tolerant and very accepting of the community, regardless of their own sexual or gender

identity. Twenge suggests that the attitudes of Generation Z could come from their

overwhelmingly individualistic mindset.[25] As far as they are concerned, each person should be

free to do whatever they want as long as it does not hurt anyone. In *iGen*, Twenge records one

Generation Z adolescent as saying,

> My view on LGBTQ is the same as on other people having sex before marriage: I don't
> particularly care. I wouldn't do it, but it has nothing to do with me, it doesn't affect me in
> the slightest, and I have no right to tell other people what to do or believe… I wouldn't
> go to a protest for it or anything, but they can do what they want.[26]

This teenager's attitude is in alignment with the majority of his fellow religious members of

Generation Z. There are some members of Generation Z (often, those who come from Christian

backgrounds) who continue to struggle to accept LGBTQ lifestyles, but they are in the

minority.[27] It is worth noting, however, that while Generation Z is undoubtedly tolerant of

LGBTQ issues and are incredibly diverse when it comes to sexuality and gender, their views and

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[24] The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, "LGBT Data & Demographics," *Williams Institute*, last modified January 2019, accessed December 6, 2020, https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/visualization/lgbt-stats/?topic=LGBT#density.

[25] Twenge, *IGen*, 230.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., 232.

understanding of these issues are a product of the increasing individualistic ideals of the generations that came before them.[28] Especially in the case of those adolescent members of Generation Z who classify as nonreligious, Generation Z are not the first to support LGBTQ peers, but they may be the loudest. In fact, a hallmark of this generation is their proclivity to campaign and stand for a cause. Many members of Generation Z are outspokenly in support of LGBTQ rights.

The final characteristic of Generation Z that youth pastors must understand is that they are growing up in a post Christian world. Feed's 2020 research on Generation Z showed them to be "the least religious generation ever," with just 51% of participating students identifying as being a Christian.[29] However, rather than identifying with another religion, many young people are defining themselves as agnostic, atheist, or "none of the above."[30] In their research surrounding reaching Generation Z for Christ in a digital age, David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock have dubbed this nonreligious generation the "nones." They have found that, even among young people who grew up Christian, only 10% are consistently and actively engaged in church and Christianity.[31] The rise of the "nones" is important to note because it gives insight into the ethics, beliefs, and convictions of Generation Z. Even more importantly, Generation Z's rise in nones sheds light on how the church can meet their specific needs. Generation Z is marked by hardship and difficulty, causing them to struggle with mental health issues. For them, the world can be a dark and lonely place. However, youth pastors can use this data to see that they have access to what Generation Z truly needs and is crying out for: the hope that is found in

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[28] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 47.
[29] Feed, A OneHope Initiative, *What We Know About Gen Z*, 7.
[30] Ibid.
[31] David Kinnaman and Mark Matlock, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2019), 33.

close, personal relationship with Christ and His people. With that being said, before youth pastors are ready to effectively meet the needs of Generation Z, the many mental health struggles that they face must first be acknowledged and understood.

Generation Z and Mental Health

Even before the uniquely stressful addition of COVID-19 and social unrest to 2020, Generation Z was experiencing several different mental health struggles. From social media and cyberbullying to stress about making life decisions, Generation Z has a lot to juggle. Out of all of their mental health battles, anxiety seems to prevail above the rest. As far back as 2012, anxiety disorders among adolescents were rising by 20%.[32] Along with anxiety, stress is rampant amongst members of Generation Z. Unfortunately, this does not come as a surprise considering the multitude of stressful situations and events that mark the history and profile of Generation Z. In order to effectively reach Generation Z for Christ, an overview of their daily fight against stressors and mental health issues must be acknowledged and understood.

It would seem that one of the biggest sources of mental health issues amongst Generation Z is also one of their most distinctive traits: their near-constant use of the Internet and social media. Social media provides a platform for independence and self-searching while also introducing the stressors of comparison, information saturation, and exposure to countless different types of sensitive topics and media. In a piece written for

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[32] Claire McCarthy, "Anxiety in Teens Is Rising: What's Going On?," *HealthyChildren.Org*, last modified November 20, 2019, accessed April 14, 2020, https://www.healthychildren.org/English/health-issues/conditions/emotional-problems/Pages/Anxiety-Disorders.aspx.

The Atlantic, Dr. Jean M. Twenge reported the following data when researching Generation

Z, their mental health, and their usage of social media:

> Eighth-graders who spend 10 or more hours a week on social media are 56 percent more likely to say they're unhappy than those who devote less time to social media. Admittedly, 10 hours a week is a lot. But those who spend six to nine hours a week on social media are still 47 percent more likely to say they are unhappy than those who use social media even less. The opposite is true of in-person interactions. Those who spend an above-average amount of time with their friends in person are 20 percent less likely to say they're unhappy than those who hang out for a below-average amount of time.[33]

Thus, it can be seen that while social media may be meant to be used as a tool for

connection, it often leaves Generation Z lonelier more unhappy than ever. It would seem

that while Generation Z is still undeniably attached to technology and social media, they are

beginning to notice some of the problems that come with them. In a 2020 study conducted

by the Barna group, members of Generation Z reported that they were experiencing several

different difficulties with their technological devices (see Figure 3). [34]

While social media opens the door to Generation Z for endless possibilities, it is not

without its pitfalls. Even in a world where the accessibility of global communication is

constantly at their fingertips, members of Generation Z are experiencing feelings of

isolation and loneliness. Despite being labeled as the connected generation, Generation Z

struggles to feel a real connection with those around them. Additionally, the use of social

media can create the possibility of issues of comparison, leading to insecurity. These

feelings of inadequacy have been shown to produce complications with depression in young

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[33] Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?," *The Atlantic*, September 2017, accessed December 6, 2020, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/.
[34] "Technology Promises Connection, but Gen Z Sees a Paradox," *Barna Group*, accessed December 7, 2020, https://www.barna.com/research/teens-devices-connection/.

people.[35] This is not to say that social media and technology cannot be remarkable tools in the lives of Generation Z, but their dangers must be acknowledged and addressed as well.
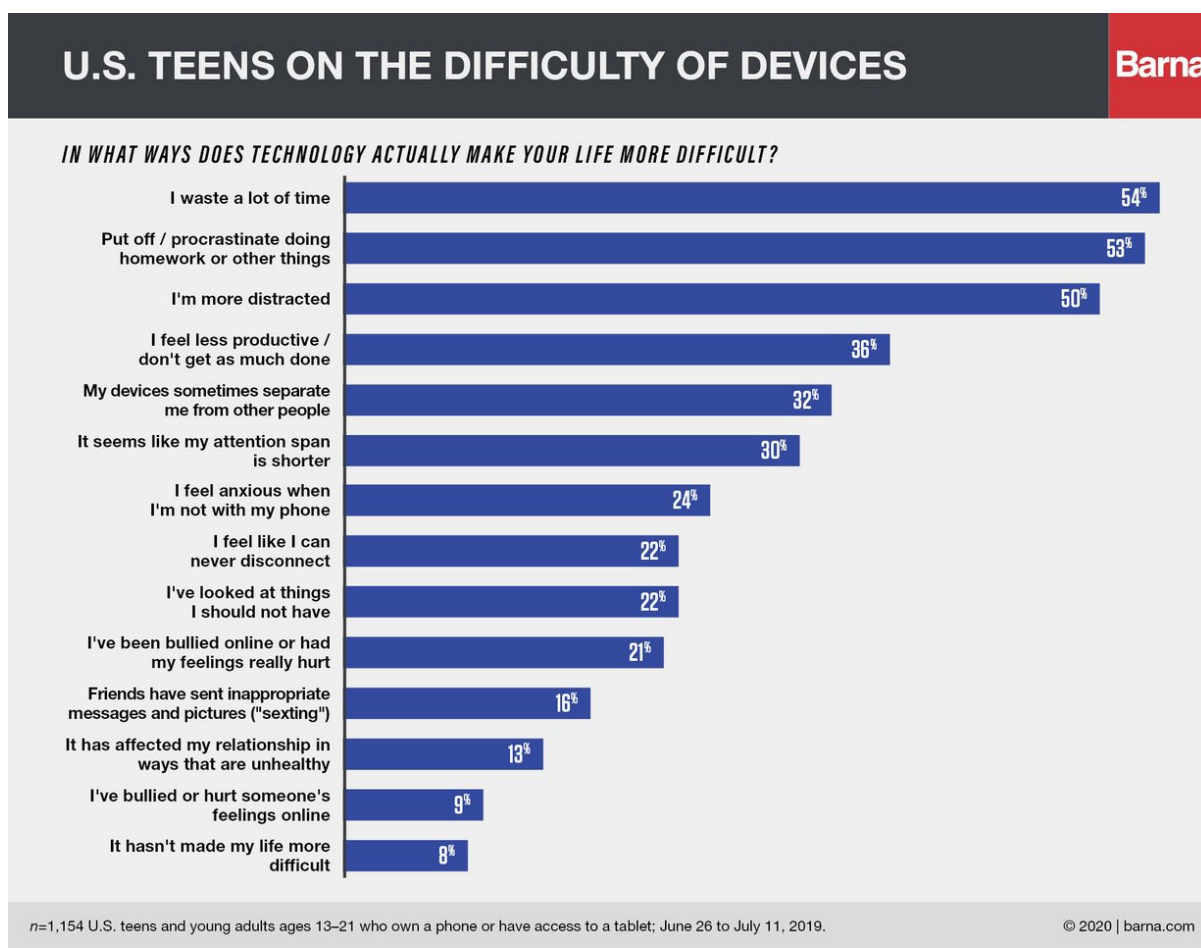

