

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY  
JOHN W. RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE PERCEIVED  
INFLUENCE THAT GENERATION Z HAS ON THE  
REVITALIZATION OF A CHURCH

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

by

Linda Proctor Mathis

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2023

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*Signatures Removed per Policy of Liberty University at the Time of Publication*

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church following its in-person decline as a result of the coronavirus in 2020 (Barna, 2020; Braddy, 2021; Earls, 2020). The theory that guided this study was based on research conducted by Lifeway Research, Pew Research, and Barna Group Research concerning Generation Z and based upon the book, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...And Rethinking Faith*, by David Kinnaman of Barna Research. The theories proposed within the books, *Essential Church? Reclaiming a Generation of Dropouts* by Rainer and Rainer and *Lost and Found: The Younger Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them* by Stetzer, Stanley, and Hayes were also used as a basis for this study. These resources adhered to the belief that the church has continued to lose a vital resource as it has continued to lose Generation Z, its young adults, especially ages between 18 and 22. The methodology used to conduct this study was in-depth interviews (Wengraf, 2006) with the participants within their natural church setting (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) or through the use of Zoom. The information obtained from these interviews was analyzed and coded (Saldana, 2021; Vanover, et al., 2022) to search for themes and commonalities among the participants in the study. Because the leadership within a church setting usually determined the direction that the organization would go (Bredfeldt, 2006; DePree, 2004), the pastors and/or the youth pastors within each of the churches used in the study were also interviewed as to their perceptions of the influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of the church.

*Keywords:* church decline, church revitalization, coronavirus, Generation Z/Gen Z, pastors, youth pastors

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### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the researcher's husband, Walter, who was always in the background during the researcher's educational journey, ready to assist in any way that he could with words of encouragement, a gentle nudge, or a heartfelt shove, whichever was needed at the time.

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**List of Abbreviations**

Christian Leadership in Education Program (CLED)

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

Generation Z (Gen Z)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Interview Protocol (IP)

Liberty University (LU)

Research Question (RQ)

## CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCH CONCERN

Research suggested that the churches were losing more and more of their young adults with each generation (Lifeway, 2017). Lifeway Research (2017) conducted a study dealing with Church Dropouts: Reasons Young Adults Stay or Go Between the Ages of 18-22. This research indicated that 34% of adults who stopped attending church did so because they went away to college (Lifeway, 2017, p. 4). This was the highest percentage and the top reason this age group dropped out of church. Of this age group who remained in church, 56% said they remained because church was a vital part of their relationship with God (Lifeway, 2017, p. 4).

Rainer and Rainer (2008) stated that the reason churchgoing students drop out of church is because the church is not essential to their lives. They do not see how their faith and the church are connected to their lives (Rainer and Rainer, 2008). Schultz and Schultz (2013) in their book, *Why Nobody Goes to Church Anymore*, pointed out that faith is a relationship, not just a topic to be studied. With churches losing their young adults, it would seem that the long-term stability of the church is at risk (Barna, 2017). The building of relationships among the generations is of importance to a church congregation for its continued growth both spiritually and physically (Stetzer and Dodson, 2007). It has been suggested that church congregations who are experiencing these losses of their young adults should explore the option of revitalization within their churches (Reeder and Swavely, 2008).

*Revitalization* is defined by Davis (2017) as the process that “occurs when God restores a once healthy church, helping it to change course from its recent decline toward spiritual disease and death” (p. 30). Reeder and Swavely (2008, p. 30) suggested that revitalization within a church is the spiritual and statistical growth observed within a church congregation following a biblical fitness plan that was developed by that church for their benefit and based upon scripture.



Dever (2007, p. 34) reminded Christians that the church is a people, not a place...not a statistic. Schultz and Schultz (2013) echoed this same sentiment as does Reeder and Swavely (2008). Reeder and Swavely (2008, p. 9) state that dying church congregations tend to rely on programs for revitalization rather than on the principles that the Lord has designed. Schultz and Schultz (2013) advocated building and strengthening relationships first with God then with others, thus reiterating Dever's (2007) perspective.

White (2017, p. 37) urged church congregations to drop everything and to start paying attention to Generation Z (Gen Z) which now constituted 25.9% of the US population. Gen Z is that group of individuals born between 1999 and 2015 (Barna Research, 2018, p. 112). This age group, in particular those between the ages of 18 and 22, is important to the health and the stability of a church congregation. White (2017) stressed that Gen Z is numerically the largest generation thus far. They are also the "first truly post-Christian generation" and "will be the most influential religious force in the West" (White, 2017, p. 11). They are the foundation upon which the congregation will build as they are the future of the church for growth and stability. They are also "the heart of the missional challenge facing the church" (White, 2017, p. 11).

The intent of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z (Gen Z) had on the revitalization of a church. However, there appeared to be a gap in the literature as to the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church. It was the desire of the researcher to assist in closing that gap to a certain extent through this research study.

Chapter One examined the concern or the need for the research on this particular topic concerning Generation Z (Gen Z). It began by examining the background of the problem to establish the concern and the need for the research as well as the significance of the study. This

background search included the following aspects of the research: theological, historical, sociological, and theoretical. Because the leadership of any organization effects the entire organization, the leadership of the church was also discussed. The purpose statement and research questions assisted in establishing the direction the study would proceed. The assumptions and delimitations established the perimeters of the study. The definition of the terms used within the study would ensure that an understanding existed between the researcher and the reader as to the exact perspective the researcher used within the study. The summary of the design and methodology added further clarification for the reader of the study.

### **Background to the Problem**

In a research article entitled, *In U.S., Decline in Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace*, Pew Research (2019, p. 2) stated that 65% of American adults described themselves as Christian which is a drop of 12 percentage points over the last decade (Pew, 2019, p. 2). Meanwhile, those who described themselves as “atheist, agnostic or nothing [nones] now stands at 26%, which is an increase from 17% in 2009.” (Pew, 2019, p.2)

The problem among churches today is that the children and the youth are not as involved in church as their parents or even their grandparents have been (Schultz and Schultz, 2013). Schultz and Schultz (2013) quoted from John Roberto (2010) who wrote about his opinion of the future of faith formation in 2020. Roberto (2010) said that researchers have predicted that by 2020 more than 85 percent of Americans won't worship God at church (Schultz and Schultz, 2013, p. 18). Roberto's prediction appeared to be a valid one. However, the decline of in-person attendance within churches in 2020 was due largely to the coronavirus pandemic (Pew Research, 2020). At this point in time, it would be difficult to speculate whether the decline of in-person attendance was the result on the pandemic only (Shellnutt, 2021) or if Roberto's prediction was

indeed a valid one and people were simply not attending church in person for other reasons.

For whatever reason, in-person church attendance has declined based upon a compilation of church research statistics (Church statistics for 2021). This research article was based upon church research statistics (2020) which were a compilation of statistics from Barna Group, Gallup Poll, Carey Nieuwhof, and Pew Research. However, Brennan (2021) stated in a recent article from Gallup (2021) that in-person religious services attendance is rebounding. As of December, 2020, 13% more Americans were attending in-person worship services while those attending remotely increased by 16% (Brennan, 2021). Pew Research (2021) was of the opinion that “life in U.S. religious congregations slowly edges back to normal” (p. 1). Brennan (2021) pointed out this steady increase in attendance of in-person adults has been mostly among adults 55 years and older while in-person attendance among those 18-34 years and 35-54 years has “dropped significantly” (Brennan, 2021, p. 4). It does appear that Christian churches are losing their young adults (Kinnaman, 2011). There is something missing within the church in regard to these young adult that they do not see the church as being essential to their lives (Rainer and Rainer, 2008).

Many churches have recognized that a problem existed between the currently established church and the youth of Gen Z (White, 2017). These churches have or are attempting the process of revitalization (Croft, 2016; Davis, 2017). There is a need for the church to reconnect with the youth (Fields, 1998; Kinnaman and Lyons, 2007). There is a need for the youth to feel reconnected to the church (Rainer, 2003; Rainer and Geiger, 2011). As church congregations began grappling with the problem of reconnecting with Gen Z and with revitalizing their churches, another issue occurred which further compounded the already existing problem. In 2020 a health crisis in the form of a pandemic arose in many countries of the world including the

United States. This pandemic was called Coronavirus or COVID-19. In order to slow or halt the spread of the virus within the U.S., the country basically shut down for a period of time. City, state, and federal government offices were closed. Schools closed as well as all non-essential businesses. This closure also included many churches and houses of worship. Pastors resorted to an online ministry in order to remain connected with congregations (Barna, 2020). “We’re finding ourselves in a profound moment where there’s actually a loss of control,” noted Mark Sayers of Barna Research (2020, p. 2) commenting on the recent data. Sayers (2020) expressed the opinion that during the time of crisis with regard to the pandemic, that the churches have experienced an aspect of leadership that he referred to as spiritual authority (Barna, 2020, p.2).

### **Historical**

The researcher sought to understand the perceived influence that Gen Z had on the revitalization of a church. In order to adequately assess the perceived influence that Gen Z had on the revitalization of a church, one must first adequately assess who Gen Z is.

Gen Z is defined by Barna Research (2018, p. 10) as individuals who were born between 1999 and 2015. Barna (2018, p. 15) referred to them as *screenagers* due to the fact that they were born into a world saturated with digital technology and mobile devices. Their interaction with others is usually via some sort of mobile device, *91% of the time* (Barna Research, 2018, p. 18) rather than face to face dialogue (Barna Research, 2017, 2018, 2019). The churches had begun to use social media within their programming for their youth in order to attract Gen Z to their programs. As a result, Barna (2018) and White (2017) stated that Gen Z feel trapped in every dimension of their lives by social media. If Barna’s (2018) and White’s (2017) opinions are correct in this regard, then possibly the churches should rethink their use of social media and rethink the importance of attempting to *connect* Gen Z with each other in face-to-face interaction

and dialogue. It has been suggested by Kinnaman and Matlock (2019, p. 109, p. 112) that “when isolation and mistrust are the norms, forge meaningful intergenerational relationships” with other believers who are “resilient disciples”. Kinnaman and Matlock (2019, p. 113) are of the opinion that these “resilient disciples” are the result of meaningful relationships which have been forged over time and connect one generation to another.

Barna (2018, p. 13) in a study, *The Forces Forming a Generation*, stated that “out of 69 million children and teens in Gen Z, just 4 percent have a biblical worldview”. This same Barna Research (2018) also found that a person’s worldview is usually in place by age 13 with their mothers being the main source from which the teens received spiritual guidance and encouragement. Hiebert (2008, p. 15) defined *worldview* as “what people in a community take as given realities, the maps they have of reality that they use for living”. In *The Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* by Doug Fields (1998) he expressed the opinion that just because someone is involved within a church ministry and learns about the Bible, does not mean that that person has been discipled and actually has accepted what the Bible said and taught as fact. Barna (2018) stressed the fact that “church attendance alone does not create distinctive believers” (Barna Research, 2018, p.58).

These few facts about Gen Z should reveal quite a lot to those who work with this age group. This generation is of importance to the future growth and health of a church. It is important for the church to connect with the youth and in turn to connect the youth to the church (Psalm 78:4-7). “Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it” (Prov. 22:6). Barna (2019) provided another interesting fact from their research. Barna (2019) pointed out that being faith-friendly is not the same thing as being faithful. In this particular study Barna (2019) revealed that 18–35-year-olds, both Christian and non-Christian,

viewed the Church from a positive perspective. But not everyone within this age group were faithful Christians. However, they all were faith friendly.

### **Sociological**

Morales (2017) in his dissertation studied *Small Group Leaders and Youth Ministry in the Christian Church*. He stated that youth workers were aware of the fact that students were graduating high school and leaving the church. However, this was not true of all graduating high school students. Of those churches that were able to keep a percentage of their young people, how did they do it (Morales, 2017)? Morales (2017, p. 146) said that his study indicated that intentional ministry and methodical relationships...can increase the potential for students to stay connected to church.

Barna Group (2019) in a recent report examining Millennials and Generation Z, referred to these two generations as the *connected generation*. Barna Research (2019, p. 24) made the statement that “despite being digital natives, relational connection is lacking for most young adults”. Barna (2019, p. 16) went on to say that “despite being a hyper-connected and globally minded generation, many young adults say they feel lonely”. They remain disconnected from people and actual life. It is through relationships that the *unchurched* become the *churched* (Rainer and Rainer, 2008; Stetzer et al, 2009). It is through relationships that those who are not Christian learn about those who are Christian, as to who they really are. It is learning about who Christians really are that lead to knowing who Jesus really is (Barna and Kinnaman, 2014; MacArthur, 2018).

Kinnaman and Lyons (2007) delved deeper into the unchurched in their book, *Unchristian*. In their opinion, “Christianity has an image problem” (Kinnaman and Lyons, 2007, p. 9). This image problem appeared to be affecting the opinions of Generation Z (Gen Z). Barna

Research (2018, p. 72) found that 59% of Gen Z said that “church is not relevant to me personally”. Yet, this generation is the children and teens of today, and the future leaders of tomorrow. This statistic should be of major concern to the Christian church.

### **Theoretical**

Rainer and Geiger (2011, p. 8) advocated that “simple is in...complexity is out”. They purpose that a *simple church* is better for worship and growth (Rainer and Geiger, 2011). From their perspective, life is very complicated for most people. Therefore, people are *hungry* for simplicity. In their opinion, “if anyone knows simple, it’s Jesus” (Rainer and Geiger, 2011, p. 16). Jesus did not abide by the “613 religious laws, 248 affirmative commands, and 365 negative commands” that existed at that time (Rainer and Geiger, 2011, pp. 16-17). Jesus took the complexity out of the religious lives of the people. He kept things simple. Simplicity within the church may be the answer to church revitalization and church growth. It may be the answer to the retention of Gen Z as well as the retention of other generations.

Davis (2017, p. 20) defined *revitalization* as “the effort to restore by biblical means a once healthy church...to a state of spiritual health, as defined by the Word of God”. Davis (2017) as well as Reeder and Swavely (2008) have a similar definition of what church revitalization is. Reeder and Swavely (2008) defined *revitalization* not as church *growth*, but as church *health*. They stated further that church growth will proceed from church health (p. 29). Reeder and Swavely (2008) are of the opinion that the size of a church body is not necessarily an indication of its health, just an indication of the amount of human bodies present (p. 29). They further stated that if a body is healthy, it will grow. Therefore, churches should focus on church health “and let God take care of the growth” (p. 29). Reeder and Swavely (2008) defined church health as “delivering transformed disciples serving Christ” (p. 29).

One fact stood out in both definitions. That is the fact that a church can be revitalized when its revitalization is based on scripture, based on the Word of God (Matt. 6:33). It can be as simple as that. Stetzer, et al (2009, p. 1) stated that the reason they wrote the book, *Lost and Found*, was because there are many in this generation [Gen Z] who are unchurched. Stetzer, et al. (2009) wanted to help the church find and reach these lost young people.

Many authors share this sentiment in regard to the fact that churches are losing their children and their youth (Kinnaman, 2011; Davis, 2017; Rainer and Rainer, 2008; Stetzer and Dodson, 2007). Pastors, youth ministers, and other church leaders are concerned as well. The congregants within the churches are concerned about the lost, especially Gen Z. Why the concern for Gen Z? They are the young adults, the teens, and the children of today. They are the ones upon whom the churches will build in the future. If they are lost forever, upon whom will these churches build?

### **Leadership**

In his book, *No Silver Bullets: 5 Small Shifts That Will Transform Your Ministry*, Im (2017, p.82), gave this advice to church leaders: “Leaders need to move from being a sage on the stage to being a guide on the side”. Im’s statement echoed a sentiment expressed by Bredfeldt (2006, p. 13) who said, “The greatest leaders among us are the great teachers among us....Teachers shape, challenge, and change people, and in doing so, they lead”. These are words to which much consideration should be given as Pastors and Youth Pastors/Leaders work together to recapture Gen Z, a generation that is being lost to the church. Kinnaman (2011, p. 19) pointed out that “millions of young adults leave active involvement in church as they exit their teen years. Some never return....” Kinnaman (2011) conducted research in an attempt to identify a single reason that young adults leave the church. From his research, Kinnaman (2011)



discovered that there is no single reason that these young adults exit the church. Each person had their own unique set of “unique and mundane reasons” (Kinnaman, 2011, p. 91).

Rainer and Geiger (2011, p. 3) quoted Albert Einstein as having said, “Out of complexity, find simplicity”. In their opinion, churches with a simple process “for reaching and maturing people are expanding the kingdom” (Rainer and Geiger, 2011, p. 14). As Pastors and Youth Leaders search for ways to reconnect with Gen Z they should look to Jesus for leadership and guidance.

Jesus took twelve ordinary men, common men (MacArthur, 2002) and changed the world. Jesus kept it simple. He relied on His Heavenly Father for guidance. He selected twelve ordinary men to teach and to train in the ways of God. By doing this Jesus taught the importance of relying on God for direction and guidance. These twelve ordinary men were living proof that “God’s strength is made perfect in weakness” (MacArthur, 2002, p. xiv). “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 cor. 12:9).

Pastors and Youth Leaders are concerned about reaching Gen Z. These leaders see statistics such as: 90% of those 20-25 believe that “I can have a good relationship with God without being involved in a church” and that 9% of those 20-25 believe that “the church is the only place to learn what it means to be a Christian” (Stetzer, et al, 2009, p. 54), they are rightfully concerned. Yet, when viewing these statistics in light of COVID-19 one views this information from a different perspective.

Because of the Coronavirus/COVID-19 outbreak, churches have had to reexamine how they conduct their worship services. For several months beginning in the early spring of 2020, many houses of worship were closed to any worship services. Beginning in late spring or early summer, 2021, churches were allowed to reopen on a limited basis due to health concerns in

regard to COVID-19 (Barna, 2020). All in attendance had to wear face masks and practice social distancing. There was a continuous process of sanitizing pews, chairs, books, anything used within the church and within the worship service. *Social distancing* meant that people maintained a distance of six feet between themselves and others within the church whether walking within the church or sitting in a pew or a chair in the church (Barna, 2020). In-person church attendance declined. Pastors who were able to do so streamed their worship services (Barna, 2020, p. 2) or posted them live on Facebook.

Pastors were contacted by Barna Research weekly during the month of May, 2020, in an attempt to assess *The State of the Church*. These pastors (Barna, 2020, p. 1) admitted to being “tired, overwhelmed, and lonely”, but they were “looking on the bright side” (Barna, 2020, p. 3). As pastors looked to the future for their church they expressed concern for the safety and wellbeing of those who would attend their services in regard to the virus (Barna, 2020, p. 3). Many churches that were able to stream their worship services continued to do so even after their churches re-opened their doors (Barna, 2020, p. 3). There was a *new normal* for *Sunday Morning Worship* (Barna, 2020). Barna Research (2020, p. 3) found that 72% of “all U.S. pastors [surveyed] agreed on some level that ‘leading my church well through this global crisis means acknowledging that I don’t have all the answers.’” At a time when churches are struggling to maintain or regain Gen Z, the question arises: How will Gen Z be affected by COVID-19? In the meantime, Mike Todd of Transformational Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma said, “My encouragement to you is not to shy away from what’s uncomfortable. Remember, growth and comfort are arch enemies. They never coexist in the same place.” (Barna, 2020, p. 3).

### Statement of the Problem

Rainer and Rainer (2008) pointed out an issue that they perceived as a problem among young adults. That perceived problem has formed the basis for this study. According to Rainer and Rainer (2008, p. 2) more than “two thirds of young churchgoing adults...drop out of church between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two”. The reason is that they did not see the church as “essential to [their] life” (Rainer and Rainer, 2008, p. 2). However, these same authors stated that “[y]oung adults are likely to stay in the church if they see church as essential to their lives” (Rainer and Rainer, 2008, p. 5).

Croft (2016) is of the opinion that the revitalization of a church can be accomplished through the power of God (Davis, 2017; Im, 2017; Stetzer and Dodson, 2007). It is possible for the churches that are declining to revitalize and reclaim those who have not found the church to be essential in their lives (Croft, 2016; Schultz & Schultz, 2013; Stetzer, Stanley, & Hayes, 2009).

*Revitalization* is defined by Davis (2017, p. 30) as “to make alive again”. Davis (2017) referred to Ezekiel 37 to reiterate his point concerning the need for God in the process of the revitalization of a church. Stetzer and Rainer (2010) used the term *transformational church* to refer to a church that has been *revitalized* through the power of God. Whereas, Stetzer and Dodson (2007) used the term *comeback churches* to refer to those churches who have revitalized, or have become *alive again* (Davis, 2017, p. 30).

Stetzer and Dodson (2007, p. 210) stated that “[l]eadership is the most important factor in making a comeback”. Morales (2017, p. 6) in his dissertation referred to leadership experts such as Brady and Woodward (2005) and Maxwell (2007) in his statement that, “an organization’s success depends on the leadership of individuals”. This writer is in agreement with his

statement. It is for this reason that within this study the perceptions of both the pastors and the youth pastors were sought as to the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of a church following its in-person decline as a result of the coronavirus in 2020. An interview protocol was developed and used as participants of Generation Z, youth pastors, and pastors were interviewed in regard to their perceptions of the influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of their church.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1.** How do pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?

**RQ2.** How do youth pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?

**RQ3.** How do individuals of Generation Z who have experienced the revitalization process perceive their influence to have been within this revitalization process?

**RQ4.** Is there a correlation between the relative size of the congregation of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church?

### **Assumptions and Delimitations**

Assumptions are defined by Leedy and Ormrod (2019, p. 412) and Roberts (2010, p. 139) as the conditions that are taken for granted in a research project relative to a study. Leedy and Ormrod (2019, p. 80) and Roberts (2010, p. 138) defined delimitations as boundaries in a research project beyond which a research will not go. Roberts (2010) did point out that

delimitations and limitations are often confused. Limitations, according to Roberts (2010) are not under the control of the researcher, but delimitations are.

### **Research Assumptions**

It was assumed by the researcher that pastors and youth leaders know and understand the process of revitalization and also know where their church stood in regard to that process. It is also assumed that the individual members of Generation Z are able to represent the views of Gen Z clearly. It is further assumed that the Generation Z participants may not be fully aware of their value as to the health and growth of their church. It is also assumed that the Coronavirus also caused a decline in the in-person attendance and participation in the church.

### **Delimitations of the Research Design**

This study was limited to ten churches within the same metropolitan city in a state within the mid-southern part of the United States. These ten churches were all evangelical protestant churches of different denominations, which included: two Baptist churches; two Lutheran churches; two Methodist churches, two Non-Denominational churches, and two Presbyterian churches. The Pastors and/ or Youth Pastors of these churches were participants as well as two Generation Z participants (between ages 18 and 22) from each of the ten churches involved. This limited the participants of the study to no more than 40. In accordance to the recommendation by Leedy and Ormrod (2019) when using the in-depth interviews and observational strategies of a qualitative phenomenological study, the sample of participants should be kept small. This particular study focused on in-depth interviews.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Biblical Fitness Plan:* A plan designed “with biblical principles by which the Holy Spirit can bring health and vitality to the body of Christ” (Reeder and Swavely, 2008, p. 30).

*Church:* For the purposes of this study unless otherwise stated, the term *church* does not refer to a building or a structure. Rather it is a term used in the New Testament to describe “a group of persons professing trust in Jesus Christ, meeting together to worship Him, seeking to enlist others to become His followers” (Holman Bible Dictionary, 1991, p. 259).

*Church Decline:* There does not appear to be a structured definition for church decline. It can mean different things to different churches because the reasons for the decline are as different and unique as the individual churches. Rainer (2014, p. 11) referred to church decline as a “slow erosion”.

*Church Revitalization:* Church revitalization is defined as the process of revitalizing or restoring a once healthy church to a state of spiritual health as defined by the Word of God (Davis, 2017, p. 20). For the purpose of this study, the term revitalization will refer to a numerical growth as seen through an increase of in-person attendance by congregates. An increase in in-person attendance is often equated with revitalization as more people are attending the church in-person, which in turn would have an effect on their spiritual health.

*Coronavirus (COVID-19):* As defined by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the coronavirus is “a respiratory disease caused by SARS-CoV-2, a new coronavirus discovered in 2019. The virus is thought to spread mainly from person to person through respiratory droplets produced when an infected person coughs, sneezes, or talks. Some people who are infected may not have symptoms.” (<https://www.cdc.gov>, 2019).

*Generation Z (Gen Z):* As defined by Barna Research (2018), Generation Z are individuals who were born between 1999 and 2015. For clarification purposes, Pew Research used the term *post-Millennials* to describe basically this same age group (Fry and Parker, 2018).

Pew Research later dropped the term *post-Millennials* in favor of the term *Generation Z* (Dimock, 2019).

*In-depth Individual Interview:* A type of interview of research participants in phenomenological research in order to gain multiple perspectives and validation of data (Carter, et al, 2014).

*Interview Protocol:* A form used by a qualitative researcher for recording and writing down information obtained during an interview (Creswell, 2014, p. 244).

*Nones:* Those who on surveys and questionnaires describe themselves as “atheist, agnostic, or nothing” (Pew, 2019, p. 2).

*Pastor:* For the purpose of this study, a pastor is defined as a leader within a church setting whose responsibilities include the leadership of the church and all of its entities as well as having the responsibility for the pastoral care of the congregants within the church (Holman Bible Dictionary, 1991, p. 1076) (Scorgie Dictionary of Christian Spirituality, 2011, p. 333).

*Phenomenological Research:* A qualitative strategy in which the researcher identified the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants in a study (Creswell, 2014, p. 245).

*Qualitative Coding:* In qualitative research it is defined as “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text and assigning a word or phrase to the segment in order to develop a general sense of it” (Creswell, 2014, p. 241). Saldana (2021, p. 5) defined *coding* as “most often being a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portions of language-based or visual data”.

*Social Distancing:* A term devised during the Coronavirus/COVID-19 crisis which designated that people should maintain a social distance of 6’ from one another (CDC, 2019).

*Spiritual Authority:* A biblical leadership based upon the Bible in which God has authority and control.

*Triangulation:* A qualitative research strategy to test research validity (Carter et al, 2014).

*Youth Pastor/Minister:* For the purpose of this study, a Youth Pastor/Youth Minister is a paid staff member whose primary duties are to provide pastoral care to adolescents.

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study is that this research would assist in filling the gap in the current literature with regard to the perceived influence that Generation Z had within a church setting and in particular to the revitalization of a church in the aftermath of its in-person decline following the coronavirus of 2020. This study explored the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church. It provided answers to the following questions: **RQ1:** How do pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process? **RQ2:** How to youth pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process? **RQ3:** How do individuals of Generation Z who have experienced the revitalization process perceive their influence to have been within this revitalization process? **RQ4:** Is there a correlation between the relative size of the congregation of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church?

To answer **RQ4** the researcher examined the size of the congregation prior to the coronavirus by using attendance statistics for the individual churches during the time period prior to the coronavirus (Table 2 *DEMOGRAPHIC DATA*, p. 116). This information as well as the information obtained from RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 was used to answer RQ4.



### **Summary of the Design**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of a church following its in-person decline as a result of the coronavirus in 2020. Creswell (2014) stated that researchers who had an interest in a study of individuals would use the phenomenological research design. *Phenomenological research* was defined by Creswell (2014) as one in which “the researcher identifies the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon [i.e., church revitalization] as described by participants in a study” (Creswell, 2014, p. 245). Leedy and Ormrod (2019, p. 417) have a similar definition of the term, *phenomenological*, which they defined as a “philosophical approach to research in which the focus of investigation is on how people perceive and experience themselves and certain aspects of their world”. This research study explored the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of a church. This was accomplished through the use of the interview process.

### **Research Population**

The research population which participated in this study was from the same metropolitan city within a mid-southern state. A total of ten churches which have experienced or are in the process of experiencing the process of revitalization within ten years of the beginning of this study were used. These churches are all evangelical protestant churches as defined by their church theology. They are of varying sizes in regard to their individual church populations as some were larger in attendance than others when they began the revitalization process within their churches. The ten churches who participated in the study were of varying denominations: Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Non-denominational, and Presbyterian. The researcher does not consider the degree of revitalization within each church to be the focus of this particular study.

