

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

**The Decline and Absence of Young Adults
at Grace Place Christian Church**

A Thesis Project Report Submitted to
the Faculty of the Liberty University School of Divinity
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry

by

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Thesis Project Approval Sheet

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THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS PROJECT ABSTRACT

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The purpose of the study was to address the problem of low attendance and engagement among young adults at Grace Place Christian Church. This topic is given consideration based on the researcher's observation of the absence of this demographic within the local ministry context. The literature review revealed this is a common problem throughout the Body of Christ. Grace Place Christian Church is a predominately African American within a military community. The unique characteristics of this ministry warranted intentional research. The researcher interviewed twenty unchurched young adults and ten pastors and collected over one hundred nine questionnaires related to the problem. A focus group developed a strategic intervention, which was implemented within the local ministry. The study revealed hindrances to young adult attendance and participation due to cynicism, a general mistrust of Christians whom they perceive as hypocritical, intolerant, dismissive of intellectual inquiry, and negligent of their perceived responsibility of activism supporting moral progress and social justice. The intervention devised and implemented within this ministry context yielded positive results over a ninety-day evaluation period. Further study is needed to determine if immediate results will hold, increase, or decrease over a more extended evaluation period. The perpetuation of Christianity and the message of Christ is inextricably tied to the church's ability to transfer leadership from one generation to the next. Thus, the attendance and participation of young adults are critical to sustaining the church.

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Abbreviations

DMIN *Doctor of Ministry*

GPCC *Grace Place Christian Church*

Chapter 1: Introduction

“Research is systematic and rigorous inquiry or investigation that enables people to understand the nature of problematic events or phenomena.”¹ The essence of this action research project is to intervene in the functioning of some aspect of the natural world or society (e.g., a church or classroom) to bring about a positive change.² This qualitative study will address declining numbers, low attendance, and lack of participation of young adults within Grace Place Christian Church. The research related to this study will reveal the factors driving the problem. A strategic plan will then be devised and implemented to address the issue(s). The researcher expects that implementing a strategic intervention will reverse this alarming trend.

This chapter provides information about the ministry context, a discussion of the problem, and a statement of the purpose of the research. In addition, this chapter includes the researcher’s basic assumptions related to the study, definitions, delimitations, and limitations. This chapter concludes with a thesis statement, clearly stating the paper’s scope, purpose, and direction, and a summary of the researcher’s conclusions.

Throughout the Scriptures, there are many examples of the transfer of spiritual leadership from one generation to the next, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worst. Genesis records the succession of spiritual leadership among the Hebrew patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The book of Deuteronomy records the transition of leadership of Israel from Moses to Joshua, as Joshua leads the people of God into the Promised Land.

¹ Ernest Stringer, *Action Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 4.

² A. M. Riazi, *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Research Methods in Applied Linguistics*, (Routledge, 2016), 5, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.4324/9781315656762>

There came a time when David, Israel's great king, had to hand off the leadership of the nation of Israel to his son Solomon. This same pattern of transference of leadership is seen in the Bible's account of Israel's great prophets, Elijah and Elisha. The New Testament records what is perhaps the most significant transfer of leadership in the life of Christ, as Jesus charges his disciples with the Great Commission recorded in Matthew 28. There are many other examples that illustrate this type of leadership transference throughout the Bible.

The Scriptures reveal that God is vested in the continuity of Christian ministry and the perpetuation of the gospel message from one generation to the next. Thus, reaching and mobilizing young adults in the church critical to the continued existence of the local church and the perpetuation of the gospel message. Young adults are typically more energetic, enthusiastic, fervent, and passionate than other age groups. In addition to their youthful exuberance, young adults possess the intelligence and experience desperately needed among Christian disciples and church leaders.

Young adults marry later in life than previous generations, meaning they have more time to commit to Christian service, church activities, evangelism, and outreach. The effectiveness of the gospel message among the next generation is inextricably tied to present-day evangelistic and disciple-making efforts. The quality of soul-winning and disciple-making in the church today will determine the effectiveness of the church in reaching generations to come. This makes the presence and participation of young adults in church paramount.

Unfortunately, there has been a gradual decline in youth and young adults in church, specifically those between 18 to 35. David Kinnaman shares this alarming statistic: "There is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in church engagement. These numbers represent about eight million twentysomethings who were active churchgoers as teenagers but

who will no longer be particularly engaged in a church by their thirtieth birthday.”³ While church attendance has generally declined over the last several decades, one of the biggest concerns is the decline in church attendance among youth and young adults. Young adults stop attending church regularly soon after high school and into their 30s, but why? How can this alarming trend be reversed? This DMIN research project will address this problem to set forth a plan and strategy that can be implemented at Grace Place Christian Church to reverse this alarming trend.

Ministry Context

The accuracy of the various research groups (e.g., Barna Research) that report a decline over several decades of youth and young adults in the church is revealed in the local ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church. The tragic trend of the absence of youth and young adults within this local church continues to be problematic. This problem has severe implications for the future of Grace Place Christian Church and perhaps the entire body of Christ. The transition of spiritual leadership to the next generation depends upon the presence of young adults in churches and their willingness to accept the charge of the continuity of Christian ministry to the next generation. This makes it critical that strategic plans are implemented to reverse this alarming trend within any context the problem exists.

Grace Place Christian Church is a predominately African American local church with a membership of approximately 150 people. The church is located just outside Fayetteville, North Carolina, in a small township named Hope Mills. Due to its proximity to Fort Bragg Army Base and Simmons’s Army Airfield, the Fayetteville/Hope Mills area is home to a sizeable military-affiliated community. Many of them are Grace Place Christian Church members. The church is

³ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Leave the Church and Rethink Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2011), Kindle loc 230.

located on Main St. in Hope Mills, beside the Hope Mills police department. The church always seeks to cultivate its relationship with the military and law enforcement communities.

To address the issue of food insecurity among the less fortunate in our community, GPCC operates a food bank, distributing free food to those in need. The food bank is an opportunity to demonstrate the love of God by ministering to the needs of the less fortunate. The church also partners with the local “Meals on Wheels” program, which provides warm meals to the senior citizens of our community. In addition to these services, the church has a men’s ministry, women’s ministry, and marriage ministry, addressing the needs of their prospective demographic.

The church has been led by its current pastor for 12 years. The present Pastor of Grace Place Christian Church is 53 years of age, married, and has two children. He is a native of the city in which the church is located. He is devoted to God, his family, and his calling as a pastor. The church’s leadership comprises individuals approximately 50 years of age, with children in their teens or older and some with grandchildren. The church’s leadership team closely reflects the age and life experience of the pastor. The presence and participation of young adults 18 to 35 years of age are missing among the church’s leadership team and the congregation.

The average age of the membership is mid-forties to mid-fifties. Most of the church’s active members and ministry participants are in this age range. The church’s socioeconomic makeup comprises middle-class working adults, prior military, teachers, school administrators, administrative professionals, and construction and factory workers. The church has many grandparents raising grandchildren; however, there is a noticeable absence of teenagers and young adults.

Youth and young adults are critical to the continuity of the church, local and universal. If the gospel message is to be taught and preached to future generations, there must be youth and young adults that can be discipled and trained for Christian ministry. This general decline and absence of youth and young adults seem to be a global phenomenon. It should also be noted that some churches do not have this problem at all. Much can be learned from those who seem to be immune. Because this DMIN research project seeks to address this issue as it exists within the context of Grace Place Christian Church, a predominately African American congregation, special attention, and research will be given to the problem related to African American youth and young adults.

Grace Place Christian Church was founded in February 2010 as a church plant. Since its launch, the church has been led by its founding pastor. The vision of the ministry includes an emphasis on praise and worship and the worship arts. The church's approach to discipleship consists of a weekly discipleship class, wherein participants are introduced to the Word of God as it relates to spiritual growth and maturity and the spiritual disciplines. Grace Place Christian Church has eight associate ministers. In addition, the church has the traditional auxiliaries of the Usher Board, Deacon Board, and an Executive board that takes care of the business and administrative matters of the church. The church is changing from a sole-authoritative leadership structure, where all or most executive decisions are made by the pastor, to a team-leadership design, where all church matters are addressed by a team of leaders, including executive-level issues.

As it relates to the absence of youth and young adults at Grace Place Christian Church, it is worth mentioning that just a few years earlier, the church had begun to see a significant increase in the number of youth and young adults in attendance, some even becoming a part of

the church's membership. This happened when the church worked towards a CD recording of a live praise and worship event. After the recording and the release of the CD, there was a significant church split. Many youth and young adults attending left with the former worship leader. This experience emphasizes that church growth, even among young adults, must be founded upon the gospel of Christ and the spiritual maturity that results from submitting to a discipleship process. Music and singing alone will not sustain church growth, nor will they produce spiritually mature Christians. Spiritual formation must be the church's emphasis, even for its young adult members.

Grace Place Christian Church has a good structure in place for spiritual formation. The Bible is taught and preached in a manner that challenges the hearer to apply its truths to their life; however, the church needs to make more significant efforts towards outreach. A good discipleship program does no good if there is no one to disciple. Jesus' command was "Go," then "Teach," and "Make Disciples" (Matt 28). Perhaps young adults that are won to Christ through evangelistic efforts and matured through discipleship will be best equipped to help other young adults through the same process.

The people that make up the congregation of Grace Place Christian Church are warm, inviting, and generally loving. The atmosphere at the church is positive. Even with current challenges, most members remain supportive and optimistic. The church has the right resources to turn the current situation around with the right strategy. Grace Place Christian Church is a ministry committed to making disciples for Christ, assisting their spiritual development, and deploying them into works of service to the body of Christ, their local community, and the world. Grace Place Christian Church summarizes its vision and mission with the simple motto, "Real Worship, Real Service, Real Love."

Problem Presented

The problem at Grace Place Christian Church is the absence of young adults between 18 and 35. This problem is not unique to GPCC. The lack of young adults in the church is a global problem. Contemporary western culture is characterized by rampant skepticism of Christianity and the Bible. Many view the Bible as a book of oppression that is harmful to the minds of its devoted readers.⁴ This anti-Christ skepticism of today's post-Christian culture contributes to the decline of young adults in church nationwide, worldwide, and within Grace Place Christian Church. This predicament has obvious detrimental consequences. The continuation of Christian ministry to the next generation depends on committed young adult Christians to pass on the tasks, privileges, and responsibilities of leading the church toward fulfilling The Great Commission of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

The absence of young adults at Grace Place Christian Church is a serious problem. Except there are young adult persons who share a passion for Christ and His mission, the church is in jeopardy locally and universally. This dire consequence merits an analysis of the church's current state, how these conditions came to be, and most importantly, what can be done to change this alarming trend. The church must implement more effective evangelism strategies, discipleship programs, and leadership development, all as they relate to youth and young adults. The future of Grace Place Christian Church, and perhaps the body of Christ at large, is inextricably tied to the retention of young adults.

⁴ David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock, and Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles: 5 Ways for a New Generation to Follow Jesus in Digital Babylon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2019), 383.

Purpose Statement

This DMIN action project aims to understand the factors driving the decline and absence of young adults at Grace Place Christian Church and develop a strategic plan to address the problem. This action project is critical for Grace Place Christian Church and could prove helpful to other churches as well, as statistics show the decline of youth and young adults to be a global phenomenon affecting the church worldwide. Devising a strategic plan based on the research results related to this problem will result in a resurgence of youth and young adults at Grace Place Christian Church and other churches of similar demographic makeup experiencing the same issue.

Accomplishing the purpose of this DMIN action research requires understanding why many young adults do not attend church; therefore, attention will be given to researching the rationale driving the absence of young adults in the church. Having this understanding allows the church to learn how to minister to young adults in the future more efficiently. Many young people feel that older adults don't understand their doubts and concerns, a prerequisite to rich mentoring friendships.⁵ It is critical that young adults know they are being heard and understood, even if they disagree.

The first act in apologetics is to listen. A part of the research connected with this project will involve listening to young adults, precisely their reasons for leaving or not attending church. For this purpose, a focus group will be initiated. This group will provide a voice for the demographic of the local ministry context, Grace Place Christian Church. While the absence of youth and young adults is reported to be a global problem, the focus of this research will be

⁵ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 353.

limited to African American young adults, consistent with the demographic makeup of Grace Place Christian Church.

Basic Assumptions

There are several assumptions related to this DMIN project. First, the researcher assumes that Grace Place Christian Church members will participate in this study. The researcher assumes interviewees will respond honestly, lending credibility to the research. Anonymity will be allowed among the interviewees, so they are not pressured to answer in ways deemed acceptable rather than truthful. The researcher assumes that the sample group is representative of all young adults. Because it is impossible to interview all young adults, the researcher uses a sample group that reflects the diversity of the larger demographic.

Definitions

Languages are such that certain words or phrases can have multiple meanings. This could lead to the misinterpretation of data or messages. To avoid such miscommunication, reoccurring words and phrases critical to this study are included with their definitions as they relate to this study. Therefore, the reader will find that repeated terms and phrases are used regularly throughout this study. Some of the terms utilized in the study are *declining attendance*, *disciple*, *discipleship*, *retention*, *spiritual development*, and *young adult*.

In this study, the phrase *declining attendance* is used repeatedly. As it relates to this study, this phrase, declining attendance, refers to the gradually waning number of young adults in attendance and engaged in church activities. In this study, declining attendance refers specifically to attendance that has dropped twenty-five percent or more among individuals who once attended regularly, 90 percent of the time or better.

The term *disciple* is used to refer to committed followers of Christ. Philosophers, religious leaders, and mystery cults attracted disciples in the Greek world. A person became a disciple as he sought out a teacher and followed him and his principles. Similarly, in the rabbinical tradition, a “learner” or “student” (תלמיד, *tlmyd*) attached himself to a rabbi (literally “my great one,” with the additional meaning of “teacher” or “master”) or a movement.⁶ A disciple is not some unique category of Christian who, at some point, decides to commit to Christ on a deeper level. All who have accepted salvation are disciples. Bill Hull asserts, “At the moment of salvation when someone decides to follow Christ, he shouldn’t experience any interruption on his journey from that point forward. As a new Christian, an individual doesn’t take a ‘second step’ toward becoming a disciple. Instead, he embarks on a seamless journey of growth that passes through spiritual childhood, adolescence, and adulthood to maturity.”⁷

In this study, the term *discipleship* is used repeatedly. As it relates to this study, discipleship refers to the process, regimen, or training employed to make one a disciple. “Making disciples has nothing to do with winning others over to a certain philosophy or turning them into nice people with friendly smiles. Rather the Great Commission launches a rescue mission; all followers receive orders with full authority to act wherever they happen to be. Discipleship involves saving people from themselves and eternal oblivion, permitting God’s transforming power to change them from the inside out.”⁸ The disciple is usually ushered through discipleship by a mentor who is fully mature spiritually and can offer advice, guidance, and prayer.

⁶ Dan Nasselqvist, “Disciple” in *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁷ Bill Hull, *The Complete Book of Discipleship: On Being and Making Followers of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2006), 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*

As it relates to this study, the term retention refers to maintaining an acceptable number of young adults attending church. Seventy percent of persons between the ages of eighteen and thirty “who went to church regularly in high school said they quit attending by age 23.”⁹ And only 20 percent of twenty-somethings report that they “have maintained a level of spiritual activity consistent with their teenage experiences.”¹⁰ Retention, as it relates to this study, speaks to reversing this trend.

*Spiritual development*¹¹ refers to the believer’s process of spiritual growth and maturation in Christ. It is facilitated through three essential resources: God’s Word, God’s Spirit, and God’s people (the church).¹² Spiritual formation happens both individually and communally. The Christian individual is first responsible for their spiritual formation. The individual then makes themselves accountable to the Christian community by being a part of a local church. Spiritual development occurs as the individual and the community (church) to which they belong commits to living according to God’s Word. Holy Spirit empowers the believer and facilitates change (spiritual formation) from the inside out.

Lastly, “*young adult*” refers to individuals past adolescence and before middle age. Erik Erikson’s stages of human development have significantly influenced the definition. Some

⁹ Cathy Lynn Grossman, “Young Adults Aren’t Sticking with Church,” USA Today, August 6, 2007, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2007-08-06-church-dropouts_N.htm.

¹⁰ “Most Twentysomethings Put Christianity on the Shelf Following Spiritually Active Teen Years,” Barna, September 11, 2006. Retrieved February 19th, 2022, <https://www.barna.com/research/most-twentysomethings-put-christianity-on-the-shelf-following-spiritually-active-teen-years>.

¹¹ Aubrey Malphurs, *Advanced Strategic Planning: a 21st-Century Model for Church and Ministry Leaders* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2013), 169.

¹² Jonathan Morrow, “Introducing Spiritual Formation,” in *Foundations of Spiritual Formation*, ed. Paul Pettit (Kregel Publications, 2008), 45.

consider young adults to fall within the 20s and 30s age range. As it relates to this study, the term young adult will refer to male and female adults between the ages of 18 and 30.¹³

Limitations

A limitation is a condition imposed on a study outside the researcher's control.¹⁴ The limits of this project are such that the researcher is limited to the context being considered, Grace Place Christian Church, Hope Mills, NC. Much can be learned from the researcher's study of GPCC that kind be implemented in other churches. Still, the researcher intends to deal with the problem as it exists at Grace Place Christian Church alone per university requirements. There is also a time limitation as the research has a due date; however, the time allowed is sufficient to address the problem considered in this DMIN action research.

Delimitations

Delimitations are constraints that the investigator places on the study that clarify the study's boundaries.¹⁵ The demographic of consideration presents a limitation. The researcher will deal with African American young adults, as Grace Place Christian Church consists primarily of African American congregants. While many other ethnic groups may share many of the same reasons for not attending church, there are specific challenges to the faith of African American Christians. This project will shed light on those factors preventing African American

¹³ Mark DeVries, and Scott Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry: Making it Work, Making it Last*, (Westmont: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 10.

¹⁴ Steve Lowe, "Definitions, Limitations, Delimitations, Assumptions" (video presentation of week 2 lecture, Liberty University), accessed January 20, 2022, https://canvas.liberty.edu/courses/218536/pages/watch-definitions-limitations-delimitations-assumptions?module_item_id=18853131

¹⁵ Ibid.

young adults from attending church. Much can be learned from the researcher's study of GPCC that kind be implemented in other churches, but the researcher intends to deal with the problem as it exists at Grace Place Christian Church alone.

Thesis Statement

The researcher asserts that understanding the factors driving low attendance and participation among young adults at GPCC will allow for developing a strategic plan to address the problem resulting in increased attendance and participation among young adults at GPCC. Children and teenagers once represented a significant part of Grace Place Christian Church membership. As they have become young adults, their attendance has significantly declined, and they are becoming disengaged. Some no longer belong to any church. At Grace Place Christian Church, young adults are those whose ages fall between the range of 18 and 30 years of age. The church continues to see declining numbers of young adults attending or engaging in church activities among this age group. This problem has severe implications for the future, as it threatens the continued existence of the local church, which, in turn, affects the body of Christ at large. The problem at Grace Place Christian Church is young adults' low attendance and participation. This research aims to discover the factors driving the problem so that a strategic plan can be implemented to reverse this alarming trend.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

There is much existing literature on the issue of the decline and absence of young adults in the church. This DMIN research project will evaluate and analyze the current literature surrounding the topic to identify relevant themes and determine gaps between the existing literature and the problem this DMIN project addresses. While considering the current literature on the absence of young adults in church, the following books and authors set a precedent, revealed several reoccurring themes, and proved foundational to the research process.

Literature Review

Any church hoping to build sustainable young adult ministry can't afford to make assumptions about what "all young adults are like." They cannot afford to draw on their dead language, based on their personal experience of "when I was their age," to craft a picture of young adults today.¹⁶ It is helpful to consider the writings of those researching and writing about this issue. The literature review affords the researcher this opportunity. A 2007 study by LifeWay Research (the research arm of the Southern Baptist Convention) found that 70 percent of the young adults they studied left the church after 18, with only 35 percent returning to regular participation later in their 20s.¹⁷ While the problem of the absence of young adults exists in many churches worldwide, this literature review is consulted to address the issue as it exists at Grace Place Christian Church.

¹⁶Mark DeVries, and Scott Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 22.

¹⁷ Brian Kirk and Jacob Thorne, *Missional Youth Ministry: Moving from Gathering Teenagers to Scattering Disciples*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 201). *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5608112>.

Precedent Literature

Many churches, historically, have difficulty maintaining the attendance of teenagers and young adults. This dilemma is also seen in many churches today. In observing worship services today, many churches lack attendees from 18 to 35.¹⁸ Why are young adults leaving the church or refusing to come to services? 61% of today's young adults have been a part of the church at one time but are now disengaged. While church attendance has declined over the last several decades, one of the biggest concerns is declining church attendance among youth and young adults. Young adults stop attending church regularly right after high school and into their 20s.¹⁹

Overall, there is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in church engagement. These numbers represent about eight million youth who were active churchgoers as teenagers who will no longer be engaged in a church by their thirtieth birthday.²⁰ The absence of young adults in the church is becoming a problem in many churches, especially those considered conservative or traditional. The findings from this research, though with unique realities in different cultures, climates, and contexts, reveal sameness in the global experiences and struggles of the church (the body of Christ). The emerging composite material can help suggest ways of dealing with the issue under investigation when adopted and adapted to fit into other contexts anywhere, anytime.²¹

¹⁸ Frisbie, Scott W. *"A Study of Church Attendance among Young Adults"* (Order No. 10196188, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2016), 1.

¹⁹ B. J. Wilson, *The Church and the Retention of Young Adults* (Order No. 28029253), 2020. Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (2449462231).

²⁰ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 230.

²¹ Daniel Wayne Hinton, *"The Influence of In-home Family Discipleship and Youth Ministry on Young Adult Disciple Making"* (Order No. 10246633, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2016), 14.