FIGURE 3

It has been shown that social media can be a significant source of stress for Generation Z. Still, it is not the only obstacle that today's adolescents face when it comes to their mental health. According to the research of Claire McCarthy, MD, who works as a pediatrician at Boston Children's Hospital, three stressors that affect every adolescent

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[35] Twenge, *IGen*, 101.

regardless of their own personal or medical history include "high expectations and pressure to succeed," "a world that feels scary and threatening," and, of course, "social media."[36]

Much of the stress that Generation Z endures stems from the pressure of decision making. This burden likely arises from the anxiety and urgency that they feel to be financially stable and independent. The reason for this awareness and desire in young people is because they have grown up in a world after the Great Recession of 2008. Though Generation Z was young at the time that the recession occurred, they are certainly old enough to see and understand the lasting effects of this crisis on their families. After they watched what their parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles went through, Generation Z is determined to avoid that kind of desperation for themselves. If this sounds like a lot of pressure to be put on a young person, that is because it is.

Being that Generation Z is largely a generation of adolescents at the time of writing, it is important to acknowledge and understand the common struggles that face any adolescent during their current stage of development. Renowned psychologist, Dr. Erik Erikson introduces us to his theory for the stages of human development. Adolescent members of Generation Z are most often working through Stage 5, also known as the "adolescence period."[37] During this stage of development, adolescents are seeking to find or learn their identity, in effect discovering who they truly are. They sort through a wide variety of shifts and changes in their world, expectations that are placed on them, and begin to form their own values and opinions. Completing this stage in a healthy way can result in a firm identity, while moving onto the next phase of development in unhealth could result in

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[36] McCarthy, "Anxiety in Teens Is Rising."
[37] Gabriel A. Orenstein and Lindsay Lewis, "Eriksons Stages of Psychosocial Development," in *StatPearls* (Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing, 2021), accessed March 17, 2021, http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK556096/.

role confusion.[38] One of the most important aspects of this stage is that the adolescent

begins to understand and embody the roles that are a part of his or her life. This is so critical

because, at this point in a person's life, their roles define them.[39] With the drastic shift in

lifestyle and, for some, roles and identity, it comes as no surprise that Generation Z was

highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Much of Generation Z sees the world as a threatening place. Growing up in an era

after Columbine, gun violence is a reality to Generation Z.[40] The American Psychological

Association ("APA") found that three in every four Generation Z adolescents report the

possibility of gun violence as being a significant source of stress, and over half of those

students sometimes experience stress at the thought of a shooting occurring at their school.[41]

Generation Z continues to show their interest in social issues, though it does add to their

stress. The APA also found that members of Generation Z reported more stress about issues

in the news (including school shootings, suicide rates, climate change, immigration, and

sexual harassment) than participating adults did.[42] These points paint a picture of a

generation of activists who care very much about the world around them. Issues that affect

others seem to affect Generation Z. However, the question is, are they biting off more than

they can chew with their social justice interests? Is there a better way for them to be

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Urie Bronfenbrenner, *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*, unknown edition. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), 6.

[40] James Brooke, "TERROR IN LITTLETON: THE OVERVIEW; 2 STUDENTS IN COLORADO SCHOOL SAID TO GUN DOWN AS MANY AS 23 AND KILL THEMSELVES IN A SIEGE," *The New York Times*, April 21, 1999, sec. U.S., accessed March 25, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/21/us/terror-littleton-overview-2-students-colorado-school-said-gun-down-many-23-kill.html.

[41] *Stress in America: Generation Z*, Stress in America Survey (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association, October 2018), 2, https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2018/stress-gen-z.pdf.

[42] Ibid., 3.

informed and active with these issues without taking on insurmountable amounts of anxiety and stress?

Although Generation Z is facing a world of trials with the odds stacked against their mental health, there is hope. As churches and youth pastors continue to seek to understand the uniqueness of the backgrounds, beliefs, and struggles of Generation Z, they will be able to more effectively and strategically meet the needs of this generation. In order to do so, youth pastors and leasers must first understand the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellness of Generation Z.

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The introduction of COVID-19, social distancing, and all the other repercussions of the virus intensified the already-difficult journey for Generation Z to form their identity and understand their role. Once it became clear that the world was not going to return to normal in a matter of weeks, the activities and hobbies that gave many adolescents their identities came to a screeching halt. With shutdowns occurring across the nation, students were forced to rethink what it meant to be a student, an athlete, or even a friend. Even before COVID-19 brought on new stress, anxiety, and social distancing, Generation Z was already feeling the effects of stress and loneliness.[43] Now, with the introduction of COVID-19 and all of its ramifications, it would seem that the mental health issues that Generation Z was already battling have become even more of a struggle for them.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the main concerns of Generation Z have been the health and safety of their loved ones, as well as several social justice issues that have come to

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[43] "Only One-Third of Young Adults Feels Cared for by Others," *Barna Group*, accessed April 16, 2020, https://www.barna.com/research/global-connection-isolation/.

light during that time. Both of these things are largely out of their control, contributing to feelings of helplessness and stress. Unfortunately, research shows that much of Generation Z was already struggling with mental health in some capacity before the COVID-19 pandemic fully hit in March of 2020. Now, due to the global scale of COVID-19, there is not a single member of Generation Z who has been completely unaffected by the pandemic and its societal effects and implications. A recent study found that during height of the COVID-19 pandemic, members of Generation Z described themselves as "feeling helpless to protect loved ones; experiencing challenges maintaining friendships remotely; missing out on academic and extracurricular celebrations and milestones; and coping with school closures, transitions to distant learning, and the displacement from the school campus settings."[44]

There is no doubt that the culmination of all of these stressors is having an effect on the mental health of Generation Z. Their need for connection and desire to gain back the opportunities lost to the COVID-19 pandemic are seemingly put on hold until further notice. As the pandemic and its ramifications on Generation Z continue to unfold through the end of 2020 and into 2021, the entire scale of its impact remains to be seen. However, there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly affected Generation Z as a whole. Tim Elmore, author of *The Pandemic Population*, notes that of each of the generations that have survived the COVID-19 pandemic, Generation Z is particularly "rattled."[45] To further clarify the struggles of Generation Z following the cOVID-19 pandemic, Elmore suggests that four potentially negative outcomes could be the normalization of either isolation, panic and anxiety, or a "scarcity

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[44] Chinwe Efuribe et al., "Coping With the COVID-19 Crisis: A Call for Youth Engagement and the Inclusion of Young People in Matters That Affect Their Lives," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 67, no. 1 (July 1, 2020): 16–17.
[45] Tim Elmore, *The Pandemic Population: Eight Strategies to Help Generation Z Rediscover Hope After Coronavirus* (The United States of America: Poet Gardner Publishing, 2020), 15.

mindset."[46] With that being said, that is not the end for Generation Z. While there is a potential for negative outcomes for Generation Z, there is a potential for positive outcomes as well.