The focus of this study was the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of the church.

For this reason and for the purposes of this study, two members of Generation Z between the ages of 18 and 22 from each of the ten evangelical protestant churches participated in this study. These Generation Z participants were recommended to the researcher by the pastor or youth pastor of their church as possible study participants to be interviewed as to their perception of their influence within the revitalization of their church. All of the Generation Z participants recommended to the researcher by the pastors/youth pastors did participate in the study.

In addition to the participants within Generation Z, the pastors and/or youth pastors of each church were interviewed as to their perceptions of the influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of the church. The leadership of the church is of vital importance to the survival of the church/organization (Kouzes and Posner, 2017). Therefore, in the opinion of the researcher, the perceptions of the pastors and/or the youth pastors in regard to the revitalization of their churches and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon this process are of importance to this study. The total number of participants in this study was forty. Not all of the churches had a youth pastor. If there was no youth pastor at the time of the interviews, the person who was currently overseeing the youth programming was interviewed.

### **Research Methodology**

In a phenomenological research study, the “researcher describes the lived experiences of individuals about a phenomenon [i.e., church revitalization] as described by participants” (Creswell, 2014, p. 14). Flood (2010) quoted Thorne (1991) as well as Burns and Grove (1999) in her explanation of phenomenology. Flood (2010) said that the primary position of phenomenology is that the most basic human truths are accessible only through inner subjectivity

(Thorne, 1991) and that the person is integral to the environment (Burns and Grove, 1999). In Flood's (2010, p. 7) opinion, the epistemology of phenomenology "focuses on revealing meaning rather than on arguing a point or developing an abstract theory". Engelland (2020) took Flood's (2010) perspective of phenomenology a step further when he said that "phenomenology potently combines two forces in philosophy: search for the elusive essence of things and wonder concerning the possibility of experiencing things" (p. 12). Leedy and Ormrod (2019, p. 231) defined a phenomenological study as "a study that attempts to understand people's perceptions and perspectives relative to a particular situation". They are of the opinion that phenomenological researchers depend mainly upon interviews with a small, carefully selected sample of participants. Patton (2015) had expressed this same opinion earlier as he stated that by capturing a personal description of a lived experience, the researcher is able to describe a phenomenon as much as possible in "concrete and lived-through terms" (p. 433).

Weller, et al. (2018, p. 1) pointed out that "the goal of research based on qualitative data is not necessarily to collect all or most ideas and themes but to collect the most important ideas and themes". Therefore, interview protocols (Creswell, 2014) were developed for use in this study. The necessary interviews were conducted among all of the participants. Rabionet (2011) in her article offered suggestions on how she designed and conducted semi-structured interviews for use in qualitative interviewing. Once the data has been collected, it was coded and organized (Creswell, 2014; Roberts, 2010) as to reoccurring descriptions and themes that may develop among the participants of the study.

Data source triangulation was used as a research strategy to test the validity of the research (Creswell, 2014; Leedy and Ormrod, 2019; Roberts, 2010). "Triangulation is a

qualitative research strategy to test validity through the convergence of information from different sources” (Carter, et al, 2014, p. 545; Creswell, 2014). Data source triangulation “involves the collection of data from different types of people including individuals, groups, families, and communities, to gain multiple perspectives and validation of data” (Carter, et al, 2014, p. 545; Creswell, 2014).

Once this data has been coded and organized and any reoccurring themes and descriptions have been explored, the four research questions will have been answered. The perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of church should be determined as seen through the eyes of Generation Z (RQ1), the pastors of the churches, (RQ2) and/or the youth pastors (RQ3) of the churches involved in the study. Insight will also be gained as to whether or not a correlation existed between the size in membership of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church (RQ4).

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Two addressed the literature that was considered relevant to this study which explored the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church. From the perspective of Kinnaman (2011) churches were losing their youth, especially between ages 18 and 22. From his perspective, the loss of this age group presented a very real problem for the churches as this age group is vital to the revitalization, the growth, and the stability of the individual churches as a whole (Kinnaman, 2011). This concern for the loss of Generation Z within the churches formed the basis of the problem being explored within the study. An investigation into both the primary and the secondary literature provided more insight into the problem.

This study was conducted to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of the church following its in-person decline in the aftermath of the Coronavirus in 2020. This particular issue concerning Generation Z was expressed in the Description of the Problem as well as in the Research Purpose Statement. In the next section the Theological Framework of the Literature was examined as it exemplified the necessity of God being first and foremost in all that is done within the church. The Theological Framework was followed by the Theoretical Framework of the literature as the theories that support the thesis statement were examined. The Theoretical Framework of the literature produced an understanding of the *why* of the study. Chapter Two concluded with additional literature that was considered to be relevant to the topic but are secondary and not primary sources. Finally, the Gap in the Literature was examined as well as the Rationale for the Study.

### **Theological Framework for the Study**

The definition for *revitalization* as gleaned from Reeder and Swavely (2008, p. 30) stated that revitalization is a process based upon a *biblical fitness plan*. They are of the opinion that each church should develop their own biblical fitness plan. This is a plan designed with biblical principles by which the Holy Spirit can bring health and vitality to the body of Christ (Reeder and Swavely, 2008, p. 30).

“Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (NIV, Co. 3:17). The early church did just that. The Bible stated in the book of Acts (NIV, Acts 2:42) that they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the growing fellowship which was rapidly becoming *the church*. This is an important point for church congregations to remember as they contemplate beginning the revitalization process. When a church of today has followed the example of the early church as shown in the book of Acts, revitalization is not impossible. “And the Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved” (NIV, Col. 3:47). It is not impossible for a church to exhibit both spiritual and statistical growth within the revitalization process (Dever, 2013; Col. 3:1-4; 15-17).

As pastors (Barna, 2020) and congregates united to revitalize their churches, biblical fitness plans (Reeder and Swavely, 2008) of sorts were devised and developed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some pastors had to close their doors to their congregations to prevent the spread of the virus. As a result, many of those churches resorted to the use of digital worship services only (Barna, 2020). Barna Research conducted surveys in an attempt to determine the effect these church closures had upon the pastors of the churches and upon the church congregations as well (Barna, 2020). This particular topic of research should provide interesting

research information in the aftermath of the Coronavirus of 2020 as to its effects upon the church as a whole.

When it was considered *safe* for church congregations to once again unite together for worship, churches were allowed to reopen (Barna, 2020). There was a change in Sunday morning from what pastors and congregates had been accustomed to seeing and experiencing for decades during worship services (Barna, 2020). Nona Jones said, “I think church attendance is going to surge after COVID....I think that COVID has really placed a newfound sense of value on human connection....There are many people who would so very much love to gather in a safe environment that provides hope” (Barna, 2020, p. 5). As a result of COVID-19, a new normal for Sunday morning worship services developed (Barna, 2020).

Ezekiel 37 is a scripture passage that is often referred to in books discussing the topic of church revitalization (Davis, 2017; Henard, 2015). It is in that passage that Ezekiel spoke of being brought by the Spirit to the Valley of Dry Bones. “He [the Spirit] asked me, ‘Son of Man, can these bones live?’ I said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, you alone know’. Then he said to me, ‘Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...I will make breath enter, and you will come to life.’” (Ezekiel 37:3-4, 6b). A change must happen for revitalization to occur.

Church revitalization is possible (Heb. 13:17; I Pet. 5:1-4) (Davis, 2017). However, it is important for one to remember what Jesus said to His disciples: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 19:26). This is not to imply that the revitalization of a church should not be attempted by man. Jesus also told His disciples that everything is possible for him who believes (Mark 9:23).

Im (2017, p. 166) proposed that instead of “disregarding [a] church’s unique personality, history, leadership style, and culture, the pastor and leadership of the church [need to] determine the right dosage of change”. “By far the biggest mistake people make when trying to change is to plunge ahead without establishing a high enough sense of urgency” (Kotter, 2012, p. 4).

Stetzer and Dodson (2007) suggested connecting people through small groups in the beginning. These small groups/communities are likened by Stetzer and Dodson (2007) to building blocks. As relationships are developed, church communities begin to grow. These church communities draw strength from one another through the love of God as they build a stronger foundation among the group. As the foundations of these groups unite and grow stronger change becomes an easier process as there is strength in unity.

### **Theological Overview**

As one examined the *Life Cycle of a Church* (Meeks, 2013; Wiens, 2018) one can understand the meaning and the intent behind the words found in Ecclesiastes. Church congregations are born and unfortunately, church congregations decline and die.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven:  
 a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
 a time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
 a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to give away”  
 (*New International Version Bible*, 1978/1984, Ecc 3:1-2; 3b; 4a; 6).

However, some churches realized their impending demise and searched for a way to change what appeared to be the inevitable for them. Davis (2017) described this change as *revitalization: to make alive again* (p. 30). Croft (2016) held a similar view in regard to the revitalization of a church. He wrote about his experiences with the revitalization of a church in his book, *Biblical Church Revitalization: Solutions for Dying and Divided Churches* (Croft, 2016). To further assist the churches in their effort to revitalize from their perceived state of



decline, Alban (2020), Meeks, (2013) and Wiens (2018) each developed their perspective on *The Life Cycle of a Church*. These perspectives provided valuable information as a church(s) moved from a state of decline to a healthy state of revitalization.

The term *revitalization* is most often linked to Ezekiel 37 (Croft, 2016; MacArthur, 2018). It is in this passage that Ezekiel spoke of being brought by the Spirit to the Valley of Dry Bones.

“He [the Spirit] asked me, ‘Son of Man, can these bones live?’ I said, ‘O Sovereign Lord, you alone know’. Then he said to me, ‘prophesy to these bones and say to them, Dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord...I will make breath enter, and you will come to life’”. (NIV, 1978/1984, Ezekiel 37:3, 4, 6b).

As one reads the book of James one will find that James encouraged the Christians to assemble together for the studying of the scriptures and for moral support as they faced persecution, trials, and temptations. He encouraged them to be not only hearers of the Word, but also doers of the Word (James 1). As one reads James 2, one will find described there how one should live their life exhibiting their faith through their deeds. In James 3, one will find that taming one of the smallest parts of the body, the tongue, is a very difficult thing to do. But James reminded everyone, especially Christians, of the value of gaining wisdom and of submitting themselves to God (James 3-4). In James 5 one reads of James’ plea that one should remember to have patience, especially in suffering, and to have faith in all things.

The book of James, the *Life Cycle of a Church* (Meeks, 2013, Weins, 2018), the advice found in Ecclesiastes and Ezekiel are all of importance to Generation Z as they are the generation which has advanced into adulthood. This generation will have a direct effect on the birth, growth, and the development of a church. They will also affect its possible decline and eventual death. Generation Z is of great importance to the health, future development, and the life cycle

of a church at the present time as they are the upcoming and the new leaders of the church.

However, Blanchard, Hodges, and Hendry (2016) offered a piece of advice to churches as these churches trained and prepared their future leaders, such as Gen Z. They reminded these churches that “most leadership resources focus on management techniques, competencies, strategies, and tactics while ignoring the most important part of leadership—the leaders themselves”

(Blanchard, et al, 2016, p. xi). They further stated that a leader’s failure to empower others is a key reason that some teams are ineffective (Blanchard, et al, 2016, p. 30). When one leads like Jesus, it creates a culture that affects all relationships, and in turn, it affects the results of that church or organization (Blanchard, et al, 2016).

### **Defining the Church**

The term *the church* is often used interchangeably to refer to a building as well as a group of people. The *church building* is the structure built for the use of the *church people* as a place in which they can congregate to meet and worship the Lord in unity. The *church* is a term used in the New Testament to describe “a group of people professing trust in Jesus Christ, meeting [assembling] together to worship Him, seeking to enlist others to become His followers” (Holman, 1991, p. 250). The definition given by Holman (1991) is the one to which this paper is referring whenever the term *the church* is used.

The early Christians considered themselves as a group to constitute a church and to be *called out* by God in Jesus Christ for a special purpose (Holman, 1991, p. 250) (*NIV*, 1978/1984; Phil. 2:1-18). The term “call, calling, or called out” referred to “an invitation, summons, commission, or naming” according to Holman (1991, p. 223). Holman (1991, p. 250) said that it is important for Christians to understand the Old Testament concept of *being called out by God* to better understand the concept of *the church* in the New Testament (*NIV*, 1978/1984; Duet.

9:10; Rom. 2:28, 29). The three basic perspectives of *the church* as listed by Holman (1991) are: (1) the church is seen as the body of Christ (*NIV*, 1978/1984; Eph. 1:22-23); (2) the church is seen as God's new creation (*NIV*, 1978/1984, 2 Cor. 5:17); and (3) the church is often described as a fellowship of faith with its members described as "saints" (p. 259) (*NIV*, 1978/1984, I Peter 4:17).

### **Life Cycle of the Church**

Croft (2016, p. 123) stated that "though fraught with challenges, dangers, trials, and difficulties", the revitalization of a church is a noble work. Acts 2:42-47 spoke of the spiritual vitality exhibited by all of the believers as the church began to form and take root among the people. The early church leaders and the early church members united in prayer, worship, evangelism, and disciple-making (Croft, 2016). Because of their devotion to and their love for God, the early church leaders and members exhibited spiritual and physical growth within the church. "And the Lord added to their numbers daily those who were being saved" (*New International Version*, 1978/1984, Acts 2:47b). This was the birth of the church. Since that time many church congregations were born, grew, maintained, declined, and died.

Meeks (2013) and Weins (2018) both developed their version of the Life Cycle of the Church. There are both similarities and differences within their individual Life Cycles. But each agreed with the fact that revitalization within a church is possible when God is in it. Each church has its own life cycle. The length of each church's life cycle is dependent upon their relationship with God.

Meeks (2013, p. 2) proposed the "Life Cycle of the Church". Its components are listed below and an explanation of each is given as stated by Meeks (2013, p. 2).

*Birth:* The dream becomes a reality, and a church is born. Turning point: *structure*

*Growth:* Expansion. Vision and strategy are clarified. Ministries strengthened. People added. Turning point: *leadership*

*Maturity:* The church is growing. Everything and everyone is working together... the challenge is staying healthy. Turning point: *renewal or stagnation*.

*Maintenance:* The church has stalled and moved into maintenance mode. People are remembering better days. Others are questioning the church's direction and decisions. Turning point: *vision*.

*Decline:* Problems are mounting. Ministries are dwindling. Resources are drying up. People are pointing fingers and blaming each other for the sad state of church affairs. Turning point: *control* (survival means a battle for power)

*Death:* People are polarized. Hope for a better day has vanished. People are leaving the church and no one new is coming in. The church is on *life support* awaiting a miraculous healing (resurrection) or burial.

Weins (2018, p. 3) also developed the "Life Cycle of a Church". His Life Cycle stressed: (1) vision; (2) relationships; (3) ministry, and (4) structure. The *vision* and *relationships* are akin to the *birth* and the *childhood* of the church. The *vision*, *relationships*, and *ministries* represent the *adolescence* stage of the church. The *vision*, *relationships*, *ministries*, and the *structure* are representative of the *maturity* level of the church. Then the church began to *decline* as shown in Weins' Life Cycle. Problems began to mount as ministries within the church began to dwindle. The *empty nest* is represented by the *relationships*, the *ministries*, and the *structure* of the church. *Old Age* is the *ministries* and *structure* of the church only and old age, of course, is followed by *death*.

Alban at Duke Divinity School (2020) published their version of the Life Cycle of a Church beginning with the birth of the church in stage one and ending with the death of a church in stage five. Stage two of their Life Cycle is *vitality*; Stage three is *equilibrium*, followed by stage four which is *decline*. There are similarities in all three of the Life Cycles presented. They all begin the same with enthusiasm, hope, and dreams. They all end with death. All living things have a life cycle. The church congregation is no exception (Alban, 2020). However, James

provided words of advice on the subject of church congregational decline. He said, “As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead” (NIV, 1978/1984; Jas. 2:26).

### **Church Revitalization**

Ezekiel 37 (NIV, 1978/1984) is the biblical passage of scripture referred to in books discussing church revitalization (Croft, 2016; Davis, 2017; Henard, 2015; MacArthur, 2018). “Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord...I will make breath enter, and you will come to life” (New International Version, 1978/1984, Ezekiel 37:3, 4, 6b). This portion of scripture made it very clear that God is a necessary part of the revitalization of the church. Jesus pointed out to His disciples that He and the Father are one (NIV, 1978/1984, Jn. 14:10). This concept is one of the basic principles of the Christian worldview/theology (Erickson, 2015). Therefore, Jesus is also a necessary part of church revitalization.

Hiebert (2008, p. 84) stated that “a worldview is the most fundamental and encompassing view of reality shared by a people in a common culture...It is their mental picture of reality...that helps them to make sense of the world” (NIV, 1978/1984; Jn. 3:16; Rom. 12). From Hiebert’s (2008, p. 85) perspective, the Christian worldview is a cultural worldview—“a social creation produced and sustained by communities of people in order to understand and live in their world”. Pearcey (2004) held a similar opinion concerning *worldview*. Pearcey (2004) defined worldview as “a way of looking at the world” (p. 23). The worldview to which a person or a group of people adhere is of vital importance to them. There is a reason that their worldview developed the way it did, that is has existed for them in that particular form. Because revitalization meant a change for the people, that change would translate into a change in their worldview.

Pearcey (2004) also emphasized that during this time of change it would be crucial that along with intellectual growth there should also be spiritual growth (Pearcey, 2004; *NIV*, 1978/1984, Lk. 10:27; *NIV*, 1978/1984, 2 Cor. 10:5). The Christian culture believes in the Triune God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It believes in and learns from the Bible, the Holy Scripture, and the Word of God. It believes that Jesus and God are one (*NIV*, 1978/1984, *Jn.* 14:10). Therefore, Jesus is a necessary part of any church revitalization. A church that is following the leadership and teaching examples set forth by Jesus in the New Testament has taken a major step toward the health and the revitalization of that church (Bredfeldt, 2006; Dever, 2013).

### **Church Revitalization and Leadership**

In the Life Cycle of the Church as presented by Meeks (2003) and Weins (2018), the leadership within the church is very important. Stetzer and Dodson (2007, p. 35) stressed the fact that “leaders matter for church revitalization”. It is not the management techniques, the strategies, or the tactics used that revitalize a church. It is the leaders themselves who *Lead Like Jesus* (Blanchard et al., 2016) and who exhibit the characteristics of Jesus as outlined within the New Testament (*NIV*, Matt. 4:18-22; *Jn.* 3:1,2). Bredfeldt (2006) made an important observation. He said that “the greatest leaders among us are the great teachers among us” (Bredfeldt, 2006, p. 14). Bredfeldt (2006) continued this thought as he stated that teaching is an enormous responsibility because it is an extremely powerful method of leadership.

Barna Research (2019, p. 17) in their research concerning *The Connected Generation*, stressed the fact that Gen Z are longing to make a difference. They do not have an interest in being merely consumers; they want to also be contributors (Barna, 2019). Gen Z are *doers* of the Word and not merely *hearers* of the Word. They have exhibited their faith through their actions.

Therefore, interpersonal relationships both within and among the generations are of importance to Gen Z and also of importance to each generation (Kinnaman, 2011). According to Barna Research (2021) when Gen Z had a difficult decision to make, they turned to the older generation for advice (p. 56). Gen Z see the church as more than a habit for them, it is a place to practice being a faithful follower of Christ (p. 61).

As the coronavirus pandemic appeared to be lessening in intensity, Gen Z as well as other Christian generations returned to their houses of worship. As churches are searching for and training new leaders during their revitalization period they should not forget Generation Z. Kinnaman (2019, p. 128) in his article on *Developing Connected Leaders* stated this warning to churches as he pointed out to them that if they are not making room for younger leaders today, they won't be around tomorrow.

### **Church Leadership and Transition**

Those within the leadership positions of the church have a very important role within the church as it enters into and proceeds through the process of revitalization. Revitalization is a transition (Bridges and Bridges, 2016) for all within the church environment. Bridges and Bridges (2016, p. xiv) stated that during periods of transition, leaders may be tempted to take short cuts, or to focus on new tactics for accomplishing quick results. They cautioned against this approach.

Bredfeldt (2006) added further to the perspective on leadership and change during transition within the church. He pointed out that changes within the life of the contemporary church have “created a crisis of leadership” (Bredfeldt, 2006, p. 37). “It is a crisis resulting from leaders who are caught on a treadmill doing good things while failing at the most basic things....The sheep are not being fed” (p. 37). Bredfeldt (2006) went on to say that “churches are

growing, buildings are being built, but the people of God live in ignorance of the Word of God, and the hard-fought battle for the authority of scripture seems to be in danger of being surrendered to other authorities” (pp. 37-38).

Bridges and Bridges (2016, pp. xiv-xv) gave three recommendations for leading during times of transition. The three recommendations are as follows:

- (1) Getting people to stop doing things the old way and getting them to start doing things the new way;
- (2) Use management techniques and abilities that you already possess in dealing with people to make them feel more comfortable; and
- (3) To overcome people’s resistance to change, address the threat that the change poses to their world.

Bridges and Bridges (2016, p. xv) pointed out that it is self-defeating to try to “overcome people’s resistance to change without addressing the threat the change poses to their world”.

Kotter (2012), as well as Kouzes and Posner (2017), shared the same opinion as Bridges and Bridges (2016) in this regard. Kotter (2012) stated that the people involved within the change [i.e. revitalization] need to understand the vision that is the reason for the change. Change is inevitable. Those who are in positions of leadership needed to embrace this fact and prepare themselves and their followers for the change that will happen at some point.

There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven;  
A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot,  
A time to tear down and a time to build, a time to weep and a time to laugh,  
A time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to give away.

*(New International Version Bible, 1978/1984, Ecc.3:1-2, 3b-4a, 6).*

Kouzes and Posner (2017) recommended that leaders envision the exciting future possibilities with their followers as the leaders enlist the followers to join them in a shared vision for the future. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (*New International Version, 1978/1984, Rom. 12:2a*). When the vision



for the change is understood and embraced by those affected by the change, it is easier to motivate and coordinate the kinds of action that create transformation (Kotter, 2012, p. 87).

Each church undergoing the process of revitalization is unique unto itself. The leadership of each church must decide which leadership style is best for their particular situation in regard to their revitalization process. Based upon Northouse's (2016) definition of *transformational leadership*, this leadership style would appear to be a functional leadership style to use during the period of church revitalization. Northouse (2016) defined transformational leadership as "a process that changes and transforms people" (p. 161). He went on to say that transformational leadership is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals (Northouse, 2016, p. 161). All of these would be important areas of concern during the revitalization process and the transition that followed.

Kotter (2012) as well as Stetzer and Rainer (2010) are in agreement with Northouse (2016) in regard to the fact that a transformation must take place in order for change to occur. However, Stetzer and Rainer (2010) did recognize the fact that, "we are supposed to see transformation, but too often we see stagnation" (p. 2). Kotter (2012) stated that vision is an important part of the transformational process and played a key role in that process. It would seem that when there is a shared vision for revitalization/transformation that stagnation would not be a major factor within the process.

Stetzer and Rainer (2010) also shared Kotter's opinion. Once the followers have embraced the vision, the leader would need to create and provide opportunities that enabled the followers to act and be a part of that shared vision (Kotter, 2012; Kouzes and Posner, 2017). "Where there is no vision, the people perish" (*King James Bible*, 1769/2004, Prov. 29:18). DePree (2004) made this observation. "People are the heart and spirit of all that counts. Without

people, there is no need for leaders” (DePree, 2004, p.13). Kouzes and Posner (2017) echoed this same sentiment as they encouraged leaders to build and facilitate relationships.

Transformational leadership would appear to play an important role within the church as the church involved itself in the process of revitalization. However, Pettit (2008) stressed the importance and value of servant leadership. (Blanchard, et al., 2016; Howell, 2003; Northouse, 2016) (*NIV, 1978//1984; Lk. 22:26-30; Jn. 13:14-15*). Servant leadership is a term coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970. Greenleaf (1970) defined servant leadership as beginning with “the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then a conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (Northouse, 2016, p. 226). Blanchard, et al. (2016) listed four basic beliefs of leadership. They are:

1. Leadership happens anytime we influence the thinking, behavior, or development of another person.
2. Jesus is the greatest leadership role model of all time.
3. Servant leadership is the only approach to leadership that Jesus validates for His followers.
4. Effective leadership begins on the inside, with our hearts.  
(Blanchard et al., 2016, p.2)

Servant leadership as discussed by Greenleaf (1977) provided a connection between leadership and servanthood. The focus of leadership shifted to a concern for the leader’s inner life as well as the leader’s outer life which could be observed more readily (Pettit, 2008). According to Pettit (2008) servant leadership is a biblical concept that Jesus worked diligently to impress upon His disciples (p. 179).

Pettit (2008) stated that Servant Leadership is really not a “style of leadership at all; it is much more foundational” as it is expressed primarily in the “inner motivation of the leader” (p.

179-180). Pettit (2008) stated that God is more concerned with the development of the person of the leader (p. 180).

### **The Church and the Coronavirus (COVID-19)**

Matthew Brown (2020) stated in his article that churches in America were facing a unique phenomenon—the government was prohibiting them from holding in-person services. For over 200 years within the United States, churches have been offered strong protection for their religious practices. However, a highly-contagious strain of coronavirus (COVID-19) had spread around the world quickly causing a global pandemic. The fear that developed in regard to this global pandemic caused churches to close their doors to the public at the request of the various local and state governments, as well as the federal government.

As of April 1, 2020, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) reported over 200,000 cases of COVID-19 in the United States. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported over 800,000 cases and over 40,000 deaths worldwide. Congregations were forced to worship online, according to Brown (2020). Health officials hoped to slow the spread of the virus by having people practice *social distancing*, maintaining a distance of 6 feet between themselves and others.

Brown (2020) went on to say that some churches defied the ban and held church services during the time they were supposed to be closed. In some instances, pastors were arrested for defying the ban and opening their churches for worship. Other churches resorted to holding their services outdoors in order for their congregations to *social distance* from one another. Many Americans simply obeyed the *stay-at-home* order and worshipped online or in front of their TV. Religious leaders were forced to find creative ways to worship.

As a result of the *stay-at-home* order, many people began to question the legality of this order (Brown, 2020). Brown (2020) further stated that religious leaders and their congregations were concerned that these burdens on the free exercise of religion would result in a permanent loss of freedom. While others felt that just because the citizens of the United States have the legal right to meet in person does not mean that they should exercise that right (Brown, 2020).

### **Theological Summary**

Church congregations are born. They begin to grow and flourish. They are excited and full of hope and promise. The book of Acts described just such churches. Yet, at some point the churches began to simply maintain. For various reasons, the churches do not grow as they once did. To the church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation these words were written: “I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either one or the other!” (NIV, 1978/1984, Rev. 3:15). Stetzer and Rainer (2010) voiced a similar opinion as the one stated in Revelation 3 when they said that rather than missionary disciples for Christ going into the world, we have a group of people who are going in circles (Stetzer and Rainer, 2010, p. 3).

Kinnaman (2011) in his book, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Redefining Faith*, stated that “[m]any young people who grew up in church and have since dropped out do not hesitate to place blame. They point the finger, fairly or not, at the establishment: “*you lost me*” (p. 9). Generation Z is of importance to the church, not just because they are the leaders of tomorrow both religiously and secularly, but because they are of value to God. God loved the world so much that His Son, Jesus, died for it (*New International Version*, 1978/1984, Jn. 3:16).

### Theoretical Framework for the Study

Stetzer and Dodson (2007) stated that leaders matter for church revitalization. Leaders who were effective in the revitalization process were proactive in their leadership. Hudson (2017) discussed the importance of the leadership of the pastor in the revitalization of the church. The purpose of Hudson's dissertation was to "seek to develop a competency model of church revitalization through a series of interviews with superior performers in the role of church revitalization and codifying a set of competencies through a panel of experts" (p. 6). He stated in his conclusion that new methods were not needed, but rather a renewed leadership (Hudson, 2019, p. 173).