There is a Southern colloquialism that says, “losing my religion.” Interestingly, it does not refer to a departure from one’s faith but rather a loss of civility and lack of control over anger. Young adults are neither angry at the church nor casting off their religion; they are not losing their faith but are quietly and without emotion, leaving the local church.²² The researcher intends to discover how this alarming trend can be reversed and set forth an action plan through research.

The General Perception of Christianity Among Young Adults

Nearly two out of every five young outsiders (38 percent) claim to have a “bad impression of present-day Christianity.” Beyond this, one-third of young outsiders said that Christianity represents a negative image they would not want to be associated with.²³ The church and Christianity cannot compromise the message of Christ or biblical truth for the sake of winning converts; however, it could be that there are some things that the church and Christians need to consider changing or a different approach to reaching out to the lost. In studying thousands of outsiders’ impressions, one could draw the conclusion that Christians are primarily perceived for what they oppose. Christians have become famous for what they oppose rather than who or what they support.²⁴ Reversing this perception in the minds of young adults would go far toward reversing the current trend of decline and absence of young adults in the church.

Outsiders consider Christians hypocritical, saying one thing and doing another, and they are skeptical of what they perceive as Christian morally superior attitudes. They say Christians

²² Thom S. Rainer, Sam S. Rainer, and Eric Geiger, *Essential Church: Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2008), accessed October 11, 2022, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²³ David Kinnaman, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks about Christianity and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks, 2011), 24.

²⁴ David Kinnaman, *Unchristian*, 26.

pretend to be something unreal, conveying a polished image that is not accurate.²⁵ Outsiders say that Christians are bigoted and show disdain for gays and lesbians. They say Christians are fixated on curing homosexuals and leveraging political solutions against them.²⁶ Kinnaman asserts, “Another common perception of Christians is that we are overly motivated by a political agenda, promoting and representing politically conservative interests and issues. Conservative Christians are often thought of as right-wingers.”²⁷ The concept of religion serves modern political ends and reflects current political circumstances.²⁸ There are many Christians who differ from those holding these opinions, but what’s important is not whether these opinions are accurate but that they exist at all because as long as the rest of humanity views Christians in this light, there is little chance that they will hear anything Christians have to say about Christ or anything else for that matter.

The information presented here helps devise a new approach to ministering to young adults that dispels these perceptions and shows Christ in the light of Scripture. As the love of God is demonstrated, other facets of His character are more readily accepted and understood. This way of thinking could be a part of the new approach, showing God’s love for all. There will always be offenses and misconceptions, but it is the responsibility of the church to do the right thing in love and in loving, trusting that God can succor the offended.

²⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ William E. Arnal and Russell T. McCutcheon, “*On the Definition of Religion*,” *The Sacred is the Profane: The Political Nature of “Religion”* (2012, Oxford Academic, 24 Jan. 2013), <https://doi-org.ezproxy.liberty.edu/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199757114.003.0001>, accessed 10 Oct. 2022.

Post-Christian Cultural Influences

The pages of Scripture, and the annals of human history, suggest that there are times when faith is at the center, and trust is pushed to the margins. In digital Babylon (popular culture), where information is instantly available at the godlike swipe of a finger, Almighty God has been squeezed to the margins.²⁹ Today, the church and Christianity exist within a post-Christian culture, a time and a place characterized by rampant skepticism about Christianity and the Bible. Many view the Bible as a book of oppression that is harmful to the minds of its devoted readers.³⁰

In society, humanity has Christians who attend church and a new generation of those who claim to be Christians but are churchless. On the other extreme, the world has people who have no religious affiliation. Add a splintered family structure, singled parented, and broken into the mix. This new world needs a new kind of church to be culturally relevant.³¹ A Post-Christian era demands a new approach to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. Such an approach must include an awareness of the multicultural makeup of modern society and strategies to share the gospel within the context of the target culture. The gospel must be communicated in culturally relevant ways. Being culturally relevant acknowledges the multiculturalism of society. Because each culture has its religion, the more cultures present means more religions are being practiced. The church should get out to where the people are who need Jesus,³² sharing the gospel with cultural awareness.

²⁹ David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock, and Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 264.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 383.

³¹ Scott W. Frisbie, *A Study of Church Attendance Among Young Adults*, 22.

³² Scott W. Frisbie, *A Study of Church*, 4.

Technology

Today, many of us turn to our devices to help us make sense of the world. Young people use the screens in their pockets as counselors, entertainers, instructors, and even sex educators. Why build up the courage to have what will likely be an awkward conversation with a parent, pastor, or teacher when you can get the same information by a Google search, and no one else will be the wiser?³³ Regarding technology, the path of least resistance is not scorn-worthy because it's easy. It's praiseworthy because it's efficient.³⁴ Three trends are shaping young adults and our culture more broadly: access (which, thanks to "Wi-Fi everywhere," is exponentially more amplified today), alienation (from institutions and traditions that give structure and meaning to our lives), and authority (which is increasingly viewed with suspicion).³⁵ Screens inform and connect, but they also distract and entertain. Babylon's pride, power, prestige, and pleasure colonize hearts and minds through screens' ubiquitous presence.³⁶

Technology is not inherently evil. It can be used for good, God, and gospel sharing. The church must do a better job of employing technology towards the Great Commission and young adult ministry. Computers, projectors, and tools such as PowerPoint© are now regularly used by churches, so using outlets such as Facebook and Twitter as tools that could be used to build upon the attendance of young adults is reasonable. This current generation of young adults are media

³³ David Kinnaman, Mark Matlock, and Aly Hawkins, *Faith for Exiles*, 219.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 336.

literate people who use these platforms to communicate. The church should also tap into these outlets to boost its growth.³⁷

Worship Style

Much emphasis has been placed on contemporary worship services, characterized by modern-sounding music to draw young adults. There are two common explanations for the emergence of music as a center of attention in many worship services today. The one to which those who study worship initially subscribed is based on the assumptions of cultural critics, such as media theorist and cultural critic Neil Postman, who argues that our culture has primarily become a culture of entertainment. Established by the emergence of television culture, our values and standards are marked by being entertained.³⁸

This approach is best embodied by the writings of theologian Marva J. Dawn. She would suggest that at their worst, evangelicals have “dumbed down” their worship to meet the lowest common denominators of edification and entertainment and have not fully committed themselves to worship God. The replacement of classic Christian songs with theologically less substantive music is a sign that evangelicals are more concerned with being relevant and popular than with the glorification of God.³⁹

The second common explanation for the shift in the importance of music is the emergence of youth culture in post-modernity. Post-modernity is defined in many ways. However, one persistent characteristic is the rejection of absolute truth for all cases, suggesting

³⁷ Scott W. Frisbie, *A Study of Church Attendance*, 96.

³⁸ Robert H. Woods, Jr., ed. *Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture, Pop Goes the Gospel* (Westport: ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2013), 135.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

multiple contexts providing multiple interpretations of the world around us. Post-modernity is frequently synonymous with the decentralization of authority, implying that a one-size fits-all model will not work with worship. This cultural shift changed how youth ministry was done from the 1950s onward. Music was used to relate to the youth, and it was music that had little to do with the music sung in worship in the 1950s and 1960s. Instead, this music would later be used in alternative worship services and congregations.⁴⁰ This reveals that the way to draw young adults is not necessarily by becoming like them but by demonstrating a better way to be.

Marriage and Family

In developed societies especially, not only those that exhibit lengthy economic prosperity, but it is also believed that men and women alike are beginning to lose the motivation to marry and have children. So, they increasingly delay or avoid one or both. Indeed, the act of getting married, something humans appear to have done for millennia out of economic practicality, if not always out of love, is growing less common quickly.⁴¹ The changing economy has lengthened the time it takes to secure employment that is sufficiently stable and remunerative to support a family.⁴² This has severe implications for the presence of young adults in the church. Married people not only go to church more often than single people do, but they also have a more enduring relationship with a person of the opposite sex, have or anticipate having children to whom they must responsibly impart values, and have probably chosen a group of friends who

⁴⁰ Robert H. Woods, Jr., ed. *Evangelical Christians and Popular Culture*, 135.

⁴¹ Mark Regnerus, *The Future of Christian Marriage* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=2532406&site=ehost-live&scope=site>, 9.

⁴² Alan Booth, *Early Adulthood in a Family Context* (New York, NY: Springer, 2012), 10.

lead lives like theirs.⁴³ The church has historically been the institution that fostered marriage and family values. People married earlier in life and therefore needed the assistance of an institution like the church to assist them in raising morally upstanding children. One reason for the absence of young adults in the church is that people marry later in life. Many believe their singleness affords them the right and opportunity to live for themselves without the bonds of the church.

For some people, passing on their religious values to their children is a matter of supreme urgency. They believe that only believers go to heaven when they die, so if they want to see their children someday in heaven, they figure it is important to take them to the church where they will learn to be believers. For other people, exposing children to church is less concerned for its eternal consequences than its effects on their lives in this world.⁴⁴ Millennials are interested in financial stability, obtaining higher education, self-exploration, and quality relationships as a part of their developmental goals. Therefore, pursuing these goals tends to postpone achieving traditional young adult markers like getting married, living independently, and having children. While young adulthood can be a fascinating time full of new opportunities, young adults face many challenges as they launch from adolescence into adulthood.⁴⁵

The church can minister to the needs of today's complex family structure. Today, there are homes with parents, children, and grandparents all living under the same roof. This necessitates an intergenerational worship environment relevant to each generation. Faith communities are perhaps the only places where families, singles, couples, children, teens,

⁴³ Robert Wuthnow, *After the Baby Boomers How Twenty- and Thirty-Somethings are Shaping the Future of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 83.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁵ Jennifer A. Pax, *Young Adult Future Outlook in the Context of Parent Advice, Parent-Young Adult Closeness, and Young Adult Ability Self-Concept*, Order No. 27997651, Montclair State University, 2020, in PROQUESTMS ProQuest Dissertations & Theses.

grandparents, and all ages come together regularly. Yet the societal trend toward generational fragmentation has moved into churches also.⁴⁶ Unfortunately, the church has not been as effective in ministering to young adults as it has other generations. An inter-generational worship environment improves the likelihood of the church having all ages represented among its congregants.

Discipleship

Regarding the church and its responsibility to make disciples, Jim Putman asserts, “The church was not designed to be a group of spectators who attend weekly lectures; it was designed to be a trained army with a powerful message. All believers are the messengers who bring the message to others and continue discipling those who believe. By doing this, we complete the same work Jesus prayed about in John 17. He gave that work to His disciples, who gave it to us.”⁴⁷ Relationships built on the joint study of God’s Word, covenant discipleship, and Christian friendship are the ultimate results of intentional ministry with youth and young adults. It allows those in relationship with one another to ask, as John Wesley did in some fashion, “How is it with your soul?”⁴⁸ This kind of discipleship is what most Young Adults desire in their churches. Every aspect of ministry with youth and young adults should be rooted in Scripture. Regular, intentional exposure to the Bible will help provide a developing knowledge of God’s people, a

⁴⁶ Holly Catterton Allen, and Lawton, Christine, *Intergenerational Christian Formation: Bringing the Whole Church Together in Ministry, Community and Worship* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), accessed October 11, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁴⁷ Jim Putman, *Real-Life Discipleship Training Manual: Equipping Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing Group, 2010), 18.

⁴⁸ Board of Discipleship, *Ministries with Young People*, (Abingdon Press, 2016), 10.

new perspective on the past, and a compass for the future. Those who are leading and training young believers to become leaders must be willing to continue to learn themselves.⁴⁹

Discipleship is how spiritually mature believers assist others in spiritual formation. “Spiritual formation is the process of being changed to be more like Jesus. It is the ongoing, gradual process of glorious transformation into the image of Jesus by the Spirit of God that is available to every believer because of honestly and intentionally seeking the face of God. It is the fruit of a relationship with God.”⁵⁰ Spiritual formation is the goal of discipleship. Christians’ use of formation originates in the New Testament writings. In Galatians 4:19, Paul uses the imagery of childbirth to express his intense desire for the Galatian church’s growth, stating that he is suffering “the pains of childbirth” until “Christ is formed in you.”⁵¹ Young adults are searching for communal and mentor/mentee relationships that are part of a good discipleship program.

Young adults today are not looking for perfection in leaders but rather transparency. They want to know that they can relate to their leaders and that their leaders can relate to them. Leaders who divulge their humanness and share how they have dealt with sin in their own lives are more likely to be trusted by young adults to lend advice, guidance, and instruction on how young adults should deal with sin in their lives.⁵² Transparency in leadership lends the credibility necessary for discipleship. Transparency is critical to the disciple-making process. If leaders cannot be trusted, they will not be accepted by this generation as their spiritual leaders, entrusted with their spiritual well-being and eternal destiny.

⁴⁹ Board of Discipleship, *Ministries with Young People*, 10.

⁵⁰ Rod Dempsey and Earley, Dave. *Spiritual Formation Is...: How to Grow in Jesus with Passion and Confidence* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 17.

⁵¹ Evan B. Howard, *A Guide to Christian Spiritual Formation: How Scripture, Spirit, Community, and Mission Shape Our Souls* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), 14.

⁵² Pokluda, Jonathan. *Welcoming the Future Church How to Reach, Teach, and Engage Young Adults* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2020), 17.

In the New Testament, the Ephesian church provides a model of a discipling church. Paul planted and served as a pastor in the church for three years. He had a strategy of discipleship and developed a team of disciples.⁵³ God's Word greatly influenced proclaiming the gospel, building churches, and making disciples. God's Word became an essential principle and primary text in the discipleship process in the early church.⁵⁴ A relationship with Jesus Christ must be experienced, and a person must not just know the Bible's teachings but also experience them so that no person on earth can take those teachings away. This method happens through relationships that extend even outside of the church. It takes place through discipleship and love.⁵⁵ The further goal of discipleship is to teach the disciple to obey God's Word. Dietrich Bonhoeffer asserts, "The disciple's answer is not a spoken confession of faith in Jesus. Instead, it is the obedient deed."⁵⁶ Discipleship equips the believer to be sent into Christian service in some capacity. Being sent is not for the spiritually elite but for every Christian,⁵⁷ including young adults.

Conclusion

In this literature review, the researcher has shared the reoccurring themes encountered while researching the absence of young adults in the church. The decline and absence of young

⁵³ Park, Hyun Il. *Developing a Strategy to Make Young Adult Disciples in Churches Focusing on God's Word in a Discipleship Process* (Lynchburg, VA: Liberty University, 2016.), 47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁵⁵ Scott W. Frisbie, "A Study of Church Attendance among Young Adults" (Order No. 10196188, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2016), 17.

⁵⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship: Readers Edition*, 1517 Media, 2015, *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=4396246>, Created from liberty on 2022-10-17 14:28:53.

⁵⁷ J. T. English, *Deep Discipleship: How the Church Can Make Whole Disciples of Jesus* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2020), 27.

adults in the church is a real problem with consequences. The issue has much to do with the Post-Christian Culture of modern times. No longer is the Bible viewed as divinely authoritative or infallible. Then there is the negative perception of Christians and their use of the Bible. Christians are often seen with suspicion or skepticism, if not outright disdain. David Kinnaman asserts, “In studying thousands of outsiders’ impressions, Christians are primarily perceived for what they stand against. We have become famous for what we oppose rather than who we are for.”⁵⁸

Technology is a great challenge and an excellent opportunity for young adult ministry. The church must take advantage of such a powerful medium for the glory of God. Too many churches assume that starting a contemporary worship service holds the secret code to bringing back the younger generation. Unless a church is tending to the foundational priorities required to grow a thriving, healthy young adult ministry, changing the worship style is one more distraction that will accomplish next to nothing.⁵⁹

Young adults are looking for ways to connect and for opportunities to change the world with the gospel. They’re looking for roles integral to the mission of our churches. They’re looking for a place where they can make a difference. They’re looking for a seat at the table and people and organizations to partner with to impact their community.⁶⁰

Theological Foundations

The Scriptures reveal God’s desire to use youths and young adults in the *Missio Dei*, mission of God. *Missio Dei* is a Latin phrase reminding the church that its mission is not the

⁵⁸ David Kinnaman, *Unchristian*, 26.

⁵⁹ Mark DeVries, and Scott Pontier, *Sustainable Young Adult Ministry*, 47.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

invention, responsibility, or program of human origin. It flows from the character and purposes of God.⁶¹ The Bible shows God's intent to rely on the strength of the youth in this endeavor. The apostle John shared this confidence in the youthful to whom he wrote, repeating the statement, "I have written unto you, young men, because ye are strong, and the word of God abideth in you, and ye have overcome the wicked one" (1 John 2:13-4 King James Version). By repeating the three categories under which he addressed his audience, John suggested that they possessed spiritual attainments worthy of being called children, fathers, and young men and possessed these attainments in ample measure.⁴⁹ God intends to use the strength of the young and the elder's wisdom to accomplish His mission, *Missio Dei*. Because this is so, God calls young adults to godliness as *individuals*, family members, and *church leaders*.

The Scriptures show God's desire that young men and women choose to serve Him early. The Bible confirms God's recognition of the value of youths and young adults to His overarching purpose of establishing His kingdom on earth. The vigor, vitality, strength, and overall passion for life make young adults an asset in accomplishing God's will and purpose for humanity. A prime example is seen in the life of Israel's King Solomon, who squandered much of his existence in imprudence, and in hindsight, wrote this word of wisdom, "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, I have no pleasure in them" (Eccl 12:1 KJV). The command "Remember your Creator" means to revere God, keep His laws faithfully, and serve Him responsibly. Because He (God) has created all people, everyone owes Him their life.⁶² This verse implies God's desire

⁶¹ Stuart Murray, *Church Planting* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 2001), 39.

⁶² J. F. Walvoord, and R. B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Dallas, Tx: Victor Books, 1985), 890.

that men and women serve Him, mainly when they are young, vibrant, filled with vigor and vitality, bursting at the seams with life and love.

Spiritual young adults are shifting from being self-centered to being God-and other-centered. They are beginning to reorient their lives around God's Word and his people and mission. They are starting to understand that God has called them to give to the body of Christ rather than take.⁶³ Spiritually mature young adults remain interested and enthusiastic about ministering to others. Young adults seek opportunities to demonstrate their faith in acts of service to others, being doers of the Word, not just people who listen to a sermon on Sunday morning. Spiritual young adults are driven by their understanding of and obligation to Christ rather than reward, position, or notoriety.

Spiritual young adults serve God and His purpose with the zeal, energy, and joy the Spirit provides. They see the world as a place that needs changing. "Spiritual young adults are beginning to see that God has created them for a purpose, and their priorities have changed. They are excited about their involvement in the church; even when they are not, they learn to be faithful. They have begun maturing in their faith and are learning to focus on fitting their skills and passions to God's kingdom purposes."⁶⁴ These characteristics make the young adult demographic a critical component in God's plan and purpose for humanity. Therefore, the presence and involvement of young adults are significant to any local church, and all that can be done must be done to facilitate the presence and participation of young adults at Grace Place Christian Church. Evangelism and community outreach are tools that can and should be used to

⁶³ Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington, and Robert E. Coleman, *DiscipleShift: Five Steps That Help Your Church to Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

recruit this critical demographic. As new disciples are brought into the fold, it then becomes essential that they are taught the significance of raising their children to live godly lives, including their participation and involvement in church activities, as the Bible says. “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old, he will not depart from it” (Prov 22:6 KJV).

The continued existence of any organization relies on that organization’s ability to transfer leadership from those of an older generation to those of a younger age. So it is with the church, both local and universal. It is then no wonder that God would make a priority or place emphasis on the transference of spiritual leadership from older Christian leaders who have served the church and now can say, like the apostle Paul, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course,” to young adult Christian men and women, prepared to assume leadership in the church. Scripture reveals this concept in the transference of leadership among the patriarchs of Israel, Abraham to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob. Moses handed leadership responsibility to a young Joshua (Num 27:22-23), David to his young son Solomon (2 Chron 5:2), Elijah the prophet to his young understudy, Elisha (2 Kings 2:12), and Jesus transferred power and authority to the Twelve Apostles and the early church (Acts 2:1-10). An aging apostle Paul relied on his son in the gospel, Timothy, and entrusted him with leading a local congregation (2 Tim 4:1-5).

The Bible contains many examples of God’s willingness, desire, and intent to use youths and young adults to accomplish His will and purpose on earth. An exploration of the biblical examples shows that youth and young adults, adequately trained, are capable of courageous faith and considerable usefulness in God’s purpose and plan for humanity. Recruiting and discipling young adults is critical. The potential that young adults possess must be recognized and cultivated for the kingdom of God. In this section, the researcher will set forth biblical examples, laying a theological foundation for the significance of young adults in church, and the

recruitment and discipling of thereof, starting in the Old Testament and concluding with the New.

Joseph

The Old and New Testaments are filled with examples of how God has used young adults, even teenagers, as key players in the *Missio Dei*, or mission of God, God's plan of redemption. Joseph, the son of Jacob and Rachel, is an example of God's willingness and intent to employ young adults in facilitating his will and purpose. The Joseph story represents a part of the ancestral narratives and the narrative bridge between Genesis and Exodus. Joseph, the firstborn of Rachel and Jacob, continues the genealogical lineage of the patriarchs. Joseph, the tribe of Israel, prepares the way for the exodus from Egypt.⁶⁵ Joseph's story explains how the Israelites came to dwell in Egypt. Joseph was the favorite son of the patriarch, Jacob. Jacob's favoritism was so apparent that it stirred jealousy among Joseph's brothers, inciting them to sell Jacob into slavery in Egypt, where God tested Joseph with Potiphar's wife to see if he was obedient.