Moving forward, youth pastors must keep this in mind and continue to research and ask questions in order to continue to meet the needs of Generation Z. In actuality, rather than introducing a whole new set of struggles for Generation Z, the COVID-19 pandemic has simply brought to light many battles that were lying just below the surface. Now is the time for the church to seek to understand these struggles and come alongside Generation Z in order to move forward together in healthiness, wholeness, and holiness.

Gaps in the Literature

Each of the topics that are covered within this review of literature are currently emerging and therefore constantly evolving. While Generation Z has been around since the mid-nineties, many of even the oldest members of Generation Z are still living at home. This means that Generation Z is still a subject to influence from several different sources, and therefore a subject to change. Additionally, the collective and ongoing effects of COVID-19 on society itself, let alone the mental health of Generation Z, remains to be seen. Although early research paints a fuzzy picture of what to expect in coming years, it will take more research and more time for that picture to come into complete focus. With that being said, because this research centers on currently unfolding topics from a religious and ministerial perspective, academic sources can be difficult to find. For the purpose of this study, some popular sources were utilized. Nonetheless, these sources still provided valuable contributions to this paper with their own research and insights into the mental and spiritual health and wellbeing of Generation Z.

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[46] Ibid., 59.

Conclusion

Generation Z has a unique amount and assortment of challenges that they have endured and will continue to wrestle with in 2020 and beyond. One of the greatest of those challenges has shown itself to be that of mental health. Issues such as loneliness, stress, and anxiety are silent and invisible enemies, yet their effects are both very visible and impossible to ignore. Moving forward out of 2020, arguably one of the most stressful and anxiety-producing years in recent history, youth pastors must seek to understand the mental health issues that Generation Z is facing. Beyond that, youth pastors must be sure to incorporate mental health into their ministry to today's adolescents. For a generation that is moving farther and farther away from any interest or involvement the church and the Gospel, it is critical that youth pastors meet them right where they are at rather than attempt to draw them back with aged tactics and strategies. Generation Z is unlike any other generation before it. 2020 is unlike any year that has come before it. In this new decade, the 2020s, youth pastors must be willing to change and adapt in order to meet the needs of today's adolescents by building their ministry structure and strategy around leading today's youth to Christ, their only solace and source for mental health, emotional wholeness, and spiritual holiness in a world turned upside down. There is most certainly hope for Generation Z past 2020. The task of today's youth pastors is to help them to see it, too.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, youth pastors have been facing unprecedented challenges and a steep learning curve when it comes to reaching today's adolescents (typically, students aged 12-18) for Christ. In order to effectively minister to Generation Z, youth pastors of today must keep in mind their unique characteristics and challenges, particularly those involving their mental health. In order to better understand how COVID-19 is adding to these unique challenges, interviews will be conducted with youth pastors both locally and nationwide.

The subjects of this study were selected based on a brief series of qualifications which included their involvement with a church youth group and their availability for the study. In order to recruit participants, an interest message was be sent out to different youth pastors serving in different churches across different cities and states. Each participant was a staff member at a Protestant Christian church within the United States of America. While the focus of this study is on ministering to Generation Z in light of their unique mental health challenges, study restrictions were put into place, so the study was unable to utilize any participants who were under the age of eighteen due to study restrictions. Consequently, the participant pool was completely comprised of youth pastors who are above the age of eighteen. Utilizing youth pastors as participants for this study was also insightful and useful because their responses helped to gain a firmer grasp on the current state of Generation Z youth ministry students in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the typical awareness of youth pastors of their students' mental health struggles.

Both qualitative and quantitative data was collected from participants in the form of interviews along with a preliminary survey conducted through Google Forms. Based upon the

participants' location and availability, the correspondence with each interviewer took place over email, on the telephone, or via a Zoom video call. In each of these cases, the participants' responses were recorded via an audio recording and typed transcript (face-to-face, telephone, and Zoom interviews) or in writing (email correspondence).

The purpose of these interviews was to gain an understanding of each of the participants' youth group structure; the overall mental health and wellbeing of the students involved in each ministry; how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted that youth group both in terms of youth group structure and the mental health of the youth students; and how much the participants understand, are aware of, or engage with the mental health of their students. Thus, the interview questions were designed in order to gain insight into these topics within the specific contexts of each participant's youth group. The types of questions asked include the size of their youth group, the overall structure of their youth group, and the mental health and wellness of the students participating in their respective youth groups before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the height of it, and presently.

Following the study, the data was analyzed in order to find any trends in participant responses and study the differing viewpoints and strategies of each youth pastor. Each response was compared and contrasted with the rest in order to determine how each youth ministry is currently responding to the mental health issues of Generation Z amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Data was also analyzed to determine if youth pastors are typically aware of the mental health struggles faced by their students and if they address those struggles within their perspective youth ministries.

In summary, this study evaluates the current state of affairs when it comes to youth ministry in 2020, as well as what youth pastors may be missing and what they are doing well in a

post-pandemic context. By gaining a better understanding of current youth ministry strategies, structures, and awareness of mental health struggles, this study will help to determine what needs to be done differently—or the same—in youth ministry moving forward in 2020 and beyond.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

The data for this research was conducted through a series of interviews. Prior to each interview, interviewees were asked to complete a brief survey via Google Forms. This survey addressed the more brief, objective questions such as student attendance and current methods of meeting with students. Each of the participants completed an interview via Zoom. These interviews consisted of eight different questions and lasted for about thirty minutes apiece. The questions asked in each interview were designed to encourage conversation about the structure of each youth ministry, the perceived mental health of the interviewee's students, the impact of COVID-19 on each youth group and its students, and how each youth ministry implemented social media within their strategy.

While there were four participants of the Zoom interviews, only 3 of those participants completed the preliminary survey. Thus, it should be noted that the data gathered from the survey is only representative of three quarters of those who participated in the study. Each of the four participants classified themselves as full-time youth pastors. It is interesting to note that certain participants worked as the directors of the youth ministries over multiple different church campuses, thus giving them a further reach of impact in youth ministry and a broader perspective of youth ministry students. Each participant was a staff member in a different Protestant Christian church within the United States of America. Each of the participants' youth ministry programs were of a different size. In the interest of keeping the interviewees anonymous, the participants will be referred to as Pastor A, Pastor B, Pastor C, and Pastor D.

The Impact of the Virus on Student Engagement

Interwoven throughout each interview were questions about the impact of the virus on each youth group. From the structure, to the attendance and engagement, to the perceived mental health of students, it was one of the goals of this study to assess the reach of the impact of COVID-19 on youth ministry. One of the interesting findings of this study was discovered in the preliminary surveys. 100% of participating youth pastors reported that they had observed a change in the overall student engagement with their youth ministry since the COVID-19 pandemic (see fig. 4).

Have you seen a change in overall student engagement with your youth ministry since the pandemic?

3 responses
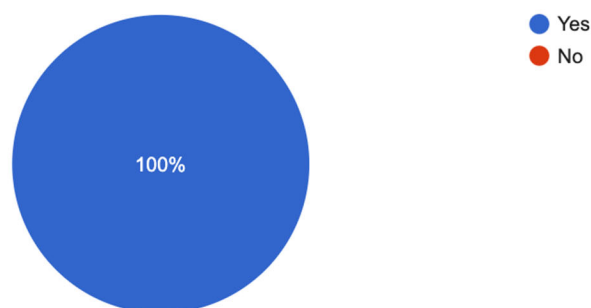
FIGURE 4

When asked how the pandemic has changed the structure of their youth ministry, Pastor A stated that, "I don't think it affected attendance, I don't think affected lean-in. I think what has been affected is... I think what has been affected isn't the mental state of some of our students, I think the perceived mental state of some of our students, because sometimes what students calling anxiety is just stress." Interestingly enough, the numbers reported by each participant of the survey aligned with this point. While attendance was down during the height of the COVID-19

pandemic and has not returned to its original peak before the virus, each participant reported

rising numbers at the time that they filled out the survey (see fig. 5).