However, Kotter (2012) cautioned leaders to remember that *leadership* and *management* are two different entities. Confusing the two entities, Kotter (2012) said is a fundamental mistake often made by leaders in their haste to effect change within an organization. Kotter (2012, p. vii) defined management *as* making a system work. He defined *leadership* as building a system or transforming an old system (Kotter, 2012, vii).

As a church is beginning the revitalization process, it is important for that church to know exactly what they want to accomplish (Kotter, 2012). Do they want to make an old system work again or do they want a completely new system? Once this decision is made, then the leadership must decide upon the leadership style they will use during this revitalization process. It is at this point that the phenomenological research method would be of value. This research method explored the lived experiences of individuals (Mapp, 2008). By re-examining the past experiences, one can determine the value of past leadership experiences and determine which past experiences would be beneficial to retain and which would not be of further value.

There are several leadership theories that can be used and used effectively. The difference in the feasibility of the leadership theories is the leader himself/herself. According to Bredfeldt (2006) there is no one size fits all formula for leadership. The nature of leadership shifts with the context of the leadership, the task of the leadership, and the followers (Bredfeldt, 2006). The leader must use the leadership theory that is best suited for their leadership style and abilities as well as the one that is best suited for the completion of the task at hand. Three suggested leadership theories that could be used and are discussed within this study are: servant leadership; situational leadership; and transformational leadership. These three Leadership Theories were examined in greater detail in this chapter. Generation Z is also examined in further detail in this chapter.

### **Generation Z Defined**

Generation Z is defined as those individuals born between 1999 and 2015 (Barna, 2019, p. 12), who are now in their college years. Those who were regular church attenders in high school have transitioned out of their youth groups and in many cases moved away for college. As they moved away from home, research has shown that they are at risk for leaving the church (Powell, 2008). Powell's (2008) research examined high school youth seniors transitioning to college. The top reason these particular high school seniors gave for attending youth group was because they liked the youth pastor (Powell, 2008). These respondents also indicated that they would like to have more time for deep conversation (Powell, 2008, p. 51) within their groups.

These are important factors to consider, especially when one examined the current research on Generation Z and church attendance among young adults. Pew Research (2019) found that in the U.S. there is a continual decline in Christianity. American adults who describe themselves as Christian dropped 12 percentage points over the last decade. Aaron Earls with

Lifeway Research (2019, p. 1) found that two-thirds (66 percent) of American young adults who attended a Protestant church regularly for at least a year as a teenager stated they also dropped out of church for at least a year between the ages of 18 and 22.

Ebrahim Hasan Al Khajeh (2018, p. 2) further stated that the role of leadership in an organization is “crucial in terms of creating a vision, a mission” and also in the determination and establishment of objectives. Leadership is crucial within the business world and is of equal importance within the church. This particular study determined among other things that the leadership style of an organization can have a positive as well as a negative impact on the performance of the organization (Hasan Al Khajeh, 2018, p. 9).

### **Character Traits of Generation Z**

Willard and Whitt (2012) made an interesting claim which if valid, could possibly have an important impact upon the *Life Cycle of the Church* (Alban, 2020; Meeks, 2013; Wiens, 2018). They have attempted to explore the assumption that one can predict the character traits of future generations through the comprehensive analysis of previous generations (Willard and Whitt, 2012). Their assumption is that by examining “William Strauss and Neil Howe’s cycle of generations theory, economic projections, birth rate projections and demographic projections [that they can] potentially predict the generation following Generation Z” (Willard and Whitt, 2012, p. 3). In order to obtain the information they sought, they examined the previous generations from Baby Boomers through Generation Z (Willard and Whitt, 2012).

They contend that if they are successful in being able to predict the character traits of future generations, that this information would be of great value to school systems. The information would assist them in predicting the class sizes for hiring purposes and for the purchasing of materials and supplies that would be needed among other things (Willard and

Whitt, 2012). The researcher is of the opinion that this information would also be of value to churches as they seek to build and expand their church congregations.

Willard and Whitt (2012, p. 98) stated that, “Research and content analysis of the reviewed literature and projections concluded that defensible assumptions and recommendations could be made to general school districts in preparation for the future Generation Alpha”. They also stated that “[t]he generation succeeding Generation Z will be called Generation Alpha and will be raised by technologically literate, conservative parents who emphasize education and pursuit of careers that improve society at the local and global level” (Willard and Whitt, 2012 p.99).

Willard and Whitt (2012) identified the following traits of Generation Z. They are the children of Generation X and have been raised by “overcompensating and overprotective parents” (p. 34). Generation Z saw their parents cope with a recession which taught them to be conservatives. Generation Z has also been referred to as Generation V (the Virtual Generation), Generation Next, Homelanders, and iGen or the iGeneration due to the iPod and the iPhone” (Willard and Whitt, 2012, p. 34). They grew up after September 11<sup>th</sup> and “do not know life without the threat of terror” (Willard and Whitt, 2012, p. 34). Adamy (2018) further described Gen Z as being “battle-scarred” and driven by money as they pursue financial security. They are socially awkward and are interested in making money. They have a strong work ethic. They seek individual recognition and extra pay. They also seek a safe work environment. They have seen their millennial predecessors *drown in debt* (Adamy, 2018, p. 2) and they want to avoid this same fate.

Parker, Graf, and Igielnik (2019) as well as Barna Research (2018) further described Generation Z as looking a lot like Millennials on key social and political issues. Gen Z is more



racially and ethnically diverse. They think that increased diversity is good for society. About half of Gen Z say that both same-sex marriage and interracial marriage are good for society. They know someone who uses gender-neutral pronouns. They have more liberal political views. About six-in-ten Gen Zers say some forms should offer other gender options. Finally, they see a link between human activity and climate change (Parker, et al, 2019; Barna Research, 2018).

### **Leadership Theories**

There are several leadership theories that have been devised and developed over the years. Northouse (2016) quoted Stogdill (1974) as having said, “there are almost as many different definitions of *leadership* as there are people who have tried to define it” (p. 2). As society changed, cultures changed. As cultures changed, leadership changed. As leadership changed, more leadership theories were developed. Three leadership theories have been selected for discussion by the researcher due to the fact that, in the researcher’s opinion, they appear to relate more to the concept of church revitalization than the other leadership theories. The three leadership theories are: Servant Leadership; Situational Leadership; and Transformational Leadership.

#### **Servant Leadership**

Servant Leadership is a leadership theory developed in 1970 by Robert Greenleaf. Northouse (2016) defined Servant Leadership as “an approach focusing on leadership from the point of view of the leader and his or her behaviors” (p. 225). Servant leaders put their followers first. They empathize with them and nurture them. During the process of church revitalization, this characteristic of empathizing with and nurturing the followers would be needed by the followers. Church revitalization can be a very traumatic event for them. Greenleaf said that servant leadership valued the community due to the fact that it provided a face-to-face

opportunity for individuals to experience interdependence, respect, trust, and individual growth (Northouse, 2016, p. 227).

Davis (2018) stated that Greenleaf had devised his Servant Leadership Theory to be used in the context of a business. However, the principles Greenleaf developed within his theory work well within the church setting also. Greenleaf urged leaders to be proactive. He said that they needed to learn as much as possible about all of the working parts of their organization. By doing this, they can better plan and make better decisions for the good of the organization (Davis, 2018).

Spears (1996) quoted Greenleaf as saying that “the servant-leader is one who is first a servant” (33). According to Spears (1996), Max DePree as well as other authors on leadership, *rediscovered* Greenleaf’s servant-leadership theory and brought it to the forefront once again. This type of leadership had a positive impact on performance and organizational *citizenship* behavior (Northouse, 2016, p. 233).

Henry J. Davis (2018) developed a *Servant-Leadership Decision-Making Rubric* to be used as an assessment tool for employee-based issues. He stated that his purpose was to “create a decision-making rubric for servant-leaders that adapts Robert K. Greenleaf’s philosophy on the treatment of employees and co-workers” (p. 151). Davis (2018) concluded that “Servant-leadership offers a distinct perspective and set of values for leaders that acknowledge the worth of others” (p. 168). Davis (2018) pointed out that just as leadership theory is not an exact science, the use of the rubric will not produce perfect solutions.

### **Situational Leadership**

Situational Leadership Approach was developed by Paul Hersey and Ken Blanchard in 1969. Its development was based on Reddin’s (1967) 3-D management style theory. Its basic

premise is that different situations demand different kinds of leadership (Northouse, 2016). To determine which leadership style is needed, the leader must assess the situation, the followers, and the goal to be reached to determine which leadership style would be best to use.

As a church is going through the revitalization process, this leadership theory would seem to be an appropriate one to use also. Each church is different, and each church's situation will be different. This leadership theory allows the leader to lead according to the current situation. Because the revitalization of a church is fluid and constantly in flux, changes are being made continually. Therefore, it would appear that this leadership theory would be of value to the church leadership during the process of revitalization.

In 1996 Hersey and Blanchard revisited their Life-Cycle Theory of Leadership, the original name for their theory which had been under development by Hersey. They had eventually changed the name of their theory to *Situational Leadership Theory*. There were a few minor changes made to the theory. Other than that, little had changed in the basic concept of their theory over the years. Irgens (1995) wrote a paper using charts to visually explain the theory of Situational Leadership.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational Leadership as defined by Northouse (2016) is “a process that changes and transforms people. It is concerned with emotions, values, ethics, standards, and long-term goals” (p.161). Northouse (2016) went on to say that this process “often incorporates charismatic and visionary leadership” (p. 161). Church revitalization is a process that required some form of transformation on behalf of the people involved in order for it to be successful. Those involved in the process must have a vision for their revitalized church and work toward making that vision a reality.

James MacGregor Burns developed the Transformational Leadership Theory in 1978 which was based upon a concept first coined by Downton in 1973. Burns attempted to link the roles of leadership and followership. In this way the leader was attentive to the needs of the followers and tried to help the followers reach their full potential. Burns first introduced his descriptive research on political leaders (Kendrick, 2011).

Sorenson (2015) wrote an article about James MacGregor Burns and the leaders who influenced his theory on leadership and practice: FDR, JFK, and LBJ (p. 10). Sorenson wrote of the fact that JFK was a president that Burns would study personally and knew as a friend. She included in her article a picture of Burns with JFK in Palm Springs, FL in 1960. Burns wanted to know that his theory was not only a theory but could also be used in practical circumstances. The above-mentioned presidents, FDR, JFK, and LBJ adhered to Burns' theory.

Kendrick (2011) wrote about Transformational Leadership in regard to its changing individuals and social systems. He stated that “[T]ransformational leadership focuses on the followers, motivates them to achieve a higher performance level and helps develop the leader within each individual” (p. 1). Kendrick (2011) used the example of Sam Walton, founder of Wal-Mart and Sam's wholesale retail stores. Sam Walton adhered to Burns Transformational Leadership Theory (Kendrick, 2011). Walton travelled the country personally visiting all of his stores over a period of time. This was a yearly endeavor for him. He met with the store managers and the employees at each site he visited. As a result, Walton's business boomed. The managers and the employees looked forward to Mr. Sam's yearly visit. They were not just employer and employee. They were a family.

The Transformational Leadership Theory worked well for Sam Walton. The probability exists that this same leadership theory would work within a church family as well, especially

when used during the process of revitalization. Leaders and followers become united under this leadership theory. They share a common vision for change and invest of themselves into the success of this vision as they follow it through to completion.

Leadership within an organization is of importance to the survival of the organization. Leadership can be positive or negative. The leadership style the leader chooses to use will determine the result of the undertaking. If the leader and the leadership style do not match, then the results could have a negative effect on the organization/church.

The leadership within a church must rely upon God for direction regardless of the leadership theory that a particular leader may follow. All things are possible with God (Mt. 19:26). Whether it is reaching out to the unchurched, the lost generation(s), or church revitalization, God should be at the center of all of the plans that are made.

### **Theoretical Summary**

Churches are faced with the problem of retaining their young adults, especially those between 18 and 22 years of age as they move away to attend college (Lifeway, 2017). The use of the phenomenological research method to better understand the lived experiences of the church would assist the church leaders in determining the most effective leadership style for their church. Though there are several leadership theories and styles, when one is attempting to revitalize their church, the ones that could possibly be of the most benefit to them would be servant leadership, situational leadership, or transformational leadership.

As suggested by Bredfeldt (2006) the leader should use the leadership style/theory that is best suited to their leadership styles and abilities. Bredfeldt (2006) went on to say that leaders are also teachers. It is important that they model and set an example of the change they want to see in others. "More is caught than taught" (Bredfeldt, 2006, p.123).

## Related Literature

### *Generation Z and Church Leadership*

Generation Z (Gen Z) is not a generation to be taken lightly. Gen Z is comprised of between 69 and 70 million children and teens, which is the largest generation yet (Barna Research, 2018, p. 10). They are now beginning to enter college and the workforce as full-time workers. Though they are the best educated generation (Fry and Parker, 2018), they are still uncertain about their future (Parker and Igielnik, 2018). White (2017) said of Gen Z that “some are calling Generation Z the last generation we will ever speak of” (p. 38). This is because the speed of culture in which change can happen in a day will make “speaking of generations and their markings obsolete” (White, 2017, p. 38, 39).

Kinnaman and Matlock (2020, p. 9) have an opinion similar to White (2017). They point to the rise and development of *digital life* as a contributing factor. The receipt and the transference of information are immediate. The younger generations are growing up and are now beginning to affect the previous generations. Barna (2020) is of the opinion that these factors combined will more than likely form undercurrents recalibrating Americans’ connection to faith and to Christianity (p. 9).

Generation Z (Gen Z) has now reached the age in which they are assuming leadership responsibilities both within the workforce and within the church. Currently just one in four Americans is a practicing Christian (Barna, 2020, p. 2) as the share of practicing Christians has dropped nearly in half since 2000 (Barna, 2020, p. 2). According to Barna (2020, p. 4) 36 percent fewer Americans attend church in 2020 than did in 1993. Millennials and Gen Z make up the majority of the U.S. population now with Millennials and Gen Z becoming the current church leaders as the older generations decline. The process of passing the leadership of an

organization such as a church from one generation to another is referred to as *Generational Cohort Theory*.

### ***Generational Cohort Theory***

Generational Cohort Theory (GCT) is a theory that was popularized by William Strauss and Neil Howe in their book, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*, published in 1991. The general thesis of Strauss and Howe's (1991) book is that social cycles repeat themselves every four generations. *Generational Cohort Theory* is a theory that explained the changes that occur from one generation to another. "The real test of this theory is its ability to predict the future." Strauss and Howe further noted that "in the next thirty years, if the pattern holds, the sense of drift and pessimism will intensify, then a crisis will emerge, compelling Americans to unite in the face of perceived public peril" (Strauss and Howe, 1991, p. 25). This statement was written twenty-nine years prior to the coronavirus pandemic of 2020.

Strauss and Howe (1991) argued that U.S. history can be understood as a regular progression of four distinct types of generational cohorts. These four types are: 1) Youth (ages 0 through 21): their central role is *dependence*; 2) Rising Adults (ages 22 through 43): their central role is *activity*; 3) Midlife Adults (ages 44 through 65): their central role is *leadership*; 4) Elders (ages 66 through 87): their central role is *stewardship* (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 441). Strauss and Howe (1991) likened each generational cohort to a *generational constellation* (p. 31). They stated that "whenever the constellation shifts up by one notch, the behavior and attitudes of each phase of life change character entirely" (p. 31). Fisher and Crabtree (2009, p. 657) stated that the social sciences use this theory (Generational Cohort) to "help understand people's attitudes and values". The researcher argues that this same theory could also apply to churches as they attempt to become established, grow, and mature. The Generational Cohort Theory would be

beneficial to pastors and church leaders as they establish, lead, and increase their congregations. By better understanding the people within their congregations, pastors and other church leaders can better plan and prepare as needed to move their churches forward. They can better prepare and equip their leadership. Moss (2016, p. 7) is of the opinion that “all generations valued leaders who were honest, helpful, attentive, and knowledgeable.”

The four generational cohorts studied were:

1. The G.I. Generation: born between 1901 and 1924;
2. The Silent Generation: born between 1925 and 1942;
3. Baby Boom/Boomers: born between 1943 and 1960, and
4. The Thirteenth Generation/ Generation X: born between 1961 and 1981 (Strauss and Howe, 1991).

The Millennials/Generation Y, born between 1981 and 1998, followed the Thirteenth Generation (Strauss & Howe, 1991). Moss (2016) referred to the Thirteenth Generation as Generation X. Generation Z were those born between 1999 and 2015 (Barna, 2018).

### ***Leadership and Technology***

Because of the outbreak of the coronavirus in 2020, churches had changed the way church services were held on Sunday mornings (Barna Research, 2020). Many churches had already begun streaming their worship services as they waited for the re-opening of their churches for in-person worship (Barna Research, 2020). It was uncertain when the total re-opening of the churches would happen. America’s churches had stepped into the physical unknown (Barna Research, 2020, p. 6). Churches now faced *Uncertain Digital & Physical Realities* (Barna Research, 2020). The live streaming of church services had been an added convenience for those who could not attend in person for various reasons. Now it had become a physical reality for the entire congregation. Kinnaman (2019) when discussing the extent to which people, especially, and churches have come to rely upon technology stated that “[w]e have



allowed our technology to out distance our theology and for this reason we find ourselves caught up in many problems” (Kinnaman and Matlock, 2019, p. 19).

### **Other Related Literature**

The Theological Framework and the Theoretical Framework consisted of primary literature in regard to the theses statement of this study. In addition to the primary literature, the secondary literature was also examined at this point. Therefore, the following relevant topics were reviewed as related literature and were examined in order to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church following the decline of that church as a result of the coronavirus pandemic which occurred in 2020.

#### ***Pastor Retention and the Decline of a Church***

Sullivan (2009) mentioned several reasons for the decline of a church. One reason was a rapid change in the demographics of an area. Another was the secularization of Sunday in which Sunday worship was in competition with children’s sports activities (McMullin, 2013). Still another was that, during the life cycle of a church, the church became more *set in its ways* (Sullivan, 2009, p. 17). It reached a plateau where there was a decrease in innovation, a loss of passion and vision (Sullivan, 2009). This loss of passion and vision may be with the senior pastor, the staff, or the lay leaders (Spooneybarger, 2018, p. 95). Sometimes leaders are allowed to stay in a position long after becoming ineffective to avoid potential conflict. Spoonyebarger (2018, p. 95) goes on to say that “leadership change requires courage because rarely is a leader replaced without significant conflict”.

However, Joynt (2019, p. 110) stated that the clergy “not being heard adversely influences clergy’s decision to remain in full-time pastoral ministry”. Joynt (2019) pointed out that there is a shortage of full-time clergy worldwide and the concept of *not being heard* is a

contributing factor. Just as “poor workplace and employee engagement” contribute to “increased absenteeism and turnover”, so does the clergy not being heard contribute to a shortage of clergy (Joynt, 2019, p.110).

In addition to not being heard, “inordinate ministerial demands, which may drain their emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and physical reserves and impair their overall effectiveness” can result in pastor *burnout* (Chandler, 2008, p. 273). This burnout can be responsible for “emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced accomplishment” (Chandler, 2008, p. 273). The ineffectiveness of the pastor in this situation can result in the decline of a church. Chandler (2008, p. 273) recommended that the leader engage in “self-care practices that foster resilience, vitality, and well-being”.

Blackaby and Blackaby (2009) stated that “people are leaving the church in droves. The media makes a public mockery of Christian beliefs. Society is...pushing the church to the periphery where it is no longer being taken seriously” (p. 19). Rainer (2015) said to church leaders, “Leaders in churches must face the brutal facts of reality. We cannot begin to lead change until we have looked at all the issues, including the tough issues” (p. 4). Brunson & Caner (2005) said in the introduction of their book, “Church would be easy without people” (p. 1). They went on to say that “many pastors lie in their beds on Monday morning debating whether or not to resign. Interestingly, many church members go through the same internal war” (Brunson and Caner, 2005, pp. 1, 2). Sullivan (2009, p. 16) stated that “through studying the failures [of a church], a stronger foundation is built to engage positive future change”.

### ***Pastor Retention and the Revitalization of a Church***

Sullivan (2009, p. 5) defined *revitalization* by saying that, “a revitalized church is a healthy, growing church that connects with the community context, turning around from decline

into vibrancy”. Sullivan (2009) is of the opinion that the revitalization of a church might be an easier process if the revitalization had begun during the maintaining or healthy part of the church’s life cycle instead of waiting until the church had declined or was dying.

Spooneybarger (2018) shared a similar opinion to Sullivan (2009). Spooneybarger (2018) said that church revitalization required a change in leadership; a change in vision; and a change in culture. The change in leadership does not necessarily mean a physical change in the person of the pastor or the church leaders, though that may be what is needed. It could be a change in the leadership direction of the church keeping the same pastor and church leaders. Moore (2017, p. 58) said that “no single source provides a greater vision for revitalization of churches than the relationship they enjoy with the Trinity as worshippers of God”. Stetzer and Dodson (2007) stated that “...leaders have recognized that the congregation has to be a part of the turnaround” (p. 30). Church revitalization is not the result of one person within the church (Henard, 2015). It is a combination of everyone within the church under the direction of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 14:26).

Hudson (2017, p. 2) quoted Rainer (2016) as saying that he “estimates the success rate for ‘organic’ church revitalization to be about 2 percent”. *Organic* revitalization is defined “as when a church retains the same leadership but tries ‘new methodologies and approaches’” (Hudson, 2017, p. 2). Hudson (2017, p. 7) said of his dissertation study that “the purpose of this...study is to ...create a competency model for pastors who are revitalizing churches in the Southern Baptist Convention that are plateaued or declining”. In his conclusion, he stated that “[w]hat churches need is not new methods, but rather renewed leadership” (Hudson, 2017, p. 173).

“Leaders matter for church revitalization” (Stetzer and Dodson, 2007, p. 35). They went on to say that “good biblical leadership requires being a devoted Christ follower” (Stetzer and Dodson, 2007, p. 35). Jesus said, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you” (*New International Version*, 1978/1984, Matt. 6:33; Blackaby and Blackaby, 2009, p. 32).

### ***Pastoral Self Care***

McClanahan (2018) wrote his dissertation on the topic of *Pastoral Care*. According to McClanahan (2018), 48% of 1,500 pastors feel the demands of ministry are greater than they can handle (p. 1). McClanahan (2018) further stated that 54% of the pastors he interviewed in the study felt that their responsibilities were overwhelming, while 61% indicated that “fatigue and irritation are a part of their daily experience in ministry”. McClanahan (2018) did state in his dissertation that he would not spend as much time on the physical causes of spiritual and emotional burnout, but rather would look at the spiritual and emotional components as keys to healing and wholeness. A possible solution for pastoral burnout is spiritual and physical discipline by the pastor. In McClanahan’s (2018) opinion, “pastors can never burnout; there is always a spark of faith no matter the cold storm raging around him” (p. 127). The pastor’s leadership is of great value to the development, growth, and sustainability of the church.

### ***The Church and Technology***

Technology is becoming more and more common within the Sunday Morning worship, as well as other aspects of the church. Davis (2000) wrote an article from her perspective describing the changes she had seen over the years within her church in regard to technology. She pointed out that so much has changed within the culture of the church itself. Many churches

now have websites with which to discover more about the church itself as well as the pastor and the church leaders.

Technology is making “the word of God more user friendly for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century worshippers” (Davis, 2000, p. 1). Her church employs a director of Cyber Ministry who oversees the church’s internet activities. The sermon is delivered within the service for those in attendance and is *streamed* to others. Points in the sermon are illustrated using clips from Keanu Reeves’ movie, *The Matrix*.

The morning worship service is “Let us Pray, Watch Movies, and Listen to a Killer Band” (Davis, 2000, p. 2). She went on to say that 10 people “pull together an extravaganza using four cameras, video, graphics, and occasionally, animation for the four weekend services, which each run just under an hour” (Davis, 2000, p. 2). However, she did point out how a member, Bruce McIver, “who has been deployed in Korea, Italy, and Saudi Arabia in the U.S. Air Force, is still able to listen to or read the sermons when he logs on—no matter where he is” (Davis, 2000, p. 2).

The technology used within the service has attracted the *MTV Generation*, according to Davis (2000). Her pastor felt that it is *critical* for this generation that he used this multimedia approach. Pastor Slaughter, her pastor, wrote in his book that “Electronic media are a life-or-death issue for the church because electronic media are the language of our culture” (Davis, 2000, p. 3).

For those who do not want the technology, there are other avenues to pursue within her church. There are small group classes. There are twice weekly Bible Study groups as well as groups who meet to discuss various topics of concern to people. For those who do not wish to be involved with all of the technology, they simply go to other churches (Davis, 2000).

Moore and Wilson (2007), in writing about the use of digital media in church worship services, stated in an article in *Christianity Today*, that digital media has become vital to “our dominant digital culture”. They go on to say that it “fits in with the gospel”, and that it is transforming churches, fueling growth, and strengthening their church communities”. They further stated that as of 2003, that 50% of the churches use some form of digital media in their worship services (Moore and Wilson, 2007).

### ***Gen Z and Social Media in Higher Education***

The role of social media and higher education was reviewed briefly in this article. Gen Z is now entering college and social media has become more prevalent among the students and to a certain degree among the faculty (Rospigliosi, 2019). According to Rospigliosi (2019) social media is being used by a significant proportion of people at a functioning university. Social media has matured to the point that it is a more accepted form of technology innovation (Rospigliosi, 2019). As a result of its increasing acceptance, there has been a change in the attitude of higher education in regard to social media.

Rospigliosi (2019) noted that Generation Z used social media differently from Millennials. Generation Z exhibited “an ambivalence towards the normative pressures of public sharing of information, and a recognition of the related increasing likelihood of mental health problems” (p. 429). Rospigliosi (2019, p. 429) went on to say that “these anxieties show in the increased number of Generation Z who will not share information publicly on social media”.

Rospigliosi (2019) further stated that a fully functioning university is a student-centered university. As such it has provided an interactive learning environment for the students. It is still uncertain how social media will fully play a role in that regard. It is a work in progress.

### ***Youth Ministers and Youth Leaders***

Leadership is of vital importance to any organization. The church is no exception. The leadership of the church can have a positive or a negative effect on the church. Kouzes and Posner (2017) stated in their book that “the leadership challenge is how leaders mobilize others to want to get extraordinary things done in organizations” (p. xi). Youth leaders/ministers play a vital role within the church. They lead and train the youth of their church. They also prepare the future leaders of the church.

Pew Research (2019) in a survey conducted in 2018 and 2019 found that 65% of American adults describe themselves as a Christian when asked about their religion. This statistic is down 12 percentage points over the last decade. Pew Research Center said, “In U.S., decline of Christianity continues at a rapid pace” (Pew Research, 2019, p. 1). When one observed these statistics, one cannot help but wonder *why*? For Youth Leaders it reiterates the importance of the work they do within the church and the impact they have upon the youth under their instruction.

Temple (2007, p.1) stated that “leading young people to mature faith is an adventure that involves passion and skill unique to the journey that is adolescence.” He defined adolescence as a “period of growth between childhood and adulthood” (Temple, 2007, p. 1). This is the very age group that is in danger of or is being lost to the church. Temple (2007, p. 3) stated that “ministry positions are often filled with little more than an interview, a resume, and a couple of calls to references that the candidate has supplied”. Yet, there are youth ministers who are leading local youth groups with effectiveness (Temple, 2007). Temple asked the questions: “What character qualities, leadership competencies do they demonstrate? What leadership flaws have they guarded against to avoid ineffectiveness?” (Temple, 2007, p. 3)

Temple (2007, p. 107) sought to “identify character qualities and leadership competencies for local church youth ministers to be effective as well as potential leadership flaws that may render youth ministers ineffective as perceived by full-time youth ministers in the United States”. As a researcher, his desire was to “identify a list that will provide a guideline for youth ministers in institutions of higher education. This list could also serve as a guide for youth ministers in assessing their leadership development and effectiveness” (Temple, 2007, p. 107)

### ***Generation Z Student Leadership Development***

Developing leadership skills among student leaders is of importance to people throughout the world. Juan Xu (2019) examined the significance of developing student leadership in higher education by both American and Chinese practitioners and researchers. Based upon his examination of the research of both the American and the Chinese leadership in higher education, Xu (2019, p. 18) has determined that there is an underdevelopment of leadership research in China.