When she tempted handsome Joseph, he refused to go to bed with her because that would be a sin against God and his master. Then he deliberately and wisely sought to avoid her daily advances by refusing to be around her. His refusal was strengthened because he was convinced that God had called him to a particular task—he had seen evidence of that in his rise from slavery. If one is to fulfill God's plan, he cannot sin against the God who will bring it about. Potiphar's wife, humiliated by Joseph's refusal of her, fabricated a lie to accuse Joseph of

⁶⁵ Axel Bühler, Thomas Römer, and Konrad Schmid, *The Joseph Story between Egypt and Israel*, edited by Axel Bühler, Thomas Römer, and Konrad Schmid, 1. Aufl. ed. (Mohr Siebeck GmbH & Co. KG, 2021), 5.

assaulting her. She showed her household servants and Potiphar the garment Joseph left when he fled from her persistent advances.⁶⁶

Joseph was eventually incarcerated, but Joseph prospered in prison because of God's favor, and while he was in jail, he was put in charge. Joseph showed faithfulness to God. This is affirmed as the chapter affirms, "the Lord was with Joseph" (Gen 39:2,3,21,23). After correctly interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh, however, Joseph rises to second in command in Egypt and saves Egypt during a famine. Jacob's family travels to Egypt to escape the famine, and through him, they are given leave to settle in the land of Goshen, the eastern part of the Nile Delta.

Joseph, a significant figure in the Old Testament, was but 17 years of age (Gen 37:2) when he was sold to a group of Ishmaelites who transported him to Egypt and sold him into slavery. Even as a young man, Joseph demonstrated godly character. His example shows God's willingness to use a young adult person in His overarching plan for humanity. God used Joseph to preserve the Hebrew nation (Gen. 45:5). At the end of his life, Joseph said to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good ... to save many lives" (Gen 50:20). Here, God uses a teenager to perpetuate the continued existence of the Hebrew nation out of which would come to the Messiah, Jesus the Christ.

Jeremiah

Jeremiah is another example of God's willingness and desire to employ youths and young adults in His plan and purpose for humanity. Jeremiah was the premier prophet of Judah during the dark days leading to her destruction. Though the light of other prophets, such as Habakkuk and Zephaniah, flickered in Judah, Jeremiah was the blazing torch that, along with Ezekiel in

⁶⁶ Allen P. Ross, "Genesis," vol. 1, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 90.

Babylon, exposed the darkness of Judah's sin with the piercing brightness of God's Word. He was a weeping prophet to a wayward people.⁶⁷

Jeremiah was a priest, but surprisingly he was not from Jerusalem. He was from Anathoth, a small town near Jerusalem. Years earlier, Solomon had banished the priest Abiathar to Anathoth (1 Kgs 2:26), and it is probable that Abiathar's descendants still lived in the town. Anathoth plays an essential role in Jeremiah and repeatedly appears again (1 Kgs 11:21, 23; 29:27; 32:7–9). It is precisely from those in his hometown of Anathoth that Jeremiah will receive some of his harshest persecution (1 Kgs 11:18–23).⁶⁸

Jeremiah was the son of Hilkiyah, a Levitical priest, likely born between 650 and 645 B.C. God began grooming him for his future role through Jeremiah's childhood training for holy service in the priesthood. Jeremiah is "from the Hebrew name (*Yirmiyahu*), meaning YAHWEH will exalt. God gave Jeremiah an overview of his prophetic ministry as he said, "Behold, I have put My words in your mouth. See, I have this day set you over the nations and the kingdoms, to root out and pull down, destroy and throw down, build and plant" (1 Kgs 9-10 KJV). Thus, God ordained Jeremiah to warn his people by preaching about the destruction of Jerusalem and the building of nations that would eventually establish the kingdom of God. Though brief, God's call of Jeremiah as a prophet contained a message to motivate him for his task. God revealed that His selection of Jeremiah as a prophet had occurred before he had even been formed. . . in the womb. The word "knew" (*yāda*) means far more than intellectual knowledge. It was used for the intimate relations experienced by a husband and wife ("lay," Gen 4:1) and conveyed the sense of

⁶⁷ Charles H. Dyer, "Jeremiah," 1122–23.

⁶⁸ J. Daniel Hays, "Jeremiah and Lamentations," *Teach the Text Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 8.

a close personal relationship (“chosen,” Amos 3:2) and protection (“watches over,” Ps 1:6). Before Jeremiah was conceived, God had singled him out to be His spokesman to Israel.⁶⁹

Jeremiah is sometimes referred to as “the weeping prophet.” This title is given because of his passionate concern for his fellow citizens’ impending punishment. If the people rejected his warning from God to repent, he said, “My soul will weep in secret for your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly and run down with tears because the LORD’s flock has been taken captive” (Jer 13:17 KJV). Of course, Judah did refuse to repent and was taken captive.

The prophet also had plenty to weep about because of how he was treated. His family members turned against him (Jer 12:6), and his message from God was rejected. As he told God, “I am in derision daily; everyone mocks me” (Jer 20:7 KJV). “Jeremiah also lamented for Josiah” (2 Chron 35:25 KJV). This was presumably for King Josiah’s unfortunate death and for the realization that the punishment the prophet prophesied would soon come upon the nation.

Jeremiah’s ministry spanned the final five decades of Judah’s history. His call to service came in 627 B.C. in the 13th year of King Josiah (cf. Jer 1:2), Judah’s last good king, when Jeremiah was about 17 years of age. Josiah’s reign was the final ray of light before the darkness of idolatry and foreign intrigue settled on the Davidic throne. Josiah’s reign provided 31 years of relative stability for Judah. Internally the nation of Judah was gripped by the idolatry that King Manasseh had promoted during his 55-year reign (2 Kings 21:1–9). In 622 B.C. (Josiah’s 18th year), Judah experienced her final spiritual renewal (cf. 2 Kings 22:3–23:25). Prompted by the rediscovery of a copy of the Mosaic Law in the temple, Josiah embarked on a diligent effort to rid the nation of idolatry. He removed the outward forms, but his actions did not

⁶⁹ Charles H. Dyer, “Jeremiah,” 1130.

reach into his subjects' hearts. After Josiah's untimely death, the people returned to their wicked ways.⁷⁰

Jeremiah gave much sincere effort toward bringing Judah back into compliance with the law of God. Jeremiah desperately preached and prophesied the Word of the Lord to a rebellious nation. In 626 B.C., the Babylonians invaded the land, destroyed the temple, and carried the Hebrews away as captives into Babylon in 586 B.C. Jeremiah prophesied only for a short time during the Babylonian captivity and concluded his prophetic ministry there. The prophet Jeremiah's life and ministry serve as another part of a theological foundation for this research and an example of God's willingness, ability, and desire to use youths and young adults in His plan of redemption.

Josiah

King Josiah reigned from 640–609 B.C. He is a figure of extraordinary importance in the history of ancient Israel and Judah. He was the noblest king to reign in the territory of Judah. Scripture says there was no ruler of his caliber, neither before nor after him, who sought the Lord with "all his heart" as did he (2 Kgs 23:25). Josiah was but a boy of eight when he came to the throne. At the age of sixteen, he began to "seek" Jehovah, and by the time he turned twenty, he initiated a campaign to purge the southern kingdom of its idolatry (2 Chron 34:1-3).

In a desperate attempt to protect his people from divine wrath and certain ruin, Josiah undertakes a massive reform of Israelite religion; he utterly destroys the cult places and installations where his people worshiped and eliminates their priests, purifying and, many would argue, centralizing Israelite worship at the Jerusalem temple. The authors of 2 Kings 23 portray

⁷⁰ Charles H. Dyer, "Jeremiah," 1125.

Josiah's reign as a pivotal moment in the development of monotheistic Judaism.⁷¹ The Bible records the account of the discovery of a Torah scroll during the renovation of the Jerusalem temple. This discovery happened during the eighteenth year of Josiah's reign. When Josiah was twenty-six, he arranged for repairs on the temple. The scroll, a copy of "the law of Jehovah given by Moses," was discovered in the temple (2 Chron. 34:14 KJV). When the religious and moral message of the sacred document was studied, and the spiritual fabric of the nation was seen to stand in such glaring contrast, a reformation was proclaimed.⁷²

This newly discovered scroll, believed by most theologians to be a manuscript of the book of Deuteronomy, contained the Law of God and became the catalyst for an ambitious program of religious reform and national restoration. With a fervent desire to please God, He led Israel back into compliance with the Law of God; Josiah closed down all pagan worship sites throughout Israel and centralized worship at the Jerusalem temple. In addition, Josiah attempted to reunite Israel and Judah as an independent monarchy under the rule of the royal house of David.⁷³

Another significant accomplishment of Josiah was the restoration of the Passover, which had not been observed with care since the days of the judges (2 Kgs 23:21-23). Since the Passover was designed to preview the death of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 5:7), Josiah was an essential element in preparing the nation for the Savior's arrival. What confidence Jehovah had placed in a spiritual lad.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Lauren A. S. Monroe, *Destructive Rituals and the Creative Process: Josiah's Reform and the Dynamics of Defilement: Israelite Rites of Violence and the Making of a Biblical Text* (New York: Oxford Academic, 2011), 3.

⁷² Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Oxford Scholarship Online, 2003. DOI: 10.1093/0195133242.001.0001.

⁷³ Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel*.

⁷⁴ Wayne Jackson, "The Value of Youth to the Cause of God" *ChristianCourier.com*. Access date: April 19, 2022. <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/866-the-value-of-youth-to-the-cause-of-god>

Miriam

Miriam was Amram and Jochebed's eldest child and Aaron and Moses's sister. After the death of Joseph, the Hebrew people began to multiply in the land of Egypt. The population of Hebrews in Egypt grew to the point that they began to be perceived as a threat to the stability of that nation. The leaders of Egypt were concerned that in the event of a war with a foreign power, the Hebrews might ally with the enemy resulting in the defeat of Egypt. Therefore, the order was given that Israelite male babies would be thrown into the Nile. When Moses was born, his parents hid him for three months; then, they placed him in a small vessel fashioned from the papyrus plant, which they deposited by the river's edge, committing their precious baby to the care of Jehovah.

From this one incident, we can glean from Miriam's life that she was already caring, competent, and brave. It would have taken quite a bit of courage to be so forthright with the Pharaoh's daughter. She must have also been obedient because although the Bible does not say so specifically, it seems her mother had left her to watch over Moses and see what would become of him. Miriam, estimated to be about ten or twelve years of age,⁷⁵ was posted some distance away, keeping watch. Finally, Miriam obtained Jochebed, Moses' mother, as a nurse for the child. Oh, the ways of providence. The entire future of the Hebrew nation, the instrument to be employed for the conveyance of the savior, was entrusted to a teenage girl.

David

Perhaps the Old Testament's premier example of God's recognition of the value of youths and young adults in the plans and purposes of God is the Bible's account of David.

⁷⁵ John M'Clintock, and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1969).

Israel's first king, Saul, was the ideal candidate. He was tall, handsome, and impressive. Unfortunately, he was also foolish and disobedient. As Israel's second king is chosen, the Lord rejected worldly standards of leadership and selected David, whom the Bible describes as "a man after God's own his own heart" (1 Sam 17:10-16).⁷⁶ The story of David opens with a dramatic contrast between the fresh hope of his young life and the rejection of the self-willed towards the fatal field of Gilboa. King Saul, whose course was rapidly descending.⁷⁷

The Bible's account of David's battle with Goliath is known worldwide and has shaped our expectation of good overcoming evil and light overcoming darkness. The story has inspired many with hope to triumph against incredible odds, persevere through difficult circumstances, and stand in faith against all that oppose them. The soldiers of Israel were on one side of the valley of Elah, and the defiant Philistine champion on the other. Morning and evening, for forty days, Goliath had challenged Israel to combat, but they were frozen in fear (1 Sam 17:10-16). When David arrived on the scene, he was chagrined at the timidity of his Hebrew relatives and volunteered to take on the infidel. But he was initially disdained as a mere "youth" by king Saul himself and Goliath (1 Sam 17:33,42). David may have been about twenty-two or so at the time.⁷⁸ God was with David and caused him to prevail. Goliath was slain, and the Philistine force was routed. Edersheim called this victory "the turning point in the history of the theocracy."⁷⁹ In the life of David, a central character of the Old Testament and the central figure of Hebrew history, demonstrates God's hand in a young adult's life.

⁷⁶ Jack Kuhatschek, *David: Developing a Heart for God* (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 10.

⁷⁷ F. B. Meyer, *David: Shepherd, Psalmist, King* (Chicago: Barakaldo Books, 2021), 6. Accessed October 13, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁷⁸ Adam Clarke, *Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, n.d.).

⁷⁹ Alfred Ederdheim, *The Bible History*, vol. IV, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959).

Mary

When it came to the incarnation of Christ, God certainly did not overlook the value of young adults. Joseph and Mary were both young adults who were planning a life together. Mary and Joseph had hopes and dreams of a good life and a loving family like all young adult newlyweds. Their plans were interrupted as God chose Mary to be the mother of Jesus Christ. Pregnant before her wedding day, she was sure to have been the subject of suspicion and gossip. Nevertheless, when the time came, she gave birth to the Son of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

Here is a fact that makes this even more astounding. In the Jewish culture, a girl was usually married by twelve or thirteen. Before thirteen, a maiden might be betrothed to a man by her parents; at thirteen, she was of the legal age to make her own choice.⁸⁰ Therefore, it is entirely possible that when Mary gave birth to the world's Savior, she was in her early teens. This emphasizes God's willingness, desire, and intent to employ youths and young adults to exercise his will.

It is a common misconception that youths and young adults lack spiritual depth and are undependable. This was certainly not the case with Mary. Her spiritual depth is seen in the psalm she uttered when greeted by Elizabeth while visiting her relative in the hill country of Judah. The song is often called the "Magnificat" (from the first word of the passage in the Latin Vulgate). The course begins: "My soul magnifies [present—continuously] the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46 KJV).⁸¹ Harry Rimmer noted that "this little song, of ten

⁸⁰ John M'Clintock, John and James Strong, *Cyclopedia of Biblical Literature*, 774-75.

⁸¹ Wayne Jackson, "The Value of Youth to the Cause of God," *ChristianCourier.com*, accessed: April 19, 2022. <https://www.christiancourier.com/articles/866-the-value-of-youth-to-the-cause-of-god>.

verses in the English Bible, draws from twenty-three separate passages in the Old Testament.”⁸²

What an excellent commentary on the spiritual capacity of a young adult.

Timothy

A New Testament example of God’s use of young adults in ministry is that of Timothy. This young pastor was the son of a Greek father and a Jewish mother (Acts 16:1). No mention is made of his father being a Christian. Still, his mother, Eunice, and grandmother, Lois, were both known for their sincere faith (2 Tim 1:5). Timothy was undoubtedly living at Lystra when Paul visited that city on his first missionary journey (cf. Acts 14:6; 16:1). Thanks to his mother and grandmother, Timothy already knew and believed the Old Testament Scriptures (cf. 2 Tim 3:15), and Paul took him on as a promising protégé. Paul thus became a spiritual father to the young man, referring to him as “my true son in the faith” (1 Tim 1:2) and “my dear son” (2 Tim 1:2; cf. Phil 2:22). Even though Timothy’s father may not have been a believer, Timothy had a spiritual father in Paul. Paul had no biological children, but in Timothy, he had a spiritual son.⁸³

Timothy’s promise for the ministry was recognized early (1 Tim 1:18; 4:14; 2 Tim 4:5).⁸⁴ There was no companion closer to the great apostle Paul than Timothy, his young friend. When the apostle wrote to the church in Philippi, the congregation he had the greatest affection for, he pledged to send Timothy to assist them. He paid the lad the highest compliment when he told the

⁸² Harry Rimmer, *The Magnificence of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1943), 118.

⁸³ Aida Besancon Spencer, *1 Timothy: A New Covenant Commentary* (Havertown: Lutterworth Press, 2014), accessed October 13, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁸⁴ A. Duane Litfin, “1 Timothy,” vol. 2, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 729–30.

Philippian saints, “I have no like-minded man who will care truly for Your state” (Phil 2:20 KJV).⁸⁵

Timothy may have been, by nature, somewhat passive, timid, retiring, and easily intimidated (cf. 2 Tim 1:7). Perhaps this is because he, as a young adult, found himself having to lead and exercise authority over those who were older and more influential than himself. Thus, Paul repeatedly spurred him into action (1 Tim 1:3; 4:11; 5:7; 6:2; 2 Tim 3:14; 4:2, 5). He was to let nothing, including his relative youth (1 Tim 4:12), stand in the way of his performance of duty (2 Tim 2:1–7; 4:5). Like a good soldier, he was to “fight the good fight” (1 Tim 1:18; 6:12), aggressively protecting and propagating the gospel, using the full range of his gifts (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6).⁸⁶ It is in this manner that youths and young adults today should be encouraged related to their spiritual service and responsibilities. Paul recognized and cultivated the potential in young Timothy. Many young adults today need this same kind of mentoring. If provided, it will result in significant positive results for the church, local and universal.

The Disciples

Our mental pictures of the scenes described in the Gospels are greatly influenced by impressions received from the illustrated books of our childhood and how great artists have depicted those scenes. Painters have been inclined to represent most of the Twelve Disciples as heavily bearded men, apparently in middle life if not beyond it, Peter and some of the others being bald-headed—a condition, it may be incidentally remarked, that would be strange in a fisherman accustomed to an outdoor life unless he was far advanced in years. John, indeed, is

⁸⁵ Wayne Jackson, “The Value of Youth to the Cause of God.”

⁸⁶ Ibid.

represented as being younger than the others; but even he, as usually portrayed, appears to be mid-life or older.⁸⁷

While the Bible does not explicitly state the ages of any of the original twelve disciples, it shares enough information to determine approximate ages. Jesus was approximately thirty years old when He began His public ministry (Luke 3:23). The disciples often referred to Jesus as “rabbi” or “teacher.” In Jewish culture, disciples (or students) were generally younger than their teachers. Therefore, it stands to reason that the disciples were under 30. Also, Jesus referred to them as “little children,” implying they were several years younger than him.

The Scripture reveals the fact that some of the disciples were fishermen by trade. James and John left their father in the boat to follow Jesus (Matt 4:21–22). Though they were young, they were yet old enough to work. They left home to pursue a rabbi means they were at least teenagers. Interestingly, the Bible reveals that Peter was married when he was called to follow Jesus. His sick mother-in-law is mentioned in Matthew 8:14. Because Peter was old enough to get married, he had to be at least in his mid-teens. According to church history, John lived longer than the other Apostles. His death was around A.D. 90, which was approximately sixty years after the resurrection. This dates him to 30 years of age or younger when he was with Jesus. Because John was old enough to care for the mother of Jesus (John 19:26–27), he is likely to have been at least 20 years of age. Because the Gospel of Matthew was written 30–40 years after Jesus’ resurrection, Matthew was likely in his 20s when following Jesus on earth.

In Jewish culture, it was customary for a child to begin religious training at 5 and continue until age 12 or 13. If a boy were intelligent and interested in continuing his religious

⁸⁷ Otis and Frank Cary, *How Old Were Christ's Disciples*, Kyoto, Japan, (Chicago University of Chicago Press Journals, 1917), 3.

studies, he would seek a rabbi to disciple him. He would follow and pattern his life after the rabbi until age 30. At that time, he could take on disciples of his own. A young man's discipleship training under a rabbi usually begins between 13 and 15. If this pattern was consistent with the followers of Jesus, some may have joined Jesus as early as age 13 and would have still been teenagers at His death, resurrection, and ascension. The Bible does not give the exact ages of the disciples of Jesus, but based on what the Scripture shows, it is likely they were all between the ages of 13 and 30 when they walked with Christ.

Jesus Christ

The most significant New Testament example of God's willingness, desire, and intent to use young adults in His plan to redeem humanity is seen in the life of the central figure of the New Testament and the Christian Faith, Jesus Christ. Because the Bible does not give Jesus' age at the time of His death nor the date of His death, determining His age at the crucifixion is impossible. However, a review of the history recorded in the New Testament, the Gospel of Luke in particular, and comparing it with Roman history reveals that Jesus was born between 6 and 4 B.C., near King Herod's death. A reasonable estimate is determined by splitting the difference for His birth date of 5 B.C. For the date of the start of Jesus' ministry, consider Luke 3:1-3, which says that it was in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius that the word of God came to John the Baptist in the wilderness and that he went into all the region around the Jordan preaching the baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. At the time John was baptizing the people, he also baptized Jesus, marking His ministry's commencement.⁸⁸

⁸⁸ Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: HarperCollins Christian Publishing, 1978), 29, accessed October 13, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

So, Jesus was probably baptized and began His ministry sometime in A.D. 29, which was when He was about 33 years old. And then, we determine the date of the end of Jesus' ministry. Based on the number of Passover feasts Jesus observed during His public ministry, three are mentioned in Scripture. Therefore, He probably ministered for about three and a half years. That would place the end of Jesus' ministry in A.D. 33. Jesus was in His 30s at the time of His crucifixion. Even in Jesus' day, a 33-year-old was considered a young adult.

Conclusion

Youths and Young adults can accomplish marvelous things for the Master's cause. But how does one always recognize this? Are young people merely ignored as empty-headed, silly people unworthy of serious responsibility? Sadly, this may be the case sometimes. But it should not overlook this valuable resource in the Master's cause. The church must be on the lookout for them and encourage them along the way. The Bible shows that God can use them mightily.

Christian theology teaches that the lives of human beings, how they live and interact with the world, should be informed by the Word of God. In other words, Christians are to live according to God's Word as it is written in the Bible. This is also true for youth and young adult Christians. The belief is that by living according to God's Word, the individual, ensures God's blessing and favor upon their lives, including God's provision and protection. The Bible suggests that a young person can live a "clean life" by carefully reading the Word of God as a guide for daily living. "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? By taking heed to it according to thy word" (Ps 119:9 KJV). According to Christian theology, this is the individual responsibility of every youth and young adult Christian believer.