On average, about how many students regularly attended the youth ministry that you serve before the COVID-19 pandemic, during the pandemic, and currently? (e.g. 150; 35; 75)

3 responses

400; 200; 300

1700; 800; 1200

300-500

FIGURE 5

However, while one participant reported that they did not necessarily observe a loss of

engagement among students, there were others who did. These numbers raise several questions.

The first question, "Why did the numbers drop?" can be answered easily with words and

concepts such as, "quarantine," "isolation," and "social distancing." However, the fact that the

numbers across the board have yet to reach their original attendance points to the existence of a

bigger issue. This leads to our second question, "Why are many youth groups struggling to reach,

let alone exceed, their original attendance pre-pandemic?" The third and final question, "Why is

attendance presently rising?" could be the key to understanding the current needs of adolescent

Generation Z, as well as how churches are currently succeeding or struggling to meet them.

The Impact of COVID Restrictions, New Procedures, and Changes in Structure

While some participants reported that COVID-19 had barely changed the current state of

their youth ministry, others shared that the virus and its impact had greatly affected their

ministry. For many youth groups, social distancing significantly influenced their ability to meet

in person, at least for a time, resulting in a substantial structure shift. In some cases, this shift, as previously mentioned, caused a dip in attendance and engagement for some youth groups. When asked about how each participant's youth ministry was affected by social distancing, they had this to say:

Pastor A:

> I'll say they don't distance. You can tell them to back on up, but they don't back up. And so, as a youth group, we don't police it … But they don't distance, they don't want to distance, they're hugging each other. It's like, I'm not going to force it. I'm not going to force them to distance, you know, and say, like six feet back up, we create spaces, within our rows within our seating, we block off seats, but they break those rules all the time.

Pastor B:

> For us, [we] went from on-site to online. And for us, we didn't have a great online platform. We so we had to open a YouTube account. We had to like, you know, get familiar with Zoom. And then even in that, how are you connecting the students through Zoom? And I'll tell you, there's some things that we did well, there's some things that we still need to grow. The philosophy difference changed overnight. And now we're back open on-site, we're streaming our services online, but the engagement is super low. So we are having services weekly. But [for] those people that can't make it, we do have a platform for that on YouTube for them to be on there. We have someone chatting on there with them. But the engagement super low.

Pastor C:

> It was crazy trying to get students on Zoom. I mean, there might be some pastors that have figured it out, we never really did. Luckily, I'm a youth pastor in Mississippi, so it's not too crazy out here. And so, starting in June, it was pretty normal after that. And so, I only had to do it for about two months. But yeah, trying to get students on, trying to come up with creative games, we were trying to just do every single thing we could, you know, inviting students telling them to invite, like, 'can you at least get them on a Zoom for an hour?' And so, trying to get them to be engaged over a computer when, you know, they're not really engaged normally. And so, it was definitely a good learning curve. For me, I'm so glad we didn't have to do it for long. I mean, I really feel for these pastors that either are still doing it, or had to do it for you know, almost a year. We [held online services] for a month and a half.

Pastor D:

> I would say it's affected different seasons different ways. So, [in March], everything started shutting down, we went to online on the weekend and for our youth, which is

Wednesday night. And so, we did everything on Instagram Live and did some stuff throughout the week … and then at the end of August, we came back in person with some new protocols in place, with some distancing, and some masks and all that kind of stuff … I don't think has changed our strategy in terms of like, what we're doing week to week is pretty similar, but it just looks a little different. Because we're trying to do our best to keep it safe. One of the things we kind of, I feel like we decided early on was with teenagers, it's really, really difficult to police distancing, but maybe a little easier to police masks. So, we leaned a little more that way. And the distancing may be a little less strict.

While one pastor stated that his ministry did not experience much change as a result of social distancing and other effects of COVID-19, the others shared some difficulties with adjusting to the new reality introduced with the virus. However, now that most youth groups (including each of the participants') are now meeting once again in person, they are finding students stretching the boundaries of social distancing and other restrictions. This could point to a deeper desire for connection and community among adolescent Generation Z.

Connecting via Social Media

As seen in fig. 5, out of the pool of participants of the survey, one reported that the current attendance of their youth group is up to 75% of their original numbers prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another reported their attendance to be back to about 70% of their original count. Considering their numbers during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (50% and about 47%, respectively), this is quite a significant increase. In order to understand why some youth groups were experiencing a rise in attendance, each participant was asked about the structure and strategy they applied to the ministries that they served.

One similarity between the interviews of multiple different participants was the utilization of social media. It would appear that those ministries that had a preexisting social media presence prior to the pandemic saw a higher rate of student engagement during the height

of the pandemic than those that did not. Pastor A, whose ministry is currently experiencing significant growth after the COVID-19 pandemic, explained that the youth ministry he serves in uses social media "as much as we can." Pastor B called social media "our greatest asset," sharing that one month into quarantine he created a TikTok profile for his youth group, and his first post had between four and five thousand views. This interviewee also said that more recently his leadership team has seen more engagement with the content that they share via Instagram Reels, a video platform they use to produce and share 30 second videos of student leaders giving devotionals.

With all of that being said, research shows that there is a right and a wrong way to reach students with technology and social media. Since Generation Z is a generation of digital natives, those involved with youth ministry must understand that adolescents already have their own tastes, their own sense of humor, and their own preconceived idea of what is and is not worth their time when it comes to social media. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic over the summer of 2020, Pastor D found great success in his team's approach to utilizing social media. Prior to the start of the pandemic and nationwide shutdowns, Pastor D's youth group had previously established a strong social media presence on the popular social networking and media sharing app, Instagram. In order to remain relevant with his students, Pastor D decided to get rid of the youth group's less popular Twitter and Snapchat accounts in order to focus on the medium that had by far the most engagement among students. Thus, during the time his youth group was not able to meet, Pastor D and his team leveraged the social media following they had previously built up on Instagram by creating a consistent and diverse upload schedule throughout the week. This weekly schedule involved interactive games and trivia, giveaways, devotions, compilations of memes and TikToks, the promotion of other church content such as the

livestreams of Sunday services, and an online stream of their typical Wednesday night services.

Even as engagement began to fade, Pastor D noted that the interactive trivia and the streamed

church services had by far the most engagement. This shows that students are more interested in

interactive content in terms of the trivia and could also point to their desire for spiritual

connection and a return to normalcy in terms of the streamed services.

Pastor C, who found success connecting with students via TikTok and Instagram Reels,

mentioned the importance of understanding and posting what students are interested in and want

to see. He stated that his team made sure that they were:

> Being consistent and posting, like, content that they want to see, you know, because they
> don't want to see a picture of me all the time preaching on Instagram. And so, we
> purposely don't. We show diversity, we try to show them having a good time. We take
> pictures of us doing the games, we take pictures, you know, of what would draw in the
> unchurched. You know, because if we're always posting pictures of them in worship, I
> mean, that's not going to draw an unchurched. And so, we try and utilize the fun aspect of
> youth, get them in the room. And we've seen, you know, students start saying yes to
> come in, because they see, it looks like a good time.

Here, we see Pastor C implementing the idea of sharing what students truly care about and deem

as important. One way that he does this is to include both youth students and adult youth leaders

on the social media team. This gives the students both a platform and a role within the youth

group, which has proven to be a significant draw for youth students in Pastor C's youth group.

In contrast, Pastor B shared that his youth group did not have a very significant social

media presence and were left trying to build one quickly once the nation began to shut down due

to the COVID-19 pandemic. He stated that his youth group's attitude toward social media before

the pandemic was not intentional, nor did they value it enough. Continuing to reflect, he said,

> I think there should be a value in social media, great missionaries. What do they do to
> effectively communicate the gospel? They learn the language, they learn the culture, so
> they can communicate the gospel. And I think in youth ministry, we should learn the
> language and learn the culture and the language of this generation social media. And so, I

think we found ourselves, you know, not being as effective because we didn't have a higher value on it pre, you know, COVID.

While social media, when leveraged well, proved to be an effective method of reaching students during the height of the pandemic, multiple participants observed a more recent decrease of interest and engagement with social media content. In fact, Pastor B noted a phenomenon he referred to as, "screen fatigue." Due to social distancing, many students in his area attend school online, often via video chat with their teachers. Essentially, after using technology all day long in an educational setting, students were opting to take a break from learning via technology, which resulted in what Pastor B explained as a "lack of engagement… especially on Zoom." This, again, is where the strategy and method of social media use is incredibly important to making an impact on Generation Z.