The purpose of Xu’s study was to explore leadership identity development of Chinese Generation Z student leaders referring to Leadership Identity Development (LID) theory developed by Komives et al (Xu, 2019, p. 6; Komives et al, 2005). Though this study is in reference to Chinese student Generation Z leaders, it is applicable to other potential student Generation Z leaders. Xu (2019) pointed out the similarities and the differences between Chinese student leaders and other student leaders. The purpose of the study according to Xu was to fill a gap in the literature regarding the literature written in English on leadership development of Chinese Generation Z student leaders and will also fill the gap in this area in China (Xu, 2019, p. 18).



### ***Executive Level Leadership Development***

The purpose of this research was to explore the leadership development experience of executive level leaders participating in a peer mentoring cohort model (Pinzer, 2017, p. 8). The leadership of any organization is of great importance. Peer mentoring is defined as “a development orientated relationship offering a unique connection with someone who is at a similar stage of development and faces some of the same decisions, challenges, and shared reality” (Pinzer, 2017, p. 12; Stanley and Clinton, 1992).

Relationships are very important especially in developing leaders. Kouzes and Posner (2017) recommended that in order to obtain a goal within an organization, there must be a shared vision. This implies a relationship. Kotter (2012) seemed to agree with Kouzes and Posner on the value of building relationships especially with and among newly developing leaders.

Pinzer (2017, p. 8) examined the similarities and differences among three peer mentoring cohort models. He examined the value of the peer mentoring cohort relationships from the perspective of the participating leaders. He attempted to determine the perceived influence the peer mentoring cohort relationships had on the participating leaders’ developing understanding of their personal mission.

Pinzer (2017, p. 216) stated that the findings provided few definitive conclusions. The study was designed to offer a general understanding of the influence that peer mentoring cohort models had on the development of executive level leaders. Relationships among the peer mentor cohorts were determined to be of importance within the study.

Relationships within any organization whether secular or religious have great value to the people involved within the relationship. Within the church setting, it seemed as though it would be to the advantage of the church leaders to promote the building of relationships among the

leaders themselves and also between the leaders and the church members. There is unity in relationships. There is strength in unity.

### **Rationale for the Study and Gap in the Literature**

#### **Rationale for the Study**

Research suggested that the churches are losing more and more of their young people with each generation (Lifeway, 2017). Lifeway Research (2017) conducted a study dealing with *Church Dropouts: Reasons Young Adults Stay or Go Between the Ages of 18-22*. The research indicated that 34 percent of adults who stopped attending church did so because they went away to college (Lifeway, 2017). This was the highest percentage and the top reason this age group dropped out of church. Of this group who remained in church, 56 percent said they remained because “church was a vital part of my relationship with God” (Lifeway, 2017, np). Rainer and Rainer (2008, p. 4) stated that the reason churchgoing students drop out of church [is] because [the church] is not essential to their lives. With churches losing their youth, it would seem that the long-term stability of the church is at risk. It would also seem that churches that are experiencing these losses would possibly need to explore the option of some sort of church *revitalization*, the spiritual and statistical growth observed within a church following a “biblical fitness plan” (Reeder and Swavely, 2008, p. 30).

#### **Gap in the Literature**

There is a gap in the literature in regard to Generation Z and the coronavirus in 2020. Generation Z is defined by Barna Research as those born between 1999 and 2015 (Barna Research, 2018). Currently this age group is beginning college. They are the 18 to 22-year-olds that the churches seem to be losing. Because they are now entering adulthood, there has not been as much research conducted among this age group as has been within other age groups.

That gap in the research that once existed is now closing. However, the researcher has found very little literature that would indicate the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church following the coronavirus in 2020. It is the intent of the researcher to assist in closing the gap within the literature that exists within this particular area in regard to the influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church following the Coronavirus in 2020.

### **Profile of the Current Study**

The research methodology used for this study was qualitative phenomenological research which explored the perceived influence that Generation Z (Gen Z) had upon the revitalization of a church following the Coronavirus in 2020. Phenomenology, according to Moustakas (1994), commits itself to a description of experiences, not explanations or analysis. The researcher must abstain from making suppositions as they focus on a specific topic or problem to guide the study.

Moustakas (1994) in his book, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, also pointed out that “phenomenology is concerned with ideas and essences; there is no denial of the world of nature, the so-called real world” (p. 46). Therefore, this study will make use of phenomenological research to seek to understand the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church after its numerical decline during the coronavirus in 2020. Ten evangelical protestant churches participated in this research, using two churches within each of the following denominations: Baptist; Methodist; Lutheran, Non-Denominational; and Presbyterian. Two members of Generation Z (those born between 1999 and 2015 per Barna Research) from each church participated in the research study as well as the youth pastor and pastor from each of the ten churches. They were interviewed as their perception of the influence

that Generation Z has upon the revitalization (numerical increase) of a church following the coronavirus in 2020.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter Two began with the Theological Research as God is most important in anything that is done within the church. This research portion examined the decline of a church and the need for revitalization. Recently the decline among churches was the result of the Coronavirus Pandemic in 2020. This pandemic caused the closure of many churches and houses of worship throughout the United States for a period of time. The closures were deemed necessary by government officials due to the fact that it was felt that large group gatherings would enhance the spread of the virus. Following the reopening of the churches, a revitalization process was needed. Generation Z, especially the ages between 18 and 22 years, is the age group that churches seem to be losing. Therefore, this age group is of particular importance to the stability and growth of the churches. It is the assumption of the researcher that Generation Z is not aware of their importance to the revitalization of a church.

The Theoretical Literature was the next section to be examined. The leadership of the church is of vital importance to the revitalization, growth, and stability of the church. The leadership within the church also impacts Generation Z. The leadership has a bearing upon whether or not Generation Z would remain in the church or would drop out of the church.

The Leadership Theories examined and deemed of importance to the revitalization of the church were: Servant Leadership; Situational Leadership; and Transformational Leadership. The Generational Cohort Theory was also examined as Generation Z has reached the age to begin taking on leadership roles and leadership positions within the church. This gradual transference

of leadership within the church has also played an important role in the revitalization process in regard to Generation Z.

Other Related Literature examined dealt with The Life Cycle of the Church; Pastor Retention; the Church and the coronavirus; Generation Z character traits and leadership potential; and Youth Leaders/Ministers leadership and relationship with Generation Z. Lastly, the Rationale for the Study and the Gap in the Literature were discussed.

The researcher found it to be a point of interest that as one examined the Life Cycle of the Church (p. 59) as explained by Meeks and as one revisited the effects of the Coronavirus upon the churches that there appeared to be a correlation between these two topics. However, this is research that could yield another study at a future time when more data is available for a more in-depth study of the effects of the coronavirus upon the Life Cycle of the Church.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Generation Z (Gen Z) is the largest generation in United States history (Barna, 2018) surpassing the millennials who had previously held that distinction. As a result, it played a pivotal role within the revitalization of an already declining Church (Pew Research, 2019) and the need for future leadership. Generation Z has been defined by Barna Research (2018) as consisting of those individuals born between 1999-2015. Current research has indicated that a decline in attendance existed within churches among this generation, especially those in Generation Z between the ages of 18 and 22 (Lifeway Research, 2019; Powell, 2008).

This chapter investigated Generation Z further as to their perception of their value to the revitalization of a church as members of this generation participated through interviews within a qualitative phenomenological study. This particular research methodology provided further insight into the perceptions that Generation Z had about itself and its influence within the church. For the purpose of this study, ten Evangelical Protestant churches within the same city were examined as to the perceived influence that Generation Z (between ages 18 and 22) had upon the revitalization of their church in the aftermath of the Coronavirus in 2020.

### **Research Design Synopsis**

#### **The Problem**

Generation Z has been defined as those born between 1999 and 2015 and encompassed 69-70 million children, teens, and young adults (Barna, 2018). As a result, it played a pivotal role within the revitalization of the already declining church (Pew Research, 2019; Rainer and Rainer, 2008) and the need for future leadership. Barna Research (2019) has referred to Gen Z as “The Connected Generation”. However, Barna said, they are “connected, but alone” (p. 16).

According to a study conducted by Biola University (2018), in regard to Generation Z “more than half of teens use screen media four or more hours a day and about 26 percent use screen media eight or more hours a day” (Talbot Magazine, 2018, p. 2). They are “immersed in a web of divergent ideas and morality without the necessary time and maturity to reflect about them and to respond appropriately” (Talbot Magazine, 2018, p. 2). The amount of time Generation Z spent with screen media affected their worldview which in turn affected their identity and other areas of their lives as well as their relationship with their parents (Talbot Magazine, 2018). According to this study “church leaders need to better reflect how technology is shaping their ministries and how they are becoming increasingly dependent on it.” (Talbot Magazine, 2018, p. 2).

Thom Rainer (2018) adhered to the perspective that people wanted to be a part of something that made a difference. They have a desire to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Adamy (2018) is in agreement with Rainer (2018) on this point. She stated that Gen Z’s attitude about work reflected a craving for financial security. They have a strong work ethic and desire individual recognition (Adamy, 2018).

Churches overall have shown a decrease in attendance among Generation Z (Gen Z) (Lifeway, 2017; Pew, 2019) as well as among Millennials before them (Barna, 2020). They viewed traditional church buildings and services as *old-fashioned* (Barna, 2020). They preferred digital services to in-person services. They preferred churches that are focused and simple. They do not like change-resistant churches (Rainer, 2021). To appeal to this generation, churches have made an attempt to revitalize (Barna, 2020).

Revitalization efforts on the part of churches have been thwarted by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) of 2020 (Barna, 2020) as churches were not allowed to have in-person worship for

fear of the spread of this deadly virus (Lifeway. 2020). However, there existed a gap within the literature as to the effect COVID-19 had upon the churches in regard to their decline in in-person attendance during this pandemic as well as a gap in the literature in regard to their revitalization efforts after the pandemic of 2020.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church following its in-person decline as a result of the coronavirus in 2020. An interview protocol was developed and used as participants of Generation Z, youth pastors, and pastors were interviewed in regard to their perceptions of the influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of their church.

### **Research Questions**

**RQ1:** How do pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?

**RQ2:** How do youth pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?

**RQ3:** How do individuals of Generation Z who have experienced the revitalization process perceive their influence to be within this revitalization process?

**RQ4:** Is there a correlation between the relative size of the congregation of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church?

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The research design and methodology that was used in this study was qualitative phenomenological (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Leedy and Ormrod, 2019). There are similarities between the qualitative research method and the quantitative research method in that



both seek information and derive assumptions or facts from this information. According to Patton (2015), the researcher should first decide upon the question to be answered, and then determine the research methodology needed to answer that question. Leedy and Ormrod (2019) are of the opinion that the qualitative phenomenological method should be used in an attempt to understand someone's perceptions and perspectives relative to a particular situation. Therefore, the researcher employed the qualitative phenomenological research method as the researcher sought to gain more knowledge and a better understanding of the particular phenomenon under investigation (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019). The researcher sought to explore more in depth the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of the church following its in-person decline as a result of the coronavirus in 2020 (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Qualitative research, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), is difficult to define because of its nature and design. From their perspective this “seemingly uncomplicated approach has become more difficult in recent years” (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 7). Qualitative research centers more on the observer/researcher than do other research methods. The researcher observed the subject of the study and through observation interprets the *world* that surrounded that particular subject. The interpretations of the researcher are based upon a “set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible” (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 7). The material practices that may be used by the researcher would include such items as: field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to self (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 7).

The instrument used within this study was person-to-person in-depth interviews conducted by the researcher with the participants (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2019). It is through these interviews (Seidman, 2019; Wengraf, 2006) that the researcher anticipated

acquiring a better and more thorough understanding of the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of the church (Moustakas, 1994; Saldana, 2021). The knowledge gleaned from these interviews would be of benefit to the church and its future growth. This knowledge and understanding of Generation Z and the generations that follow Generation Z would be of benefit to the church as it attempted to attract new members and maintain the members it already had for its stability and future growth.

Irving Seidman is credited with having developed the interview process within phenomenological research (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019; Seidman, 2019). He was interested in the stories of people. From his perspective, when one listened to the stories told by others, they began to understand the world as viewed by others. It was through the interview process that he would listen to and learn from the stories other people told. His love of listening to these stories became a field of research for him (Seidman, 2019). His research eventually resulted in the interview design which he described as the *three-interview series* (Seidman, 2019).

This process as the name implied involved a series of three interviews. The first interview involved getting details about the participants such as life histories. This information helped the researcher to better understand the phenomenon from the perspective of the participant. The second interview was designed to pin down concrete details of a particular experience. The third interview was designed to encourage the participant to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. This process enabled the researcher to better understand what a particular experience was like for the participant (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019; Seidman, 2019).

The researcher agreed with Seidman's three-interview process and saw the value in the three interviews. However, the researcher had attended worship services from time to time at each of these churches during the last five years and was familiar with the churches to a limited

extent. It should also be noted that the researcher had limited contact with the pastors such as brief conversations after Sunday worship. There was relatively no contact with any of the Gen Z participants of these churches prior to the study being conducted within the individual churches.

Because of the limited familiarity with the churches, the researcher did not feel that Seidman's (2019) Interview One was a necessary interview in this instance. One interview with each participant in addition to the statistical attendance data obtained from each of the ten churches would suffice to obtain the participant's perspective on the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of the church. The researcher did explain to each participant that a follow-up interview may be needed if more information or clarification of a point became necessary (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019)

### **Data Recording Procedures**

In discussing the data recording of the interview, Wengraf (2006) suggested both tape recording the interview and also incorporating the use of note taking using the topic or keyword process. Creswell and Creswell (2018) were of the same opinion. The researcher followed both Wengraf's (2006) and Creswell and Creswell's advice (2018). All of the interviews with the participants were audio and video recorded and were in-person or via Zoom, with the exception of two phone interviews. The participants were informed of this process prior to the start of the interview. The Informed Consent Form they each signed prior to the interview stated that the interview was being audio and video recorded. The participants each checked the box on the Informed Consent Form indicating that they were aware of the fact that the interview was being both audio and video recorded. The participants were also aware that by signing the Informed Consent Form that they were giving their permission to be recorded. In addition to the interviews being recorded, the interviewer also took notes during the interview process.

After the interviews were conducted, the researcher analyzed the data searching for commonalities and differences which were coded and interpreted as to the similarities and differences among the participants' responses (Saldana, 2021; Seidman, 2019; Wengraf, 2006). Saldana (2021) defined *code* in qualitative analysis as very often “a word or a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing...attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 5).

Qualitative research had certain guidelines to follow, but also allowed for some leeway within the study. It relied on such variables as text and image data collected from people, usually through interviews as with phenomenology (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Vanover, et al, 2022). Qualitative research sought to understand the *why* or the *what* associated with a lived event such as the revitalization of a church. It looked beyond the actual facts of an event and examined the surroundings of the event, such as the people involved; the time and place involved; the age and gender of the participants, as well as the socio-background of the participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Leedy and Ormrod, 2019). According to Patton (2015) there is no definitive way to categorize the various philosophical and theoretical perspectives that have influenced qualitative research.

Another aspect that separated quantitative and qualitative research was that qualitative research involved comments about the researcher and about their role within the study (Patton, 2015). They are not necessarily merely bystanders observing an event; they also became participants within the event. In that instance their purpose was to better understand the event and the participants, as well as to better understand the participants' actions within the event. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2019) the ultimate goal was to provide for the researcher a

sense that they better understood what a particular experience felt like for the participants (p. 233).

Moustakas (1994) contributed a description of a heuristic process in phenomenological analysis. He is of the opinion that practical instruction in the systematic interpretation of interview transcripts is helpful for extracting themes that are common across interviews or unique to an interview, and then creating a conceptual link (Creswell and Poth, 2018, p. 11). Moustakas (1994) in speaking of phenomenological research stated that the challenge of this methodology is to “explicate the phenomenon in terms of its constituents and possible meanings.” Creswell and Poth (2018) added to this concept when they stated “phenomenology commits itself to descriptions of experiences, not explanations or analysis (p. 2) ... Whether we are aware or not, we always bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research” (p.15). Based upon this statement by Creswell and Poth (2018) it can be assumed that Moustakas’ (1994) comment about the need for practical instruction in the systematic interpretation of interview transcripts would be helpful as one searched for a common theme(s) among the interview transcripts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher should also keep in mind that phenomenological research is heuristic and allowed for the possibility of individual interpretation and conclusions to a certain extent.

In order to gain the desired information from the participants within this study, the *phenomenological* research method was deemed by the researcher to be the logical research method to use (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Patton (2015) defined this research method as one that investigates “the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people” (p. 98). Creswell and Creswell (2018) added to this definition by saying that in this particular research methodology researchers study

individuals; explore processes, activities, and events; or learn about broad culture-sharing behavior of individuals or groups (p. 183). Groenewald (2004) wrote an article in which he described in detail *A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated*. He described step by step the core principles of a phenomenological research design and, by the examination of a specific study, illustrated the phenomenological methodology (p. 42).

The possibility existed that this study might need modification as it was further developed. There may need to be a decrease in the number of participants as the interviews may become too lengthy to complete within an allotted time frame. However, as the study progressed, any changes that needed to be made to accommodate some unforeseen developments were very simple ones and were made quite easily. The number of participants used within the study did not prove to be overwhelming. On the contrary, the participants were very easy to work with and very accommodating if there were any changes that needed to be made. In one instance, the room in which the interviews were being conducted was needed for another purpose. In between interviews, the interviewer was moved to another room where privacy would not be an issue. The interviews continued and the process proceeded without further incidents. However, the researcher was as prepared as possible for any other contingency that may possibly arise.

The possibility also existed that there may be a need for follow-up interviews after the original interviews were concluded. However, to date, the researcher has not needed any additional information to clarify a statement made by a participant or to investigate further the exact meaning intended by a participant. The interviews were all video recorded with the signed permission of the participants. As a precaution, the possibility of follow-up interviews was explained to the participants before the actual interviews began. They each verbally acknowledged the possibility of participating in follow-up interviews.

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was a mid-sized metropolitan city with a population of 1,163,000 people. These participants were from ten different evangelical protestant churches within that city. The participating churches were two each from five different protestant denominations. The protestant denominations that were used within the study were: Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Nondenominational, and Presbyterian. The interviews for this qualitative study were either conducted at each of the different churches participating within the study, via Zoom, at the Researcher's office, or over the phone. The location of each interview was noted on the individual interview forms with the researcher's notes and was adjusted to accommodate the participants due to school and work challenges. The participants, as often as possible, were interviewed within their own church setting for their convenience. However, the participants also had the option of being interviewed via Zoom. Dates and times for the interviews were arranged with each individual church and the participants within the study. The information obtained from this study would provide insight to pastors and youth pastors as to ways in which they could reach Generation Z as well as future generations in order to keep them spiritually grounded within the church. By learning more about Generation Z and future generations, one can be better prepared to teach them and to train them to be future leaders within the church.

### **Participants**

The participants of this study were Generation Z participants and pastors and youth pastors from each of the protestant churches in the study. There were two participants from Generation Z between the ages of 18 and 22 as well as a pastor and youth pastor from each of the ten different protestant churches used within the study. There were twenty (20) active participants from Generation Z, ten (10) youth pastors and ten (10) pastors in this study. The

study included both male and female participants, as there was no required number of either gender to be a participant within the study (Creswell and Creswell, 2018; Creswell and Poth, 2018). The information obtained from this study about Generation Z and their influence upon a church would assist pastors and youth pastors as to ways to reach Generation Z as well as future generations in order to keep them spiritually grounded within the church. The future leaders of a church or any organization will come from the younger generations.

Letters were sent to churches that would possibly have participants who would meet the necessary qualifications for participation within the study asking them to be a part of this study if they met those qualifications. The qualifications for church participation consisted of that church having members or regular attenders who would be members of Generation Z (those born between 1999 and 2015) and would be one of the five evangelical protestant denominations which would be used for the study: Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Nondenominational, and Presbyterian with at least two members of Generation Z between the ages of 18 and 22. The participant churches would also need to have a pastor and a youth pastor who would be willing to participate in the study. The pastor and youth pastor would not necessarily be a member of Generation Z. All ten of the evangelical protestant churches the researcher contacted about participating within the study met the participation requirements and agreed to participate in the study.

Once the churches that were to be a part of the study had been determined, the pastor was contacted at each church asking them to select two young adults between the ages of 18 and 22 who were willing to be participants within the study, as well as provide contact information for the youth pastor of the church. The researcher contacted the participants by mail, email, or in person, to verify their willingness to participate. In addition, the researcher verified that the Gen



Z participants were of the correct age (between 18 and 22 years) to participate in the study. The participants were also asked to sign an Informed Consent Form (Appendix A) stating that the study had been explained to them and that they understood what was expected of them as they participated within this study. The researcher was also available to answer any questions that may arise prior to the study being conducted.

Because all participants are considered adults, there was no need to have parental or legal guardian consent, though parents/guardians could be contacted by the researcher either by email, mail, or telephone should that become necessary. The researcher followed all legal and ethical requirements established by Liberty University.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher had an active role within the study as the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with each of the participants (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). If for some unforeseen reason, a face-to-face interview could not be conducted, then a *Zoom* interview, or in one case a phone interview, was conducted. Several of the interviews with the Gen Z participants and with the pastors and/or youth pastors were conducted face-to-face at the individual churches. However, some of the interviews, especially with the Gen Z participants, were conducted using *Zoom* per their request or at the Researcher's office due to convenience for the participant.

The face-to-face interview was preferred by the researcher as the researcher would be in a better position to note the body language of the participant during the interview as they answered the questions from the interviewer. However, the interviewer discovered that she was able to view the participant quite well using *Zoom*. Though in-person is still the preference of this interviewer, *Zoom* also proved to be a useful interview tool. It should also be noted that the researcher is not a member at any of the churches that were used within the study. However, in

the past the researcher has attended worship services at three of the churches as special events were taking place at the time. The researcher has had no substantial contact with any persons who were possible participants within the study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

According to Creswell and Poth (2018) “during the process of planning and designing a qualitative study, researchers need to consider what ethical issues might surface during the study and plan how to address these issues” (p.53). They also pointed out that a common misconception is that for the researcher, these issues will only surface during data collection. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested that this may not be a valid assumption. They further suggested that in the preparation for the study, the researcher list the possible ethical considerations that may arise. This was done by the Researcher and included in the research files.

For the purpose of this study, all participants were at least 18 years old and older. There were no minors involved in the proposed study. The researcher had each participant sign an Informed Consent Form (Appendix A). This “form describes the nature of a research project and one’s participation in it; required for many studies involving human beings” (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019, p. 415). Creswell and Creswell (2018) added further explanation of the consent form when they stated that “this form acknowledges that participants’ rights will be protected during data collection” (p. 248). These signed Informed Consent Forms along with any other signed papers that were needed are kept in a locked file cabinet which is in a locked room with very limited access to the possession of a key to the room.

The researcher conducted the interviews in a room or an area which afforded privacy for those participating within the study. It was the desire of the researcher that the interviews be

conducted at each of the individual churches participating within the study at a time convenient with the participants and which afforded privacy for the participants. However, several of the participants preferred to meet on Zoom for the interview as this was more convenient for them. The researcher accommodated their wishes in this respect. The researcher was alone in a room during the Zoom interviews to ensure confidentiality during the interview process. It appeared to the researcher that those persons being interviewed on Zoom was also alone in a room during the interview process. Therefore, confidentiality did not appear to be a problem with the Zoom interviews.

Only the researcher would have access to the names of the individuals involved within the study, unless there is a need for another person within the study to also have access to this information. This person would also sign a Privacy Agreement in order to further protect the privacy of the participants. Each participant was assigned a coded name (Table 1, p. 112) by the researcher for use within the study (e.g., Baptist church participants were coded as: B1; B2; and BP/BYP. Lutheran participants were coded as: L1; L2; LP/LYP, etc. (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019, p. 114).

The researcher of this study was aware of the fact that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) must also be involved within the initial process before the study could begin involving human participants. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is a committee on a college or university campus that reviews research to determine to what extent the research could place participants at risk during the study. The researcher filed an application with the IRB and was granted approval to conduct the research project (Appendix E). The participants who were interviewed in person signed the Informed Consent Forms (Appendix A) prior to their interview. Those participants who were interviewed on Zoom were emailed an Informed Consent Form for

their signature. The forms were signed by the participant and emailed back to the researcher prior to the interview. The level of risk for the participants in the study would be nothing more than they might experience in a normal day.

It was the desire of the researcher that all of the participants who began the study would be able to complete the study. However, should a participant need to withdraw from the study, they may do so. The researcher would note the changes that would be made within the study and what accommodations were made in the aftermath of the participant's withdrawal. It should be noted that all of the participants who began the study, completed the study.

### **Data Collection Methods and Instruments**

#### **Collection Methods**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church following its in-person decline in the aftermath of the Coronavirus in 2020. The researcher had determined that the interview process would be the most effective research method to use to obtain the desired results to answer this particular research question within the study. This determination is based upon research conducted by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas (1994) pointed out that phenomenological research would be the most effective research method to use when one is seeking to understand the lived experiences of individuals within a particular setting. In this instance, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church. The particular phenomenon involved within the study was the revitalization of a church after the Coronavirus in 2020.

Groenewald (2004) further expanded upon the phenomenological research design in his article, *A Phenomenological Research Design Illustrated*, published in the International Journal

of Qualitative Methods. The purpose of his article was to “distill the core principles of a phenomenological research design”. (p.42) Groenewald (2004) was of the opinion that his article would assist the novice researcher, who is “overwhelmed by the plethora of research methodologies” (p. 42) to select the appropriate research design (i.e., the phenomenological research design) and to become familiar with its use in a research study.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018) ethical issues are among the issues that researchers encounter during the collection process and the analysis of data. As the researcher collected data, it was important for the researcher to be aware of the sensitive nature of the data that was being collected. The researcher would avoid disclosing information that may be harmful to the participants, as well as to avoid situations where data might be identifiable. Creating a participant profile was one way to protect the identity of the participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The researcher assigned coded names to each of the churches within the study as well as each of the participants within the study in an attempt to prevent the unintentional disclosure of confidential information (see Table 1, p. 112). The church names and the name of the city were omitted from the study as an additional protection measure for the participants’ privacy.

### **Instruments and Protocols**

The researcher sent letters to the pastors of each of the ten churches explaining the research and asked to meet with them. When the researcher was granted permission to meet with each pastor of each church, the researcher explained the proposed research methodology and anticipated procedures. The pastors were all in agreement to participate with the study. The researcher then asked the pastor to provide the names and contact information (i.e., email) of two individuals from Generation Z who were between 18 and 22 years of age. The researcher

emailed letters to each of the participants which briefly explained the research and provided the Consent Form. The researcher's contact information was given to the participants in each email, and a suggested interview date, time, and place (i.e., their church setting or Zoom) was included. The researcher was able to confirm 20 Gen Z participants from within the ten evangelical protestant churches which participated within the study.

### ***Interviews***

Once two individuals of Generation Z from each church agreed to participate within the study, the researcher arranged to meet with them either in person or by Zoom and discussed what was expected of them as they participated within the study. Basically, the only expectation of them was to participate in an interview with the researcher which took no more than one hour. It was anticipated that one interview session would be adequate to obtain the necessary information needed for the study. However, the participants were told in advance that the need may arise for a follow-up interview. The potential interviewees all agreed to participate, and all signed the necessary consent form (Appendix A) as required by the IRB in order to adhere to the outlined ethical considerations of the IRB and those of the university (Patton, 2015; Seidman, 2019; Wengraf, 2006). The date and time of each interview was arranged with each participant once they had consented to be a participant within the study.

### ***Procedures***

Seidman (2019) is of the opinion that the interview process in phenomenological research should be a three interview process. The researcher agreed with Seidman (2019) that the interview process is a step-by-step process and also agreed with him in the fact that three interview sessions can be necessary within this particular research method. Seidman stated that interview one focuses on the life history of the participant. By understanding the life history of

the participant, one could better understand the participant's perspective on that particular event. In the opinion of the researcher, the life history of the participant is not necessary in order to ascertain the participant's perception of a phenomenological event such as the COVID-19 virus and its effect upon the participant's church congregation.