The Bible also reveals God's intention for young adults in marriages, informing how they should interact with one another as husbands and wives and how they should interact with

the children. In the first and second century A.D., even more so than today, new marriages were primarily between a young man and a young woman; therefore, much of what the Bible says about marriage is aimed at young adults. Christian theology, embracing the writings of the apostle Paul, asserts that wives are to submit to their husbands, honoring them as the head of the family; in the same way, the church is to submit to Christ as its head. Husbands are to love their wives the same way Christ loves the church (Eph 5:22-25). Wives were admonished to submit to their “own” (Grk. *idios*, one’s own) husband. The Scriptures instruct children to honor and obey their parents (Eph 6:1-3), and young fathers are warned against provoking their children to wrath. Young married couples were encouraged to live godly lives informed by God’s Word, submitting themselves to one another and God.

The theological foundations for this DMIN project reveal God’s intent to employ youths and young adults to accomplish His overarching purpose on the earth, *Missio Dei*. Christian theology affirms that God is calling young adults to obedience to His Word in their personal lives, their domestic context, and as church leaders to perpetuate the continued existence and effectiveness of the church and the message of Jesus Christ. The following section will explore some theoretical implications based on these theological foundations.

Theoretical Foundations

Life experiences are a significant influence on personal spirituality and church involvement. Experiences such as marriage, singleness, military, civilian, children, recent loss of loved one, socioeconomic standing, ethnicity, and others affect how one embraces religion, spirituality, and church life, including church attendance. The declining number of young adults attending church is a global problem. The problem’s factors differ according to culture, nationality, social class, and ethnicity. As the intent of this project is to address the low

attendance of African American young adults at Grace Place Christian Church, the researcher will begin this section by sharing some of the everyday challenges unique to African American young adults and how those challenges affect their perception of the church and the likelihood of their attendance and participation in the church. Then, attention will be given to four theoretical models that will form a lens through which the researcher will view and address this issue.

Challenges of African American Young Adults

African American young adults are often economically disadvantaged due to racial wealth inequalities. “The processes and mechanisms by which racial wealth inequality operates are challenging to discern, but the effects of such inequality are readily apparent. In particular, racial disparities in wealth provide material goods, opportunities, resources, services, and psychological satisfactions for Whites, and they penalize African Americans by decreasing their quality of life.”⁸⁹ A challenge for all young adults is the combination of difficult entry into the labor force and stagnant wages for new workers,⁹⁰ African American young adults in particular. Troubled inner-city youth often originate from struggling, single-parent households with crushing burdens and exhausting challenges. They usually do not enjoy the luxury of continued parental support for their academic development.⁹¹

Another challenge has to do with the issue of identity. Identity issues are more complicated for African American emerging adults than for emerging adults in other American ethnic groups because they must overcome the negative assumptions others have about them as

⁸⁹ Lori Latrice Martin, et. al., *Color Struck How Race and Complexion Matter in the “Color-Blind” Era* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017), 1.

⁹⁰ John R. Logan, *Diversity and Disparities America Enters a New Century* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2014), 7.

⁹¹ William Jeynes, *The Wiley Handbook of Christianity and Education* (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2018), 166.

young Black people.⁹² In addition to the everyday challenges of emerging adults, African Americans must navigate their emerging adulthood within a society where they are often negatively perceived. Racist ideology not only results in blacks being targeted but also attacks one's self-esteem and self-perception.⁹³ Psychologist J. J. Arnett states, "For African American emerging adults, the challenge is not just to sort out their assessments of who and what they wish to be but to reject and overcome the negative stereotypes others hold about them."⁹⁴

Racism operates not only through individuals' hurtful words and actions but also through impersonal systems. Another definition explains racism as prejudice plus power. It is not only personal bigotry toward someone of a different race that constitutes racism; instead, racism includes the imposition of bigoted ideas on groups of people.⁹⁵ It's important to note that what is considered blatant racism today was once the law of the land. A US Supreme Court ruling in 1896 supported the practice of segregation. In a case known as *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the Court determined that African Americans were not entitled to use the same public facilities as whites, so long as they were provided with public facilities similar to the ones whites used. "Separate but equal" treatment of the races, the Court said, was perfectly legal.⁹⁶ While laws can be and have been reversed, the condition of the human heart that prompted establishing such rules remains. African Americans and other people of color are many times its victim.

⁹² Arnett, J. J., "Emerging Adulthood: A Theory of Development from the Late Teens Through the Twenties" *American Psychologist*, 55, (2000) 49–480.

⁹³ Hart, Drew G. I., *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism* (Herald Press, 2016), 95. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5652307>.

⁹⁴ J. J. Arnett, "The Psychology of Emerging Adulthood: What is Known, and What Remains to be Known?" *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, J. J. Arnett and J. L. Tanner ed., (Washington: APA Press, 2006), 303–30.

⁹⁵ Jenar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 16, accessed October 12, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

⁹⁶ Chuck Robinson, *Racism* (Philadelphia, PA: Mason Crest, 2017), 37.

As African Americans enter young adulthood, they are more likely to find themselves among communities of diverse cultural, racial, and socio-economic backgrounds. Whether in college, the workplace, or the new neighborhood where they have chosen to live, as emerging adults, African Americans interact with those beyond the immediate social world of family, friends, and community and into the larger society.⁹⁷ Though many young adult African Americans may have experienced racism, prejudice, or discrimination earlier in life, the likelihood of such an experiences increases as the number and range of non-Blacks in their environment increases, compounding the complexities of emerging adulthood with the challenge of surviving in a society often hostile to one's existence. This has significant implications for how the church is perceived through the eyes of African American young adults.

African American Young Adults and The Church

As African American young adults deal with identity issues, they seek positive affirmation from outside sources, such as fraternities, sororities, historically black colleges, social clubs, etc. Historically the primary basis for affirming black identity was the black church. The black church helped enslaved African Americans endure the hardness of 400 years of slavery, survive the injustices of the Jim Crow era, and persevere through the Civil Rights Movement to secure the civil liberties enjoyed by so many today. At the heart of this struggle for freedom was the black church, ministering to the needs of its community and the world. The black church was the cornerstone of the community, esteemed and supported mainly by African Americans. However, today many young adult African Americans have become cynical toward

⁹⁷ J. S. Phinney, "Ethnic Identity in Emerging Adulthood," *Emerging Adults in America: Coming of Age in the 21st Century*, J. J. Arnett and J. L. Tanner ed., (Washington: APA Press, 2006), 117–34.

the church and the gospel's message. The researcher will share a few likely causes of this shift towards cynicism among African American young adults.

The Christian faith has suffered a significant setback. Barna Research Group's most recent data shows that young adults have lost much respect for the Christian faith. Nearly two out of every five young adults (38 percent) claim to have a "bad impression of present-day Christianity."⁹⁸ To equip and retain the next generation of Christian believers, this perception must be changed. Change begins with understanding the causes of the problem. The researcher will share four factors driving the exodus of African American young adults from the church.

John the Baptist asked the following question of Jesus. "Are you the expected one, or should we look for someone else?" (Luke 7:19 KJV). This is a question of disillusionment. Many African American young adults today, Like John, are disillusioned with the church. This disillusionment among so many is the result of several things. The moral failures of high-profile spiritual leaders and the church's negligence in holding them accountable are likely causes of disillusionment. Another is the church's silence on social justice matters that are dear to the hearts of African American young adults. Many African Americans believe that the church is more interested in politics than people.

African American young adults are engaged in activism for social change and moral progress in contradiction to the church's perceived position of preserving and protecting the status quo. African American young adults point out what they perceive as religious hypocrisy in the church, where so many church leaders are so vocal about the theological concept of *Imago Dei*, the notion that every man is created in the image of God, while refusing to affirm the value of black lives, even as such life is snuffed out, before the eyes of the world, on national

⁹⁸ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian*, 24.

television. Dr. Eric Mason asserts, “The issues of racism and injustice are like the Kilauea Volcano. They form a hotbed of lava that lives just beneath the surface, and at any moment, they can explode violently, as happened in Charleston, South Carolina, when Dylan Roof went into a black church and gunned down ten worshippers.”⁹⁹ The church’s negligence in addressing matters related to racism and injustice has given rise to an anti-church movement among African American young adults who, consequently, are turning to religions and activism they find culturally and ethnically affirming. The church’s failure to address racism and social injustice has allowed other organizations to fill this gap, many of which communicate an anti-Christian message. As a result, today’s church faces the stiff challenge of converting and retaining the next generation of Christian believers.

Faith, Reason, and Young Adults

Another factor driving the exodus of African American young adults from the church is the notion that, in the church, questions are unwelcome. Intellectual reasoning must be set aside for blind faith to be a Christian. The debate over the relationship between the Christian faith and worldly wisdom has been part of Christianity from its beginnings. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul offers only Christ crucified to the Jews who seek miracles and the Greeks seeking wisdom (1 Cor 1:21–23). Yet, in the same breath, Paul can speak of Jesus as the “power and wisdom of God” (v24), so those who seek wisdom must ultimately be seeking Christ.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Eric Mason, *Woke Church, An Urgent Call for Christians in America to Confront Racism and Injustice* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2018), Kindle loc 284.

¹⁰⁰ Neil Ormerod, “The Debate over a ‘Christian Philosophy’” *Faith and Reason*, 3–34. 1517 Media, (2017). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1pwt3xs.4>.

God can be known in two different and complementary ways: through natural reason and revelation.¹⁰¹ While reason has its limits, it can be helpful to one's understanding of God. Noted Christian apologist William Lane Craig said, "Reason is a tool to help us better understand and defend our faith; as Anselm put it, ours is a faith that seeks understanding." The church, it seems, has not done the work of communicating this truth to young adults.

Interestingly, when an individual leaves the church, the point they leave is not the point they had a doubt. A season of doubt usually precedes their departure, during which time, unfortunately, their questions go unanswered. "Have more faith," "Read your Bible," "Don't question God," and "Have faith in God" are shallow responses often given to those seeking clarity. Though well-intended, these are often harmful responses to the deep pain and sincere questions young adults often have. God has endowed humans with rational capacities, which can and do, lead us to the truth. However, these analytical capacities do not, and cannot, by themselves, offer us salvation, such is found in Christ alone.¹⁰² Even so, the church must cultivate an environment and culture where questions are welcomed, not shunned. A young generation of outsiders raises significant criticisms of the Christian faith and its people. Knowing the problem and diagnosing the hostility is just the start. How should the church respond? What can a church do to address this perception of our Christianity?¹⁰³ Cultivating an environment where young adults can ask questions about life, the Bible, God, and faith is a great place to start.

¹⁰¹ George Karuvelil, *Faith, Reason, and Culture an Essay in Fundamental Theology* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 44.

¹⁰² Steve Wilkens, ed. *Faith and Reason: Three Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), accessed October 18, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹⁰³ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian*, 205.

Decolonization and The African American Young Adult

A simple definition of decolonization is the action or process of a state withdrawing from a former colony, leaving it independent. Regarding culture and Christianity, decolonization includes dismantling the social classification structure wherein he who classifies race and gender assumes the natural position of privilege and power. Thus, decolonization includes dismantling racism. Walter Mignolo, an Argentine semiotician and professor at Duke University, has done extensive research and writing on decolonization. Mignolo asserts,

Race and gender are two concepts of Western modernity that make us believe they “represent” something that exists. Behind race, there is an implied logic of classification (the logic of coloniality), assuming that people belong to different races and the markers are blood and skin color. The classifications shape and guide our perception of society. However, decolonial gnoseological assumptions say that names and classifications do not refer to what there is but frame what we perceive.¹⁰⁴

Mignolo’s work implies that classifications of race and gender have been used historically to establish a hierarchy of privilege and power. Social progress requires that such structures be revised to allow equality among people.

Decolonization is relevant to the church in that it must acknowledge the existence of racism, that it is sinful, and that its intent was and always will be evil. This suggests that the church cannot afford to be silent on issues of social injustice, including racism, dismissing them as “not a gospel issue” or the threat of so-called critical race theory infiltrating the church. Such positioning by the church has fueled disillusionment among many African American young adults. The church seems to champion unity as long as such unanimity adheres to the existing structure of privilege and power. A more theological approach is to champion unity among

¹⁰⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 85.

diversity as we are many members of one body, distinctly different and uniquely unified with Christ as our head. In his book, *A Multitude of all Peoples*, Dr. Vince Bantu writes, “Christianity is not becoming a global religion. It has always been a global religion.”¹⁰⁵ Though black and white Protestants typically gather for worship separately from one another and have different histories and present daily realities, the two groups agree on the core tenets of Christianity and the importance of religion and spirituality in their personal lives.¹⁰⁶ Being Christian should not mean that one must dismiss their ethnicity. Instead, celebrate bringing their race under the banner of Christ, where both the individual and their ethnicity are affirmed as belonging to God.

In his own life, Jesus repeatedly broke through racial and cultural boundaries. For example, he made friends with a Samaritan woman at a well, even though Jews in his day hated Samaritans (John 4:4–26). And after Jesus’ death and resurrection, he told his disciples to “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19 KJV).¹⁰⁷

Family Life Cycle Theory

In this section, the researcher shares the four theoretical models from which the issue will be viewed and addressed: 1) *Family life cycle theory*, 2) *Social learning theory*, 3) *Cultural broadening theory*,¹⁰⁸ and 4) *DiscipleShift*.¹⁰⁹ Biblical disciple-making using a methodology of relational environments. *Family life cycle theory* applies to this study. It states, “the needs and

¹⁰⁵ Vince Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples, Engaging Ancient Christianity’s Global Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), xiii.

¹⁰⁶ Jason E. Shelton, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: How Racial Discrimination Shapes Religious Convictions* (New York University Press, 2012), 56.

¹⁰⁷ Rebecca McLaughlin, *10 Questions Every Teen Should Ask (and Answer) about Christianity* (Crossway, Kindle edition), 45-46.

¹⁰⁸ Thomas P O’Connor, R. Hoge, and Estrella Alexander, “The Relative Influence of Youth and Adult Experiences on Personal Spirituality and Church Involvement,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4, 2002), 724. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387486>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

tasks an individual must address during different parts of the family life cycle determine his or her church involvement.”¹¹⁰ The research related to this theory identifies a decline and disengagement among young adults occurring most often in the teenage years and the early 20s. Certain factors are also recognized as influencers of this phenomenon. The primary influencer is marriage. The research shows that church involvement is more substantial for married persons than single persons and persons with children than those without.¹¹¹ Other researchers point out that the influence of family life may be gender-specific. Since men’s religious roles are less institutionalized or socially defined than women’s, men’s involvement in the church may depend more on nonreligious factors such as changes in family status.¹¹² *Family life cycle theory* is helpful to this project in that it explains how life experiences lend to the likelihood of church attendance or absence. This allows the researcher to create a strategic plan for increasing church attendance among young adults that is consistent with what is likely to be the life experiences of the target demographic, allowing for a tailored solution addressing the issue as it exists at Grace Place Christian Church.

Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory views religious behavior as learned from a particular life context.¹¹³ As life contexts change, people change, primarily by observing role models and

¹¹⁰ Thomas P O’Connor, R. Hoge, and Estrella Alexander, “The Relative Influence of Youth and Adult Experiences.”

¹¹¹ D. P. Mueller and P. W. Cooper, “Religious Interest and Involvement of Young Adults: A Research Note,” *Review of Religious Research* 27(3): 1986, 325-45.

¹¹² J. Wilson and D. E. Sherkat, “Returning to the Fold,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 no. 2, 1994, 148-61.

¹¹³ Thomas P. O’Connor, R. Hoge, and Estrella Alexander, “The Relative Influence of Youth and Adult Experiences on Personal Spirituality and Church Involvement,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41, no. 4, 2002, 725. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387486>.

practicing new behaviors.¹¹⁴ In the teenage years, when peer influences tend to outweigh parental guidance, teenagers will become less church involved as they learn new behaviors from their peers that help them relate to their changing situations. Similarly, an adult's attitudes, beliefs, and values and those of their adult friends will influence that person's religious and church involvement. Social learning theory would suggest that spiritual learning will vary from one denomination or religious group to another, depending on the kind of religious modeling and practices that are most prevalent in each group.¹¹⁵

This theory is helpful to this project as it underscores the need for an effective discipleship program. According to this theory, the individual's spirituality, including church attendance, dramatically depends upon the examples set by those closest to them. This is the goal of discipleship, to impact the lives of disciples in such a way that they are transformed into the image of Christ by being living examples of all that is taught by words or training. When Jesus said to Peter and Andrew, "Come and follow me. . ." (Matt 4:19 KJV), he intended that these new disciples would study not only His words but, more importantly, His way of living until they could not only quote what Jesus said but live the kind of life He lived, engaging the world as He did.

Cultural Broadening Theory

Cultural broadening theory (also called "localism theory") considers church involvement in terms of "plausibility structures."¹¹⁶ This perspective contends that in a highly differentiated

¹¹⁴ A. Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 43.

¹¹⁵ O'Connor, "The Relative Influence of Youth and Adult Experiences on Personal Spirituality and Church Involvement." 724. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387486>.

¹¹⁶ M. Cornwall, "The Determinants of Religious Behavior: A Theoretical Model and Empirical Test," *Social Forces* 68, 2, 1989, 572-92.

and pluralistic modern society, maintaining a particular religious worldview requires a community of people to support one another's belief in it in daily interaction.¹¹⁷ This theory suggests that "local orientation," interactions with local institutions, and networks of friends and family should predict higher rates of church involvement.¹¹⁸ An excellent example of this is youth during high school and especially college, as they are away from parents and relatives and are exposed to perhaps more liberal social attitudes and secular worldviews. On the opposite end of the spectrum, cultural broadening can be seen as Christian believers engaging their faith as a Christian community. It is in this way that cultural broadening theory relates to this project.

This project aims to increase the attendance of young adults at Grace Place Christian Church. Cultural broadening theory suggests that when individuals embrace the Christian community, they are more likely to attend and remain in the church. Community groups are essential to the Christian life because Christians were created for community. Christians are built to function in relationships with one another and with God. Christians can do so through the grace and reconciliation made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Community, therefore, is an expression of who God is in a Trinitarian relationship and a testimony to his love in redeeming us as a people through Jesus.¹¹⁹ Cultural broadening theory supports this Christian community concept and informs this study.

DiscipleShift

In the book *DiscipleShift*, authors Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington, and Robert Coleman lay out a five-step plan to increase disciples and disciple-making in the local church. The model

¹¹⁷ M. Cornwall, "The Determinants of Religious Behavior," 574.

¹¹⁸ W. C. Roof, *Commitment and Community* (New York: Elsevier Press, 1978), 89.

¹¹⁹ Brad House, *Community: Taking Your Small Group off Life Support* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway), 2011.

for which the authors advocate measures success by how many people are being loved and led into the way of Jesus coming to Christ and following him. It measures how many people are being transformed into Christ's likeness and pursuing his kingdom mission. It values and counts how many are becoming disciples who can make disciples.¹²⁰ To this end, the authors offer a five-step strategy, admonishing churches to *shift* focus from simply increasing church attendance to biblical discipleship using the methodology of relational environments. The gist of this model says that churches should not only seek to increase attendance but make disciples, the latter having priority over the former. Inherent within the context of disciple-making is the concept of accountability. The accountability factor of disciple-making lends to consistency in attendance and service. It is in this way that this model informs this DMIN project.

¹²⁰ Jim Putman, Bobby Harrington, and Robert E. Coleman, *DiscipleShift: Five Steps That Help Your Church Make Disciples Who Make Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan), 2013.

Chapter 3: Methodology

An immediately noticeable difference between young adults' views of the church and older adults is that young adults do not see the church as central to the Christian faith. In previous generations, most Christians would have seen Christian faith and church attendance as inextricably linked; young adults see them as two entirely different things. Young adults subscribe to the view that church attendance is unnecessary to be a Christian. They believe it is possible to be spiritual without organized religion. The church is, at best optional and, at worst expendable.¹²¹ Given this mindset among young adults, it is no wonder we are seeing declining numbers of young adults in the church.

Young adults are not so much questioning the church's methods or styles. They are asking whether there is a need for the church at all.¹²² This position severely affects the church as it exists locally and universally. If church and church attendance are deemed expendable, then the question turns to the viability of Christianity entirely. This research aims to address the problem of the absence of young adults in the church. In doing so, consideration will be given to how the prevailing way of thinking among young adults can be changed, so that church and church attendance are understood as essential. This chapter shares the research design, data collection methods, and focus group processes and procedures.

¹²¹ Simmons, Brian. *Wandering in the Wilderness: Changes and Challenges to Emerging Adults' Christian Faith* (Abilene: A C U Press, 2011), 86, accessed February 15, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 85.

Intervention Design

The intervention in this study is a qualitative grounded theory design. The grounded theory emerged in the 1960s due to Glaser and Strauss's sociological research program on dying in hospitals.¹²³ Through their work, they crafted a method that enabled the researcher to generate systematically a substantive theory grounded in empirical data. The goal was to discover an approach that would grab the data and fit it into a framework that would work in the real world.¹²⁴ Because this study aims to set forth an action plan addressing the declining number of young adults at Grace Place Christian Church, the qualitative grounded theory design is effective.

Qualitative grounded theory is such that it builds theory rather than tests it. This approach provides researchers with tools for analyzing information. This approach helps the researcher consider alternative meanings of a given set of facts or experiences. It is both systematic and creative. Finally, it reveals themes and concepts related to the problem addressed.¹²⁵ This study will use grounded theory to understand the information gathered through various perspectives and multiple methods.

Data analysis in qualitative research deals with words, language, and meanings. This approach's greatness is its ability to describe and understand social life accurately. This approach's difficulty is working with empirical data as texts with multiple meanings. Qualitative data analysis organizes and reduces the data into themes that can be fed into descriptions,

¹²³ Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods," *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 548.

¹²⁴ Glaser and Strauss, *Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldin, 1967).

¹²⁵ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 207.

models, or theories.¹²⁶ Data is broken down to classify it. “The concepts we create or employ in classifying the data, and the connections we make between these concepts, provide the basis of a fresh description.”¹²⁷ This approach works well with instruments like interviews, questionnaires, and focus groups, used in this study.