However, perhaps there is an even better way to reach Generation Z beyond social media. While consistency has been shown by Pastor C to be a crucial element to the utilization of social media, Pastor A may have found another key to using this tool effectively: using it in a way that is complementary. Pastor A had a unique perspective when it comes to using social media. Interestingly, he also had some of the highest in-person engagement out of each of the participants. He explained that his youth group always uses social media as complimentary content to whatever content they are primarily producing. For his specific context, that happens to be weekly in-person services. Rather than simply posting whatever regular content his ministry produces for in-person services to social media, Pastor A noted that his team produced content created specifically for the platform of social media in addition to their primary content. In this way, Pastor A and his team acknowledged that "there is a proper place for [social media]. It's not all going to go digital, and it's not all going to go away… And we have to leverage [social media] regardless of if there's a quarantine or not." With this quote, Pastor A brings up a

very important point: the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects are temporary. While social media was and is a crucial element to the effectiveness of ministry to Generation Z, it is not the only strategy. Social media as a tool works best when it is rightly utilized as a compliment to the ministry that is done in-person and in community with Generation Z.

A Dip in Enthusiasm

While the number of students in attendance at youth group services may be rising, more than one participant of this study reported that they had observed a dip in the engagement of their students in the form of a gradual lack of enthusiasm. Pastor C told an anecdotal story of one student who was once very active in the youth ministry at his church completely stepping away from the youth group during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing. Not only was that student no longer attending youth group, but Pastor C disclosed that that student's parents made it mandatory for him to attend church with them on Sunday mornings. Pastor C also reported that while he would attempt to connect with the student on Sunday mornings, the student still has not returned to youth group on Wednesdays.

As a part of the preliminary survey, each participant was asked to describe the current overall mental health of their students in their own words. In alignment with Pastor C's story, one study participant reported that, "Every student is different, but I have an overall sense that there is a lack of enthusiasm and joy about life in general. Some worse than others - and joy and enthusiasm aren't completely gone, but noticeably diminished." Thus, we see once again that this lack of engagement may stem from a general lack of enthusiasm within youth group students. Pastor D elaborated on his experience with this common theme within the context of the youth ministry that he serves:

> I think in general, the thing that I've sensed is maybe a little less energy and excitement about life. You know, one of the things about young people that I think is awesome is just a lot of a lot of energy, a lot of excitement, a lot of joy, a lot of enthusiasm, a lot of passion, just naturally about random stuff, I would say. It's not totally gone … There's not as much—I think—some of the energy and optimism and hope maybe has been sucked out of people just because it's been such a hard draining long year season.

Pastor D went on to explain that while he certainly does not perceive students to be completely hopeless or miserable on average, he has indeed observed a dip in joy. So, in youth groups that are not necessarily experiencing a dip in engagement in terms of attendance, there is a common factor effecting each one: a loss of excitement. There is still the very real issue of mental health among Generation Z. Then, what can youth pastors do to help students to find joy and connect with God, the church, and each other in a meaningful way? Some youth ministries utilized social media to address the topic of mental health.

Addressing Mental Health

When asked about the perceived overall mental health of each of their students, multiple participants described a general decline. Pastor C identified several specific areas of struggle within the lives of his youth students, reporting,

> I think there has been an impact. You know, loneliness, depression—those things are real. And we know that data when it comes to suicide, we haven't been impacted directly by that here, but I know that's been high. I think for me, what was crazy is we just moved here. And so, my kids didn't finish their first year of school. And so, I think that that's the uniqueness of it: they didn't even have traction with friends … And so, think about even the mental health of your identity.

Pastor C goes on to tell a story about his daughter, who is both a member of his youth group and of Generation Z. She is a soccer player, so she found herself struggling with her perception of her own identity once the COVID-19 pandemic began to cause shutdowns, leading from cancelled practices to a completely cancelled season. Not only that, but she experienced a

dramatic shift in her social life from the move earlier in the year, with the added stress of the pandemic, and the newfound obstacles to interacting with other teenagers in the form of shutdowns and social distancing. Pastor C described his daughter as asking the question of "If I am not a soccer player, who am I?" If even his daughter, who is a believer, was so impacted by the pandemic, Pastor C brought up the point that students without a strong faith in God must have had a much more difficult struggle with issues like loneliness and identity. This further pushes the importance of reaching Generation Z in a way that intentionally addresses issues like mental health.

Recognizing this prevalent struggle among their students, each of the four participants had addressed and/plan to address the topic of mental health in the context of their youth groups. In general, most participants chose to do so in person, with the exception of Pastor A's YouTube show streaming conversations about mental health. Several participants emphasized the importance of interweaving the topic of mental health throughout all of their content. Pastor C described a discussion he had with his students via Zoom early on in quarantine. He discussed the positives and negatives of isolation with his students. Pastor C also described how he was able to share his testimony on a few occasions, within which he shares how God delivered him from a struggle with anxiety when he was a teenager. Pastor C even noted that this led to several one-on-one conversations with students where he was able to support and encourage them after they shared similar struggles.

In another similar approach, Pastor B mentioned that he had preached sermons about identity and helping students to find how to make an impact and utilize their gifts, even at home. Understanding that mental health is an ongoing battle for Generation Z, Pastor B mentioned his plans to preach a series of sermons about emotions in May of 2021.

For some, like Pastor D, mental health may not have been addressed in a specific series or other topical content but was instead alluded to as an overarching theme. He explained,

> I would say we tried our best to weave it in as much as possible to everything we were doing, because it felt so—still does feel this way—It's such a massive focal point of what everybody in the world is dealing with, and even more so probably young people, that it's hard to talk about anything without it seeping into it in some way … It's just, it's such a prevalent thing right now that I feel like it was a part of everything that we were doing, and still is a little bit.

Both Pastor B and Pastor D recognize the importance of continuing the conversation. Since mental health struggles are such a real and prevalent issue for Generation Z, it is so important for youth pastors to be addressing those issues when trying to reach them. Having mental health interwoven into many conversations during the COVID-19 pandemic was very effective because those struggles had become interwoven into the everyday lives of students.

The Effectiveness of Reliable Resources

According to this research, those youth pastors who felt they had adequate resources to understand and therefore address the topic of mental health had a higher engagement with their youth ministry. Those who were able to name the resources that they used were more likely to have a strong understanding of the mental health of their students. Of those who participated in the preliminary survey, only one of the participants chose the option stating that they felt that they did have access to adequate resources in order to address the mental health of their students (see fig. 6). One interviewee even said,

> To be honest with you, that's something I definitely want to grow in because I either resort back to either teachings I've heard or there was like one book I read in a counseling class … a year and a half ago, maybe two years ago. And so, most of the time I revert back to things that are in that book. And so, I mean, honestly, having this conversation with you, lets me know I probably should, maybe do a little more research and have things refer back to.

This pastor was among three out of the four interviewees who mentioned that the church they worked at also employed a mental health professional that they could refer students to in the case of mental health struggles. However, if what Pastor A was alluding to is true and that many adolescent members of Generation Z are truly dealing with issues of stress and identity, students truly do need pastoral counsel. Thus, having access to and knowing where to find resources to better understand students is becoming a more and more important aspect of youth ministry. Additionally, having the resources to walk with students through mental health struggles in a healthy way can be a great way to build strong community among students and youth ministry leadership.

Do you feel that you have adequate resources and/or knowledge to address the mental health of your students?
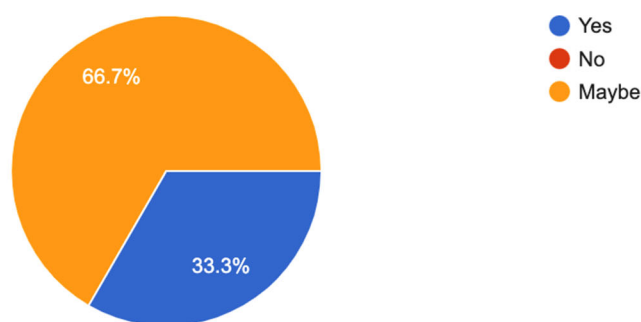
3 responses

FIGURE 6

Meeting the Need for an Authentic Church Community

Another way that participants found to address mental health in a tangible and practical way was to build community. As previously identified, one of the main needs and desires of any adolescent is to find belonging.[47] Thus, it is no surprise that participants who focused their

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[47] Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, 167.

efforts on building intentional community among their students saw the most success in terms of student engagement. Following the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, students experienced a heightened awareness of the mental health struggles that they were already facing, particularly, loneliness and confusion about identity. Now, concerning youth ministry in 2020 and beyond, youth pastors have found some of their greatest success through fostering an environment that allows for intentional community among students and leaders. By building an environment where students feel safe to be themselves and share their emotions and experiences, participating youth pastors found that students were beginning to once again engage fully with their youth group.