However, according to Seidman (2019) interview two does explore the participant's perception of a phenomenological event. The researcher is in agreement with Seidman on the importance of this aspect of the interview process. In order for the researcher to determine the perceived influence that Generation Z has upon the revitalization of a church following the coronavirus in 2020, the researcher examined the perception of the participants within the study. The degree to which COVID-19 affected the church congregation from the participant's perspective is of importance to the researcher's study.

Interview three of a study would reflect on the meaning of the phenomenological experience to the participant (Seidman, 2019). This information may or may not be of value to a study, depending upon the research question(s) the researcher was attempting to answer. For this particular study, the meaning to the participant of the phenomenological event the participant had experienced would add additional information to the study but may not be necessary to answer the research questions proposed within the study. It is the researcher's opinion that the desired information could be obtained from the participant during one interview session, rather than three interview sessions (Seidman, 2019) to discuss the event and the meaning of this lived experience from the participant's perspective (Wengraf, 2006). However, the researcher explained to the participants that another interview may possibly be needed for clarification purposes (Wengraf, 2006).

Wengraf (2006) is of the opinion that the interview process consists of three types of structured interviews: (1) lightly structured; (2) moderately structured; and (3) heavily structured. Lightly structured interviews are designed to elicit information that is biographic-narrative in nature. The moderately and the heavily structured interviews are each designed to elicit more in-depth information from the interviewee. It depends upon the information the researcher is seeking to obtain as to which interview structure the researcher would use in their study (Wengraf, 2006). The researcher would use Wengraf's (2006) lightly to moderately structured interview process. The proposed interview, though consisting of several questions, would center around one basic question: What is the perceived influence that Generation Z has upon the revitalization of a church following the coronavirus of 2020? It was anticipated that this research question would lead to a broader discussion about the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of the church (Table 4, p. 119; Appendix B).

Once the participants from each church were obtained, dates and times for the interviews were arranged with the pastors, youth pastors and the two participants from each church. After the interviews were conducted, the researcher began coding and analyzing the data looking for similarities and differences in perspectives among the responses from the participants (Table 3, p. 117) (Saldana, 2021; Vanover, et al, 2022). The last step was the writing of the report concerning the study (Saldana, 2021; Vanover, et al, 2022).

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis, the collection and interpretation of data, is according to Leedy and Ormrod (2019), closely intertwined with data collection as the researcher must constantly analyze the data that has been collected and interpret it in order to know how to proceed with the study. Sometimes it is difficult for the researcher to have total objectivity in the analysis process as their



personal attitudes and opinions often times creep into the process (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019). Yet, this constant analysis and interpretation of the data is necessary in order for the researcher to know which data collected is important to the furtherance of the study and which data is not. The process of data collection and analysis is very time consuming for the researcher (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019). However, Leedy and Ormrod (2019) stated that the process can also be very stimulating, challenging, and quite enjoyable as well.

Vanover, et al. (2022) suggested that the researcher use Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS) to manage the research process in an interview-based study. The QDAS first appeared on the market in the 1980s according to Vanover, et al. (2022). In their book, *Analyzing and Interpreting Qualitative Research After the Interview*, Vanover, et al. (2022) it provided the reader with strategies for transcribing, analyzing, and interpreting interview data. Wengraf (2006) in his book, *Qualitative Research Interviewing*, provided information for the researcher as to how to proceed with the interview process and the analysis of the data after the interview process has been completed. The researcher explored the possibility for the use of Qualitative Data Analysis Software but decided not to use this software. The researcher, however, did conduct in-person or Zoom interviews with each of the participants involved within the study.

### **Analysis Methods**

Data analysis is a process that is used within the qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches. Regardless of the research method used, the data collected must be analyzed, or studied in depth, and interpreted as to its value to the research study being undertaken. As the researcher conducted a qualitative study, Patton's (2015) "Twelve Steps for Ensuring a Strong Foundation for Qualitative Analysis" had merit to the researcher.

1. Begin analysis during fieldwork: Note and record patterns and possible themes while still in the field.
2. Inventory and organize the data: Check that the data elements and sources are labeled, dated, and complete.
3. Fill in the gaps in the data: Fill in the gaps in the data while connections in the field are fresh.
4. Protect the data: Back them up. Make sure the data are secure.
5. Express appreciation: Thank those who have provided you the data.
6. Reaffirm the purpose of your inquiry: Restate the purpose of your inquiry, and therefore the purpose of your analysis.
7. Review exemplars for inspiration and guidelines: reexamining classic works in your field can be a source of inspiration.
8. Make qualitative analysis software decisions. All qualitative analysis software has a steep learning curve. Allow time.
9. Schedule intense, dedicated time for analysis. Set a realistic schedule.
10. Clarify and determine your initial analysis strategy. This process involves reconnecting with the theoretical and strategic framework that guides the design decisions.
11. Be reflective and reflexive. Qualitative analysis is ultimately highly personal and judgmental.
12. Start and keep an analysis journal and/or codebook. Document the analytical process.

### **Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of quantitative research can be verified through *numbers* as the type

of information/results quantitative research yields is numerical. Its trustworthiness and credibility can be more easily verified than qualitative research results. Qualitative research yields information that cannot easily be reduced to numbers as the researcher is typically out in the field conducting research with and among people (Patton, 2015). This type of research typically involves an in-depth examination of a complex phenomenon. Therefore, its trustworthiness and credibility are not as easily verified as quantitative research (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019).

Saldana (2021) expressed the opinion that whether the researcher is a “lone wolf” (p. 52) researcher or is working within a group with other researchers all would benefit from interacting with other researchers. He stated that the researcher can communicate with the participants or other researchers as to the validity of the information that was obtained. Was it transcribed or interpreted correctly? If a problem arises during the coding of the data, one could consult another researcher in an attempt to rectify the problem. Saldana (2021) recommended these steps to access the trustworthiness of the account of the data transcribed: (1) initially code *as* you transcribe interview data; (2) maintain a reflective journal on the research project with copious analytical memos; and (3) check your interpretations developed thus far with the participants themselves (Saldana, 2021, p. 52). Saldana (2021) is of the opinion that the researcher could benefit from these recommendations to assess the trustworthiness of his or her account of the interview process.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the research, the researcher followed the steps recommended by Saldana (2021). An Interview Protocol was developed by the researcher to assist the researcher during the interview process. Each interview was video recorded with the interviewee’s signed permission. In addition to the video recording, the interviewer made

written notes on an Interview Protocol sheet (Appendix B) devised before the interview process began and used within each interview. A predetermined coding process had been devised by the researcher prior to the interviews and was used within each interview. (Example: BP1 (1<sup>st</sup> Baptist church pastor); BYP1 (1<sup>st</sup> Baptist church youth pastor); BP2 (2<sup>nd</sup> Baptist church pastor); BYP2 (2<sup>nd</sup> Baptist church youth pastor)...PP1 (1<sup>st</sup> Presbyterian church pastor); PYP2 (2<sup>nd</sup> Presbyterian church youth pastor), etc.). As each interview began, the researcher stated her name and that she was at ... church interviewing the church pastor, etc. on ... (date) at ... (time). The church name was not used, only the church denomination in order to maintain anonymity. A few minutes was spent at the beginning of each interview in general conversation with the interviewee to establish a rapport. This time of conversation included the researcher explaining to the interviewee the interview process and that there were no “right or wrong” answers. The interviewee’s perspective/perception was all that was needed as the questions were answered. The predetermined interview questions were asked and the participant responses were video recorded (with the exception of the two phone interviews) and recorded on the interview sheet, as notes were taken by the interviewer. If needed for clarification, follow-up questions were asked of the interviewee by the interviewer.

### **Credibility**

Patton (2015) pointed out that any research strategy ultimately needed credibility to be useful. Any credible research strategy required that the investigator adopt a stance of openness, being careful to fully document methods of inquiry and their implications for resultant findings.

Leedy and Ormrod (2019) listed nine criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness and credibility of qualitative research. They are: purposefulness; explicitness of assumptions and biases; rigor; open-mindedness; completeness; coherence; persuasiveness; consensus, and

usefulness (p. 25). The researcher followed Patton's (2015) recommendation in order to build and maintain credibility with the interview participant during the interview.

### **Dependability**

Leedy and Ormrod (2019) defined dependability as the concept that accounts for the ever-changing contexts within which research studies take place and thus requires researchers to provide in-depth descriptions of their data collection methods.

The researcher had determined that the interview process would be the most effective research method to use to obtain the desired results to answer this research question within the study. This determination of using the interview process is based upon research conducted by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas (1994) pointed out that phenomenological research would be the most effective research method to use when one is seeking to understand the lived experiences of individuals within a particular setting. In this instance, the researcher was seeking to understand the perceived influence of Generation Z within a church setting during a particular phenomenon which was the revitalization of said church after the Coronavirus in 2020.

### **Confirmability**

The researcher made a concerted effort to base conclusions on actual data as much as possible and to describe data-collection and data-analysis as thoroughly as possible. By describing the data-collection and data-analysis processes in enough detail other researchers might reasonably replicate their study and draw similar conclusions (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019).

The research method that was used was the in-depth interview method. There were two (2) participants (between 18 and 22 years of age), one (1) Pastor, and one (1) Youth Pastor from each of the ten churches participating within the study. They were interviewed within a private setting, usually within their own church setting or via Zoom. The interviews were audio and

video recorded to achieve accuracy during the transcribing process. Each participant was asked to sign a Consent Form (Appendix A) prior to the beginning of the study. The researcher conducted the interviews and transcribed the results of the interviews.

According to Creswell and Poth (2018) ethical issues were among the issues that researchers encounter during the collection process and the analysis of data. As the researcher collected data, it was important for the researcher to be aware of the sensitive nature of the data that they were collecting. They should avoid disclosing information that may be harmful to the participants, as well as to avoid situations where data might be identifiable. Creating a participant profile would be one way to protect the identity of the participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

### **Transferability**

Transferability is defined by Leedy and Ormrod (2019) as the extent to which a research study's findings might be similar or applicable to other individuals, settings, and contexts; term most frequently used by qualitative researchers (Leedy and Ormrod, 2019, p. 421). It is the desire of the researcher that another researcher would find this study and the information that it contained of value to them and to their research. It is through the sharing of data collected within a study that pertinent information is transferred from one research project to another and is expanded and further developed.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter Three: Research Methodology delved into the various aspects of the dissertation which could be considered the *heart* of the research—the research methodology of the interview. Seidman (2019) pointed out that “at the heart of the interviewing research is an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (p. 9). Seidman (2019) went on to say that this is why the people whom the researcher interviews are difficult to code with numbers, and why

finding pseudonyms for participants is “a complex and sensitive task” (p. 9). For this reason, the researcher used code names which related to the individual churches involved within the study, such as: Baptist church (B); Baptist pastor (BP); Baptist attendee/participant 1 (BA1); and Baptist attendee/participant 2 (BA2); etc.

This chapter began with a synopsis of the Research Design, the reason for the study. The following section examined all of the participants within the study. The instrumentation that was used within the study was described within the next section. Lastly, the analysis of the methodology and the trustworthiness of the study were examined. The trustworthiness of the study determined the value of the study to the current research as well as to other researchers who may be conducting similar research.

The researcher conducted a study to explore and to attempt to answer the question of what was the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of a church. The researcher wanted to obtain the answer from the perspective of the pastor, youth pastor and from the perspective of two (2) Generation Z participants from each ten different evangelical protestant churches. The methodology used was qualitative phenomenological utilizing in-depth interviews to achieve the objective.

## CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The first two chapters of this dissertation explored the research problem this study investigated, and the literature related to that problem. Chapter Three examined the phenomenological research methodology used by the researcher to determine the answer to the research questions. Chapter Four analyzed data (interviews) of the study, determined the findings as a result of the data, and the significance of those findings. This analysis began with the compilation of the Protocol and Measures used within the study to obtain the necessary data. This sample data was gathered based upon a specific demographic (Generation Z between ages 18 and 22) as stated within the study. The data was analyzed, and the Findings determined based upon the results of the analysis. As the methodology chosen by the researcher was a phenomenological approach, the analysis focused on the experiences of the participants. Therefore, it was based on personal experience, perspective and interpretation by the participants of how they perceived their influence to have been to their church during the COVID-19 pandemic and after the pandemic as the church began to revitalize. The researcher desired to bring forth in her analysis, these experiences and perceptions from the participants' perspective which may possibly challenge preconceived generalized assumptions existing in some churches today.

### Compilation Protocol and Measures

In this section the researcher presented a description of the compilation protocol and the measures used to describe the process by which the researcher gathered the necessary data. A lightly structured in-depth interview process was used. Wengraf (2006) defined this process as one in which the interview design focused on narration and storytelling. Patton (2015) used the term *phenomenological interview* to describe a type of interview process similar to Wengraf's



(2006) lightly structured in-depth interview. Both had similar goals. Both sought to obtain information from the participant that would answer a specific question or questions about a particular event or phenomena from the participants' perspective.

### **Lightly Structured In-Depth Interview**

Wengraf (2006) stated that this lightly structured in-depth interview process was aimed at inducing narrative. Seidman (2019) had previously developed the three-interview process in qualitative research. From his perspective, phenomenological theory put an emphasis on exploring the meaning of people's experiences in the context of their lives. The three-interview process consisted of: 1) focused life history; 2) details of lived experiences; and 3) reflections on the meaning of the experience. The purpose of this three-interview process was to gain insight into the experience of the participant to better understand the meaning of the experience for the participant. Creswell and Creswell (2018) referred to this interview approach as the research study of individuals using narrative and phenomenology, both qualitative research designs.

The researcher was familiar to a limited degree with each of the churches and had researched as much as possible the history of each church. Though this was not the life history of the participant, it affected the life history of the participant as each participant was actively involved in the activities of their individual church. Thus Step #1 in Seidman's Three-Interview Process was met. During the interview process itself, Steps #2 and #3 were met. In Step #2 the details of the lived experience were briefly discussed with each participant as they answered the research questions. In Step #3 the meaning of the experience was briefly discussed as the participant told of how they as members of Gen Z had influenced the revitalization of their church. In regard to the pastors and youth pastors, their meaning of the experience was explored

as they discussed their perception of the influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of the church.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) further stated that this research design was used when the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews as the researcher did. Twenty-eight of the face-to-face interviews the researcher conducted were conducted in-person, with the participant at the participant's church setting, in a private room. One of the face-to-face interviews was conducted at the researcher's office in a private conference room as this site was closer to the area of the city in which this participant lived. The option was also available for interviews to be conducted via Zoom. Nine of the study participants preferred to be interviewed via Zoom and two were interviewed by phone. All pastor participants agreed to meet face-to-face at their individual churches. The Youth Pastor interview locations varied due to travel commitments with their ministry. Some of the Generation Z participants met face-to-face at their individual church and some were working or away at school and needed to meet virtually via Zoom.

Wengraf (2006) expanded on the thought of the face-to-face interview process as he stated that this type of interview process was used for the "elicitation and provocation" (p. 111) of storytelling. The researcher was interested in the telling of a story as well as in the perspective of the participant in regard to the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of a church in the aftermath of the Coronavirus in 2020. To obtain the perspective of the participant, a story-telling format appeared to be the best format to use. Creswell and Creswell (2018) stated that qualitative interviews of this sort involve "unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and that are intended to elicit views and opinions" (Appendix B and D).

The interview process involved three questions for each participant: (1) Since the coronavirus began in 2020, do you think that your church has declined numerically, remained the same, or increased after the reopening of the churches nationwide in 2021? (2) Why do you think this (decline/increase) happened within your church? (3) As a member of Generation Z, talk about the influence that you and your generation had upon the revitalization/decline of your church as it reopened in 2021? (4) As a Pastor/Youth Pastor, what influence do you think that Generation Z (those between 18 and 22 years of age) had upon the revitalization of your church in the aftermath of the coronavirus in 2020? These questions were designed to elicit views and opinions. It should be noted that Question 3 was designed for Generation Z participants only, while Question 4 was designed for Pastors and Youth Pastors only. Each participant had three questions to answer.

### **Data Recording Procedures**

In discussing the data recording of the interview, Wengraf (2006) suggested both tape-recording the interview, and also incorporating the use of note taking using the topic or keyword process. Creswell and Creswell (2018) were of the same opinion. The researcher followed both Wengraf's (2006) and Creswell and Creswell's (2018) advice. All of the interviews with the participants were audio/video recorded. The participants were informed of this process prior to the start of the interview. The Participant Consent Form (Appendix A) that each participant signed prior to the interview stated that the interview was being audio/video recorded. They checked the appropriate place on the Participant Consent Form indicating that they were aware of the fact that the interview was being both audio and video recorded and that they gave their consent to the process before the interview began. In addition to the audio/video recording of the

interviews, the researcher used a prepared interview form on which notes were taken (Appendix D) as each question asked was answered by the participant. (Appendix B)

### **Measures**

Qualitative research, according to Roberts (2010), is a philosophical orientation which focuses on people's experiences from their perspective. Roberts (2010) referred to a quote from Albert Einstein as she stated, "Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted" (p. 143). Roberts (2010) also advised researchers who use the qualitative method in their research study not to try to make their study fit a predetermined research methodology (p. 142). A qualitative phenomenological study by definition is a difficult research methodology to measure in concrete terms. "Rather than numbers, the data are words that describe people's knowledge, opinions, perceptions, and feelings as well as detailed descriptions of people's actions, behaviors, activities, and interpersonal interactions" (p. 143). These things are intangible and do not lend themselves to tangible measurements. For this reason, the researcher used audio/visual equipment to record each interview in order to watch the video as many times as needed to capture the intent of the participant as they answered the interview questions.

### **Demographic and Sample Data**

This study was conducted within a mid-sized metropolitan city of over 1,163,000 people in the metropolitan area. The area was discovered by Hernando de Soto in 1541, but was not established as a city until 1819. Its position on the river made it a valuable port for trading. It has a rich and varied history which added to its flavor and charm and enhanced its uniqueness. It has often boasted of the fact that it has more churches than gas stations, with a church on every corner.

It was requested by the research committee of the researcher that ten evangelical protestant churches be included within the research as opposed to the original number of five evangelical protestant churches. An amendment was sent to the IRB requesting the change of 5 evangelical protestant churches to 10 evangelical protestant churches. The amendment was approved by the IRB (Appendix E).

The researcher sent letters to the pastors of different evangelical protestant churches within this city seeking their participation in this study. Not all churches to whom a letter was sent responded to the letter. Of those who did respond, the researcher contacted them individually and answered any questions they might have regarding the study. Additional letters were sent as needed. The researcher was able to eventually confirm the participation within the study of ten evangelical protestant churches. The ten evangelical protestant churches were: (1) 2 Baptist churches (2) 2 Lutheran churches; (3) 2 Methodist churches; (4) 2 Non-denominational churches; and (5) 2 Presbyterian churches. The sample population of each church consisted of four individuals (a pastor, a youth pastor, and two members of Gen Z, between ages 18 and 22) from each of the ten evangelical protestant churches within the same metropolitan city.

It should be noted that just prior to the start of the Coronavirus, two Baptist churches had begun the process of merging their two churches. This process stopped during COVID. However, once COVID was “over” and churches began to open again for in-person worship, the merger process resumed. The Baptist church used within this study is the larger Baptist church into which the second smaller Baptist church merged. This Baptist church is referred to in the study as Baptist 1. The merger was mentioned due to the fact that it had an effect on the two churches which merged, and the participants were from both churches involved in the merger. The merger seemed to go very well as those who participated within the study and were

interviewed seemed very hopeful and optimistic about their church. The Baptist pastor who was interviewed for the study was the pastor of the larger church into which the second smaller church merged. The Youth Pastor of the newly formed church was the former pastor of the smaller Baptist church involved in the merger, and the two Generation Z participants were from the second smaller Baptist church. These participants were selected by the pastor of the church. Both pastors are considered equals within the church leadership. They divided the duties of the church between themselves and seemed to work well together. The church referred to in the study as Baptist 2 is a different Baptist church and was not involved with the merger.

In addition to the merging of the Baptist church at the time of the study, it should also be noted that the Non-Denominational church within this study had a transition of pastors during the revitalization period following the COVID pandemic. The founding pastor followed through with his pre-COVID plan to retire and did retire after the COVID pandemic. The new pastor, who had been *called* to replace the retiring pastor before COVID, attended the church and assisted the founding pastor as needed during COVID. After the founding pastor retired, the *new* pastor was installed as the senior pastor of the church. The new pastor of this church was the pastor participant interviewed for this study.

Each of the pastors involved in the study was given basic information about the study as well as the contact information for the researcher in the letter which they received prior to the beginning of the study. Interviews were arranged by the researcher with each of the pastors. Questions that any of the pastors may have had were answered and discussed as needed prior to the pastors consenting to participate within the study. All of the pastors who agreed to participate within the study also signed a Research Consent Letter (IRB approved letter, Appendix A) agreeing to have the research conducted within their church. In addition, each of the pastors

signed a Research Participant Consent Letter (IRB approved letter) agreeing that they themselves would be participants within the study. They were all interviewed for the study at a time and place that was convenient for each of them. The pastors were all interviewed at their individual church offices. The youth pastors were interviewed either by phone, Zoom, or in-person, and the Gen Z participants were interviewed via Zoom or in-person depending on the method more convenient for them as some were away at school during the time of the research for this study.

The researcher had obtained the names of two Generation Z participants from each of the Pastors. The researcher then sent a letter to the possible Generation Z participants requesting their participation within the study. All of the perspective Generation Z participants responded positively, as stated above, to the Research Participant Request letter sent to them by the researcher. They each also signed a Research Participant Consent Form (IRB approved letter) agreeing to participate within the study.

The researcher now had permission to conduct the research interviews within each of the ten evangelical protestant churches within the research city. The researcher also had permission to interview the pastors, the youth pastors, as well as two (2) Gen Z participants from each of the ten evangelical churches.

All of the participants were given code names as seen in Table 1 (p. 112) *CHURCH AND PARTICIPANT CODE NAMES*. The code names for each church as well as the code names for each attendee/participant that were used in the interviews are listed in Table 1 (p. 112). These code names were used on the interview data and any other data deemed necessary in order to protect the privacy of the participants. The completed interview protocols identifying each participant were filed according to individual churches and stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's office to protect the privacy of each individual.

Table 2 (p.116) *DEMOGRAPHIC DATA* contained pertinent demographic information for each of the ten churches. The demographic data indicated the status of each church as to whether or not there was an increase within the church attendance or a decline in the individual church attendance over the years since the churches were first established. Table 3 (p. 117) *COMPARISON OF THEMES AND COMMONALITIES* expanded further upon the interview notes taken, highlighting a commonality among the ten churches, and Table 4 (p. 119) *INTERVIEWS: PASTORS, YOUTH PASTORS, AND GENERATION Z* are notes taken during the interview process, and show the 10 churches' responses by question and participant.

**Table 1**

*CHURCH AND PARTICIPATION CODE NAMES*

CHURCH	PARTICIPANT	CODE
<b>BAPTIST 1</b>		B1
	Baptist Pastor 1	BP1
	Baptist Youth Pastor 1	BYP1
	Baptist 1 Participant 1	BA1
	Baptist 1 Participant 2	BA2
<b>BAPTIST 2</b>		B2
	Baptist Pastor 2	BP2
	Baptist Youth Pastor 2	BYP2
	Baptist 2 Participant 1	BA3
	Baptist 2 Participant 2	BA4
<b>LUTHERAN 1</b>		L1
	Lutheran Pastor 1	LP1
	Lutheran Youth Pastor 1	LYP1
	Lutheran 1 Participant 1	LA1
	Lutheran 1 Participant 2	LA2
<b>LUTHERAN 2</b>		L2
	Lutheran Pastor 2	LP2
	Lutheran Youth Pastor 2	LYP2
	Lutheran 2 Participant 1	LA3



	Lutheran 2 Participant 2	LA4
<b>METHODIST 1</b>		M1
	Methodist Pastor	MP1
	Methodist Youth Pastor 1	MYP1
	Methodist 1 Participant 1	MA1
	Methodist 1 Participant 2	MA2
<b>METHODIST 2</b>		M2
	Methodist Pastor 2	MP2
	Methodist Youth Pastor 2	MYP2
	Methodist 2 Participant 1	MA3
	Methodist 2 Participant 2	MA4
<b>NON-DENOMINATIONAL 1</b>		N1
	Non-denominational Pastor 1	NP1
	Non-denominational Youth Pastor 1	NYP1
	Non-denominational 1 Participant 1	NA1
	Non-denominational 1 Participant 2	NA2
<b>NON-DENOMINATIONAL 2</b>		N2
	Non-denominational Pastor 2	NP2
	Non-denominational Youth Pastor 2	NYP2
	Non-denominational 2 Participant 1	NA3
	Non-denominational 2 Participant 2	NA4
<b>PRESBYTERIAN 1</b>		P1
	Presbyterian Pastor 1	PP1
	Presbyterian Youth Pastor 1	PYP1
	Presbyterian 1 Participant 1	PA1
	Presbyterian 1 Participant 2	PA2
<b>PRESBYTERIAN 2</b>		P2
	Presbyterian Pastor 2	PP2
	Presbyterian Youth Pastor 2	PYP2
	Presbyterian 2 Participant 1	PA3
	Presbyterian 2 Participant 2	PA4

Table 2 (p. 116) as seen below illustrated the *Demographic Data* which related to each of the ten churches used within the study. This data was obtained from the individual churches after the researcher met with each of the pastors. Each of the ten evangelical protestant churches that participated within the study are listed below giving their *Date of Origin; Original Attendance Numbers; Pre-COVID Attendance Numbers; Post-COVID Attendance Numbers; and their Present Attendance Numbers*. This information is of value as one has a visual of the attendance numbers of each of the churches who participated in the study. Table 2 (p. 116) provided an overall view of the increases and decreases in attendance of each of the churches over a given period of time beginning with the date of origin of each of the churches and the attendance numbers for each church at its beginning. One is able to see the increases and the decreases in attendance at each of the churches. This information provided an indication of the decline or of the revitalization of each church for a specific period of time.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC), COVID was first confirmed in the United States on January 20, 2020, though its first confirmed date of origin was in 2019 in China. The Pre-COVID attendance numbers that were used in the study were those recorded by the ten evangelical protestant churches just prior to the date of January 20, 2020 at each church. The Post-COVID numbers were the attendance numbers taken after April 20, 2022. At the time of this study, COVID-19 was not officially over. However, mask mandates had been lifted, and COVID-19 restrictions reduced across the United States in varying degrees. There was a return to “normal” life which was beginning at that time in most cities. The Present Attendance numbers for the churches are as of May, 2022. Churches that had closed during COVID-19 began opening their doors for in-person worship on Sunday morning beginning in the spring of 2022 when the airlines lifted their mask mandates. Though some churches had already opened

their doors for in-person worship, more and more churches that had previously been closed, had begun to open their doors as they resumed in-person worship.

As people began to return to the churches for in-person worship, the churches began the process of revitalization. Church revitalization is defined by Davis (2017) as “the process of revitalizing or restoring a once healthy church to a state of spiritual health as defined by the Word of God” (Davis, 2017, p. 20). The spiritual aspect of church revitalization, though of extreme importance, is not the revitalization aspect used within this study. The spiritual aspect of church revitalization is difficult to measure in a concrete way. However, in-person attendance is an entity which can be measured. A decrease in the attendance numbers of the churches would indicate a decline within the church, not only numerically, but possibly a spiritual decline as well. An increase in the attendance numbers would indicate growth or revitalization within the church, numerically and possibly spiritually as well. Without the people in a church, a church could not survive. It would only be a building. The churches used within this study are of varying sizes in regard to attendance as indicated by Table 2 (p. 116) *DEMOGRAPHIC DATA* below.

The oldest church within this group of churches began in 1911 with 35 people. Over the years, this particular church increased in attendance from its original attendance of 35 to its Pre-COVID attendance of 300. It is unknown what events may have occurred over the years to affect its growth at the time. However, COVID did affect its decline from an attendance of 300 to its attendance of 150 post-COVID. However, Presbyterian 2 continued to experience growth as indicated by Table 2 (p. 116).