The purpose and objective of this study are to address the problem of declining numbers of African American young adults at Grace Place Christian Church. The qualitative grounded theory design will be used to analyze and interpret data. Three instruments will be employed to collect data for research and analysis: personal interviews, a questionnaire, and a focus group. These three instruments will allow triangulation as data is analyzed and interpreted for understanding.

Institutional Review Board and GPCC Approval

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is an administrative body established to protect the rights and welfare of human research subjects recruited to participate in research activities conducted under the auspices of the institution with which it is affiliated.¹²⁸ The details of this research project were reviewed and approved by the IRB of Liberty University before its initiation. The purpose and function of the IRB are to protect the welfare, rights, and privacy of human subjects. The IRB of Liberty University has the authority to approve, disapprove,

¹²⁶ Diane Walker and Florence Myrick, “Grounded Theory: An Exploration of Process and Procedure,” *Qualitative Health Research*, 16, No. 4, Sage Publications, 2006, 549.

¹²⁷ Ian Dey, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A User-friendly Guide for Social Scientists* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 30.

¹²⁸ Oregon State University, “*What is the Institutional Review Board?*” Oregon State University Office of Research Integrity, <https://research.oregonstate.edu/irb/frequently-asked-questions/what-institutional-review-board-irb> (accessed July 26th, 2022).

monitor, and require modifications in all research activities that fall within its jurisdiction as specified by both federal regulations and institutional policy. The IRB of Liberty University has vetted and approved this research, protecting the welfare, rights, and privacy of all who participated in this study.

Permission to conduct research and implement an intervention within the ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church was requested by the researcher and approved by the Executive Board of Grace Place Christian Church. The GPCC's Executive Board was informed of the details of the research by letter. The Board was informed of the details of the study and its potential benefits to GPCC and the Body of Christ. The researcher was informed of the Board's decision to approve the study in a meeting held on April 11th at 7:00 p.m.

Triangulation

Ernest T. Stringer asserts, "The creditability of a study is greatly enhanced when multiple sources of information are incorporated."¹²⁹ Various perspectives from diverse sources help the inquirer understand the meaning as they are exposed to how various experiences are perceived. Triangulation lends credibility to a study by ensuring that no one perspective informs the research. The information amalgamates diverse sources, holding diverse perspectives and reaching a common conclusion. The key to interpretation is not in the tools or the reporting of the information guided by a set of techniques but in how one makes sense of everyday life experiences.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research* (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 58.

¹³⁰ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach*, 72.

The term *triangulation* derives from an analogy with navigation and surveying.¹³¹ “A person can fix her location or gain bearings by knowing two other landmarks or signposts. For example, triangulation networks showed people how a point on a map could be located from an unknown point rather than previously fixed points. And according to the detectives on television, a cell phone can be located by triangulating it between two towers.”¹³²

Triangulation, as it relates to qualitative research, is a way to cross-check data that provides breadth and depth to analysis and increases the trustworthiness of research. It is a means of refining, broadening, and strengthening conceptual linkages and perceptions.¹³³ Sometimes, different data collection methods provide divergent data, making interpretation evident and straightforward. At other times, various data collection methods may yield additional data. The purpose of triangulation is to consider all the data from all sources and, through analysis, interpretation, and synthesis, conclude its meaning. In this study, triangulation is achieved by employing multiple data collection methods (interviews, questionnaires, and a focus group) to gather information to be analyzed, interpreted, and synthesized for presentation.

Interviews

In this study, the researcher will interview twenty unchurched young adults evaluating their thoughts, feelings, opinions, and perceptions of Christianity and the church. The researcher will engage these interviews from the position of a student, listening and learning from the interviewees without offering any explanation or defense. The intent is to understand the barriers

¹³¹ Hammersley, Martyn, and Paul Atkinson. *Ethnography: Principles and Practice*, 3rd ed., (New York: Routledge, 2007), 231.

¹³² Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 72.

¹³³ Ibid.

that make young adults hesitant and resistant to Christianity and church attendance. The researcher believes that if these barriers can be understood, strategic intervention can be designed and implemented within the local ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church to increase attendance and engagement among young adults.

As a part of this study, ten local church pastors whose churches seem to represent success in the engagement of young adults, including church attendance, conversions, and involvement in the local church, will be interviewed. The intent is to hear the perspectives of individuals who seem to be experiencing success in the area being addressed as problematic in this research project. Perhaps these individuals can offer perspectives to help solve the declining number of young adults at Grace Place Christian Church. Hearing from these individuals gives us another lens to analyze the situation. The interview provides the researcher with an understanding of various church leaders' perspectives concerning young adults in the church and how best to facilitate their attendance and involvement.

An interview is a face-to-face meeting between two or more individuals to share information. The interviewer asks the questions, and the subject(s) answers with the intent to offer information that shares their opinion and perspective on a matter or point of interest. Interviews provide opportunities for participants to describe the situation on their terms. It is a reflective process that enables the interviewee to explore their experience in detail and reveal the many features of that experience that affect the issue investigated.¹³⁴

In interviews, people describe their situations by verbally articulating their thoughts, personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. These personal details are unknown to the interviewer except through the interview process. The interview process allows the interviewer

¹³⁴ Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*, 74.

to hear and be exposed to varying perspectives on a subject matter. From these varying perspectives, the interviewer can then take the data retrieved and begin working towards a synthesis of understanding. “While interview data is only a representation of the interviewee’s opinions, experiences, and understandings, it allows you to gain insight into thoughts that are not expressed through a person’s actions or that are too sensitive for people to discuss in a group setting.”¹³⁵ Through the interview, the researcher can better understand the interviewee’s perspective. The intimate setting allows the interviewer to interpret words and body language.

As the interviews for this study are conducted, the interviewer will identify himself and the purpose of the interview. Before beginning the discussion, the interviewer will ask the interviewee for permission to record information. Consideration will be given to time restraints. The interviewer will, at no time, display aggression or become, in any way, offensive. All perspectives will be equally respected. The general tone of the interview will facilitate an open and honest discussion of the subject matter.

The primary purpose of the interview is to ascertain a unique type of information. Through the research process, the researcher seeks to discover what is in and on the interviewee’s mind. Patton states,

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. . . . We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that occurred at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and their meanings to what goes on. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing is to ascertain the other person’s perspective.¹³⁶

This study will include interviews, allowing the researcher to enter the perspectives of others so that their view can be included in a synthesis of information addressing the problem.

¹³⁵ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 103.

¹³⁶ Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Evaluation Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1990), 278.

Questionnaire

“A questionnaire is a paper and pencil instrument for doing an interview.”¹³⁷ 110 individuals of the Grace Place Christian Church membership participated in this study. This sample group includes individuals between the ages of 16 to 73 (no children were allowed to participate). These individuals were contacted by mail (U.S. Postal), email, text messaging, social media, and mass calling. This sample group includes perspectives from different generations, backgrounds, and ages.

Participants have been given the option to participate anonymously. This decision has been made in the interest of fostering honesty among participants. Participants must return their completed questionnaires by March 12, 2022. Questionnaires must be returned to the researcher’s physical mailing address or email address or placed in the researcher’s mailbox at Grace Place Christian Church, enclosed in a sealed envelope. Once the questionnaires are turned in, they cannot be retrieved or altered by the participant or anyone else, including the researcher (*See Appendix A: Research Questionnaire*).

The questions in the questionnaire will provide data that can be analyzed, interpreted, and synthesized to produce a working theory as to why the problem exists. With an understanding of why the problem exists, an action plan can be constructed to reverse the trend, resulting in increased church attendance and engagement among young adults. The data collected through the research questionnaire will be analyzed, interpreted, and synthesized into a theory about the reason for the problem. This will be accomplished by a focus group consisting of young adults.

¹³⁷ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 113.

Focus Group

Group interviews are sometimes called focus groups.¹³⁸ In this sense, the term focus group is used in this study. As stated earlier, the data collected through the research questionnaire will be analyzed, interpreted, and synthesized into a theory by a focus group of young adults. The researcher has formed a focus group of seven young adults. Six of the seven are current members of Grace Place Christian Church. Three of the seven attend regularly and are actively involved in the church; three used to participate regularly, but their attendance has declined over the last five years. One is no longer a member of any church. “Through group interaction, data and insights are generated related to a particular theme imposed by the researcher and enriched by the group’s interactive discussion. The synergy of the group will often provide richer data than if each person in the group had been interviewed separately.”¹³⁹

Each of the seven focus group members has been contacted by the researcher. The study has been explained to them, and they have each agreed to participate in the study. All are over twenty years of age, so no parental consent was needed. Each has agreed to an ethical standard that includes honesty, transparency, and trustworthiness as they participate in the study.

The focus group will analyze, discuss, and interpret the questionnaire results. Based on the theory derived from the data, they will formulate an action plan to reverse the trend of declining numbers of African American young adults at Grace Place Christian Church.

The researcher will act as the moderator. The moderator will ensure that each person is given equal time to express their views or share their thoughts. The moderator will ensure that discussions remain relevant to the study. The moderator will summarize the perspectives shared

¹³⁸ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 120.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

among the group, identifying key features of their experiences and perspectives and guiding the group's corporate formulation of an action plan addressing the problem.¹⁴⁰

This DMIN action research will address the problem of the declining number of young adults attending and active at Grace Place Church. Because the church's membership is 98% African American, some consideration is given to factors that dissuade African American young adults from attending, belonging, or being active in the church. The researcher expects that the research will be beneficial in addressing the problem of the absence of young adults at Grace Place Christian Church.

The data will be documented and shared with the focus group when all interviews are completed. The researcher and focus group will analyze and interpret the data to identify emergent themes. The research will expound upon these themes in later sections of this paper. The themes identified in the collected data will inform the design of an intervention implemented within the ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church.

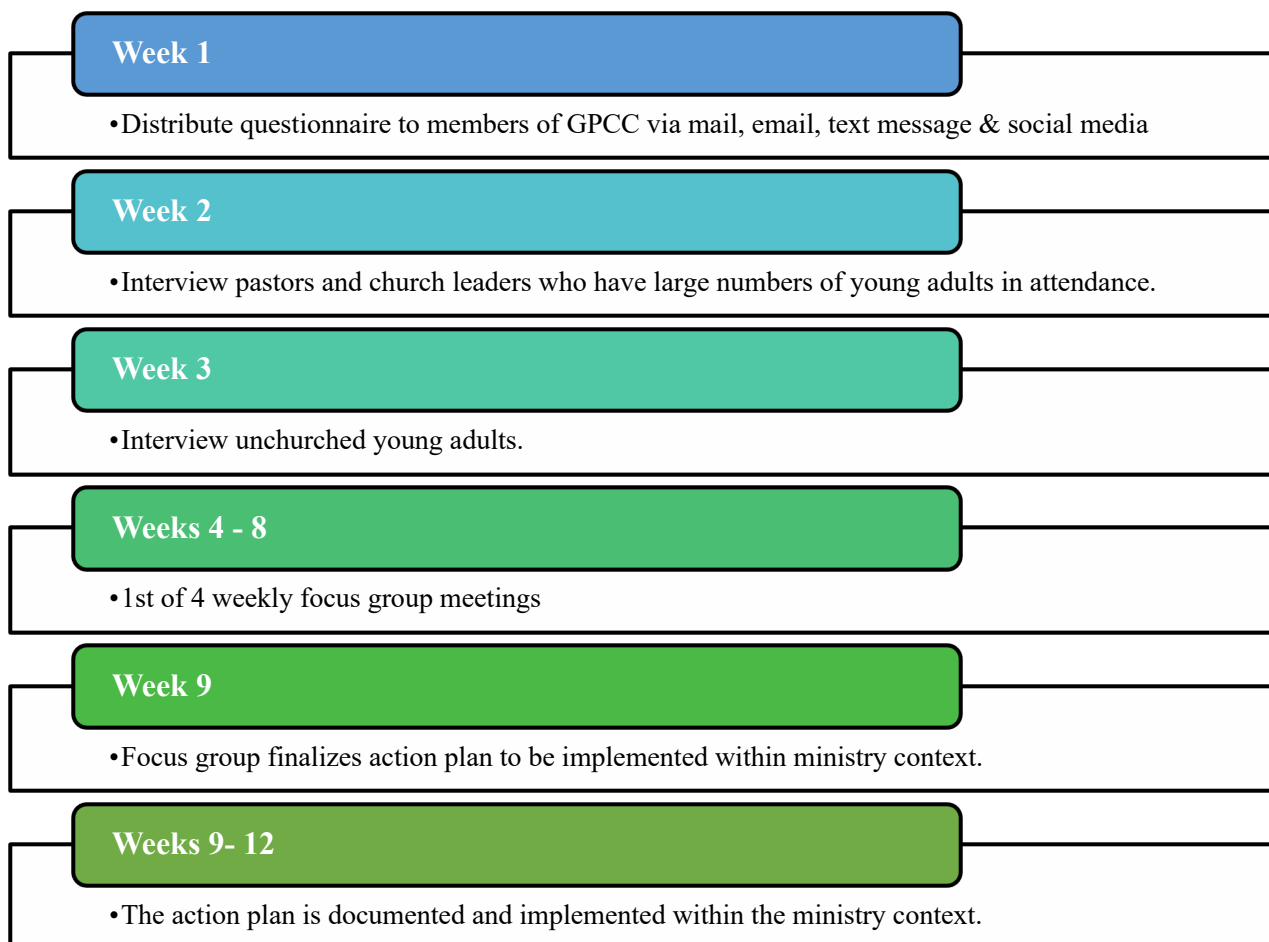
Graph 1: Research Project Overview and Design

Research Project Overview and Design	
Step 1	Distribute the questionnaire to Grace Place Christian Church members.
Step 2	Interview pastors and church leaders with many young adults attending their churches.

¹⁴⁰ Ernest T. Stringer, *Action Research*, 74.

Step 3	Interview young adults who do not attend church, listening to why they do not attend.
Step 4	Hold the first focus group meeting on June 6 th , 2022. Present results of the interviews and questionnaires for discussion among the group members.
Step 5	The focus group will meet once each week for three consecutive weeks to analyze and discuss collected data and formulate a strategic plan to address the issue.
Step 6	The strategic intervention developed by the researcher and focus group will be documented and implemented within the ministry context.

Graph 2. DMIN Action Research Project Timeline



Implementation

This research conducted interviews with twenty unchurched young adults and ten pastors. Questionnaires were distributed to the members of Grace Place Christian Church. The discussions and questionnaires were used to collect data on church attendance among young adults. A focus group was formed and facilitated by the researcher to analyze, synthesize, and interpret the data collected and to collectively develop a strategic plan to increase the attendance of young adults at Grace Place Christian Church. After meeting weekly for four weeks, the focus group finalized a strategic plan of action to be implemented within the ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church.

Based on the themes that emerged from the data collected, the focus group developed a four-part strategy: 1) *Provide What They Need* – this first phase involved devising a discipleship structure specifically for young adults, taking into consideration where they are in life. Because many young adults are also young parents, in addition to the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, engaging the scriptures, etc., the focus group devised a discipleship structure that also emphasized family life and how the spiritual maturation of the parent(s) facilitates spiritual growth in the children. This strengthens both the local church and the Body of Christ. This discipleship structure also considers young adults' typical work schedule and pace of life by taking advantage of technology such as video conferencing and internet-based courses for spiritual formation. The idea here was to devise a discipleship structure that not only introduced the spiritual disciplines but did so in a way specific to the life and lifestyle of the contemporary young adult.

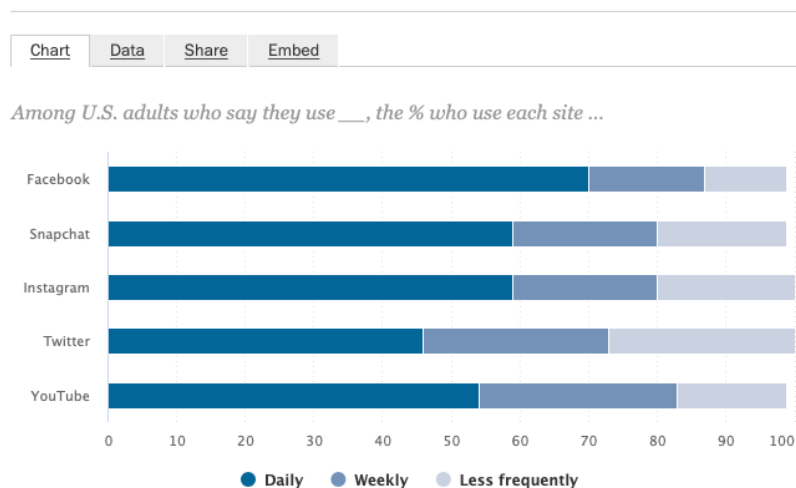
Part 2) *Go Where They Are* – In His Great Commission in Matthew 28, Jesus admonished His disciples to go, teach, and make disciples. As more Americans have adopted social media,

the social media user base has also grown more representative of the broader population. Young adults were among the earliest social media adopters and continue to use these sites at high levels, as seen in figure 1. As the second phase of this four-part strategy, the focus group devised an internet-based plan that included a social media advertising campaign and the development of social media content such as sermon clips, Bible study notes, worship service snippets, brief Bible teaching videos, inspirational quotes, brief testimonial videos, etc. The focus group concluded that social media is not only a meeting place for the world but a mission field for the church; therefore, this strategy is consistent with Jesus' Great Commission. This internet-based strategy is an integral part of the larger strategic plan devised by the focus group and implemented within the ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church.

Figure 1. How Often Americans use Social Media Sites

How often Americans use social media sites

For many users, social media is part of their daily routine. Seven-in-ten Facebook users – and around six-in-ten Instagram and Snapchat users – visit these sites at least once a day.



Note: Respondents who did not give an answer are not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Jan. 25-Feb. 8, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Part 3) *Give them a seat at the table (a voice)* – The research related to this project suggests that many young adults believe that older adults see them as a pseudo-adult, not an adult; therefore, they are not taken seriously by older adults. They think their lifestyles, perspectives, input, and suggestions are seen as immature and, therefore, not given serious consideration. The focus group sought to address this perception in this third phase of a four-part plan by providing young adults with a ministry context within the local church. Just as there is youth ministry, marriage ministry, men’s ministry, etc., permission was given to young adults ministry. A ministry focused on young adult lifestyle as to spiritual formation. The young adult ministry had sponsored worship events with guest speakers ministering to young adults. In addition, Grace Place Christian Church has promoted participation in young adult small groups and allowed outings for young adult fellowship. Also, young adult persons were added to the leadership team of GPCC. Giving young adults representation among the church leadership and a ministry context affirms their legitimacy as genuine adults with significant contributions and a context within which those contributions (e.g., ideas, suggestions, concerns) can be made and given serious consideration.

Part 4) *Make it interesting and relevant so that they stay and invite others* – The research related to this study reveals that youth and young adults are cause-oriented. Young adults are passionate about moral progress, equality, and social justice. Many young adults believe that the church and Christianity are not interested in such matters. Many even see the church and Christianity as a hindrance to moral progress, only interested in maintaining the social structures that have historically empowered Christians and Christianity while marginalizing others.

The focus group concluded that a plan for increasing attendance among young adults should include cause-oriented ministry endeavors. The strategic plan developed by the focus

group had several ministry causes in which young adults could volunteer: 1 Christians Against Human Trafficking, 2 Help for the Homeless, 3 GPCC Food Bank, and 4 Boys to Men youth mentoring programs. Including these options for young adult volunteers demonstrate the church's commitment to evangelism and proselytizing and the improvement of society through the practical application of biblical teachings and Christian principles.

The purpose of this study is to address the problem of the declining number of young adults in attendance, and participation, at Grace Place Christian Church. A focus group was formed and assisted in interpreting and synthesizing collected data. The focus group devised a four-part strategic intervention to be implemented within the local ministry context. The intervention designed by the focus group was implemented on July 1st, 2022. This intervention was allowed a 3-month evaluation period. During the evaluation period, consideration was given to how the plan would influence the number of young adults in attendance at Grace Place Christian Church and how it would affect the church overall. The researcher will share the results of this strategic intervention in chapter 4 of this paper.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

After interviewing twenty unchurched young adults and ten pastors and parsing the collected questionnaires of over 100 church members, the researcher, and a focus group of 8 young adults identified several themes related to the problem of low attendance and disengagement of young adults in the church. The researcher will share these themes in this section and how they contribute to the problem. In this section, the researcher will also share the strategic intervention developed based on the data collected in this research and the results of its implementation at Grace Place Christian Church.

Cynicism

Many young adults outside of Christianity have little trust in the Christian faith. Esteem for the lifestyle of Christ's followers is quickly fading among outsiders. They admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and they reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians.¹⁴¹ Pastor and author Andy Stanley asserts,

Much of what makes American Christianity so resistible to those outside the faith are things we should have been resisting all along. While many of us have been working hard to make the church more interesting, it turns out that fewer people are interested. And while most people outside the church continue to have a favorable view of Jesus, they don't necessarily have a favorable view of his body, the *church*.¹⁴²

In his interview, Anthony, an African American young adult, said, "Christians are exclusive and intolerant. They claim to be a religion of love, but their actions say otherwise."

¹⁴¹ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian*, 11.

¹⁴² Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New That Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020), 17.