One example of this success can be found within Pastor C's youth group. He described a very personal and intentional approach to reaching out to students. Pastor C said, "And so honestly, like traditional, which I think we got so accustomed to not having to do because of social media and stuff was like texting and inviting them. That was something that we really kind of instituted back. And I would say our youth ministry doubled since we've been doing that just like, you know, like, just a follow up." Not only was this outreach-focused approach growing the youth ministry, but it had doubled it at the time of Pastor C's interview. This could point to the genuine need and desire of Generation Z to be seen and to live in community. Pastor C had even more stories about how meeting with students and investing into them personally as a youth pastor or youth leader can have a great impact on the mental and spiritual health of adolescent members of Generation Z. One practice that he has been maintaining within the youth ministry he leads is regular, one-on-one meetings with students. As a part of a mentoring program, he and his wife meet with students and personally contact them is phone or text throughout the week in order to ask if they need prayer. Pastor C explained that the purpose of this program is to help

keep his students from feeling isolated and "let them know that they're not alone." Even without designing content specifically themed around mental health, Pastor C was addressing mental health issues by ministering to the very root of many students' struggles. As we know, one of the greatest struggles for the adolescents of Generation Z is that of loneliness and finding a community within which they feel that they belong. By reaching out consistently to individual students, Pastor C met those needs found by Generation Z within a Gospel-centered context.

Pastor D found a separate but effective way to build community among his Generation Z students. The strategy implemented amongst his ministry was a system of small groups that he called "tribes." Pastor D described these tribes as essentially operating as miniature youth groups themselves, with "high capacity" youth volunteers in terms of leadership qualities and trustworthiness. He even mentioned that "90% of the time, the leader that's in that tribe, we feel is very capable to deal with a day-to-day depression, anxiety issue like that." Pastor D contributes to the popular opinion amongst today's youth pastors that small group style discipleship is one of the best ways to reach and build connection amongst Generation Z's adolescents. In fact, when asked during the survey what they believed to be the best way to address mental health in youth ministry, each survey participant selected the option for small groups (see fig. 7).
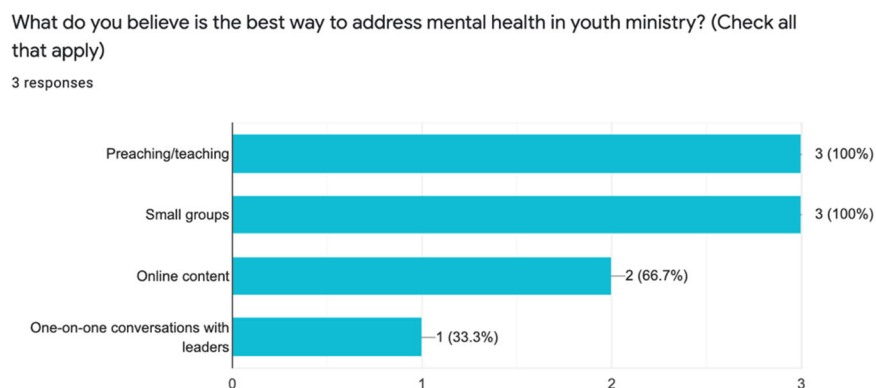

FIGURE 7

Another participant, Pastor B, also elaborated on this important element of effective youth ministry beyond 2020. He understood this very real necessity of Generation Z, noting that "teenagers are communal" and "they want community." Conversely to Pastor C's story of successful connection with students, Pastor B explained what happens when the opposite is true, and students are disconnected from the community of the church and youth group outside of youth services. In his own ministry, Pastor B saw a lack of engagement, which he diagnosed was a symptom of a lack of "true authentic community and great online presence." Pastor B came to this conclusion after his youth group experienced a significant decline in "online numbers" after no longer being able to meet in-person due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Pastor B shows just how important it is to build community among Generation Z's youth in order to reach or impact them in a substantial way. Even if we are putting out online content, if there is no relational connection behind it, students likely will not engage with it and will opt for something else that they perceive to more effectively meet their needs. That being said, while Pastor B did notice a deficit within this specific ministry, he also mentioned his solution and strategy to building "authentic biblical community." He explained that his goal was to "create some form of connection will hopefully lead to community." Pastor B hypothesized that by creating a system of small groups for the students involved at his youth ministry, youth leaders would be able to forge a connection between themselves and the students that were a part of the small group. He continued that he hoped that connection would "lead to community," which, in turn, would lead to each leader genuinely caring for and meeting the needs of their small groups. Pastor B paints a picture of what it would take and what it would look like for youth pastors to meet the specific needs of Generation Z by doing so in the context of tight-nit community, such as in a small group.

One of the most core and prevalent needs of Generation Z, one that even transcends any struggles with mental health, is a need to connect with others and belong to a community. Thus, just as these participants explain within the contexts of their own youth groups, youth pastors must focus on creating an environment that allows for safe, authentic, and Christ-centered community.

Reaching Students with the Truth Christ

While creating relevant social media context and true connection among communities for Generation Z, if that is all youth pastors are doing, they are essentially producing a club that just happens to be particularly relatable to Generation Z. While Generation Z has their own struggles and their own unique needs, each of them has a need for a relationship with God. As found by Pastor A, two of the best ways to meet this need is to address the identity of each member of Generation Z, and to present them with the complete truth of Scripture without gimmicks.

During his time serving in youth ministry, Pastor A found that Generation Z possesses a unique hunger for the things of God. At one point, he said that today's students are embodying "a desperation." He goes on to elaborate about those members of Generation Z that remain open to the Gospel, describing them as the remnant. Within his interview, Pastor A explained the biblical background of the concept of a remnant as those students who are continuing to "lean in" and show a desire to engage with both Christ and the church. So then, how do youth pastors reach members of Generation Z in a way that pulls them in and satisfies their present hunger for more? Pastor A suggests that youth pastors should leverage Generation Z's interest in culture and what James Emery White refers to as "'hard thinking' applied to the issues of today" in order to

reach them in a way that is both lasting and effective.[48] Research shows that Generation Z, unlike

some of the generations before them, is no longer interested in the "feelings" and "philanthropy"

offered by the church.[49] Rather, they want something concrete; something real. They connect

most when the church shows how God addresses current cultural and social justice issues, and

when they experience firsthand the power of Jesus and the movement of the Spirit of God. Pastor

A went on to explain an anecdotal example of this that he experienced with members of

Generation Z. He said, "And so, what we want to do is we want to lean into what students are

embodying, and that's a desperation. We're seeing more students just want worship nights [and]

prayer nights. And so, we've been creating spaces for that rather than big events. And we've seen

been seeing a greater attendance." Therefore, Pastor A is giving an example of what research is

showing to be true about Generation Z: they are largely uninterested in theatrics and production

when it comes to church and are much more interested in the content and tangibility of the truth

of the message being preached.

Building upon the topic of meeting the core needs and desires of Generation Z, Pastor A

brought up another issue core to meeting the needs of Generation Z in a ministry setting:

identity. Previous research showed that besides belonging, another top need and motivation of

adolescents is to find and live out their true identity. In fact, when it comes to mental health,

Pastor A noted that identity should be a part of the conversation. He said that many people take

on their struggles with mental health take them on "as an identity peace and not as a condition."