**Table 2****DEMOGRAPHIC DATA**

<b>ATTENDANCE</b>					
<b>Church Denomination</b>	<b>Date of Origin</b>	<b>Original</b>	<b>Pre-COVID-19 (1/20)</b>	<b>Post-COVID-19 (4/22)</b>	<b>Present (5/22)</b>
Baptist 1	1955	75-80	386	284	303
Baptist 2	2019	120	160	40	15
Lutheran 1	1984	75	117	64	75
Lutheran 2	1993	60	60	79	73
Methodist 1	1955	600	1500-1700	750-800	750-800
Methodist 2	1988	116	539	531	534
Non-Denominational 1	1972	75	50	55	60
Non-Denominational 2	2013	77	67	38	35
Presbyterian 1	1921	21	325	121	245
Presbyterian 2	1911	35	300	150	275

**Compilation of Raw Data**

Table 2 (p. 116) listed the year each church opened its doors for worship, indicating the number of people in attendance at that time. Table 2 (p. 116) also provided the Pre-COVID attendance as of January 2020 when the CDC first confirmed that COVID had reached the United States. It should also be noted that there was a decrease in the *Present* attendance

numbers from the Pre-COVID numbers with the exception of the Lutheran 2 church and the Non-Denominational 1 church. These churches had an increase. The Non-Denominational 1 church experienced the retiring of its founding pastor and the arrival of a new pastor. The Lutheran 2 church had no such change. A suggested possibility for the increase in attendance at the Lutheran 2 church could be the after effects of COVID.

The researcher viewed once again the recorded interviews and examined the interview sheets which had been compiled as the interviews were being conducted. There were ten (10) pastors and ten (10) youth pastors interviewed from the ten evangelical protestant churches who participated in the study. There were also two (2) Generation Z members from each church who were interviewed as indicated in Table 1 (p. 112) for a total of 20 Gen Z participants. A combined total of 40 participants were interviewed for this study.

Table 3 (p. 117) demonstrated a “*Comparison of Themes and Commonalities*” among the ten churches as shown below. It listed the main themes found within the interviews of all of the participants within the study, by leadership (Pastors and Youth Pastors) and church attendees (Generation Z participants). As one examined Table 3 (p. 117) one can compare and contrast the themes and commonalities exhibited within each of the interviews.

**Table 3**

*COMPARISON OF THEMES AND COMMONALITIES*

<b>CHURCHES</b>	<b>PASTORS/ YOUTH PASTORS</b>	<b>GEN Z PARTICIPANTS</b>
<b>BAPTIST</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COVID brought internal things to the surface</li> <li>• Growth and revitalization in college ministry with merger</li> <li>• Good mixture of ages</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People got out of the habit of coming to church</li> <li>• A strong foundation needed to be developed in the church</li> <li>• Use of technology increased</li> </ul>

LUTHERAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-person attendance declined during COVID</li> <li>• Gen Z declining, many away at school</li> <li>• Families with children increased after COVID</li> <li>• We are beginning to see growth</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Church Declined (Lutheran church #1) Church Increased (Lutheran church #2)</li> <li>• Need people their own age at the church</li> <li>• Increased technology use and delayed opening got many in the habit of staying home</li> <li>• More families are coming in as activities increased</li> </ul>
METHODIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Declined – People got used to staying home</li> <li>• Gen Z are the life blood of the church but losing that generation</li> <li>• Hybrid service used</li> <li>• Gen Z a tough demographic to reach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Declined Attendance</li> <li>• Gen Z not very impactful</li> <li>• Redesign church structure to meet the busy schedules of Gen Z</li> <li>• Gen Z attract Gen Z</li> <li>• Gen Z is the smallest demographic in our church.</li> </ul>
NON-DENOMINATIONAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Declined in attendance</li> <li>• Gen Z are the life blood of the church and slowly coming back</li> <li>• Need to build relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gen Z vital in growing the church after COVID</li> <li>• People tend to come to the church during hard times and the church was closed</li> <li>• The ease and use of technology encouraged people to develop the habit of staying home</li> </ul>
PRESBYTERIAN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gen Z looks for diversity in attendance</li> <li>• Gen Z looking to build relationships</li> <li>• Technology became more important</li> <li>• Need to train Gen Z to be leaders in the church</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People are drifting from the church but COVID gave Gen Z a chance to evaluate their own faith</li> <li>• COVID taught Gen Z to appreciate church and the relationships it brings</li> <li>• We need to be deeply rooted in God</li> </ul>

Essential and relevant excerpts from each of the interviews, by participant and question, were given below in Table 4 (p. 119). Each question was listed individually above the

appropriate Table as well as the answers that were given by the participants were shown in the appropriate Table. The questions for RQ1-RQ4 are the Research Questions the researcher sought to answer.

**Table 4**

*INTERVIEWS: PASTORS, YOUTH PASTORS, AND GENERATION Z*

**RQ1: How do pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?**

<b>BP1</b>	“We merged with another Baptist church and have increased our attendance, especially in the college age adult ministry. We are seeing growth, especially in our college age young adults. We increased by 75-80 people after COVID when we reopened in 2020. We have a good mix of all generations now. We are stronger in the Lord.”
<b>BP2</b>	“We shut down per the order of the Governor to help prevent the spread of the virus. An internal church conflict was bubbling prior to COVID. The previous pastor retired and I was voted in as the new pastor. The church split with a few remaining with the church here. As we reopened after COVID, not very many came back for in-person worship. We need more college age adults to help grow our church.”
<b>BYP1</b>	“I was the pastor of the smaller Baptist church that merged with the larger Baptist church. Our youth group was dying, but with the merger, it has revitalized and more youth are coming. The youth are very important to the growth and to the stability of the church. I opted to be the youth pastor rather than the lead pastor after the merger because I believe in the value of the youth within the church. I stayed with them.”
<b>BYP2</b>	“We had a lot more members before COVID. We declined after COVID. We are losing our Gen Z. Those Gen Z who have remained are helping out within the church. I run the sound equipment. Other Gen Z are helping in other ways. We are trying to attract more Gen Z into our congregation. We need them!”
<b>BA1</b>	“We declined after COVID. We merged with another Baptist church and together we have increased. We’re seeing growth as more people come in. Our youth group has really increased since we merged.”
<b>BA2</b>	“We declined. We closed down for a period of time. Our pastor left and we couldn’t find another one. We merged with another Baptist church. We had a lot more younger people than they did, and they had more older people than we did. Our Gen Z are inviting more and more people to come to church.”
<b>BA3</b>	“We declined. People got out of the habit of coming. When we reopened, they did not come back. Many livestreamed the services from home. People saw the virus from different perspectives. Some were afraid of the virus. It was easier to stay home and watch the service on TV.”
<b>BA4</b>	“We declined. Many Gen Z did not come back. People stayed home when the church reopened. To them, they did not see the church as very important in their

	lives. My generation sees and understands the effects of social media upon our lives. Social media can be used to draw people into the church, or it can have an adverse effect on the church.”
<b>LP1</b>	“We declined in-person. We have to take care of our “neighbors” and be good stewards. We have to protect the health of everyone. The church had to use technology for services. We used YouTube and Facebook Live. We never really had a lot of this age group (Gen Z) coming. We see them at Christmas and Easter when they return home from college. Young adults of this age are more global missions minded.”
<b>LP2</b>	“We have remained about the same in attendance. We actually did not close our doors. We continued to meet but took precautions. Our members were urged to do what they felt was best for them. Many came to church to worship.”
<b>LYP1</b>	“We declined. People had the option to stay home and watch the worship service on TV. They chose that option rather than come into the worship service. They were concerned about the possible spread of COVID. They got used to staying home and decided to continue that pattern after COVID ended.”
<b>LYP2</b>	“We have remained about the same since we reopened. In some areas we have seen growth. We centered our lives and our church meetings around Jesus Christ. We did not fixate on the pandemic. We did take precautions and did follow the advice of our medical leaders. We have confidence in our Lord.”
<b>LA1</b>	“We decreased. People had option to stay home, and they got used to staying home. Our numbers got really low.”
<b>LA2</b>	“Definitely declined. Our numbers are really, really low. We offer online church. People had the option of staying home and watching it on TV. They chose to watch on TV.”
<b>LA3</b>	“Our church has remained about the same statistically. I do not think that my generation is very impactful. We have mostly an older congregation. Gen Z is the smallest demographic in our church. We have about 4-10 Gen Z coming. Most of my friends are atheist. I think that people are tired of watching church online and want to get back with other people. But most of my friends do not go to church.”
<b>LA4</b>	“We declined some at the beginning, but we are seeing people come back now. People began to stream the service and some continue to do that. We had some decline, but have remained pretty much the same overall.”
<b>MP1</b>	“Declined. People got in the habit of staying home. They have the live-stream” component added to their Sunday morning choices. Gen Z has many stresses on their life, and they feel isolated and stressed.”
<b>MP2</b>	“We have experienced a decline. My previous congregation was mostly elderly people. We did not usually have Gen Z in the service at my previous church. It is the same with Gen Z attendance at this church. Not many Gen Z come. This had been a tough demographic for us to reach. Those (Gen Z) who came during the summer are now leaving as they go back to school. We are having a hard time getting Gen Z back into the church. I don’t think that Gen Z feel that they



	are as important to the church as they really are.”
<b>MYP1</b>	“We declined for a season, but we are on our way back up now. We declined pre-COVID. Most of our decline were with the people on the fringes of church and were not active members.”
<b>MYP2</b>	“We declined. Gen Z do not think that they are important for the growth and stability of the church. They tend to not get involved. How do we engage and retain Gen Z? I think that churches “just need to show up and be there for this generation (between 18 and 22 year olds). We need to demonstrate unconditional love and understanding toward them. Churches need to provide space for the 18 to 22 year olds. Allow them to “question” the church and then provide answers for them.”
<b>MA1</b>	“Declined. We used to have 150-200 people now we have 50. We used to have 3 services on Sunday and 2 bands. Now we only have 1 service and 1 band. But COVID has made us stronger Christians. Not many watch our live stream. We only have about 50 views. Masks may have been the problem. We lifted the mask mandate, and more people are coming.”
<b>MA2</b>	“Declined in in-person attendance. I plan to go to Seminary after college. I will be on the candidacy tract. Now I am a lay leader and am working to rebuild our church after COVID.”
<b>MA3</b>	“We stayed about the same. We have mostly older church members. They had to stay home during COVID because of the possibility of compromising their immune systems. We gradually increased when the church reopened. I think that people were getting tired of watching church on TV. They wanted to get out and be with other people. They wanted to come back to church and worship. I don’t think that my generation had much of an impact upon my church. There are not a lot of Gen Z within my church. We are trying to get more Gen Z into the church.”
<b>MA4</b>	“We did not change much in attendance. We stayed about the same. People have a problem with their comfort level in confined spaces and do not like to be close to others. But some people want to build our community of believers. I think we have forgotten how to be social creatures. How do you engage in a community of people who have not really gathered together?”
<b>NP1</b>	“We declined somewhat. We removed the tape from the pews and our attendance has increased. Former membership returning. However, no Millennials are attending worship. We have about 40-60 on Sunday night. We have a Potluck meal and then have Worship Service at night. It will increase. We are trying a new format.”
<b>NP2</b>	“Declined in in-person attendance. We conducted our worship services online. Our attendance remained stable using this format for worship. More people began to log on and “attend” our worship services. We did not always record the attendance statistics with our online services.”
<b>NYP1</b>	“Declined somewhat but numerically stayed the same because we counted in-person and attendance through our live streaming. People stayed home on Sunday and watched service on the computer. In-person numerically declined

	but combined with the online attendance for worship service we maintained.”
<b>NYP2</b>	“We declined numerically. Because of COVID many people did not come to in-person worship services. People could rest and relax at home on Sunday rather than come to a worship service and chance getting COVID. People were concerned about getting sick if they came and mingled with others. Our denomination also expressed concerns for our church members if we opened up. Because we did not open, some of our people went to other churches that were open.”
<b>NA1</b>	“Declined at first when we reopened. Less people came back...maybe about 10. Older people decided not to come. We are beginning to see growth. We are getting new people into the church.”
<b>NA2</b>	“We declined somewhat at the beginning when we first opened up after COVID. Lots of new faces as new people are coming in after COVID. We are definitely growing. We have a new pastor and younger people are coming in. People seem excited about being back in church.”
<b>NA3</b>	“We declined in attendance when we first opened up after COVID. We resorted to conducting our worship services online during COVID. We also used Facebook Live for our worship services. We have an older congregation. But we also have younger people within our congregation who are tech savvy. We, the younger generation, worked with the older generation and helped with the presentation of the online worship services.”
<b>NA4</b>	“We had a decrease in our worship service attendance which was health related. People were concerned about the spread of COVID. However, during times of tragedy (as COVID could be classified), people seemed to want to flock to church. People always want to turn to church during times of tragedy. New people began to come in when our doors were open for them. However, Gen Z did not seem to have the desire to come back to church. People got accustomed to staying home on Sunday morning. But now things are opening up more and more within our church. We are gradually seeing people come back to church.”
<b>PP1</b>	“Declined in in-person attendance during COVID. Now no masks. More Gen Z coming in. We are getting more racially diverse. Gen Z look for diversity. They feel at home with everyone. Before we had about 160 people. Now we have about 125. Families are coming back. We welcome everyone to worship God with us.”
<b>PP2</b>	“We declined some. Now more people are coming back after COVID. It seemed as though COVID was like a pruning of people who were marginal. We saw the value in technology within our services as people could watch online who could not attend in person. Music was a big part of the worship service. We need the music. It creates a culture in which people want to be a part.”
<b>PYP1</b>	“We have increased in attendance. Pastor Tim is very adamant about opening the doors when we are able to. Several families came here from other churches. Their churches had not reopened at the time. The wearing of masks was optional with us. We are increasing our attendance as people see that they are welcomed to come in and worship.”
<b>PYP2</b>	“We declined in attendance during and after COVID. Before COVID we

	averaged 250-300 people. The first week we reopened we had 20-40 people coming in. But we are increasing in numbers. Gen Z took meals to people who were sick. We know that God is always around us and that we are never alone. We are training Gen Z to lead and to bring in other disciples.”
<b>PA1</b>	“I came to church here in the middle of everything. Older people are drifting away because of COVID. Attendance is less than before. But more people are starting to coming in.”
<b>PA2</b>	“Attendance is lower than before. People are beginning to feel safer about coming to church. They are slowly trickling in. We have a steady increase.”
<b>PA3</b>	“The church has declined in in-person attendance. People are afraid of COVID and have not come out to church. Gen Z have to make a choice. They have to step back and really take the time to know who God is and that they can trust Him. The world believes the lies and in turn lies to people. My heart hurts for people who are scared about everything. They don’t know God---who God is—what God can do”.
<b>PA4</b>	“Our church has declined in attendance since COVID. A majority of our youth took church for granted. We are here to serve the Lord. Church should not be taken for granted. If we are deeply rooted in God, when things like COVID happen we are strong in the Lord. We as a faith family can help others in times of need and help calm fears. It is good to come to church to see and be with your friends. But we should also come to worship the Lord.”

**RQ2: How do youth pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?**

<b>BP1</b>	“We had a moderate increase after COVID. People got out of the habit of coming to church. We are becoming a more generational church family. The merger helped with the increase in attendance. We have a good mixture of ages now in our church. This builds a stronger foundation”.
<b>BP2</b>	“Prior to COVID, the church experienced internal conflict and an eventual decline. I am a fairly new pastor to this particular church, though I have been a pastor for several years. The church shut down during COVID as requested by our Governor to help prevent the spread of the virus. The conflict was bubbling prior to COVID. Many left the church when it closed during COVID. Now that COVID is over, we are working to rebuild our church. Gen Z has done a lot to help with the revitalization of this church. They are witnessing within the neighborhood and inviting people to come to church. They are very enthusiastic.”
<b>BYPI</b>	“The youth, Gen Z, are very important to the church. They are the future leaders of the church and need to be trained to take on leadership roles. Gen Z are the future of the church if the church is to grow in number and bring others into the fellowship of the church. We have depended on them and will continue to depend on them in the future. We need them. They are the foundation of our church.”

<b>BYP2</b>	“As a church we declined, but we are doing as much as we can to revitalize our church. I am a Gen Z. Myself and the other Gen Zs are always inviting people to come to our church. We canvas our neighborhood and invite people to come. We pass out brochures about our church. We plan special events that we think people, especially Gen Z, would like to attend. We help out within the church. I run the sound equipment during the services. COVID really affected our church. Many of our people did not come back after COVID. They stayed home to watch church on TV.”
<b>BA1</b>	“Before the merger we had about 15-16 people in our youth group. We are seeing growth after the merger. Our youth group has increased and we are doing well.”
<b>BA2</b>	“We closed for a period of time. Then we merged with another church. Now we have 20-30 youth coming to our youth meeting. We now have 11 in our college age class.”
<b>BA3</b>	“We declined some during COVID, but we are slowly getting more people in. Our church is trying to attract more Gen Z age people as they are needed within our church. They are able to help with the music, the lighting, and other technical things that need done.”
<b>BA4</b>	“Gen Z are very useful within the church. They have technical skills that the older generations do not have. Gen Z have and will continue to attract other Gen Z people into the church who also have a unique skill set which would be of value to the church.”
<b>LP1</b>	“In-person has declined. We use YouTube and Facebook for our services. We had to resort to technology. How do you worship during a pandemic and still protect your neighbor?”
<b>LP2</b>	“In some areas we have seen growth to a certain degree. We kept our doors open and let the congregation decide what was best for them. We had a good balance of people coming in to our service.”
<b>LYP1</b>	“We had a loss in attendance our college age members went back to school. We went out into the neighborhood to the people rather than expect them to come to us. Families are beginning to come back in as we have increased our activities at church.
<b>LYP2</b>	“We had a stated goal for reaching out to people. We made a concerted effort to reach the people in our neighborhood. We hoped they would come to us, but we did not wait for that to happen. We reached out to them. Gen Z was there helping any way they could.”
<b>LA1</b>	“I think the demographics have a lot to do with the decline in our church. We have an older congregation. They do not come out for in-person worship.”
<b>LA2</b>	“We stayed online a lot longer than other churches. The nursery not opened. We did not have Sunday School. People aren’t seeing the point in coming back.”
<b>LA3</b>	“Before COVID people were going to church. When COVID hit people stopped coming. Some people lost loved ones during the pandemic. They turned to the church for answers. They found their answers in their faith and in going to church.”
<b>LA4</b>	“We have older people in our church. They stayed home during the pandemic. It

	was easier and safer for them to stream the service”.
<b>MP1</b>	“Gen Z have a lot of stresses in their life. They feel isolated.”
<b>MP2</b>	“Our church has mostly older people in it. We do not have many Gen Z but we are working to get them into our church. They like to volunteer for things. We plan to have events to get them more involved within the church and to use them more.”
<b>MYP1</b>	“Gen Z is pulling away from church. Statistics show an increase in suicide. We are losing this group to the present culture. But they are slowly coming back to church. We try to do things together as a “family”. We want Gen Z to feel wanted and a part of a community.”
<b>MYP2</b>	“Our youth group is a young youth group. Most of our older youth group are leaving for college and we are working on building up our current youth group. We depend on the older youth group who remain here to interact with our younger youth group and to be role models for them. We depend on them to show the younger youth group what it means to be a leader and how to go about learning to be leaders.”
<b>MA1</b>	“Many reasons for the decline. All services and group meetings are online. It takes more of an effort to attend in person. People more self-conscious online, but not so much in-person. I need the social contact.”
<b>MA2</b>	“People are uncomfortable being in confined spaces. Some people want community but have forgotten how to be sociable. People are watching each other to see how someone else will react before they react.”
<b>MA3</b>	“I don’t think that my generation (Generation Z) is very impactful. I am not sure that we as a group do much within our churches to help out with things. We need to volunteer more than we do. We need to be of service within the church as well as outside of the church. There is so much that needs to be done in the church that we can do.”
<b>MA4</b>	During COVID we were limited with what we as a generation could do. We had Zoom, but we missed being with other people and each other. As we are now getting back together.
<b>NP1</b>	“Closed for a period of time. Gradually increasing since we reopened. We had no youth pastor.”
<b>NP2</b>	“We did not have very many Gen Z prior to COVID. We are working to build up that group now that COVID is over.”
<b>NYP1</b>	“Zero. Gen Z are just not coming back to the church – unless their family drags them there and they have to come. They deem the church to be “hypocritical”. History repeats itself. Some not coming back had youth ministers who were not very good. They left. Church let them down by not finding the right person. If you don’t get them early and keep them, you lose them. We need to revitalize the church. I don’t measure how this youth group is at this present time. I measure it by what are they doing now. Are they still in church?”

<b>NYP2</b>	“We did not have very many Gen Z before COVID. Our goal is to build up that group.”
<b>NA1</b>	“People are scared of COVID. It is easier to stay home. People like staying home.”
<b>NA2</b>	“We have a new pastor. More and more younger people are coming. We use a Worship Team for singing. Singing less and less hymns.”
<b>NA3</b>	“We could not meet together during COVID. We did a lot virtually, but it is not the same. We want to get involved.”
<b>NA4</b>	“We are the next inheritors of the church. It will one day be ours to lead. We need to prepare ourselves for that day.”
<b>PP1</b>	“Gen Z are more willing to ask for help when they need it or do not understand something. We need to use Gen Z and take advantage of what they know. They are important to the growth and the stability of the church.”
<b>PP2</b>	“We declined , but now more people are coming. We make use of technology within our services. Music is big, but we need the music to worship. We try to create a culture that people want to be a part of. This seems to be bringing Gen Z in gradually.”
<b>PYP1</b>	“We opened our church as soon as we could. We value Gen Z and use them as much as we can. They are involved with all of our technical things. They are good with technology. They fulfill an important aspect of our worship service.
<b>PYP2</b>	“Gen Z want to be used and we used them as much as we could. They delivered meals to people in need within our neighborhood. Gen Z told people that God is always around. They are never alone. We are training our youth to be the leaders coming up.”
<b>PA1</b>	“People are being cautious but feeling better about returning to church. People see that they need something more than themselves. They need to be with other people.”
<b>PA2</b>	“People are coming back as there is a lowering of mandates and restrictions. People had never had to consider not going to church. They want to keep things as “normal” as possible.”
<b>PA3</b>	One Gen Z participant stated that if people saw her Gen Z group, they would want to be a part of it. She said that her group is always doing something. She stated that, “The world and the enemies are trying so hard to break down my generation. They say, “It’s all about YOU...It’s what makes YOU look good. It’s about what glorifies YOU.” She further stated, “Christianity is about humbling yourself. It’s not about me!”
<b>PA4</b>	We need to be deeply rooted in God. More Gen Z are coming back to church to see their friends...to be with their friends. Gen Z came back to church to worship the Lord. “We do like to hang out with our friends and sometimes we take church for granted, but we come to worship the Lord.”

**RQ3a: How do individuals of Generation Z who have experienced the revitalization process perceive their influence to have been within this revitalization process?**

<b>BA1</b>	“Agape (youth group) grew with the merger. We have a lot more younger people coming to church now.”
<b>BA2</b>	“We now have maybe 50 in our college and youth group after merger. We all get along great after. We now have a youth pastor as the pastor of the other church who merged with us became our youth pastor.”
<b>BA3</b>	“As things are opening up, we (Gen Z) are ready to be back and help where we are needed. We want to serve the Lord.”
<b>BA4</b>	“We are preparing ourselves to serve the Lord within the church. We are reading our Bible to prepare our hearts and minds. We may not be able to do much, but we will do what we can.”
<b>LA1</b>	“A lot of technology being used in church now. We invite people to watch the service with us live. We have easier access to technology as younger people help other people with technology.”
<b>LA2</b>	“Our church has stayed alive a lot longer than other churches have. We have to have church in our lives otherwise we will not pass it down to our kids. Gen Z should try to reach out to others more.”
<b>LA3</b>	“To try to get people back in church we have advertised on Facebook and other social media venues about our church. People are looking for answers and the church needs to be ready to help them answer the questions.”
<b>LA4</b>	“COVID negatively affected the church. We are trying to help people get back to normal. We do livestreaming and use Facebook to communicate with people, trying to get them back into church.”
<b>MA1</b>	“I don’t know if we have had much of an impact. We have cut back on service projects and outings. Not much going on. People seem to have a COVID mindset. They feel uncomfortable when people are around them.”
<b>MA2</b>	“We have a very unique young adult ministry. We have a strong cohort of young adults. We meet often during the week as well as meeting on Sunday. We are living in “community” really well.”
<b>MA3</b>	“Now that COVID is over, Gen Z is working on how to get people back into church. Gen Z are usually working and they cannot attend church as it is now scheduled which makes it difficult to get others to attend church with them”
<b>MA4</b>	“I don’t think that we had much influence on the church. We did what we could to help out when needed, but few people were coming for a while. Now people are beginning to come back in slowly. We need to be prepared for them.”
<b>NA1</b>	“Getting more involved in church will lead to revitalization. When we are at home, there is no community. We have a Worship Team and a Prayer Team. We are trying to get people back in church”.
<b>NA2</b>	“We closed for in-person for about a year. We did live-stream. It was good to listen to other pastors. I’m in college and live on campus. My generation is coming back to Christ—We are influencing college campuses for Christ.”

<b>NA3</b>	“As we (our church) opened up more, people seem to hear us more. We had a huge decline in our Gen Z. People began to notice the decline and then began to really notice us more.”
<b>NA4</b>	Our church has a stage built for theater and the local community theater group used that stage for its productions before COVID. We have now opened that stage up again to the theater group. They did a play during the summer with a summer group in which we (Gen Z) were also a part. We took advantage of the fact that people were coming into our church for the theater. We let them know that we held church services here and invited them to come and join us on Sunday.
<b>PA1</b>	“Not great to be honest with you. Many in college and at that age, they drift. Many college campuses shut down. There are few people in Gen Z coming to church right now. My wife and I are the only ones at the moment.”
<b>PA2</b>	“Not too many in my age group coming. Have other age groups with more, but not Gen Z. We have declined in this age group. My age group does not see religion as important. It is not prioritized as it should be. They don’t care about church. They want to go where there is a larger community of people like them.”
<b>PA3</b>	“Our church has declined. Not many people came back to the church for worship services.” Gen Z had to make a choice. Do we go to church and worship God, or are we too afraid to go and we stay home?
<b>PA4</b>	“If people are deeply rooted in God, they would come back to church for worship. A majority of the young people took church for granted. They came to church to see their friends, but that was lost to all of us for a time. Church is for the worship of God. Gen Z can help build a strong foundation for worship within our church.”

**RQ3b (Pastors/Youth Pastors Only): As a Pastor/Youth Pastor, what influence do you think Generation Z (those between 18 and 22 years of age) had upon the revitalization of your church in the aftermath of the coronavirus in 2020?**

<b>BP1</b>	“They are essential!! The church has to have a generational representation. The church has to be generationally active, not simply Christian consumers.”
<b>BP2</b>	“They are important to the future and to the well-being of the church”.
<b>BYP1</b>	“Gen Z want to be helpful. They are faithful to their church and more importantly, they are faithful to God. They try to bring others into the church.
<b>BYP2</b>	“They are workers for the Lord. They are bold and invite others to come to church with them”.
<b>LP1</b>	“This age group looks for missions to be a part of. They want to belong to something and to DO something.”
<b>LP2</b>	“We did not close our doors for very long during COVID. We were open and Gen Z was there with us.”
<b>LYP1</b>	“Gen Z stayed when others drifted away. They stayed to serve. They want to be in church.”