This being the case, it is no wonder that one of the themes that emerged from the information collected in this research is cynicism, a general mistrust of Christians and Christianity. Of the 20 unchurched young adults interviewed in this study, 16 (80%) cited hypocrisy among Christians as one of the reasons they do not attend church and are hesitant, if not resistant, to Christianity. As unchurched young adult interviewees expressed this position, they were asked to explain their reasons for feeling this way and what could be done by a church to change their opinion and make them more likely to attend. Theresa was once a member of a vibrant church. She was active in church activities. Both she and her brother Tim were members of the church's choir. When her brother revealed his homosexual lifestyle, he was no longer allowed to participate in the choir or other church activities. In an interview with her, she stated, "I understand the church's position on sin and homosexuality, and I agree with it. My departure from the church and Christianity was not because of the church's beliefs regarding homosexuality, but rather their insensitive and hateful attitude and behavior towards homosexuals, including my brother Tim. They say the right things, but their behavior contradicts their talk. Such hypocrisy makes Christians untrustworthy." It is impossible to convince individuals to be a part of a religion they do not trust. The fundamental reason for young adults' cynicism towards Christianity, Christians, and the church is the issue of hypocrisy. What, if anything, can be done to change this opinion held by so many young adults? In this section, the researcher will share the responses of those interviewed as they relate to the theme of cynicism and what can be done to dispel it.

From the interviews of twenty unchurched young adults, the issue of hypocrisy was consistent as one of, if not the primary reason, for their negative perception of the church, Christians, and Christianity. R. C. Sproul says of the hypocrite, "The hypocrite is one engaged in intentional deception. He pretends to be more righteous than he is. The hypocrite is an amoral

playactor. He lives a lie. He claims to be free of faults that he practices covertly. His life is a guarded sham.”¹⁴³

One young man expressed how the pastor of a local church insisted that his friend and his finance’ participate in pre-marriage counseling for an extended amount of time as a condition for his officiating the wedding and allowing the use of the church’s facilities. As the couple began pre-marriage counseling, they were informed by other church members that the pastor and his wife were legally separated and in the process of divorcing. The news devastated his friend as he had great respect for the pastor. His friend is no longer a member of any church and cites this incident as one of the reasons for his disillusion with Christianity and the church.

William expressed, “Church people talk about love and grace but are often among society’s most hateful and intolerant.” He went on to talk about a particular popular pastor who devoted an entire sermon to defending the hateful remarks and behavior of an elected public official, suggesting that such behavior is necessary to defeat evil, therefore, permissible by God and the “godly;” however, after an extensive internet search of over 50 sermons, he said, “I could not find one sermon in which the pastor said anything about the unjust killing of George Floyd nor anything about injustices suffered by the economically challenged or minorities.” He felt that this neglect of the sufferings of those he called the less fortunate was indicative of hypocrisy on the part of the pastor and his followers. He stated that if Christians are not interested in helping the hurting and the equitable treatment of all people, he could see no reason to be a Christian or attend church. His understanding of the Bible, though limited, informed him that Christians, like Christ, ought to be loving and advocates of the oppressed.

¹⁴³ R.C. Sproul, *Reason to Believe: A Response to Common Objections to Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 1982, accessed September 15, 2022. <https://searchebSCOhost.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1780536&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Whether we like it or not, the term “hypocritical” has become fused to young people’s experience with Christianity.¹⁴⁴ The general perception of young adults is that Christians say they believe one thing, but their actions show differently. Unchurched young adults say they see little or no difference between church goers and non-churchgoers. Several young adults interviewed said, “Why should one be a Christian when Christians are no different from anyone else?” Twenty unchurched young adults were interviewed and were asked, Do you know a person who committed to Christianity? If so, besides going to church, would you say that their lifestyle is any different from non-Christians? 90% of those interviewed said they know a person or persons committed to Christianity; however, only two said they see notable differences in the lifestyle of the Christians they know and non-Christians. 80% said they see no noteworthy difference between the Christians they know and non-Christians, as seen in figure 2:

Figure 2. Difference Between the Lifestyles of Christians and non-Christians, as Perceived by Unchurched Young Adults

Personally, know a person(s) committed to Christianity.	18 (of 20)
See no lifestyle difference between Christians they Know & non-Christians	16 (of 20)
See notable differences between the lifestyles of Christians & non-Christians	2 (of 20)
Had no personal relationship with a person committed to Christianity	2 (of 20)

These results are consistent with studies conducted by the Barna Group, which indicated that born-again Christians fail to display much attitudinal or behavioral evidence of transformed lives. For instance, a 2007 study found that most of the lifestyle activities of born-again

¹⁴⁴ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian*, 42.

Christians were statistically equivalent to those of non—born-again. When asked to identify their actions over the last thirty days, born-again believers were just as likely to bet or gamble, visit a pornographic website, take something that did not belong to them, consult a medium or psychic, physically fight or abuse someone, to have consumed enough alcohol to be considered legally drunk, to have used an illegal, nonprescription drug, to have said something to someone that was not true, to have gotten back at someone for something they did, and to have said mean things behind another person's back.¹⁴⁵ The overwhelming answer of unchurched young adults as to the reason for their cynicism was hypocrisy.

John Church asserts, "That there have been hypocrites in the church in all ages is very evident. But this argues nothing against the religion of the Son of God. Although ignorant and carnal persons pretend to object to religion because so many hypocrites profess it, this same objection proves such persons to be hypocrites themselves."¹⁴⁶ Though the perception of all Christians as hypocrites is inaccurate, the church must yet do all that is within its power to change this perception in the minds of young adults, understanding that only God can change the human heart.

Unfortunately, this research has revealed that the cynicism of unchurched young adults bleeds over into perceptions of young adult Christians. For this reason, many once faithful young adults have left the church disillusioned. The attitudes of many unchurched young adults, as well as Christian young adults, have shifted, as it relates to their faith, from one of optimism to one of cynicism, as they have become increasingly disillusioned with the church and Christianity.

¹⁴⁵ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian*, 47.

¹⁴⁶ John Church, *Is This Your Likeness: A Scriptural Definition of Hypocrisy and Sincerity* (London: Crosby Row Southwark, 2018), 11.

Another reason for cynicism among unchurched young adults is the problem of evil in the world. Greg stated, “If a God exists, he must not care much for human beings. There is just too much evil and too many injustices in the world to believe that there is a God of justice who rules the universe.” 75% of the young adults interviewed expressed doubts about Christianity, the church, and even the very existence of God because of the presence of evil in the world. They believe either there is no God, or the God that does exist is not a loving one because if a loving God existed, there is no way He would allow so much evil in a world He created. This, combined with the perceived notion that Christians are not interested in actual moral progress but are interested in supporting only the political agendas and ideologies that they feel are conducive to the perpetuation of the way of their religion and way of life.

All this begs the question, what can a church and Christians do to change the attitude of the cynic? Amy Orr-Ewing’s words are helpful as she writes, “Our human outrage at suffering points us beyond ourselves to seek meaning and transcendence.”¹⁴⁷ In a later section of this paper, the researcher will offer a more detailed strategy for changing the negative perception held by the unchurched, but for now, suffice it to say, If the church would take the time and make an effort to explain from the scriptures the impact of sin on the human experience, that suffering is not from God, but the result of sin in the world, yet He provides for us the opportunity to escape the effect of sin by embracing His Son, Jesus Christ. Articulating a well-versed apologetic regarding human suffering and the problem of evil would go a long way toward dispelling the cynicism resulting from a misunderstanding of God and human suffering.

In addressing the issue of hypocrisy in the church, the church must emphasize praxis as much as it does theology. It is vital that our theology, what we know about God, inform our daily

¹⁴⁷ Amy Orr-Ewing, *Where is God in all the Suffering?* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2020), 15.

living. Unfortunately, some have hijacked Christianity to support their ideology by suggesting, either directly or indirectly, that their beliefs are correct and others are wrong because their views reflect the will of God. The problem is that while some people may not go to church, they read the Bible; therefore, they can quickly identify hypocritical Christian behavior, such as hate and racism. While some Christians may be judgmental and even hateful, which is wrong and inexcusable, as followers of Jesus, Christians are called to recognize the difference between right and wrong and make proper moral judgments rather than be judgmental and condemning.¹⁴⁸

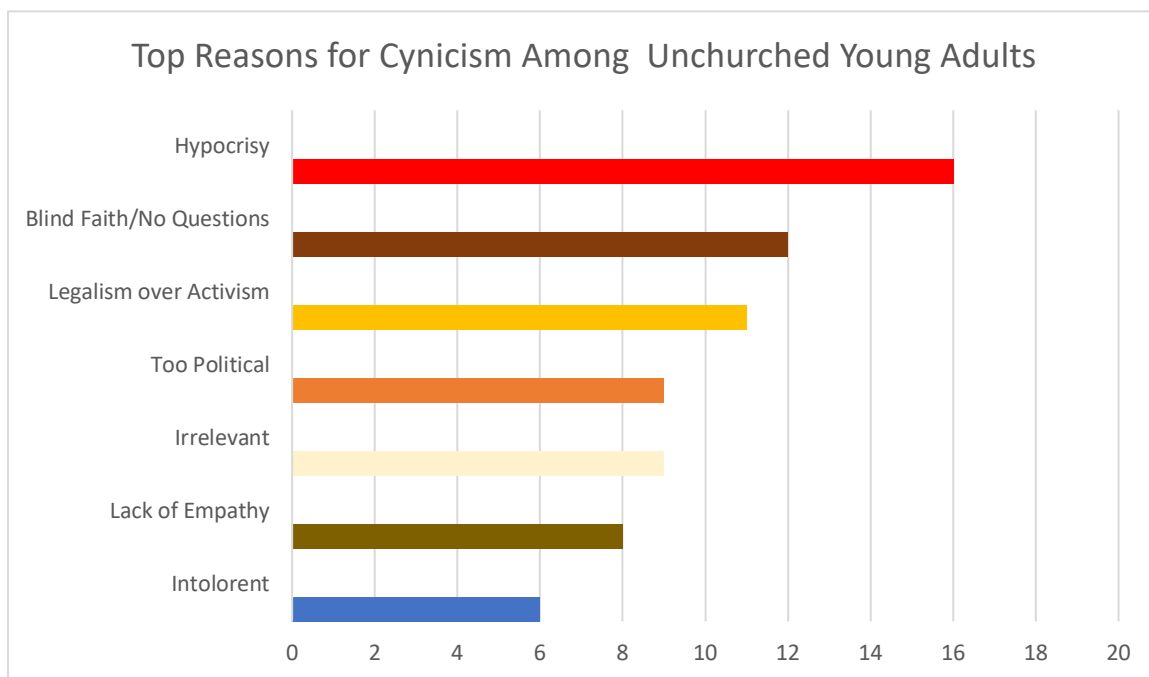
This research reveals the top reasons for cynicism among the unchurched: 1. Hypocrisy. The opinion that Christians say they believe one thing but exhibit behavior to the contrary. 2. Proselytizing without empathizing. The accusation is that Christians are interested in making converts but not in the welfare of those they convert. 3. Intolerance of others. The notion is that Christians are intolerant of anyone who does not believe exactly what they believe. 4. Too political. The opinion that Christianity has become about supporting specific political agendas rather than helping people. 5. Irrelevance. The idea is that Christianity is out of touch with the lives and lifestyles of modern people and modern times. 6. Blind faith over intellectual inquiry. This is the opinion that Christianity is dismissive of science and intolerant of any intellectual inquiry that falls that cannot be answered with a quote from a chapter and verse from the Bible. And lastly, 7. Legalism over activism. This view suggests that Christians are silent and inactive on social justice, moral progress, or human rights.

Twenty unchurched young adults were asked why they are cynical towards Christians and the church. Their answers were grouped into seven themes and prioritized according to the

¹⁴⁸ Michael L. Brown, *“Can You Be Gay and Christian?”* (Lake Mary, FL: Charisma House Books, 2014), 12.

number of interviewees that cited that theme as one of the reasons for their cynicism. Most themes were mentioned more than once by different interviewees. Figure 3 ranks the themes according to the responses of the unchurched young adults interviewed.

Figure 3. Top Reasons for Cynicism Among Unchurched Young Adults



Christians need to know that these unchurched young adults expressed that their expectation of pastors, Christians, and the church, is not perfection but integrity, honesty, and accountability, virtues fundamental to the Christian faith. Jason, a 28-year-old, said, “I know that pastors and Christians are only human beings. I understand that they are not perfect. I don’t expect them to be. I expect them to be honest and to practice what they preach.” Addressing the attitude of cynicism among unchurched young adults and others must therefore begin with the church taking an honest look at itself, being willing to admit shortcomings, and then making efforts to improve. It’s impossible to fix a problem while at the same time denying its existence.

This is different from saying that every issue cited is valid. Still, because it is the perception held by those whom the church seeks to win for Christ, the church must take them seriously and be willing to do the work that is necessary to change those perceptions in ways or by methods and strategies consistent with Scripture and that do not compromise the gospel of Jesus Christ. In the Epistle of James, the Bible offers this advice:

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. If anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he is. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does (Jam 1:22-24 KJV).

Responding to the accusations of the unchurched in this way, without offense and retaliation, but with self-examination, being willing to adjust where necessary, to minister the gospel of Jesus Christ within contemporary culture effectively.

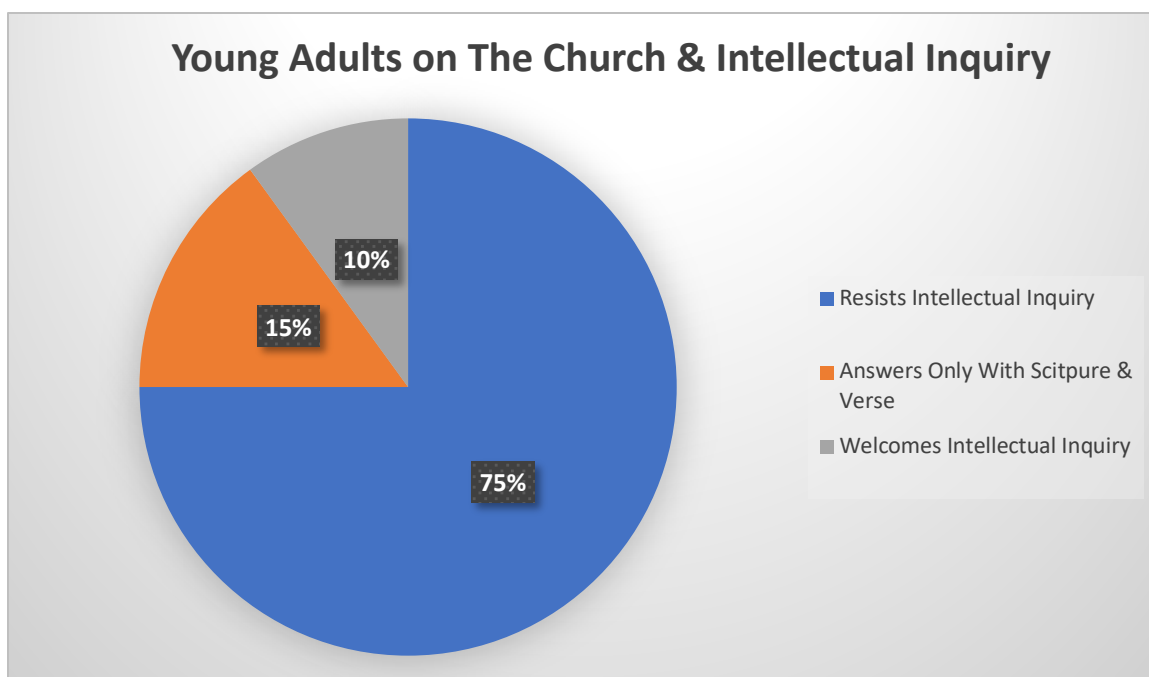
The Rejection of Intellectual Inquiry

Another reoccurring theme among participants interviewed was the notion of Christians and the church as being dismissive of history and science to embrace a literal interpretation of the Bible. Many people today, especially young adults, incorrectly believe that science and history contradict and disproves Christianity and the Bible. They think there was a time when people had to make up myths to explain how the world around them came to be, and this, they say, is the origin of the Bible and the stories contained therein. They believe science now offers explanations for the world's creation and the creation and human history. They believe science also informs people of what is good for human beings and what is most helpful for human existence. They think the Bible was a primitive way of trying to make sense of what we now know through science and the scientific process.

Scientists try to ascertain the laws that govern the universe through the scientific process. The process begins by asking “Why?” about a given phenomenon. Next, they form a hypothesis to explain why the phenomenon is likely to occur. The theory is then tested by running experiments. For the most part, scientists assume that everything in nature is caused by something else and that the cause-and-effect will work the same way wherever you are in the world because the universe follows consistent rules. At the heart of the scientific method is the question, why? Today, the scientific method has almost become a philosophy or worldview for many young adults. Because they embrace this philosophy, they engage life and the world around them in this manner, even in matters related to faith, Christianity, and the existence of God. So, when they ask questions, and no answer can be provided, or worst, when they feel as though their inquiry is not given serious consideration, they dismiss whatever was considered invalid or invalid because it cannot stand up under their interrogation.

Because young adults approach life from this perspective, the church cannot afford to dismiss serious intellectual inquiry with simple answers like, “Just have faith,” “Read your Bible more,” or “Just trust God.” The unchurched young adults that participated in this study overwhelmingly said that they would rather Christians admit that they do not know the answer to a given question rather than dismiss it with a simple but incomplete answer. When asked why they do not attend church, 15 of 20 participants said they do not attend church because they do not believe Christians welcome their questions or seriously consider them. Three participants said Christians only entertain questions that they can quote a chapter and verse from the Bible as an answer to it. Only 2 participants believed Christians welcome intellectual inquiry as it relates to faith, Christianity, the church, and God (*see figure 4*).

Figure 4. Young Adults on the Church and Intellectual Inquiry

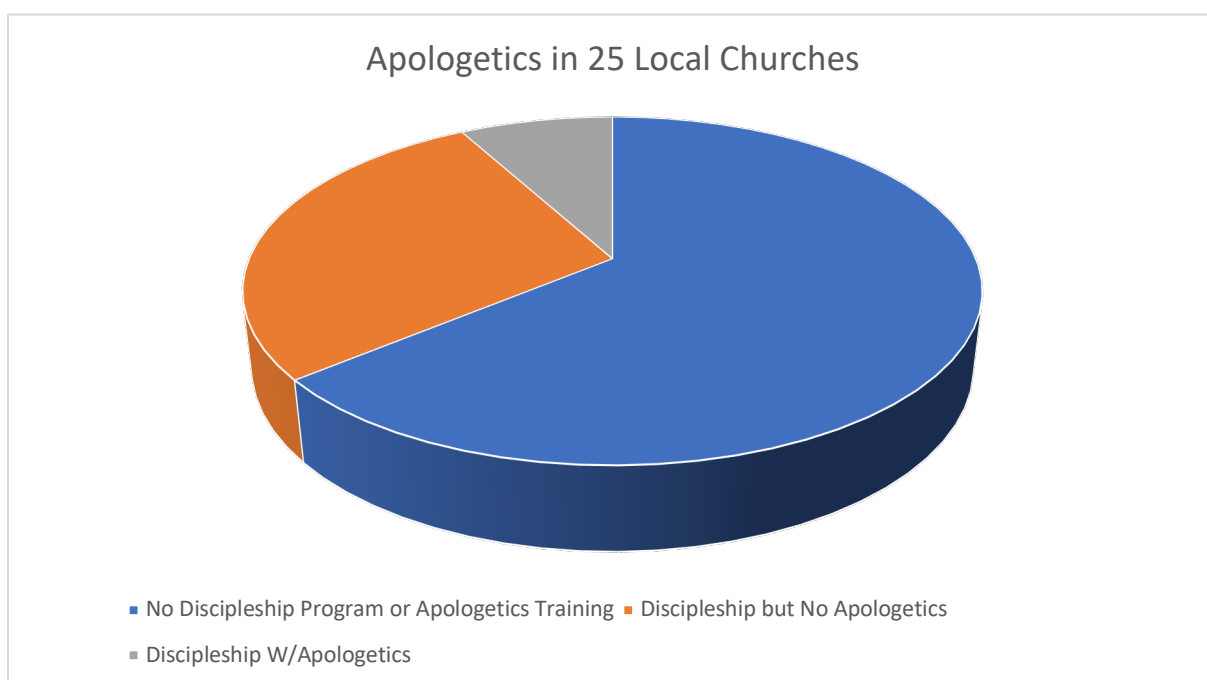


Today's young adults are inquisitive in ways, perhaps unlike previous generations. Young adults in and outside the church seek answers to why things are how they are. Previous generations sought these same answers but trod lightly regarding matters related to God, faith, Christianity, and the church. There was a sort of unwritten rule that said you don't question God or the things of God, at least only to a certain degree, and whatever answer was given sufficed. Today's young adults are not that way. As students of the scientific process, they search for the cause of what they see and the why of what they are being told is factual. Logic, proof, and evidence heavily influence their beliefs. This can be a bit of a challenge for the church because of the role of faith in Christianity. Challenging as it may be, it is by no means unsurmountable.

The answer perhaps lies in the church, not dismissing faith but embracing apologetics and all that goes into presenting a logical defense for the gospel of Jesus Christ. The apostle Peter said, "Always be prepared to answer everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that

you have” (1 Pet 3:15 KJV). As a part of this study, 25 pastors of varying denominations were asked whether an apologetics class or apologetics training was a part of their discipleship program. 16 of the 25 churches did not have a discipleship program. Only 2 of the 25 offered training in apologetics, as seen in figure 5. In a later section, the researcher will expound upon the critical issue of apologetics.