He concluded that until youth pastors are able to help Generation Z navigate the topic of identity

amongst themselves, they will be unsuccessful in their attempt to help them to navigate mental

health. One of the primary concerns, according to Pastor A, is for youth pastors to help students

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[48] White, *Meet Generation Z*, 86.
[49] Ibid.

to realize "who they are in Christ," or what the Bible says about them, no matter what they may be struggling with at any time. Here, Pastor A brings up a very significant point. Once we reach students with relevant social media content and connect with them by building strong and lasting communities, we must also reach them by communicating biblical truth about their own identities. While identifying and addressing mental health are both clearly important, it is also important that students understand that their identity is not tied to the struggles that they face. On the contrary, youth pastors in 2020 and beyond should address this issue by helping students understand their identities in light of Scripture, who God is, and who He says they are. Thus, just as Pastor A says, the mental health conversation is both relevant and needed, but it should always be accompanied by a conversation about identity and biblical truth.

Strengths, Weaknesses, and Areas of Future Study

One of the greatest strengths of this study is that it was conducted via interviews of youth pastors who either work in youth ministry or oversee a team of youth pastors across different church campuses. This was a strength because it allowed for the study of multiple different perspectives of people who are at the frontlines of youth ministry in 2020 and beyond. They had firsthand insight of the ways that Generation Z have been impacted by mental health and, more recently, the impact of COVID-19. They had a broad range of experience in this field, of addressing the obstacles faced by Generation Z, and of reaching and communicating the Gospel to adolescents.

One aspect of this research could be considered either a strength or a weakness. This thesis was written from a religious perspective. The research was conducted within the context of the Protestant Christian church in America. It is primarily aimed at youth pastors or any other

staff members or volunteers who influence and lead the adolescents that make up Generation Z in a religious context. However, the findings of this study can apply to any person seeking to make a positive impact on Generation Z following the COVID-19 pandemic. While this study was designed with vocational ministry in mind, any youth worker could utilize and benefit from its findings.

One of the greatest weaknesses of this study also gives way to an opportunity for future research. Due to study restrictions, minors were not permitted to participate in the study. Because of this, no adolescent member of Generation Z was able to be surveyed or interviewed as a part of this paper, even though they are the ultimate subjects of this research. With that being said, one of the greatest opportunities for future research would be to survey and interview members of Generation Z who are involved in youth ministries. Additionally, much of this research is focused on those members of Generation Z who either identify as Christian or are involved in a local youth group. With that being said, further research could be conducted regarding the mental health of members of Generation Z who are unchurched and/or non-Christian.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

What Does this Mean for Youth Ministry in 2020 and Beyond?

In light of the completion of this study and the analysis of its data, one can pull from the common threads between each interview in order to deduce four different key courses of action that youth pastors can take in order to minister to adolescent members of Generation Z in a way that specifically addresses their unique needs and desires: effectively utilizing social media, fostering authentic community, discovering and clarifying their identities through the communication of biblical truth. Perhaps one of the best ways we can minister to Generation Z in a way that targets their mental health struggles is to disciple them well. What does this mean?

The research shown within this study does show that social media can be an incredibly useful tool for communicating with Generation Z. However, this is only the case when it is used well. Since Generation Z has been shown to use technology and social media everyday throughout the day, it only makes sense that youth pastors should use this as a medium to reach teenagers. That being said, since they are digital natives, they know exactly what kind of content they are interested in and exactly what kind of content they would rather "swipe" past. So, in order to use social media effectively, youth pastors should be relevant to their audience, consistent with their posts, and make that content complimentary to the ministry they do in-person. This way, students are pulled in by the relatable and reliable content but are also drawn in to become a part of the community.

Social media is a great tool for initial contact with students and as a compliment to in-person ministry, but as research has shown, community over social media is not a substitute for in-person community. Out of all four of the interviews, "small groups," or another synonymous term (for example, "connect groups," or "tribes) was a recurring key word in three of them.

Across the board, one thing is clear: youth pastors on the frontlines of youth ministry in 2020 and beyond see an intense need for community, and the success of creating communities that are both safe and supportive spaces for students. So, in order to effectively reach Generation Z, youth pastors should seek to provide a rich, authentic community for their students that goes beyond weekly services and social media posts. Whether this looks like meeting with students outside of church, calling or texting them throughout the week, or cultivating honest conversation within a small group, community is an essential part of meeting the needs of Generation Z.

In order to reach Generation Z for Christ, one of the main tasks of youth pastors is to help adolescents to rightly understand their identity. As stated before, it is important to address the issues surrounding mental health within the context of youth ministry, but this conversation should also be interwoven with the conversation of identity. This way, students learn that their identity is not based on, nor dependent on their mental health struggles. Rather, youth pastors should teach students that their true identity, their peace, and their joy can all be found in Jesus Christ. Within the context of Generation Z, who are already relatively skeptical of the church, the best way to do this is not through elaborate productions or theatrics, but by communicating the simple truth of the Gospel found in Scripture. When seeking to reach Generation Z, youth pastors should go "back to basics" by teaching Scripture, trusting students with the truth of the Gospel, and stripping away the production centered elements that have become synonymous with youth ministry in favor for more "stripped-down" events such as worship and prayer nights. Ultimately, Generation Z is looking for truth. Youth pastors know that lifegiving truth is found in Scripture. So, once youth pastors connect with students through social media and build community amongst them with spiritually strong leaders, they can help students come to an understanding about their own identities in Christ through the communication of biblical truth.

All of these things can be utilized as tools to help address and heal the mental health struggles that are all too common amongst Generation Z youth. However, these tools can also be used to reach a far deeper issue at the core of each student. It can help make connections with students in a way that draws them in because they feel understood and that they belong. In this way, youth pastors will be able to reach out to Generation Z and help them to connect with Christ and with the church in a meaningful way, even after all of the challenges of the past year. Generation Z is an unprecedented generation, living through a completely unprecedented time in history. Their need to come to know Jesus in a lifegiving and lifesaving relationship grows every day. From mental health issues to other obstacles and struggles, youth pastors can more effectively reach Generation Z for Christ by utilizing social media, building authentic communities, and helping Generation Z discover their true identity through biblical truth. Generation Z is a generation faced with obstacles and adversity, but they are a resilient generation with hope for restoration, renewal, and revival in Christ.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF FIGURES

APPENDIX B: LIST OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Please describe how the pandemic and social distancing has changed the structure of your youth ministry, if at all, in the past year.

2. Do you believe the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing have affected the overall engagement of your students with youth ministry? If so, how?

3. How, if at all, have you used social media or online content to engage with students in the past year?

    • How do your students engage with the online content you post?

    • Have you used social media or online content to address mental health issues? If so, how?

4. How has social distancing impacted your youth ministry in the last year?

    • How has it changed your approach to youth ministry, if at all?

    • How will it change your approach moving forward?

5. Please describe the change you have noticed, if any, in your students' mental health in the last year.

6. Have you addressed mental health to your students in the past? If so, how?

    • What about your youth leaders and volunteers?

7. What kind of resources, if any, do you use to address your students' mental health struggles?

8. Do you have a plan set in place in order to evaluate and help students with their mental health? If so, please explain.

APPENDIX C: EXTENDED INTERVIEW QUOTES:

Pastor A on using social media as complimentary to primary content (pg. 30):

> We always use [social media] as complimentary. In fact, I think a lot of people when they would record their sermons, pre-COVID, and pre-quarantine, they would just post them and put them on YouTube. And what we did is it forced us to get more intentional with what we already do. So instead of capturing someone and putting it on YouTube, we create content *for* YouTube. Like, just like a merry go round is created for a child. An adult can ride it, it's just weird. It's not meant for an adult; it's meant for a child. Right, you put a kid on it, it's okay. And it's the same way. Sometimes we shoot content not meant for YouTube. And so, what that forced us to do is to create content specifically for YouTube, but to also leverage every area of social media in its proper way, whether we did a live YouTube show, after that, then we would do Instagram lives with all the youth pastors and your students. And then we'd break out into small groups via Zoom. And we'd do that every single week. And that caused us to say, 'you know what, there's a proper place for this. It's not all going to go digital, and it's not all going to go away. But there's a proper place for it. And we have to leverage it regardless if there's a quarantine or not.'