<b>LYP2</b>	“We set a goal of reaching out to people within our neighborhood and bringing them into church. We want to get as many in as we could. Gen Z was right there. We are still working on this goal and Gen Z is still with us.”
<b>MP1</b>	“We have had an increase in young couples. This huge group has had a huge role in revitalizing our church after COVID.”
<b>MP2</b>	“Gen Z have accepted responsibility and are assisting within the church any way that they can. They are working and in school, but still they want to be of service.”
<b>MYP1</b>	“Gen Z are the only folks bold enough to make a commitment to come back to church and be a part of things once again. COVID brought struggles for the church. Gen Z brought authenticity to the church as we dealt with the struggles”.
<b>MYP2</b>	Gen Z has “stepped up” and taken leadership roles when they were needed to do so. They want to be involved any way they can. They have been a positive influence on the generation coming behind them.”
<b>NP1</b>	“They are the life blood of the church. We need them!”
<b>NP2</b>	“They are very important to the church. During COVID we did not have any Gen Z coming because of restrictions. We are now getting them back. They are needed in the revitalization process.”
<b>NYP1</b>	“Their input has been listened to but not enough. They are looked at as the future of the church. We are in the here and now. How do we draw people in and draw young adults in? Teach them and prepare them to be leaders. Use them. Some churches have tried to use them and some churches have tried to shut them down. If the love of Christ doesn’t get from their heart and head to their fingertips they will not truly understand what they are supposed to do.”
<b>NYP2</b>	“We did not have that age group at all for a while. We have the very young and the older age groups. We could have really used Gen Z to help with various programs and activities at the church. We need them and are trying to get them back into the church.”
<b>PP1</b>	“Gen Z had trouble coming back to church as many played sports and games were scheduled on Sunday. Gen Z has added a freshness and energy to the church. They are theologically and technologically savvy. We have a lot of older people in our church. They are slowly coming back. We have diversity within our church. People like Gen Z look for churches with diversity. They value everyone.
<b>PP2</b>	“At this point, I would say, maybe, none. Andy Stanley said in his book that at the moment, Gen X is reaching more people for the Lord than Gen Z is. We do not have very many Gen Z in our church at the moment. We are working to remedy that situation.”
<b>PYP1</b>	“Influence long lasting. We have mostly an older congregation. Our Gen Z do not have a lot of influence at the moment because they are so few. We are trying to get more Gen Z into our church.
<b>PYP2</b>	“We need to maybe change some things within the church in order to attract

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	and keep Gen Z. Gen Z are our future church leaders and we need to get them back into church.”
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**RQ4** related to the phenomenological research method of this study and is therefore addressed in the **Data Analysis and Findings** section of this study. This question is based on the researcher’s analysis of the data obtained during the research process, observation of the churches during Sunday Worship, and the conversations with the participants.

### **Data Analysis and Findings**

#### **Data Analysis**

The researcher began each interview defining the terms of *church revitalization* and *church decline* as they pertained to the study to each pastor, youth pastor and Generation Z participant. *Church revitalization* was defined as an increase in in-person attendance in the Sunday morning worship service. *Church decline* was defined as a decrease in in-person attendance in the Sunday morning worship service. It would be difficult to determine church *revitalization* and church *decline* in terms of the spirituality of a church. The attendance numbers of the churches were a more measurable entity and a probable indicator of the revitalization or the decline of a church.

As stated earlier, the phenomenological research methodology chosen for this study focused on the experiences of the participants. The data collected were the experiences and perception of these experiences from the participants own perspective. The experience for this study was the COVID-19 pandemic and how it impacted the church. The viewpoint for this study is how Generation Z (between ages 18 and 22 years old) experienced, participated in, and influenced that impact within their own church. The perspective for this study is from the pastors and youth pastors viewing their church and their Gen Z attendees, and how those Gen Z attendees viewed themselves. In this section, the researcher provided the perceptions given

based on the interviews and the research. These perceptions may challenge some of the “ideas” surrounding the typical age group of Gen Z in most churches. These perceptions might also provide insight for other church leaders to possibly re-evaluate how this group of church attendees are perceived and utilized within their own churches.

Table 1 (p. 112) provided a list of the church denominations used within the study as well as the *Code Names* assigned to each church and each participant within these churches who were participating within the study. These code names were used to further enhance the anonymity of the churches and the participants. Table 2 (p. 116) provided *Demographic Data* on each of the churches used within the study. This data provided the “Date of Origin” for each church; the “Original Attendance” numbers when each church opened; the “Pre-COVID-19 Attendance Numbers (1/20)”; the “Post-COVID-19 Attendance Numbers (4/22)”; and the “Present Attendance Numbers (5/22)”. This information would enable the reader to get a sense of the character of each church as to its growth and/or decline over the years of its existence. It will also further allow the reader to observe the effect of COVID-19 upon the growth and/or decline of each church within the study.

### ***Research Question 1 (RQ1)***

**How do pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?**

The researcher asked the pastors if they thought their church’s numerical attendance, declined, increased, or remained the same after reopening the church following the shutdown from the COVID-19 pandemic. The answer to this question provided information for the researcher as to whether or not the pastors involved within the study viewed their church as

revitalizing (increasing in in-person attendance) or declining (decreasing in in-person attendance).

When the researcher addressed this question to the pastors, the question arose often from these pastors of how does one tabulate the statistics for Sunday morning worship during this time period? Even though an online account indicated that someone “logged into” that account, there is no way to know how many people may also be viewing that account at that particular time. There may be only one person or there may be a family of four viewing that worship service. To attempt consistency among the participating churches in the study, the researcher focused on in-person attendance only after the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the Coronavirus (COVID-19), many churches within this particular state were not open for in-person worship services on Sunday morning. To prevent the spread of the virus, the governor of the state asked churches to refrain from meeting together for worship services for a period of time. Many churches adhered to the governor’s request and did not meet in-person for worship services. Many of these churches had the technical capabilities to provide their congregation with the option of using the virtual format to broadcast their Sunday morning worship services. Those churches who had that option took advantage of that option which was available to them. However, there were some churches who decided to continue to meet together for their regularly scheduled Sunday morning worship services. They took precautions to protect the health of their members who attended these services, such as wearing masks and social distancing the requested 6’ interval between individuals. Since the churches took different approaches to the pandemic response and state/federal guidelines, the time period for closure among the churches participating in the study ranged from two (2) months to almost two (2) years.

Many of the church attendees were staying home to attend the services streaming online that had increased in popularity during COVID-19. The researcher asked the pastors how they had handled the recording of their statistics, in regard to those congregates who streamed the worship service in the privacy of their own homes. Most pastors did not seem overly concerned about counting the statistics of those members of their church who opted to stay at home and view the church service on their television sets. They knew that their members were watching the services that were being streamed. They also held the opinion that as soon as it was “safe” for their members to return to their church for worship, that their members would return for in-person worship. The researcher accepted the statistics that were provided by each church. However, as stated earlier, for this study the researcher reinforced the focus of in-person attendance of the participants as this statistic could be validated within each of the churches.

When asked their opinion as to whether their church increased, remained the same, or decreased in in-person attendance in the aftermath of the Coronavirus in 2020 the researcher noticed the perspective of the participants brought different results, as shown in Table 4 *INTERVIEWS: PASTORS, YOUTH PASTORS, AND GENERATION* (p. 119) and a numerical comparison is shown in Table 2 *DEMOGRAPHIC DATA* (p. 116). The pastors viewed the church as a whole and from a different perspective as would a congregant within the church body. For example, BP noted that there was an increase in attendance, but the younger generation saw a decrease in attendance (see Table 4, p. 119). A majority of the churches showed either a decline or the same attendance as before. They saw a loss of in-person attendees who were in church before the pandemic as opposed to the in-person attendance at the time of these interviews (see Table 4, p. 119). Each pastor that was interviewed had different experiences and therefore, different perspectives on the effects of COVID upon their church.

When then asked, by the researcher, how they perceived Generation Z's influence to the revitalization (or decline) of their church, one thing remained constant among the pastors that it is important to the church as a whole. The pastors interviewed had all expressed the same opinion concerning the value of Gen Z to their church. Table 4 (p. 119) provided comments from the interviews supporting this observation. They gave comments such as, "We have a good mix of all generations in our service", "we are stronger in the Lord for it", and "we need more college age adults to help grow our church". Another pastor said that he had the opportunity to become the lead pastor, but he opted to remain with the youth. He said, "The youth are very important to the growth and to the stability of the church. I opted to be the youth pastor rather than the lead pastor because I believe in the value of the youth within the church. I stayed with them." He went on to say that even though their church lost some of their youth/Gen Z, that they are seeing numerical growth within the youth of their church. Gen Z are inviting people to come to church with them." In addition to an overall agreement of the importance of Gen Z within the church, many pastors felt Gen Z brings the sense of community back to the church. As one pastor stated they are very "mission minded". Gen Z has a concern for others and wanted to reach out to bring other people within the church.

Another pastor stated that Gen Z did not want to close the church during COVID as requested by the governor of the state. They wanted to remain open. Gen Z continued to meet on Sunday morning and brought other Gen Z people to the worship service. Another pastor stated that when school was out for the summer or Christmas break that he saw an increase in the attendance of Gen Z, but they decreased when school was back in session for them. It appeared to the researcher that Gen Z were highly valued within the churches and were welcomed whenever they were able to attend worship services there, or anytime that they could come and

help with services or other activities that were going on at the church. One Pastor referred to Gen Z as the “lifeblood” of the church. He stated that whenever Gen Z is there, he has attempted to build a stronger relationship with them. He valued their input and their presence.

Based on the interviews among the ten participating churches, regardless of the denomination or size of the congregation, the pastors perceive Generation Z as a vital part of the church community. They are a generation focused on others and the community, a basis of most evangelical protestant church mission statements. The Pastors perceived this generation (Gen Z) as focused on relationship and helping others. This is evident in the focus of mission work and inviting friends to church. Finally, the pastors perceive Generation Z as the future of the church. They will be the leaders of the church and need to be brought up to “step in” as those leaders. With regards to the revitalization (or decline) their church had after the COVID-19 pandemic, the pastors perceived Generation Z as key leaders in how they did or will increase in-person attendance within their own church.

***Research Question 2 (RQ2)***

**How do youth pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?**

The youth pastors were interviewed at each of the ten evangelical protestant churches who participated within the study. Their comments were similar to these of the pastors. One youth pastor pointed out that during COVID “people got out of the habit of going to church”. This was a recurring theme among the youth pastors’ perception as shown in Table 3 (p. 117) *COMPARISON OF THEMES AND COMMONALITIES*. From the interview responses in Table 4 (p. 119) one can see that the youth pastors, just as the pastors of the churches, also valued Gen Z and wanted them in church. One youth pastor stated that having Gen Z in their church

provided a good mixture of ages which helped to build a stronger foundation within the church. All of the youth pastors experienced a decline in in-person attendance within their churches during COVID (Table 4, p. 119). Gen Z is credited by the youth pastors as having played a major role in strengthening the young adult ministry and revitalizing the church in in-person attendance. Gen Z has been instrumental in inviting other people to the youth programs and assisting in increasing the attendance within these youth programs (Table 4, p. 119). It appeared to be the consensus of the youth pastors that Gen Z are the foundation upon which the youth pastors are attempting to strengthen and build up their youth group. Just as the pastors perceived, so do the youth pastors perceive Gen Z to be the “future leaders” of the church. As the future leaders of the church, Gen Z are being trained to move into these leadership positions in the near future. However, one youth pastor pointed out that he sees Gen Z as pulling away from the church. Another youth pastor pointed out that “if we do not make a place for them (Gen Z), we will lose them” (Table 4, p. 119).

Overall, the youth pastors see the value of Gen Z through the statistical growth of their church. They fear that if Gen Z are not used within the church, that they may become lost to the church. COVID provided many uses for technology and in some areas pushed churches to move more towards utilizing technology in their ministry. During COVID many of the youth programs had to be conducted online through avenues such as Zoom and Facebook LIVE. However, now that churches are open for in-person worship, some of the youth pastors fear that they may have lost some of their Gen Z (Table 4, p. 119), because people have become comfortable with fitting church into a one hour Facebook LIVE while they are home. It appeared to the researcher that it is the desire of the youth pastors to re-engage with Gen Z and to get them more active in church as Gen Z once had been.



Youth Pastors perceived Gen Z as wanting to be of service within the church. They want to be used and to be of value within their church. Youth pastors seemed to recognize this fact and are trying to incorporate Gen Z within the leadership of the church as much as possible. The youth pastors are using Gen Z as mentors to the younger age groups within the church. Another way that Gen Z is being used within the church is with the technology that churches have begun to use extensively. Gen Z is familiar with this technology and is eager to assist in that regard. They are being used which in turn makes Gen Z feel valued within their church (Table 4, p. 119). Of all of the youth pastors interviewed, only one youth pastor saw Gen Z as not returning to church and being as involved within the church as much as they had been prior to COVID. They are in college and have not returned to church as much as he would like for them to have returned. He thought that there needed to be some things that changed within the church to encourage Gen Z to come back to church. However, he did not elaborate on what those things might be.

Youth Pastors acknowledged that one obstacle with Generation Z is living away from home during school. It is difficult to have them fill leadership roles when their attendance is based on school breaks. Churches begin to experience growth and revitalization as the college students returned home from college but declined when they leave at the start of the new semester. Therefore, the researcher concluded the church needed to find a way to attract the college students within their city during the school year. This is a commonality among the churches but not necessarily a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the researcher believed that this obstacle should not impact the revitalization or decline of the church due to the pandemic, since during the pandemic colleges and universities shifted to online studies and many closed dormitories. Therefore, students were home during the shutdown for the pandemic.

Also, after COVID, churches began to experience growth as they were able to begin once again many of their church activities that had ceased during COVID. The return of the college students, especially those aged between 18 and 22, for the summer break meant there was more leadership within the church. The college age church members worked within their churches to assist as leaders in many of the summer children and youth activities. This does not imply that Gen Z is not important to the church. This group does want to be a part of the church and the activities of the church. One pastor pointed out that Gen Z were faithful to God and to their church. They want to be a part of the church. They are mission minded and want to bring others into the church (Table 3, p. 117; Table 4, p. 119). Gen Z attract Gen Z. Post COVID, the churches are seeing growth. That growth is bringing about a sense of stability within the church. Gen Z is an important part of that growth and stability.

Among the ten youth pastors interviewed from the participating churches, many of the perceptions were similar to the pastors' perceptions. However, the youth pastors seemed to recognize some of the obstacles that come with the Generation Z age group of this study, such as, leaving for school semesters, working on Sundays or when church activities are happening, or even being involved in sports that play/practice on Sundays. For the youth pastors, the influence Generation Z has on the revitalization/decline of the church following the COVID-19 pandemic is important, however, the churches need to be flexible and adapt with how they reach that age group because traditional service times or activities may not be what works for that church when retaining Generation Z within their church. One observation the researcher noticed during the interview process is that if a church had underlining issues, no matter how small, the COVID-19 pandemic provided an opportunity for those issues to surface.

The underlining issues ranged from lack of technology to issues among the congregation. An example would be the need for technology. Some churches immediately recognized they did not have the equipment or trained members to transition to virtual services and activities. This was, in a sense, forced on many churches that were slow to make the transition. They realized they did not have the resources (i.e. equipment, trained leaders) to minister in that capacity. Technology is, however, an area where Generation Z stepped in to take leadership roles and presented another example of their influence during the pandemic for their church. . Another issue that surfaced during COVID-19 was more personal for the congregants. This included members reexamining their faith and the importance of church within their own lives. Some of the church leaders have recognized and acknowledged those issues within their churches.

***Research Question 3 (RQ3)***

**How do individuals of Generation Z who have experienced the revitalization process perceive their influence to have been within this revitalization process?**

Because of COVID, many churches that had not previously incorporated a lot of technology within their church services began to do so. The beginning of the use of technology as well as the increased use of technology within the church services became necessary. During COVID, churches who had not previously broadcast their church services on television began to do so to reach their members who were no longer attending services in-person for various reasons. Technology is an area in which Gen Z are “experts” having grown up using much of this technology. They were very familiar with what to do and when to do it in regard to the technology. Gen Z became invaluable to their churches as they assumed the roles of technical advisors and the “in-house” technicians with in their churches.

However, because Gen Z was so used to the technology, they were unaware of their invaluable assistance within their church in this regard. The use of technology and technology itself were “second nature” to Gen Z. Because of this they were not aware of how valuable their skills and expertise in this area actually were to their church and the worship services. People came to depend upon Gen Z as the experts in technology. As a whole, Gen Z became an invaluable asset within their churches.

One Gen Z person stated that Gen Z are preparing themselves to serve the Lord. They are reading their Bibles to prepare their hearts and minds for whatever the Lord may have for them to do. They will help within the church wherever they can. They are reaching out to other young adults trying to get them into church. Even though there is technology which can be used in order that people can view the worship service online, Gen Z are trying to bring people *into* the church for worship. They are using Facebook and other resources to invite people to come into their churches. They are trying to get things back to *normal*.

Because what Gen Z does within their church is so natural for them, they do not think that they are doing very much. They fail to realize just how invaluable they have become within the structure of their church. As one Gen Z church member stated in their interview for this study, “I don’t see that we are making very much of an impact within our church. We are just trying to help people get back to normal. We advertise on Facebook and other social media venues about our church. We do livestreaming to communicate with people, trying to get them back in church.” Another Gen Z person pointed out that Gen Z have to have church as a part of their lives, otherwise they will not pass this on to their children. “The church has to have generational representation” stated a pastor. This same pastor further said that “the church has to

be generationally active, not simply Christian consumers. Gen Z is important to the future and the well-being of the church”.

People were still afraid of COVID, especially the older people, and rightly so. However, a majority of the young people took church for granted and did not always come to church, stated another Gen Z. If they did come to church it was only to see their friends, not to worship God. Gen Z had a choice to make, stated another Gen Z. Do they come to church to worship God, or to see their friends? Gen Z can help to build a strong Christian foundation within their church and at the same time build strong Christian friendships within their church. Another Gen Z college student stated, “My generation is coming back to Christ. We are influencing college campuses for Christ.”

***Research Question 4 (RQ4)***

**Is there a correlation between the relative size of the congregation of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church?**

Many of the churches were faced with challenges when the COVID pandemic began in the United States. Some of those challenges faced by the churches are listed below and were addressed by many of the participants.

- **State and Federal restrictions and closures** – these forced churches to shut down for a period of time. The reopening depended on the church and the restrictions.
- **Concern for health** – the church was concerned for the health of their attendees, especially those in the age bracket (typically small children and elderly) who were deemed “vulnerable” to COVID-19. Even a reopening came with a new style of worship.

- **People getting comfortable staying home** – as churches adapted to streaming services and Bible Studies on Zoom and the limit of in-person activities due to close spaces and services not offered, such as, nursery care, people stayed home to watch services.

As the restrictions began, people were forced to find ways to stay connected. This problem surfaced in churches as well. Churches were viewed, by more than just those that attended, as a community. One day, due to the Pandemic, the attendees were shut off from that community. The pastors and church leaders needed to learn, quickly, how to adapt and reconnect to this community within their own individual homes. Across the country and the world, everyone experienced an increase within virtual production. People began setting up at-home offices and businesses and adapted their operations accordingly. Schools set up virtual learning and students logged on from their own homes. Churches set up virtual worship as they would conduct the service from individual homes, or the leaders would “film” the service from church and post it online. Bible studies and other “community” activities were done on social media, or other software platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and WebEx. The world of virtual became everyday life and people became more comfortable with it. As restrictions decreased, the churches opened their doors again for in-person worship and other activities. There was still a fear on the part of many as they returned to “normal” life. There were still restrictions on gathering, such as, being indoors and social distancing. For the majority of the participants, they felt these challenges further contributed to the decline. However, the more life returned to “normal”, the more the church attendance increased.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought many challenges to every aspect of everyday life. However, when the churches were forced to close their doors, this very act brought forth the

question of “how do we reach our community when we cannot access them?” Technology became vital for reconnecting families, friends, and communities. Technology is also the greatest correlation between the relative size of the congregation of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of their church. For many larger churches pre-COVID they were streaming Sunday services online. It was an outreach tool. When the pandemic began it was an easy transition to move from in-person to virtual. The larger churches, in most cases, had the equipment, trained personnel, and money to make the transition to virtual. In smaller churches the financial means did not always allow for the purchase of needed equipment for streaming, pre-COVID. During COVID streaming services and social media boosted to the front and everyday life was transitioning to them for work and connecting to one another, including churches. Smaller churches were forced to adapt or lose a connection with their community and church family. Larger churches just simply transitioned from Sunday services streaming to all activities streaming. One church even provided family craft night on Zoom as one could drive-by curbside to pick up their supplies from the church. The smaller churches began with a cell phone recording a Sunday sermon to post on Social media or streaming a Sunday service on Facebook LIVE but eventually moved to cameras and Zoom Bible Studies or Youth Activities.

Technology was also the greatest influence Generation Z had for these churches. Social media, streaming and virtual connections were everyday life for the Generation Z group in this study. COVID-19 was an opportunity for them to step into more leadership roles with their churches. In the smaller churches, it was often the Generation Z taking the lead on making the connection with the communities and developing new ways to minister to the congregation. For the larger churches, Generation Z often was support to the tech team or they became new

members to an already developed tech team. When it came to technology the size of the church often mattered and people that knew how to work with the technology of that time could choose to help their church or sit back and do nothing. Most of the larger churches already had teams and equipment in place and most of the smaller churches did not and that is why Generation Z became more vital in the smaller churches' revitalization (or decline) from and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Findings**

After examining the data and analyzing the questions, the Researcher found that Generation Z's influence varied depending on their particular viewpoint of church in general, their specific church, and life demands. The pastors' particular viewpoint of Generation Z's influence varied depending upon the amount of Gen Z attendees within their churches and their experience working with this generation.

As one views the Demographic Data (Table 2, p. 116), one can observe that each of these ten churches have been stable churches with periods of growth, decline, and growth again. It should also be noted that at the time of this study none of the ten churches appeared to have fully recovered numerically from the coronavirus in 2020 with the exception of the Lutheran 2 church and the Non-Denominational 1 church. The Lutheran 2 had 60 pre-COVID and 73 in present attendance. The Non-Denominational 1 had pre-COVID attendance of 50 and a present attendance of 60.

As one examined Table 2 (p. 116) and Table 3 (p.117) one was able to make inferences from the data as well as draw some conclusions. Looking first at Table 2 (p.116) one observed that overall, the ten evangelical protestant churches who participated in the study had shown a steady increase in attendance in the Sunday morning worship service post-COVID. The Baptist



church had an average attendance of 284 worshippers since they reopened post-COVID. Their present average attendance (as of 5/22) is 303 worshippers. The Lutheran church had an average of 64 worshippers attending post-COVID. Their present average attendance of worshippers is 75. The Methodist church showed an average attendance of between 750-800 worshippers post-COVID. Their present average attendance of worshippers post-COVID remained at 750-800 on Sunday mornings. The Non-Denominational church averaged 55 worshippers when they reopened post-COVID, and the Presbyterian church averaged 121 worshippers in the Sunday morning worship service post-COVID. The Non-Denominational church had an average attendance of 60 worshippers post-COVID and the Presbyterian church had increased to an average of 245 worshippers.

Based on these statistics which were obtained from the individual churches, it appeared most of the evangelical churches have shown a gradual increase for in-person worship on Sunday mornings. Based upon the information in Table 1 (p.112), it could be inferred that more people had begun to attend church services in-person on Sunday morning. There were exceptions to the responses in **RQ2**. For example, the Baptist church contributed the increase in their attendance numbers to the merger. The non-denominational church participants mentioned the positive experience Gen Z had with the church leaders or with the style of worship as the contributing factor. This variation in response illustrated the limitation which was noted previously. The viewpoint of the different Gen Z participants could result in different perceptions because the methodology of this research is based on the *perception* of the participants. The following will examine these viewpoints and the findings based on each research question.

***Research Question 1 (RQ1)***

**How do pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?**

When one examined the data gleaned from the interviews with the pastors and with the Gen Z participants (Table 2, p.116) one may or may not see a different picture of in-person attendance. One Baptist pastor saw an increase in the college ministry in his church which is the group in which Gen Z participants would be found. However, the two Gen Z members who participated in the study from that church had comments similar to those of their pastor. All three (1 Pastor and 2 Gen Z participants) of the Baptist church study participants saw growth in this age group. Part of the reason could be that this church recently merged with another Baptist church in their area. The other Baptist church had a smaller attendance and had asked the larger Baptist church about merging their congregations. This process had begun pre-COVID. There were steps within the Baptist denomination that had to be followed before the merger could take place. At the time that this study was taking place, the merger was in its final stages. The merger seemed to be an exciting event for all concerned. The pastor had stated that there was a good mixture of ages as the merger added 75-80 people to the congregation (RQ1).

***Research Question 2 (RQ2)***

**How do youth pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?**

In relation to the perspective of Generation Z, one of the Gen Z participants said that there were a lot of young people coming and more college age people were coming. The other Gen Z participant said, "There are a ton of youth on Wednesday night. We have a variety of

classes now since we merged” (Table 2, p. 116) (**RQ2**). This is a result of the youth pastors providing classes and activities for Generation Z to attend and be involved in the church.

One of the Lutheran churches, however, had shown a decline in attendance post-COVID. Post-COVID, the average attendance of those returning to in-person worship was 64 people. Their present number in attendance had increased to 75 (5/22). Pre-COVID their average attendance was 117. Overall, they had an *older* congregation. It is believed that this is the reason that not as many people had returned for in-person worship on Sunday morning. The Sunday morning services for the Lutheran church have been and are still being streamed (as of 5/22). This is of benefit to their older congregates as they are still able to “attend” services on Sunday morning. Typically, people associate with and build relationship with people with whom they have things in common and with whom they share common interests. This is true within a church as well. A common theme among the youth pastors was that Generation Z are going to attract other Generation Z. The isolation among people which resulted from COVID-19 helped many to realize how much they missed the community with whom they associated in church, such as, youth groups, praise teams, Bible Study, and other activities. In the researcher’s opinion, COVID-19 provided the circumstances in which Generation Z was able to understand the relevance and the importance of the church community within their own lives.

Pastors and Youth Pastors addressed how they perceived Gen Z’s influence in the revitalization of the church. The pastor participants all seemed aware that Generation Z (between 18 and 22-year-olds) were key to the future of the church but at the same time struggle with the challenge that Gen Z are at the time in their lives when they are leaving home for work or school. Therefore, their involvement with their “home church” is sporadic and inconsistent.

The perception is that the pastors want more Gen Z involvement in the church and view it as essential to the growth of their church, but struggle with how to achieve that involvement.

***Research Question 3 (RQ3)***

**How do individuals of Generation Z who have experienced the revitalization process perceive their influence to have been within this revitalization process?**

As one read the commonalities in Table 3 (p. 117) and the comments found in Table 4 (p. 119) from Gen Z and the Pastors/Youth Pastors of the churches involved in the study, one can see that the pastors and the youth pastors valued Gen Z and wanted them active within the church. **RQ3** was asked specifically to the Generation Z participants and addressed their own perspective of how they viewed their influence on the revitalization (or decline) of their church. A few Gen Z participants expressed the opinion that they had very little impacted on the revitalization of the church. Some expressed concern that many of the Gen Z at their church were *lost* due to work and school. The biggest impact that was a common theme among the Gen Z participants was the impact and use of technology and a sense of community within their church among their generation. It was often mentioned how the services adapting to technology and live stream were reaching more Gen Z who would not otherwise go to church or that may have left the church due to work or school. The participants talked greatly about the sense of community provided in their church and how that was missed during the shutdown. Gen Z participants mentioned that they felt that church did not relate to their life, that they do not understand how it is relevant to them. Yet, it seemed that Generation Z was aware that their particular skills in technology are of value to the church as was seen during the COVID pandemic. With few exceptions, Gen Z seemed to understand that they as a generation are valued and have a place

within the structure of the church. They also seem to value relationships with other Gen Z cohorts. At the same time, they seem to want to build relationships with other generations.

***Research Question 4 (RQ4)***

**Is there a correlation between the relative size of the congregation of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church?**

After examining research question 4, one can observe that there is no correlation between the size of the church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had on revitalization of the church. The data showed that regardless of the size of the church, the issues were the same. The exceptions were due to issues unrelated to the COVID-19 influence, such as, the merging of the Baptist church. COVID-19 impacted everything from the smallest church or business to the largest church or business. How Generation Z influenced the revitalization after the reopening of their church was more about their personal experience and the opportunities available at their church.