Figure 5. Apologetics in 25 Local Churches



In addition to how resistance to intellectual inquiry affects unchurched young adults, is its effect on young adult Christians struggling with their faith. Across denominations and cultures, unanswered and unaskable questions are a common thread in why people leave the church. Rather than not being resistant to intellectual inquiry, the church should seek to invite questions and is willing to do what is necessary to find answers, even when finding the solutions may present challenges to existing beliefs or doctrines. Grappling with questions allows even deeper faith. Jesus promises, “And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Legalism over Activism

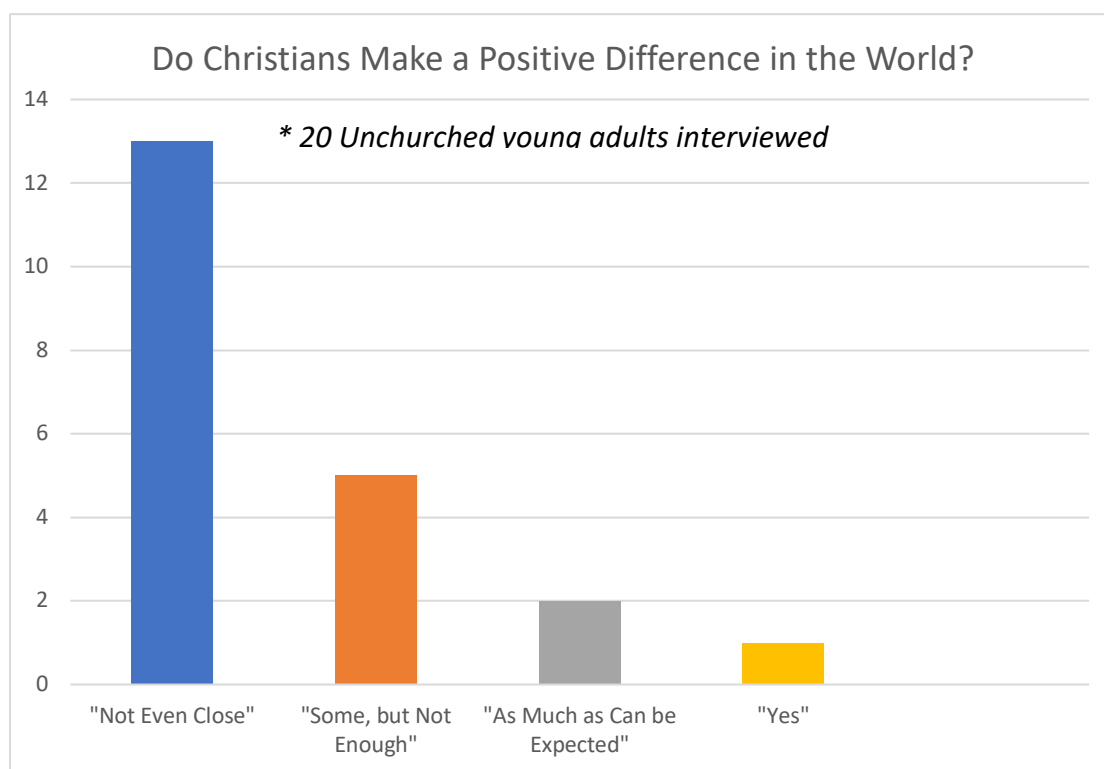
The interviews conducted as a part of this study revealed that unchurched young adults see the church as an institution of legalism absent activism. Today's young adults are cause-oriented. They look for reasons that promote spiritual well-being, moral progress, equity, and justice. They are passionate about serving humanity, helping the hurting, and giving to the needy. Based on the interviews conducted as a part of this study, unchurched young adults believe the church and Christians are interested in abiding by rules and moral codes that make them superior to others but are not interested in helping others or making a positive difference in their lives. One young man said, "I believe Christians prioritize holiness in their minds and hearts, but it rarely translates into positive contributions by the church towards the betterment of society. They love God, but people, not so much."

Many modern young adults see Christians and Christianity as people who fantasize about a perfect world but neglect their responsibility to do their part in making this world a better place. Consequently, young adults have become much more interested in social movements, philanthropic endeavors, and charity work as they see these kinds of organizations as more effective in making, or at least trying to make, a difference in the world and the lives of other human beings. It is an interesting paradox that the most cause-oriented generation is not connecting with the most cause-oriented organization the world has ever known, the church. Though this perception of young adults of the church may be inaccurate, it is their perception and, therefore, a barrier to the gospel.

The question was posed to 20 unchurched young adults was, "Besides preaching and evangelizing, does Christianity, and do Christians, do as much as they could or should to make a positive difference in the world?" Participants were asked to answer in one of four ways. 1) not

even close, 2) some, but not enough, 3) As much as expected. 4) Yes. Of the 20 participants interviewed, 13 responded: “not even close.” Five said, “some, but not enough.” 2 answered, “as much as can be expected.” No one answered “Yes.” The general sentiment among unchurched young adults is that the theology of the church does not translate into a praxis helpful to society, as seen in figure 6 below. Christianity is a great idea, but it is not practiced as advertised by the church and is therefore not helpful to society.

Figure 6. Do Christians Make a Positive Difference in the World?



Only three of the 20 young adults interviewed said they would recommend Christianity to their friends, family, or children. Gospel-centric engagement with causes related to issues of moral progress could go a long way toward reversing this hesitancy towards Christianity and the church.

Christianity: A Religion of Oppression

Emergent from the data collected from the interviews and questionnaires that were a part of this study was the perception among young adults of Christianity as a religion of oppression. This was consistent among most young adults interviewed, especially African American adults. Young adults generally view Christianity as white supremacy masquerading as faith. Common among young adult African Americans is the belief that Christianity is “the white man’s religion,” implying that white men invented Christianity to enslave and marginalize black people. The idea is that Christianity seeks to give legitimacy to white supremacy by telling the marginalized and oppressed that they should be content with their condition and that God will make things better in the afterlife. Any attempt towards social progress, social justice, or equality is believed to counter the gospel, especially when such efforts are likely to upset a power structure that positions white people at the top.

An African American young adult by the name of Jason stated in his interview, “When I think of the events of the Civil Rights Movement, such as Bloody Sunday in Selma Alabama, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Medgar Evers, and others, the death of Emmitt Till and the trial of those who murdered him, I often ask myself, and others, where were the Christians? I was disappointed to discover that many *Christians* were major opponents of the Civil rights movement and even used the Bible to justify their position.” Originally opposed to religious involvement in civil rights based on the “spirituality of the church,” but embarrassed by public spectacles of expelling prospective worshippers and espousing racist rhetoric, white religious conservatism reinvented itself for a new day,¹⁴⁹ But African American young adults seem to

¹⁴⁹ Paul Harvey, *Bounds of Their Habitation: Race and Religion in American History* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016), 201.

remain skeptical. Angela grappled with the voting trends of white Christians, saying, “Barack Obama has been married to the same woman for 30 years, has two children and no illegitimate children. He served two terms as President without scandal or legal battles, conducting himself and the nation’s affairs honorably at all times. Still, white Christians called him the Anti-Christ, then turned around and voted overwhelmingly for a self-professed predator, a liar and narcissist twice impeached, and still under investigation for crimes. Still, white Christians ignore all this and say he was sent by God, though his life was, and is, a contradiction to every Christian principle.” Angela concluded that only racism could explain this position she viewed as hypocritical and hateful.

Young adults are not only put off by the oppressive actions of Christians but are equally as put off by the inaction of Christians in matters related to racism, social justice, and moral progress. The young adults interviewed as a part of this study leveled a consistent indictment against Christian inaction. Jerome asked, “Why do Christians not understand that it is not enough to act hatefully but must also speak out against hate? To do the former and neglect the latter serves no purpose other than perpetuating the status quo.” Jay stated. “It does no good to tell us we are not like that” if you can’t tell them “They are wrong for being that way.”

Some Christian leaders have provided moral and theological reasoning for their reluctance to challenge the existing system. Evangelicals generally prioritize an individual’s salvation experience over social concerns. In this view, the church’s primary mission is to win souls for Christ. Working for racial justice, in contrast, may be seen as a “political” issue; they believe in lives only in the person. It is not a matter to be addressed as systemic. Civil rights activists who cited the Bible in support of their cause were often dismissed as “a bunch of theological liberals,” The rejection of a “social gospel” remains popular among conservative

evangelicals today who advocate for Black Lives Matter or immigrant rights as political activities. The debate over the legitimacy of a “social gospel” has been around for centuries, continues to this day, and is likely to continue, but what is undisputable is the effect of Christianity’s disengagement in social matters on the perceptions of modern young adults.

Luke’s Gospel records the account of Jesus returning to Nazareth after his temptation in the desert. After that desert experience, Jesus went to the temple to read. That day the reading came from Isaiah 60, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim the release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed....” (Luke 4:18 New American Standard Bible). The gospel of Christ will free those who are oppressed and the oppressor. The results from the interviews with 20 unchurched young adults suggest that Christianity and the church can do the cause of Christ an excellent service by going beyond simply saying, “We are not that way,” but also including a forceful condemnation of the wrong way to be and those who are that way. Perhaps this would help restore the relationship between Christianity, the church, and modern young adults.

The research related to this project revealed that within the African American community, Christianity is perceived as “the white man’s religion,” a part of a systemic structure for the oppression and marginalization of nonwhites. The majority of the theological productions that have emerged in the significant Christian confessions, mainly in the North Atlantic region (especially those that have institutional support), have been, with some exceptions, somewhat naive in their approach to political and social realms; many times, they have been openly

favorable to dominant powers.¹⁵⁰ This perception is common among African American young adults. The idea of Christianity as the “white man’s religion” was made famous in the African American community by Elijah Muhammad, an American religious leader, black separatist, and self-proclaimed Messenger of Allah, who led the Nation of Islam from 1934 until he died in 1975, during a time when the issues of racism and social injustices. During this time, there was a cry for a positive sense of black identity. Elijah Muhammad answered this cry by suggesting to black people that they leave Christianity and convert to Islam because Christianity was their oppressor’s religion. So a doctrine of Christianity as “the white man’s religion emerged.” And today, many African American young adults subscribe to this point of view. Of the 13 African American young adults interviewed, 10 believed Christianity to be a religion of oppression. Their reasoning is as follows.

The African American young adults interviewed believed Eurocentric Christianity is the Christianity of the Bible. This is due to the traditional depictions of Jesus Christ as a white man. Also, there is the historical use of the church to legitimize slavery and the adverse effects of colonialism and imperialism on indigenous populations. Though all of these were latter conventions, this belief still exists. The fact is that biblical Christianity is not Eurocentric but theocentric. The church’s task is to communicate this fact to African American young adults effectively.

Another common belief is that the “story of Jesus,” His life, death, and resurrection, were all fabrications created to aid the oppression of black people. The same way of thinking led to Karl Marx’s statement about religion being “the opium of the masses.” Marx suggested that

¹⁵⁰ J. Rieger, ed. *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagements after Long Silence* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2013), 77, accessed October 10, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

religion numbs human beings to the harsh realities of life, making them docile and easily manipulated by a given power structure. In this sense, many young African American adults believe Christianity to be a narcotic dealt to their ancestors, making it easy to manipulate and control. Among modern young adults, African American young adults especially, there is a common belief that Africans were influenced to accept their oppression through Christianity. The fact is that the gospel empowered the oppressed to fight injustice. Fredrick Douglas, the notable African American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman, said, “I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ. I, therefore, hate the corrupt, slaveholding women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land.” Douglas understood the difference between authentic biblical Christianity and the hijacked version of Christianity used to aid black people’s oppression. These myths are easily debunked through apologetics and an accurate understanding of history. Christianity is not “the white man’s religion” but something God has revealed to all humanity for spiritual and physical liberation. The challenge for the church is how to communicate this fact to modern young adults.

Intervention Results

As a part of this project, a focus group was formed to assist in analyzing, interpreting, and synthesizing the data collected in the interviews of twenty unchurched young adults, ten pastors, and over 100 questionnaires. The further task of the focus group was to formulate a plan of action that would be implemented within the ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church to attract young adults to the church, facilitate their spiritual development and deploy them into ministry (acts of service) in some way. This intervention was designed with measurable metrics evaluated over 12 weeks to determine its effectiveness or ineffectiveness. In this section, the researcher will share the details of the strategic plan developed by the focus group and

implemented at Grace Place Christian Church. Lastly, in this section, the researcher will share the results of the intervention.

Intervention Details

As stated earlier, the task of the focus group that participated in this study was to analyze, synthesize and interpret collected data to formulate an intervention strategy to be implemented within the ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church to increase attendance and participation of young adults. After parsing the data collected in twenty interviews with unchurched young adults, ten pastors, and over 100 questionnaires, the focus group devised a four-part strategy. This four-part strategy includes outreach, evangelism, discipleship, and leadership elements. The plan breaks down into the following four commands: 1) *Go where they are and invite them to come*, 2) *Provide what they need when they arrive*, 3) *Make it interesting and relevant so that they stay and invite others*, 4) *Give them a seat at the table of leadership, so that they are represented and have a voice*. The researcher will set forth the details of each of these commands, the sub-elements of which they consist, and how they work together, each as a part of a strategy to reach and retain unchurched young adults and to develop and equip them for Christian service in their local church, within their communities, and throughout the world. This strategy was implemented at Grace Place Christian Church with positive results that will be shared in a later section. Now, the researcher will share the details of the four-part strategy, beginning with the first part, *Go where they are and invite them to come*.

Part one of the intervention, *Go where they are and invite them to come*, combines outreach and evangelism. This critical part of this intervention strategy prioritizes ministry over marketing. The idea here is to offer an act of service, showing the love of Christ, particularly the service prayer, by asking simply, “how can I pray for you” or “is there anything I can pray with

you about?” To offer prayer is to demonstrate concern for the well-being of one who is being prayed for. It is often said, “People do not care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Praying for the unchurched young adult will provide the opportunity, at some point, to invite them to church. Because the initial connection with the unchurched demonstrated concern for their well-being, they are more likely to respond positively to an invitation to a church service or activity.

“*Go where they are*” means to meet young adults in the places and spaces where they gather. This includes geographical location, physical addresses, the internet, social media, and virtual reality platforms. Today, communication mediums exist that did not exist 20 years ago. This plan considers social media, the internet, and virtual reality platforms as mission fields and seeks to enter such places and spaces to engage young adults for the cause of Christ. The age range for the majority of users of Facebook is between ages 25- 34, with over 2.8 billion users. A vital aspect of this plan is targeted ads on social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. These targeted ads are simple 2-minute church commercials, informing the public of the church, what it offers, and why the viewer should consider coming and being a part of it. Prayer requests are received through the implementation of Chatbots, automated replies that receive the viewer’s prayer request, and a little information about the viewer so that they can be contacted for a personal follow-up by the pastor or someone representing the church. Weekly sermons and church announcements are archived on YouTube for public viewing. A social media presence intends to engage young adults in frequent forums, offering prayer and an invitation to the church and Christ.

The desire to increase attendance and participation among young adults is so that the church does not die out with a generation. The perpetuation of the church and the gospel of Jesus

Christ is inextricably tied to the development of young adult Christian believers for Christian service and leadership. Part two of the devised four-part strategy, providing *what they need when they arrive*, addresses this fundamental requirement. Providing *what they need when they come* means creating a structure that facilitates the spiritual development of young adults. This includes spiritual support through relational mentoring, a discipleship program, apologetics training, and opportunities for cause-oriented ministry activities.

Part 3 of the intervention is *to make it exciting and relevant so that they stay and invite others*. In this part of the strategy, the emphasis is on providing ministry in both exciting and relevant ways, such as small groups, Bible studies, fellowship outings, or church services explicitly dedicated to the edification of young adults. The idea is to provide ministry relevant to where young adults are in life, such that it is helpful, beneficial, and worth sharing with other young adults.

Part 4 of the intervention strategy says, *Give them a seat at the leadership table*. This means allowing young adult representation among the church's leadership. The church should search out qualified young adults and place them on its leadership team. Presentation fosters a sense of legitimacy and inclusion. Word of the young adult demographic among the church's leadership gives young adults a voice so that they know that their concerns, suggestions, and ideas are being heard and given serious consideration.

This four-part strategic intervention was implemented at Grace Place Christian Church on June 1st, 2022. This plan was evaluated for sixty days. This strategy continues at Grace Place Christian Church, as it has proved helpful in the ministry context. In the next section, the researcher will share the results of this intervention after its 60-day evaluation period at Grace Place Christian Church.

Following the guidance outlined in the intervention strategy devised by the focus group, Grace Place Christian Church initiated a social media advertising campaign on Facebook and Instagram. Chatbots were deployed to ask to solicit prayer requests from viewers and subscribers. A two-minute Ad was created targeting individuals between the ages of 19-35 within a 15-mile radius of Grace Place Christian Church. In addition, GPCC distributed bottled water at the town's summer music festival. This provided an opportunity to offer prayer and to share the church's information with attendees who were, for the most part, young adults.

Grace Place Christian Church added an apologetics class to its discipleship program to facilitate the spiritual development of young adults. A small group ministry was explicitly formed for young adults. A young adult ministry was organized, and fellowship events and services were scheduled. A partnership with the Exodus Road organization, a nonprofit ministry addressing human trafficking, was formed. Young adults were encouraged to support this endeavor. Lastly, the church's leadership team added two young adult members of GPCC. Both have been members of GPCC since they were children and are now 28 and 29 years of age. This strategic intervention was initiated on June 1st, 2022, and was evaluated over 60 days. In the next section, I will share this intervention's results, challenges, and expectations after 60 days of its implementation at Grace Place Christian Church.

The strategic intervention devised by the focus group, after 60 days of its implementation within the ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church, yielded the following results: The number of young adults in attendance (attending at least 2 Sunday morning services and two mid-week services per month) increased from 12 to 20, and increase of 80 percent. Three married couples between the age ranges of 25 to 34 became members of the church, increasing married young adult couples from 3 to 6. Besides the increase in the number of young adults in

attendance and membership, GPCC also witnessed an increase in the number of young adults engaged in ministry; that is, they participate in some aspect of ministry beyond just attending services. The current apologetics class has 15 participants, 10 of whom are young adults. In addition to increased attendance and engagement, GPCC has witnessed a positive impact on the overall morale of the church membership. After sixty days of the intervention's implementation, 25 members were asked, do you think the young adult ministry has positively impacted the church? 23 of 25 responded "Yes."

This plan was met with resistance initially. The prevailing sentiment among opponents of its implementation was that the special attention given to young adult ministry would cause other aspects of the church's ministry and membership to go lacking. Also, some stated that sixty days would not be enough time for such a plan to make any difference. However, the researcher notes that 60 days is a relatively short period for implementing and evaluating such an intervention, yet the results yielded are promising in this short time. For this reason, GPCC continues implementing this strategic plan while writing this paper.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

While no two contexts are identical, there are often enough similarities to make the research in one context relevant to others. Grace Place Christian Church has certain factors that are unique to its context. However, it shares many of the same dynamics present within most churches. Therefore, some aspects of this study will likely benefit other churches of similar demographic makeup. All churches share the joint mandate of making disciples for Christ (Matt 28:19); however, this study addressed the issue of low attendance among young adults at Grace Place Christian Church. While church attendance and spiritual transformation are not synonymous, church attendance is a critical and necessary part of the disciple-making process. For this reason, the researcher chose to address the low church attendance among young adults in this study. Increased attendance and participation of young adults in the church will allow the church to facilitate their spiritual transformation.

The results of this study revealed, among other things, Grace Place Christian Church's ongoing need to make intentional, strategic efforts to address the absence of young adults in attendance at church, and participating in church activities, including being a part of the church's leadership. This study shows that this problem is not unique to Grace Place Christian Church. Much talk has recently been concerning a "post-Christian America." Of Americans ages 18 to 29, only 21% report attending church at least weekly, and only 27% say they pray daily. Even more concerning is this finding: Only 31% of young adults say they believe in God as described by the Bible. However, religious participation has declined for decades across all demographics, although markedly less so for older and Black Americans.¹⁵¹ Though this study was done within

¹⁵¹ Jennifer Graham, *Watching Post-Christian America Unfold in Real Time*, Deseret News, <https://www.deseret.com/2022/3/21/22989309/perspective-our-new-poll-shows-were-watching-post-christian-america-unfold-in-real-time-faith-church> March 22nd, 2022.

the ministry context of Grace Place Christian Church, the results of this study are likely to prove beneficial in many churches, especially those of similar demographic makeup. In this chapter, the researcher will share his conclusions regarding the investigation, his recommendations for further study, and how this study might benefit other churches.

Research Implications

A significant issue revealed by this study is the extraordinary degree to which public opinion and the public's perception of the church and Christianity have changed over the last 75 years. After twenty interviews with unchurched young adults, ten interviews with pastors, and information gathered from over 100 questionnaires, it is clear that the church is no longer viewed with the same level of respect, nor is it perceived as being true to the message of Christ. Moreover, our research shows that many outside of Christianity, especially younger adults, have little trust in the Christian faith, and esteem for the lifestyle of Christ's followers is quickly fading among outsiders. They admit their emotional and intellectual barriers go up when they are around Christians, and they reject Jesus because they feel rejected by Christians.¹⁵² The public scandals of mega church pastors and other prominent church leaders have damaged the church's credibility and leadership, hindering the message of the gospel. Its judges, Christians, are viewed as dishonest, hypocritical, hateful, narrow-minded, and intolerant, especially among young adults ages 19-35. To effectively share the gospel of Jesus Christ with this new generation, one must understand the intensity with which young adults hold these views. The researcher has learned through these interviews that being defensive will not work. One must seek a reasonable understanding of these perspectives to best minister to their community. Perception is reality;

¹⁵² David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian*, 11.

therefore, it is incumbent upon Christians and the church to understand and work to change these perceptions. For the church to minister effectively to non-Christians and point them to Jesus, Christians must understand and approach them based on their thoughts. Ignoring their hostility will not change their perceptions but understanding why they hold these perceptions will put Christians in a better position to change how they are perceived by the unchurched. Changing the perceptions of others often means changing oneself.

This research revealed that part of the reason Christians are viewed so negatively is that the fundamental beliefs of Christianity grate against today's morally relativistic culture. Modern youth and young adults find Christian perspectives contradict their anything-goes mindset. Although outsiders don't always understand Christianity, Christians must carefully not toss aside the biblical motivations contributing to these perceptions. For instance, Christians are known as judgmental because they address sin and its consequences. Christians *should* be involved in politics because faith weaves itself into every aspect of life. Christians *should* identify homosexual behavior as morally unacceptable because that is not what Scripture teaches. Christians *should pursue* conversations and opportunities that point people to Christ because we are representatives of life's most important message. And Christians *should* strive for purity and integrity even if that makes us appear sheltered. As Christ's representatives, we have to articulate the reality that there is a holy Creator who holds us to a standard that exists beyond our finite lives. Our awareness of a transcendent being should alter who we are and how we think.