Pastor D on excitement in his youth group (pg. 32):

> It's not like everybody's dead zombies walking around now, but there's definitely a noticeable dip in just the excitement. I mean, like, this is like a really anecdotal example. But like, you can tell the difference. When you get up on a stage on Wednesday night, you say who's excited to be here, right? And you get a woo. Okay, the woo is maybe like, 30% less enthusiastic, right? It's just like that. I think you feel it in the atmosphere.

Pastor C on the structure of his mentoring program (pg. 36):

> We have a mentoring program here [where] I'll meet with the guys once a month, and my fiancée, every week and a half now she meets with the girls. So, it's really cool. Just yesterday, I met with a student, [and] we got protein shakes. Like that was like, I don't know how I'm going to [reach out to him], you know, so we went and got protein shakes, and we met, and I was just talking to him, because on a Wednesday night, he's not going to open up, he won't. So, I was getting to spend that time with him and make the effort. You know, he opened up and we talked, I mean, he did not stop talking for an hour. And so, it was awesome. And so, we got to talk. And, you know, I asked him how his home life was, and that's a lot to do with what, you know, the things he's dealing with his home life, and, you know, what's his next steps. And [that] wasn't in place before. And that was one of the things is, I was like, you know, you can't mentor student two times a week or two times a month (because we do services twice a month). But I know if we meet with them on a one-to-one level, and…that doesn't mean that's the only time me with them … And so that's the biggest thing for me is making sure they know that, you know, I'll text them, I'm praying for them, I'll text them, you know that I'm thinking about them. And

that just kind of lets them know that they're not alone. And so, I do my best. And so, like I said, every single probably once a week on Mondays, I'll text all those people and just see how they're doing. Just so they'll know that, you know, because a lot of them don't have people doing that. And so, and our leaders are good about doing it, too. That's something we taught them. And so that's kind of the, I guess it's a pretty structured plan, but also as far as specifically for mental health, maybe not, but kind of to keep them from feeling like, you know, they're isolated.

Pastor B on the importance of authentic community and a strong online presence (pg. 38):

So many churches got exposed for not having true authentic community and great online presence. If you didn't have those two things, your church and youth ministry was impacted deeply … We didn't really have that. We were just kind of doing discussion groups on a Wednesday. That's not a small group. That's not life together. That's not. And so, we got exposed quickly where our online numbers, all that went down so fast because why am I going to jump online when you don't even know me? And so, for us, we're trying to rebuild…because it's like, because we got exposed. Man, I just can't imagine all the kids that and we have multisite You know, I'm over all Next Gen. And so, it just breaks my heart to know how many kids probably kind of stepped out of church or lost their way in this last year. And it's our fault because we didn't work hard to build authentic biblical community.

Pastor B on small groups, connection, community, and care (pg. 38):

We're trying to create connection…and that will hopefully lead to community. Because community's still not going to happen in that circle fully [immediately]. But at least there's connection and conversation and then hopefully a leader can get to know some people and there can be a little bit more care. Because that's, you know, that's the beauty of small groups, you know, to grow large, you got to grow small. It's the Jesus system. It's what he did. And it's like, if I have a small group of 12, I know if Caitlin's gone, because I'm responsible for caring for Caitlin. But if I'm just like, have 150 students, if Caitlin's gone, I don't even know she was gone or not. And unless I didn't look at my data and who that most churches, their data in their head counts aren't fully 100%. So, like small groups, it's just so critical that there is that community.

Pastor A on "the remnant" and applying biblical truth to youth ministry (pg. 39):

Those who were leaning in have leaned in even more. Those who were hungry have gotten even more hungry. I think we think that just because COVID happened and we've seen a drop off, that is negative. But anytime there's a drop off biblically, it's called sifting. And it's also called, I mean, like separating the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the chaff, and it also talks about the remnant. And in the Bible…understand remnants were always created out of tragedy and God takes it. And remnant isn't the

leftovers. It's an ultra-focused, desperate, concentrated level of holiness found in his believers that were used to bring Israel forward into a new season without losing integrity. And in this season, I also see a remnant emerging, that are desperate that are hungry. And that precludes I think what's going to be a reawakening or revival amongst the next generation.

Pastor A on identity and biblical truth (pg. 40):

I think we needed a broad understanding and the fact that if everybody has a mental health problem, we're going to bring awareness to it, but then we're going to baby the situation. And we won't even suggest that maybe you don't have mental health issues, because no identity is attached to it. And I think anytime we talk about mental health, we need to attach identity to the conversation. Because there's a lot of people [who] say, well, I struggle with anxiety, I struggle with depression, as an identity piece and not as a condition. Yeah, and until we can help them navigate identity, we can't help them navigate mental health. I struggled with clinical depression for 12 years of my life. My grandmother had it, my great grandmother had it, my mom had it, and I had it, it was genetic. And I was put on medication for those 12 years, and it helped to balance me out. But if anybody said, 'Let me help you get through depression,' that wasn't the problem. The problem was my brain was my chemistry was working against me. And I mean, I praise God, I was supernaturally healed at an altar call in my first year of college, and when that happened, I mean, I knew it. And what I needed to realize is who I still was in Christ, regardless of what I was struggling with, this wasn't me. And a lot of society says, 'this is you.' And it's okay for you to embrace this. And I think as believers, we needed the tools to have the identity conversation along with the mental health conversation.

APPENDIX D: IRB DOCUMENTS AND STUDY APPROVAL FORM

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

Title: Youth Ministry in 2020 and Beyond: COVID-19, the Mental Health of Generation Z, and What it Means for Youth Ministry in America

Investigator(s): Abigail Smith, Dr. Bellamin Gomez

Purpose: The purpose of the research study is to focus on the mental health of students who are involved in youth ministry in order to gain a better understanding of how to effectively minister to youth students following the COVId-19 pandemic. You must be 18 years or older to participate.

What to Expect: This research study is administered either online, in person, or over the telephone. Participation in this research will involve completion of one interview. This interview will ask you several questions about the youth ministry that you lead, including the structure and attendance. You may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. You will be expected to complete the interview once. It should take you about 20 minutes to complete.

Risks: There are no risks associated with this project which are expected to be greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

Benefits: As a youth pastor or youth leader, helping to provide this information will help researchers to gain a better understanding on how to best and most effectively minister to the youth today. Your participation in this research is helping to build on and grow the way we do youth ministry.

Compensation: There will be no direct compensation for this study, it is fully voluntary.

Your Rights and Confidentiality: Your participation in this research is voluntary. There is no penalty for refusal to participate, and you are free to withdraw your consent and participation in this project at any time.

Confidentiality: While there may be some personal identifiers gathered, these details, along with the transcripts of the interview, will be kept completely confidential. Your name, the name of your church, any names you use in your interview, or any other personal details will be protected and kept completely confidential. Your answers during this interview are strictly for research purposes and will therefore only be accessible to the interviewers, myself (Abigail Smith), and my thesis advisor (Dr. Ben Gomez). This data will be used to support research within a thesis paper, so once it is gathered, it will be kept completely confidential and will not be shared except to provide data for the thesis paper. This data will be destroyed five years after the study has been completed. Any audio recordings will be transcribed and destroyed within 100 days of the interview.

Recruiting Script for Emails, Face-to-face, and Telephone Calls

Hello, Participant's Name,

My name is Abby Smith and I am a Children's, Youth, & Family Ministries major at Southeastern University. I am currently in the process of completing research for a thesis entitled, "Youth Ministry in 2020: How COVId-19 has changed the way we view and do youth ministry." Because of your involvement with youth ministry, I was wondering if you would be interested in participating in my study.

Participating youth pastors and youth leaders will conduct an interview with me. During this interview, I will ask you several questions about the youth ministry that you lead. The main focus of my work is to better understand the mental health of youth students, how their mental health has been affected by the pandemic, and how churches and youth pastors in particular can better understand and address their mental health in a youth ministry setting.

If this sounds like something that you would be interested in, please let me know simply by emailing me back a "Yes," or "No." I would love to send you some more information and learn more about your youth ministry!

Thank you so much for your time.

Abby Smith
Children, Youth, & Family Ministries
Southeastern University

RECOMMENDATION:

☑ **Approved as submitted**   ☐ **Approval Deferred; add'l information required**
                                         (additional IRB review required)
☐ **Approved with stipulations as noted**   ☐ **Not Approved**

Signature: IRB OFFICE   **Date:** 01/20/2021