The Baptist church in Table 2 (p. 116) exhibited an attendance of 303 as of 5/22. The Lutheran church had a current attendance of 75 as of 5/22, while the Methodist church exhibited a current attendance of 750-800 during the same period. The Non-Denominational church showed a current attendance (5/22) of 60, and the Presbyterian church currently had 245 members attending after COVID (5/22). It appeared that the pastors and the youth pastors valued Gen Z as a group and wanted them in their churches. Gen Z had value themselves as well as the fact that they added to the church with their presence and their skills in the opinion of the pastors and the youth pastors. Not only did Gen Z attract others in their age group which would increase the attendance within the church, but their unique skills and abilities added positively to the worship service (Table 3, p. 117; Table 4, p. 119). Therefore, it appeared that the numerical size

of each church did not have an effect upon the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of the church (**RQ4**). All ten of the evangelical protestant churches, regardless of their numerical size, valued Generation Z and wanted this Generation to be active participants within their church.

However, an increase in the numerical size of the church did have an effect on the revitalization of the church. An increase in the numerical size of the church would be a *concrete sign* that the church had grown in the aftermath of the coronavirus. This outward sign of physical growth would be an encouragement and a motivation for the church members to continue their efforts to bring others back into the church for in-person worship. As others continued to attend in-person worship services, the church would continue to visibly exhibit growth.

One impact the size of the church had on the influence of Gen Z to that church would be the portion of Generation Z attendees within that church. A church which has 60 people in attendance and 30 (50%) are Generation Z, then Gen Z would have a greater influence on the revitalization or decline of that church. A church with 300 attendees and 30 (10%) are Generation Z would not necessarily see a greater influence from Generation Z. However, this correlation has to do with percentage of Gen Z attendees to the whole congregation rather than the actual size of the church.

### **Evaluation of the Research Design**

Roberts (2010) in her book wrote about the selection of the research methodology for the dissertation study. It is important that the researcher match the proposed study to the correct research methodology. She suggested that first the researcher would need to determine the topic for the dissertation. The topic for the dissertation would depend upon the question the researcher

is attempting to answer. The researcher wanted to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of the church after the Coronavirus in 2020. Many, if not all, churches closed their doors to in-person Sunday Morning Worship in an effort to curb the spread of the Coronavirus (Earls, 2020). These churches resorted to the use of technology as their congregates worshipped in the privacy and “safety” of their own homes to prevent the spread of the virus (Lifeway Research, 2019).

As a result, in-person attendance declined drastically in many churches. Some smaller churches closed their doors permanently as they were no longer able to afford to keep the church building open when no congregates were coming in for worship (Earls, 2020). The lack of in-person worshippers translated into a loss of revenues for many churches. This loss of revenues was something that many of these small churches could not withstand (Earls, 2020). A study that would explore the “influence” that a particular generation had on the revitalization of a church following its reopening in the aftermath of the coronavirus in 2020 is difficult to measure in concrete facts and figures. The influence a person had on a situation or on another person is not easy to measure.

Creswell and Poth (2018) appeared to be in agreement with Roberts’ perspective on phenomenological research. Their book, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Creswell and Poth, 2018) discussed five qualitative approaches to research: Narrative, Phenomenology, Grounded Theory, Ethnography, and Case Study. Based upon the descriptions of these five qualitative approaches to researching the researcher decided that the phenomenological approach would be the qualitative approach best suited for this particular study.

This qualitative approach is “based on the philosophical orientation called *phenomenology*, which focuses on people’s experience from their perspective” (p. 143). The research inquiry began with a broad, general question: What is the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of a church following its decline in the aftermath coronavirus in 2020? Roberts (2010) summed up the section on Qualitative Research focusing on phenomenology by saying, “...qualitative researchers look at the essential character or nature of something, not the quantity...Researchers are interested in the meanings people attach to the activities and events in their world and are open to whatever emerges” (p. 143). Therefore, in the opinion of the researcher, qualitative research focusing on phenomenology was the best research method for the researcher to use in order to answer the research topic selected for the study.

The researcher was interested in the perception of the individuals participating within the research study. In order to reveal the perception of the individuals involved, the researcher needed to question each participant by asking them their opinion or their viewpoint of a certain phenomena, i.e. the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of a church in the aftermath of the coronavirus in 2020. It was from the accumulation of these perceptions and viewpoints that the researcher was able to ascertain the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of the church in the aftermath of the coronavirus in 2020.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter Four encompassed the data analysis and findings of the dissertation. The Compilation Protocol and Measures of the study were examined first. Wengraf’s (2006) lightly structured in-depth interview process was used to gather the necessary data for the study. Wengraf (2006) recommended that the researcher record the interview as well as take written notes. The researcher did both as recommended, in that the interview sessions were audio/video



recorded as well as notes were taken by the researcher during the interviews. The participants within the study signed consent forms agreeing to be interviewed and agreeing to these interviews being recorded with the assurance that their privacy would be protected.

Permission was obtained from the individual churches that participated in the study before the study began. Once the necessary permission was granted, the researcher obtained permission from all of the participants who would participate within the study. The researcher determined how the individual components of the study were to be measured. Demographic data on the individual churches was obtained from the various church participants/pastors in order that a comparison could be made among the churches in regard to the attendance statistics over a given period of time beginning with their *Date of Origin* through to the *Present*, which is the date of May, 2022. This information provided a glimpse into the churches as how they fared prior to COVID as well as how they had progressed post-COVID (Table 2, p. 116). Table 3 *COMPARISON OF THEMES AND COMMONALITIES* (p. 117) provided a comparative overview of the themes gleaned from the interviews. It also contained information of interest as to the effects that the Coronavirus had on the pastors, the youth pastors, and the church congregates in regard to in-person church attendance during and after the coronavirus.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

The first four chapters of this dissertation examined the problem explored within this study: the origin of the problem, the current literature surrounding the problem and its possible solution, the gap in the literature concerning the problem, and an analysis of the research pertaining to this problem. Chapter five concluded the dissertation process as it reexamined the research problem. It examined the Research Purpose, the Research Questions, the Research Findings, the Research Conclusions, Implications, and Applications, followed by the Research Limitations, and lastly, Further Research possibilities.

### Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z had on the revitalization of a church following its in-person decline as a result of the coronavirus in 2020. An interview protocol was developed and used as participants of Generation Z, youth pastors, and pastors were interviewed in regard to their perceptions of the influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of their church.

### Research Questions

**Research Question 1:** How do pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?

**Research Question 2:** How do youth pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process?

**Research Question 3:** How do individuals of Generation Z who have experienced the revitalization process perceive their influence to have been within this revitalization process?

**Research Question 4:** Is there a correlation between the relative size of the congregation of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church?

### **Research Conclusions**

As one examined the interviews as shown in Table 2 (p. 116) and Table 3 (p. 117) one would be able to make inferences from this data and thereby draw conclusions. Looking first at Table 2 (p. 116) one can observe from the Demographic Data the individual churches' attendance over a given period of time from the Date of Origin of the ten churches to the Present Date (4/22) when this study was conducted. Since their date of origin to the present (4/22) the churches have shown growth. Overall, the ten evangelical protestant churches who participated in the study had shown a steady increase in attendance in the Sunday morning worship service from pre-COVID (1/20), just before the pandemic was declared, to the Present (4/22) when this study was conducted. The Baptist church had an average attendance of 284 worshippers since they reopened post-COVID. Their present average attendance at the time of this research was 303 worshippers. The Lutheran church had an average of 64 worshippers attending post-COVID. Their present average attendance of worshippers is 75. The Methodist church showed an average attendance of between 750-800 worshippers post-COVID. Their current average attendance of worshippers post-COVID remains at 750-800 on Sunday mornings. The Methodist church used a range for their attendance as they were not certain that they had been able to count everyone who was in attendance. The Non-Denominational church averaged 55 worshippers when they reopened post-COVID, and the Presbyterian church averaged 121 worshippers in the Sunday morning worship service post-COVID. The Non-Denominational church currently had an

average attendance 60 worshippers post-COVID, and the Presbyterian church have increased from 121 post-COVID (4/22) to an average of 245 worshippers as of May, 2022.

Based on these statistics which were obtained from the individual churches, it would seem that all ten of the evangelical protestant churches have shown a gradual increase since they reopened their buildings for in-person worship on Sunday mornings. Based upon the information in Table 1 (p. 112) it could be inferred that more people are beginning to attend church services in-person on Sunday mornings, post-COVID.

However, when one examined the data gleaned from the interviews with the pastors and with the Gen Z participants (Table 3, p. 117) one may or may not see a different picture of in-person church attendance. The Baptist pastor saw an increase in the college ministry in his church which is the group in which the Gen Z participants would be. The two Gen Z members who participated in the study had comments similar to those of their pastor. All three (the Pastor and 2 Gen Z participants) of the Baptist church study participants saw growth in this age group. Part of the reason could be that this church recently merged with another Baptist church in their area. The other Baptist church had a smaller attendance and had asked this particular Baptist church about merging their congregations. This process had begun pre-COVID. There were steps within the Baptist denomination that had to be followed before the merger could take place. At the time this study was taking place, the merger was in its final stages. The merger seemed to be an exciting event for all concerned. The pastor said that there is a good mixture of ages as the merger added 75-80 people to the congregation. One of the Gen Z participants said that there are a lot of younger people coming and more college age people coming. The other Gen Z participant said, "There are a ton of youth on Wednesday night. We have a variety of classes now since we merged" (Table 3, p. 117).

The Lutheran church, however, had shown decline in in-person attendance post-COVID. Post-COVID, the average attendance of those returning to in-person worship was 64 people. Their current number in attendance had increased to 75. Pre-COVID their average attendance was 117. They have an older congregation overall. It is believed that this is the reason that not as many people have come back to the in-person worship services on Sunday morning. They did stream their services on Sunday morning. This was of benefit to their older adults in the congregation as they are still able to “attend” services on Sunday morning.

The question arises: How does one tabulate the statistics for Sunday morning? The researcher asked the pastors how they handled their statistics in regard to those who streamed the service in the privacy of their own homes. Most did not seem overly concerned about counting those statistics. They knew that their congregants were watching the services that were being streamed. It is believed by the pastors overall that once everyone felt safer coming to in-person worship on Sunday morning that they will see an increase in their statistics. For the purposes of this study, only in-person attendance was counted as these statistics could be verified.

The Methodist church had seen a decrease in their Sunday morning worship attendance. However, they were doing quite well relatively speaking when one examined their attendance numbers. Based upon their attendance numbers, they only have about 50% of their people returning to in-person worship post-COVID (Table 2, p. 116). They gave a range of numbers for their attendance as it has been difficult to accurately count all who may be there. They also streamed their services. It is uncertain exactly how they measured the attendance of those who were streaming the worship services. However, their youth pastor said that they had “declined for a season”, but that they were beginning to increase. He did say that “Gen Z are the only folks bold enough to make a commitment to come back and be a part of things” (Table 3, p. 117). It

should be noted that this particular Methodist church since its inception in the city has been a large church in regard to in-person attendance over the years. Though it has declined in in-person attendance post-COVID, it still had a fairly large congregation on Sunday morning.

The Non-denominational church had remained steady in attendance post-COVID. They were in a unique situation during COVID. The founding pastor was in the process of retiring when COVID happened. The church was searching for a replacement pastor. The founding pastor remained in place as senior pastor through COVID. Once COVID was “over” and the churches were re-opening, the search began once more for a new pastor. A possible new pastor had been found within the last few months of 2020. However, COVID had interrupted the process. The retiring senior pastor was finally able to retire in January, 2022. The pastor that the church was interviewing as their possible new pastor attended services at this church occasionally post-COVID and took over as senior pastor in January 2022. Though there have been some changes in the church, overall, the church seemed to be going fairly smoothly in spite of all of the disruptions with COVID-19 and their long-time senior pastor retiring. The attendance has gradually increased and has remained fairly stable (Table 1, p. 112).

The Presbyterian church had also seen an increase in in-person attendance post-COVID. They had resumed their Wednesday night dinners which were held prior to the Wednesday worship service. Their attendance on Sunday and Wednesday had gradually been increasing, according to the pastor. People are looking for relationships, the pastor said, and the church is trying to provide an atmosphere in which these relationships can continue to build and grow stronger. However, not many Gen Z are coming back yet. Those of Gen Z who have come back have been the “best advocates” (Presbyterian pastor, 2022) for returning to in-person worship for

Sunday and Wednesday services. As COVID restrictions have decreased within the city, it appeared that there had been a gradual increase in church attendance (Table 2, p. 116).

The correlation between relative size of the congregation and Gen Z influence was answered by examining the answers given by the different participants for RQ1; RQ2; and RQ3, as well as re-examining the “Current” (as of 5/22) statistics column found in Table 2 (p. 116) for the individual churches. For example, BP answered RQ1 by stating that the church had increased in in-person attendance after COVID (Table 4, p. 119). There was a post-COVID attendance of 284 and Current attendance of 303 (Table 2, p. 116). BP answered RQ2 by stating there was a “moderate increase [in attendance] after COVID” (Table 4, p. 119). This increase in attendance was due to a merger between this Baptist church and another smaller Baptist church post-COVID (Table 3, p. 117). The researcher used this same process of examining the different attendance statistics for the various churches. In the opinion of the researcher, there does not seem to be a correlation between the relative size of a church and the perceived influence that Gen Z had upon the revitalization of the church (RQ4). The ten churches are of varying sizes in regard to the attendance of their congregations. Gen Z had begun returning to church in varying degrees at each church. All of the churches seemed to want Gen Z to be present within the church settings as indicated by the interview process. Overall, Gen Z seemed to have a desire to be in church. It appeared to the researcher that Gen Z are wanted in the various churches and are welcomed in these churches. Therefore, it may be concluded that there is no correlation between the size of the church congregation and the perceived influence that Gen Z had upon the revitalization of the church (RQ4). Regardless of the size of the individual congregations, all of the churches seemed to value Gen Z and their involvement and contributions to their individual churches (Table 3, p. 117; Table 4, p. 119).

### **Research Implications**

The implications of this study appeared to be that when God is in the midst of everything, there is no adversity that cannot be overcome. COVID affected the in-person attendance within the churches, yet the churches continued to survive and thrive as seen in the gradual increase in their attendance statistics post-COVID. It would be of interest to the researcher to review the year end statistics at the end of the next church calendar year, and/or further out, in order to determine if the congregations continued to grow, remain the same, or stagnate, post-COVID. During COVID, statistics may or may not have been kept as systematically as they would have been pre-COVID, but the pastors did seem to keep in touch with their individual congregates by phone and/or the internet (Barna, 2020). Based upon the information found in Table 2 (p.116); Table 3 (p.117); and Table 4 (p. 119), one can imply that the churches are rebounding from COVID-19.

The pastors, as well as the congregates themselves, have expressed positive attitudes toward the revitalization of their churches. They recognized that for a period of time, their churches were in a state of in-person decline during the Coronavirus. However, that state of in-person decline appeared to be decreasing. Within the ten evangelical protestant churches in the study, the attitudes of the individual church congregates are more positive overall as time moved forward. More and more of the congregates appeared to be returning for in-person worship services which can be validated by the Sunday morning Worship Service statistics.

### **Research Applications**

The research data contained within this study would be of value to churches as they strive to reach, attract, and incorporate Generation Z into their church congregations. Churches who are in a state of decline would find the information contained within this study helpful to them as



they seek to revitalize their churches. Generation Z would be of great value to them during the revitalization process. They would attract others within their generation to the church. Church congregations who have expanded, or those who are seeking to begin a congregation in another area that could accommodate their expansion, would find this information useful to them.

According to White (2017) Gen Z were born after 9/11 and have lived through two economic crashes (2000 and 2008). Because of this “Gen Z have had “their eyes opened”” (White, 2017, p. 39). They have developed “coping mechanisms...and a strong sense of independence” (White, p. 40). As a Youth Leader, the Researcher has seen value in the characteristics White (2017) stated to describe Gen Z. White mentioned the “coping mechanism...and a strong sense of independence” that Gen Z possessed. Gen Z is mature and able to assume leadership positions within a church. They are willing to be of service within a church setting and are also willing to commit to a given task within a church.

The fact that Gen Z want to be of service to God through the church is of importance to the older church leadership. Gen Z are willing to be trained by the “older leaders” as these older leaders prepare for someone to eventually replace them and become the next leaders of the church. “They (Gen Z) are eager to start working and are mature and in control” (White, 2017, p. 48). These are characteristics which would appeal to a pastor as they begin a new church plant; seek to grow a newly planted church; or seek to develop a base of people who would be a strong foundation upon whom the church could grow or could continue to grow.

This research concerning Gen Z, its characteristics, and its influence on the revitalization of a church would be useful when one is searching to develop and train strong church leadership. The information on Gen Z may also apply to other generations who come just before or just after Gen Z.

## **Application for ministering to Generation Z**

There are several ways that a pastor, youth pastor or church member can apply this research to their own church when ministering to Generation Z. As the research indicated, Gen Z attracts Gen Z. They want to be involved and are an asset to utilizing technology. Finally, relationships are important to them and building that sense of community. Based on the responses from the Generation Z participants, the researcher provided three practical applications that can be adapted to any church size: Hybrid Sunday School, Virtual Gathering Room, and Building Relationships.

### **Hybrid Sunday School**

Generation Z are at the age where life is pulling them in different directions and this can make it difficult to attract and retain Gen Z. If in-person is the only option for worship and connecting, over time the Gen Z members may disconnect from the church. The church would need to have a designated Sunday School class for that age group and provide the option of virtual attendance. This would not replace in-person Sunday School class but it would blend the in-person attendees with those who are home sick, away at college, or even those that may need to leave early for work. The addition of screens in the classrooms and access for the virtual attendees to see the class, as well as, the in-person class to see the virtual attendees, would encourage open discussion and involve all members. Similar classroom designs were done across college campuses during the COVID-19 pandemic and hybrid classes were adapted as colleges began to reopen. This can grow to other classes and can be utilized to help connect those church members who may be in nursing homes or “shut-ins” within their own homes.

### **Virtual Gathering Room**

Another way to connect Generation Z is to develop a Gathering Room at the church, a room or space somewhere near the sanctuary. The room would have screens where people could connect virtually to the church on Sundays if they are away for any reasons. The in-person attendees can visit the Gathering Room and greet those members who could not be there in-person. They can have a conversation with them, pray with them, or just welcome them to church. This can be accessible before and after the service or during a greeting time of the service. Once the service has begun the virtual attendees would be connected to the live stream of the service. There are many software options that will aid in providing this setup for the church. This is also a great way to utilize Gen Z and their experience with the Social Media platforms.

### **Building Relationships**

Finally, virtual connections are great and can connect people to the church who are away, but it should not be the sole interaction with someone. Face-to-face connections build more of a relationship than a computer screen alone. This is why it is important to provide opportunities for the in-person and virtual attendees to come together. The less structured the better for Gen Z. This does not mean there is no plan. It just means that the Sunday School teacher can say “I am going to have lunch at... (local favorite).....on Tuesday at 11:00 am, who would like to come hang out?” or plan a night of pizza and bowling. It does not matter what the opportunity is just as long as there are opportunities to build that community relationship. In addition, all do not need to attend every opportunity and some will not. In fact, there may be times when only one or two will show up but one should keep having the opportunities available. This is also important for those Gen Z that are being utilized in leadership roles or technical support within

the church. Gen Z want to be involved and it is important to make sure that they are more than just a tool being utilized in the church. They are a part of the community within the church.

There are many ways that a church can reach and utilize Gen Z. There are ways that will be specific and unique to each church, each area and even each city. The goal is to provide the opportunities and let them know they are welcomed in the community that is your church.

### **Research Limitations**

This study was conducted incorporating ten evangelical protestant churches of different denominations, but all from the same city. These denominations were: Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Non-Denominational, and Presbyterian. If different religions (i.e., Catholic and/or Jewish) as well as other church denominations, all from the same city, were also used within the study, would there be a difference in the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of the church? If so, what would be the difference(s)?

It should also be noted that when church attendance was counted, only in-person statistics were examined as these statistics could be verified. Although there are ways to obtain virtual statistics for streamed services, the researcher did not include any attendance statistics for those who *streamed* the Sunday morning worship service because the statistics which related to those who *streamed* the Sunday Morning Worship Service were not obtained by all of the churches in their weekly attendance count. Therefore, only in-person statistics from the individual churches were used. If the study were conducted within a broader, geographical area, the researcher anticipated that the results would vary even within the in-person Sunday Morning Worship Service as there would be variances among in-person attendees within the various denominations. The question would be to what degree would be the variance? Overall, would these variances make a significant difference?

The study was conducted within the same geographical area of the United States, within the same city. It is possible that conducting the study in a broader area (i.e., other cities within the same state; other cities within the same geographical area such as a mountainous area or a beach front area) would yield different results as well. The result could be impacted in a city that had more members commuting from rural areas instead of urban areas. These other options could possibly provide results that indicate that the location of a church had an impact to the revitalization of the church following the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Further Research**

This study would provide information which would be useful to a church as they evaluate their ending year and as they plan and prepare for their new upcoming church year (Barna, 2020). By talking to those involved within the decision-making process of the church and asking their opinion of what happened that year as to the church's effectiveness in achieving their goals, the leadership would get a better understanding of whether or not they achieved their pre-established goals. However, to get a deeper understanding of the actual effectiveness as to whether or not the desired goals were met, the leadership would need to go beyond the levels of leadership to the *workers* who are actually involved within the day-to-day workings of the church (i.e., the boots on the ground). They would view the workings of the church from another perspective as would the leadership.

The researcher would have an interest in re-examining this same topic five years from now to determine if the same conclusions could be drawn from that research that were drawn within this particular study. If the conclusions in a repeat of this study were the same conclusions, why were they the same? If the conclusions were different, why were they different?

Generation Z is defined by Barna Research (2018) as those born between 1999 and 2015. If another study were conducted five years after this current study re-examining the current 18 to 22-year-olds, what similarities could be found and what differences could be found within the past study group and the current study group? Would there be enough differences or similarities to establish a research conclusion based upon the projected research hypothesis?

Another research possibility would be to use the same research question(s) and examine 18 to 22-year-old males and 18 to 22-year-old females. What are the differences and what are the similarities in their responses? Is there an established pattern emerging from the research on 18 to 22-year-olds as to their perception of the influence they have on the revitalization of a church?

To expand this study further, the researcher would broaden the research area and participants to include other similar metropolitan cities or include other denominations within the selected metropolitan city to determine if the location of the church or the denomination of the participant impacted the conclusion of the study. In addition, the researcher would study further to see if there is a correlation between the length of time the participants have been a church goer and their perception of the church, revitalization, and Generation Z influence. For example, was the Generation Z participant a church goer with their family from an early age or are did they begin attending church later on? Finally, the phenomenological research method focused on the perception and experience of the participants; therefore, would different Generation Z participants at the same churches bring different results as well as differently perceived influences? This would be an interest of the researcher to study further.

## Chapter Summary

Chapter Five revisited the research purpose and the research questions. Based upon the interviews conducted, this research answered the four research questions that were asked: (1) How do pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z had within this revitalization process? (2) How to youth pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z has within this revitalization process? (3) How do individuals of Generation Z who have experienced the revitalization process perceive their influence to have been within this revitalization process? and (4) Is there a correlation between the relative size of the congregation of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z had upon the revitalization of a church? There is still much to learn about Generation Z and the generations to follow as to their effect upon the church.

One thing that stood out within each of the interviews is the fact that Generation Z is held in high regard by the pastors and the youth pastors at each of the churches that participated within the study, regardless of the size of the church congregation. However, Gen Z did not seem to be aware of this fact. They did not see themselves as being valuable within their church. According to White (2017), Gen Z will possibly be the last named generation. There are no particular characteristics that stand out within the next generation that would differentiate it from any other generation, as there has been in the past. “The good news is that these young adults have great potential to change the world” (Barna, 2019, p. 5).

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## APPENDIX A – PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

**Title of the Project:** A Phenomenological Study of the Perceived Influence that Generation Z Has on the Revitalization of a Church

**Principal Investigator:** Linda Mathis, Doctoral Student, Liberty University

**Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a pastor and/or youth pastor or Generation Z (Gen Z) church attendee or church member for at least one year prior to the coronavirus pandemic. Gen Z participants must be between 18 and 22 years of age and attending and involved in their church. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

**What is the study about and why is it being done?**

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceived influence that Generation Z has upon the revitalization of a church following its in-person decline in the aftermath of the Coronavirus in 2020.

**What will happen if you take part in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things:

1. Recorded interview (in-person or virtual) - 45-60 minutes
2. Possible follow-up interview - 30-45 minutes

**How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include a better understanding of the perceived influence that Generation Z (between ages 18 and 22 years) has upon the in-person revitalization of a church in the aftermath of the Coronavirus in 2020.

**What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of codes. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Electronic Data will be stored on a password-locked external hard drive, paper documentation will be stored in a secured file cabinet, and both will be retained for three years upon completion of the study. After three years, all records will be deleted.
- Interviews will be recorded (video and audio) and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password-locked external hard drive for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. The transcribed data will be secured in a locked file cabinet with limited access and then deleted after three years.

### How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

### Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Linda Mathis. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. John Beck, at [REDACTED].

### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

**Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record and video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Printed Participant Name

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Signature & Date

## APPENDIX B – PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FORM

Date:

Time:

Location:

Interviewer:

Participant Code:

Interview Question #1: Since the coronavirus began in 2020, do you think that your church has declined numerically, remained the same, or increased after the reopening of the churches nationwide in 2021?

Interview Question #2: Why do you think this (decline/increase) happened within your church?

Interview Question #3 (Generation Z only): Talk about the influence that you and your generation had upon the revitalization/decline of your church as it reopened in 2021?

Interview Question #4 (Pastors/Youth Pastors only): as a Pastor/Youth Pastor, what influence do you think Generation Z (those between 18 and 22 years of age) had upon the revitalization of your church in the aftermath of the coronavirus in 2020?

## APPENDIX C – DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

ATTENDANCE					
Church Denomination	<i>Date of Origin</i>	<i>Original</i>	<i>Pre-COVID-19 (1/20)</i>	<i>Post-COVID-19 (4/22)</i>	<i>Present (5/22)</i>
Baptist 1					
Baptist 2					
Lutheran 1					
Lutheran 2					
Methodist 1					
Methodist 2					
Non- Denominational 1					
Non- Denominational 2					
Presbyterian 1					
Presbyterian 2					

## APPENDIX D – NOTE BOOK TEMPLATE

**Notebook:** The perceived influence that Generation Z has on the revitalization of a church

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Name of Participant (i.e., B/P)	Date	Location (i.e., B)	Interviewer
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**RQ1:** How do pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z has within this revitalization process?

**RQ2:** How do youth pastors who have experienced the revitalization process perceive the influence that Generation Z has within this revitalization process?

**RQ3:** How do individuals of Generation Z who have experienced the revitalization process perceive their influence to be within this revitalization process?

**RQ4:** Is there correlation between the relative size of the congregation of a church and the perceived influence that Generation Z has upon the revitalization of a church?

The question raised by this RQ can be better ascertained once the Pastor and the Youth Pastor from each church have been interviewed.

## APPENDIX E – IRB APPROVAL LETTERS

**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 28, 2022

Linda Mathis  
John Beck

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-572 A Phenomenological Study of the Perceived Influence that Generation Z has on the Revitalization of a Church

Dear Linda Mathis, John Beck,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

**Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB.** Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

Sincerely,  
**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**

**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

August 19, 2022

Linda Mathis  
John Beck

Re: Modification - IRB-FY21-22-572 A Phenomenological Study of the Perceived Influence that Generation Z has on the Revitalization of a Church

Dear Linda Mathis, John Beck,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has rendered the decision below for IRB-FY21-22-572 A Phenomenological Study of the Perceived Influence that Generation Z has on the Revitalization of a Church.

Decision: Exempt - Limited IRB

Your request to increase the number of churches involved in your study from 5 to 10 and increase the number of participants from 25 to 50 has been approved.

Thank you for complying with the IRB's requirements for making changes to your approved study. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions.

We wish you well as you continue with your research.

Sincerely,

**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**Research Ethics Office**