However, Christians should not simply dismiss the perceptions of the unchurched by saying things like, "Well, they are sinners. They are supposed to hate us," neglecting the Christian's responsibility to demonstrate the love of God and having compassion for others. It is an exercise in futility to recognize God's holiness but cannot articulate the other side of his

character: grace. In the life of Jesus, we see the example of the appropriate balance of grace and truth (John 1:14). Embracing truth without holding grace in tension leads to harsh legalism, just as grace without truth devolves to compromise. Still, the critical insight based on our research is that modern youths and young adults rarely see Christians who embody service, compassion, humility, forgiveness, patience, kindness, peace, joy, goodness, and love.¹⁵³ Whether this perception is valid does not change how the world sees Christians, and Christianity determines how they respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The question to be considered is why young adults perceive Christians negatively and, more importantly, to what degree their perception is correct.

While the focus of this study addressed low church attendance and participation among young adults, it was surprising to learn that young adults desire discipleship programs that lead to spiritual maturity and transformation. The interviews and questionnaires that were a part of this study revealed that young adults prefer environments of intellectual rigor. Young adults enjoy personal challenges that stretch them and cause them to grow. 17 of 20 young adults interviewed said they wish the church were more educational and less entertaining. They express their longing for one-on-one training that includes accountability. These longings are consistent with what should be offered in a good discipleship program. Engaging the Word of God and the spiritual disciplines, such as prayer and fasting under the supervision of a mentor are all critical components of discipleship.

The researcher was astounded to learn of the interest in Christian apologetics among unchurched young adults. Of the twenty unchurched young adults interviewed, eleven said they would be interested in taking a course in Christian apologetics. Their interest stemmed from a

¹⁵³ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian*, 36–37.

deep curiosity about the origins of the Bible, questions regarding the existence of God, and a desire to understand the problem of evil in the world. These unchurched young adults were open to hearing a logical defense for these matters and learning more about what history, science, and archaeology had to say about it. Interestingly, these young adults, though skeptical of Christians, were not dismissive of the existence of God. This desire to know the truth about such matters presents an excellent opportunity for the church to fill in the gaps in the same way that the Apostle Paul did at Mars Hill, declaring to the Greeks the identity of their “unknown God.” Likewise, Christians today can articulate the identity of the God for whom the world is searching.

The question young adults seem to ask is not unlike any other generation. It is a question familiar to many. Young adults want to know if there is hope for the world. One is hard-pressed to find a larger, more significant question than this imperious query concerning the cosmos. For all our cynicism, people are inescapably creatures of hope at the end of the day. They look forward; yearn for something more, something better, anything to give meaning, value, and substance to our short lives. Even when humanity’s hopes for family, friends, country, and themselves are satisfied by a happy reunion, an election that goes our way, a job promotion, or a negative biopsy, more enormous hopes (and fears) still loom.¹⁵⁴ Christians understand Jesus Christ to be not only the hope for this world but the hope of all eternity. The challenge for the church is how to communicate this truth to unchurched young adults.

It is good to know that young adults are not content with simply warming pews but have the desire to learn and grow. This is promising because it suggests that once young adults come to Christ, they are already of the mindset that facilitates spiritual development. Getting young

¹⁵⁴ Douglas Groothuis, *Christian Apologetics: A Comprehensive Case for Biblical Faith* (Downers Grove, IL; Nottingham, England: IVP Academic; Apollos, 2011), 15.

adults to church is pointless if no spiritual transformation follows. The predisposition of young adults toward personal growth and intellectual rigor presents the church with the opportunity to train and deploy a mighty army for the cause of Christ.

This research discovered young adult expectations that the church should lead the way in matters related to social justice and moral progress. While many young adults accuse the church of dismissing issues related to social justice and moral progress, they voice their expectation of the church to be leaders in such matters, often citing the teachings of Christ and the New Testament as the basis for their position. Though many young adults accuse the church of being hypocritical, hateful, and intolerant, they expect the church to be an excellent example of what is right and righteous, particularly as it relates a good example of what is correct and honest, particularly concerning living peaceably with all people. The researcher identifies in this scenario an opportunity for Christians to show their love for God, and His creation, by being the voice of righteousness in such matters, displaying to the world the love of God and how He has created all people in His image, making everyone worthy of love and respect, much of which God is excellent and such that every man would desire for himself.

The researcher understands that the degree to which Christians or a church should engage in social justice, and perhaps how they should go about it, remains the subject of much debate among Christians. What is a common belief and a workable starting point is the fact that every Christian believes all men are created in the image of God and are indeed God's creation, and therefore deserving of love and respect. Perhaps advocating for righteousness in matters related to social justice, moral progress, and equality would help Christians dispel the perception held by so many, young adults in particular, of Christians and Christianity as being a group of people

who fantasize about a perfect world to come but neglect their responsibility to do their part in making this world a better place.

To put it simply, unchurched young adults are not listening to the Christian talk of a better world to come because they cannot see beyond the church's unwillingness to at least try to make this present world a better place for all who inhabit it, or at least this is their perspective. It is an interesting paradox that the most cause-oriented generation is not connecting with the most cause-oriented organization the world has ever known, the church. Though the negative perception held by young adults of the church may be inaccurate, as many ministries and missionaries have dedicated their lives to serving God and humanity in various ways, because so many, for whatever reason, hold this perception, the church cannot afford to dismiss their concerns and accusations, for to do so, means to forfeit the opportunity to reach out to them demonstrating genuine concern for the issues that concern them.

Research Applications

The literature review related to this research revealed that many churches have had difficulty maintaining the attendance of teenagers and young adults. This dilemma is also seen in many churches today, including Grace Place Christian Church. In observing worship services today, many churches lack attendees from 18 to 35.¹⁵⁵ But why? Several themes emerged from the leadership review: 1) Cynicism—a general mistrust of Christians and Christianity. 2) Hypocrisy—the belief that Christians are not honest about what they claim to be. 3) Intolerance—the common perception among young adults of the church as being hateful towards others who are different. 4) Dismissive of matters of social justice or moral progress. The interviews and

¹⁵⁵ Frisbie, Scott W, “*A Study of Church Attendance Among Young Adults*,” (Order No. 10196188, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2016), 1.

questionnaires that were part of this research confirmed the legitimacy of these perceptions in the lives and minds of modern young adults. At the same time, not all perceptions were not necessarily valid. Yet because it is the honest perception of young adults, the church must be willing to do the things necessary to change these perceptions. Whether true or not, their existence in the minds of young adults presents a barrier to the gospel of Jesus Christ. This research aimed to set forth a strategic plan to address young adults' low attendance and participation at church. Through the study, the investigator discovered that dealing with the negative perception of the church held by young adults must be a part of any strategy to address the problem absence of young adults at church. In this section, the research will set forth recommendations for reversing the negative perceptions of the church held by modern young adults.

Reflect Christ in Responding to Criticism

Doing a better job of reflecting Christ in response to criticism would positively impact the negative perceptions of the church and Christianity held by many unchurched young adults. When Jesus faced criticism, he did not merely dismiss it as unwarranted persecution. Sometimes He talked; other times, He responded with silence. Occasionally, He told a story (or a parable) to answer a question; in other instances, He quoted Old Testament Scripture. Sometimes He told his listeners what to think; in different settings, He would retort with blunt questions, deflecting blame or forcing inquirers to “discover” the truth themselves.¹⁵⁶ This research reveals that while many negative perceptions of unchurched young adults are not factual, defensive responses from Christians do not help to change them. Getting angry and defensive only perpetuates negative perceptions of the Church and Christianity. The church must learn to respond to criticism

¹⁵⁶ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian*.

appropriately and with the proper motivation. Criticism should not cause Christians to become angry or defensive. At the same time, Christians should not shy away from tough decisions or unpopular positions. When faced with criticism, Christians should evaluate their response to determine whether it is driven by the need to defend God or their ego.

Embrace the Relational Aspect of Jesus' Ministry

This study reveals that the relationships and interactions of Christians with the unchurched determine how the unchurched see Christianity, the church, and God. Negative perceptions can be overcome through meaningful, trusting relationships. Furthermore, humans are wired, so spiritual influence occurs most commonly through relationships. The aim of changing the negative perceptions of young adults is not to be liked by them but that they might be pointed to life in Christ. This best occurs within the context of trusting relationships.

However, such relationships between Christians and non-Christians are rare. Christians should make more significant efforts at establishing relationships with the unchurched. This is not to suggest that they should in any way or at any time compromise the teachings of Christ, but live them out in the presence of the unchurched so that they see the example of Christ in their context. For Christians to isolate themselves and interact only with other Christians further perpetuates the negative perceptions held by the unchurched.

Christians are responsible for faithfully representing Christ within the natural network of their relationships. Approximately twenty million born-again Christians in the United States describe faith as their top priority and say their entire purpose in life is summed up by the statement, "love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength." This is a small slice of the total population, yet it is an enormous group of Americans. What would be the cumulative effect

if this group of believers were a picture of Christ to the people who live on their streets or work in their offices? What would their neighbors and co-workers see and hear?¹⁵⁷

It is worth adding here that Jesus said Christians would be known for their love for fellow believers, but walls of hostility exist within the church. Churches separate themselves from other churches, holding some nearer while keeping others far off, all the while content with ecclesial distance. Within the churches, racial, ethnic, gender, age, and class walls are constructed to keep some farther away. High and low walls between church and world endure, saving the world's social, cultural, political, and economic barriers out of sight.¹⁵⁸ If Christians do not demonstrate loving relationships within the church, it does not matter how much we display Jesus to outsiders. The site of Christians warring against other Christians in the media has done much harm to the cause of Christ. If Christians cannot love their own, the effectiveness of their witness will continue to erode among the unchurched. Relationships within the Christian community should be beacons of grace and acceptance, biblical accountability within the context of love and relationship, unity without blind conformity, transparency, and mutual support. Living life together, learning to become the people Christ intended, and being honest about our faults and our continual need for Jesus's grace will go a long way toward dispelling the negative perceptions of the unchurched.

Embrace Technology and Innovation

Jesus was a master communicator. He attracted people who were unaccustomed to his style, ability, and message and connected with them in creative ways. He made complex

¹⁵⁷ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *UnChristian*.

¹⁵⁸ Joseph D. Small, *Flawed Church, Faithful God: A Reformed Ecclesiology for the Real World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2018. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/liberty/detail.action?docID=5614095>).

concepts vivid and used the language of ordinary people to help point them toward spiritual depth. Yet it was not just clever oratorical skills or provocative stories that enthralled people. It was his drive to connect people with God's heart.¹⁵⁹ Based on the research results, the researcher recommends that the church continue to communicate the gospel creatively, taking advantage of the proliferation of the internet and technological advancement.

The recent global pandemic made the church aware of the need for alternative methods of meetings and ministry. Though the threat has, mostly passed, the church should not abandon the lessons learned during the time of the pandemic but should seek to build upon such practices, understanding their critical role in facilitating the message of the gospel, and ministry to young adults. The church should not run away from technology but should instead embrace it for the cause of Christ. The church must be equipped to go where the lost are to reach them effectively. This includes cyber places and spaces, as the numbers of individuals using social media, the internet, and the metaverse increase exponentially yearly.

In a changing world, it is critical that the church not be so tied to antiquated methods that such methods take priority over the message. Christians cannot allow the content of the message of Christ to be hindered or compromised by external dressings. The message of the gospel of Jesus Christ is more significant than any method by which it is disseminated. Therefore, Christians should adopt certain flexibility regarding methodology so that the gospel is communicated effectively to an audience. The internet and technology should not be seen as a barrier to the good news but as a means to facilitate the message of Christ.

¹⁵⁹ Joseph D. Small, *Flawed Church, Faithful God*.

Serve the Community

This research highlighted the need for Christians to be more intentional in cultivating and demonstrating deep concern and sensitivity to outsiders and the issues that concern them. Esteeming and serving people is consistent with the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and, therefore, should be reflected in the lives of Christians. This means Christians should show love and compassion and be kind to people who differ from themselves, even hostile. The research reveals that the reputation of Christians and Christianity is intricately connected to its passion for justice, service, and sacrifice. Negative perceptions result from Christians abdicating their responsibility to serve their community, not just critiquing and condemning it. The posture of Christians toward outsiders should reflect the breadth and depth of what Scripture teaches regarding loving and serving others.

Research Limitations

This research shows that a church committed to doing the work necessary to reestablish trust can make a positive difference. The study indicates that implementing a strategic plan to address issues of concern to young adults and inserting place a structure to support their spiritual growth and development will make a positive difference in the attendance and participation of young adults at church. The intervention developed and implemented at Grace Place Christian Church yielded significant results in the sixty days it was evaluated. What remains to be seen is whether the immediate increases of the sixty-day evaluation period used in this study will translate into a sustainable rise over a longer period. The author recommends giving this same study is given a three-year evaluation period. This would provide a better indication of whether the intervention implemented here, and its positive results are sustainable over time and to what degree the discipleship component yields spiritual transformation in the lives of young adults.

Though this research deals with church attendance and participation among young adults, the researcher does not suggest that church attendance is the ultimate goal. Church attendance is but a means to an end. That end is spiritual transformation. And spiritual transformation takes time. Sixty days is limited to measure how effective the intervention is in developing spiritually mature disciples for Jesus Christ; therefore, a more extended evaluation period is needed. The good news from the 60-day evaluation period is that it did lend to an increase in potential candidates for discipleship. Further study will determine whether such candidates will make good disciples.

Further Research

The primary term in the Great Commission is the imperative verb “make disciples.” Other words, such as “go,” “baptize,” and “teach” all modify and explain how we are to fulfill the primary task. The Great Commission cannot be fulfilled without intentionally pursuing the lost. Church attendance is the first step in making disciples. Church attendance is the invitation to “come.” Coming to Christ through the church is the beginning of a process that leads to spiritual development and maturity. While the strategic intervention implemented as a part of this research produced immediate positive results in church attendance among young adults, whether this lends to spiritual transformation can only be determined by evaluating it over an extended period. To continue this study, it is recommended that the same intervention should be run over a period of at least three years. This would give a better sign of whether the plan helps meet the long-term objective of spiritual transformation in the lives of young adults.

Another matter to be examined over time is whether young adults in church leadership prove helpful in attracting young adults to the church and benefit the church at large. Will the presupposition of having young adults in leadership lead to young adults in attendance and

membership? And will young adult leadership positively influence the church, including all age groups? It would be counter-productive to increase young adult attendance and participation if other age groups fall off. Again, an ongoing study using a more extended evaluation period is necessary to determine benefit or detriment of young adult leadership and how the more senior church leaders may best help groom the younger. Placing young adults among the church leadership is good because it gives representation and a voice to a demographic of the church that otherwise would not be represented or heard. Young adults serving on the church's leadership team should be individuals who possess the skills, experience, and maturity needed to do the entire church effectively. Young adults in church leadership need to know that their position in administration is not only to serve the interests of youths and young adults, but also to serve the entire church. Every matter should not be approached from the perspective of "what's in it for young adults?" The young adult leader must understand the congregation's diversity and lead in a manner that benefits all, not just young adults. For this reason, the spiritual maturity of young adult leaders is critical.

When leadership is based on the team model, whatever is undertaken and accomplished is far richer than what one individual, no matter how chosen, gifted, and talented, could do alone.¹⁶⁰ Being a part of the church's leadership team allows the young adult to glean wisdom and understanding from older team members. Leadership works best when it is provided by groups of gifted leaders serving together to pursue a clear and compelling vision. Over the past decade, over four thousand books on leadership have been published. Most discuss the necessary skills needed to become king of the hill; few downplay personal superiority or emphasize serving within a team context. Almost every leadership book or training course discusses what the

¹⁶⁰ Michael A. Blue, *Building Credibility in Leadership*, 3.

central leader can do to satisfy people's demands and outperform everyone else. Leadership books or studies rarely suggest that leadership is best accomplished without a high-profile, multi-talented, famous icon in the center-stage spotlight. But we have found that the "superstar" model of leadership, while appealing and not without some experiential validity, can do more to decimate the health of an organization than to facilitate its well-being.¹⁶¹ The young adult leader must remember that they are a leadership team member, not a charismatic dictator. A church could benefit significantly from having young adult representation among its leadership. How best to implement young adult leadership is a matter for further study.

The difficulty in attracting young adults to Church and Christ has much to do with negative perceptions that are a part of a shift in contemporary culture. Young adults, mostly view church and Christianity through a lens of skepticism and cynicism. The idea that Christianity and the church are no longer considered, by outsiders, with the same level of respect and reverence that it was decades ago, can be a tough pill for Christians to swallow. Yet to see a spiritual resurgence among young adults, the church must address its internal issues and put aside simple forms of Christianity, piercing the antagonism of the unchurched with service and sacrifice. The research shows that the church is ineffective when it simply condemns and criticizes the lives and lifestyles of the unchurched. But the church is most effective when it finds ways to serve its community and build meaningful relationships within which Christ is reflected. Christians can counteract the outrage in the world by intentionally developing a Christ-centered worldview, living as God's ambassadors, loving others in a winsome way, and engaging thoughtfully with

¹⁶¹ George Barna, *The Power of Team Leadership: Achieving Success Through Shared Responsibility* (The Crown Publishing Group), Kindle edition, 7-8.

others, both online and face-to-face.¹⁶² The image problem of Christianity and the church can be repaired by Christians becoming more faithful to Christ, their redeemer, and His teachings, reflecting his love and compassion to others, and demonstrating genuine concern for the unchurched in need of the same redemption.

In winning young adults for Christ, Christians must understand that being Christian is not just about being for Christ, but also about His people and the world He created. It is contrary to every Christian principle to be for Christ and against outsiders. It is incumbent upon Christians to serve others and intercede on behalf of outsiders, “If my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land” (2 Chron 7:14 KJV). The church must answer this challenge. Doing so is sure to go far in changing the perception of unchurched young adults, increasing the likelihood of their attendance and participation in our local churches, and, most importantly, securing their eternal salvation.

¹⁶² Ed Stetzer, *Christians in the Age of Outrage: How to Bring Our Best When the World Is at Its Worst*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2018), accessed September 15, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.

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Appendix A: Pastors and Church Leaders Interview Questions

How would you describe the attendance and participation among young adults at your church?

How can a church best position itself, or what can it do to attract young adults, minister to their needs, and develop them for Christian service?

Is there anything your church has done that was instrumental or helpful in attracting young adults to your church?

In your opinion, why are some churches struggling with attracting young adults to their church?

What would be your advice to a middle-aged or senior-aged pastor dealing with the absence and lack of participation of young adults in his congregation?

Would you say one's approach, strategy, or method of ministering to young adults should differ from any other age group?

How confident or concerned are you about the next generation of Christians and Christianity?

Why?

In your opinion, how significant is the pastor's age in attracting young adults to their church?

How would you describe the general attitude of young adults at your church towards discipleship, spiritual maturation, and Christian service?

In your opinion, are young adult couples today as committed as previous generations to raising their children to be good Christians?

What do you think is the general opinion of unchurched young adults about the church and organized religion?

Appendix B: Unchurched Young Adult Interview Questions

What is your general opinion of Christianity and the Christian church?

Did your parents attend church regularly, and was church attendance a part of your childhood and adolescent years?

Do you believe the fundamental claims of Christianity, that there is one God, that Jesus is the Son of God, born of the virgin Mary, that He (Jesus Christ) died on a cross to make atonement for humanity's sins, was resurrected from the dead, ascended into the heavens and will one day return to reign over His earthly kingdom?

In your opinion, is it necessary to attend church to be a Christian? Explain your answer.

In your opinion, is it necessary to go to church to be a morally good person? Explain your answer.

Do you believe the Bible is infallible, divinely inspired, and authoritative, instructing how we should live our lives today?

How would you describe the church (Christianity) and organized religion in seven words or less?

If church attendance was once a part of your life, what were your best and worst experiences at church.

Do you consider the Bible relevant to your life and lifestyle as a young adult?

Do you believe that God exists and intervenes in the affairs of human beings?

What do you, or will you, teach your children about God, morality, and the afterlife?

Is there anything a church could do to make you more likely to attend?

Do you believe most Church leaders (e.g., pastors) are honest and trustworthy? Why or why not?

Appendix C: GPCC Membership Questionnaire

What is your age?

With what regularity do you currently attend church?

- a. Regularly
- b. Somewhat Regularly
- c. Not Regularly
- d. Rarely, if at all

Has your church attendance increased or decreased over the last 5 to 10 years? Why?

In your opinion, why are young adults not coming to church?

Why are young adults leaving churches they once attended?

Why are young adults becoming more and more disengaged in church?

What can be done (based on Scripture) to increase attendance among young adults at Grace Place Christian Church?

Do you believe church attendance is necessary to be a Christian?

Do you believe the Bible is infallible, divinely inspired, and authoritative?

Do you believe Christianity is the only way for a person to know God?

IRB Approval Letter**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

April 19, 2022

Michael McGill

Darren Hercyk

Re: IRB Application - IRB-FY21-22-938 The Decline and Absence of Young Adults in Church

Dear Michael McGill and Darren Hercyk,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application by the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds that your study does not classify as human subjects research. You may begin your project with the data-safeguarding methods mentioned in your IRB application.

Decision: No Human Subjects Research

Explanation: Your study is not considered human subjects research for the following reason:

(1) Your project will consist of quality improvement activities that are not “designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge, according to 45 CFR 46. 102(l).

Please note that this decision only applies to your current application. Any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued non-human subjects’ research status. You may say these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

Also, although you are welcome to use our recruitment and consent templates, you are not required to do so.