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LOOKING BACK TO MOVE FORWARD:

YOUTH MINISTRY AND ITS EFFECT ON THE

FAITH AND CHRISTIAN PRACTICES OF TODAY'S ADULTS

by

ANDREW A. TAYLOR

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2017

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ABSTRACT

Looking Back to Move Forward:
Youth Ministry and its Effect on the Faith and Christian Practices of Today's Adults

by

Andrew A. Taylor

This mixed methods explanatory research project investigated the effectiveness of youth ministry practices in shaping, or failing to shape, adult Christian faith. Fifty-nine former youth group members from three congregations were surveyed, and six were interviewed: two active Christians, two inactive Christians, and two non-Christians. Results revealed the active Christians had experienced a personal sense of God's presence and witnessed God's activity in the public sphere. This suggests that youth ministry would do well to utilize practices that encourage adolescents to experience and articulate a sense of God's presence in both their personal lives and in the world around them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank those who have given me an interest in youth ministry, as well as those who encouraged me in the research and writing of this thesis. Thanks foremost to my first youth ministers, my mother and father, Lenore and Wallace Taylor, who read me Bible stories, taught me to pray, and helped me to sense God's presence in my life and in the world around me. Thanks also to my sisters and brother-in-law, Judy Taylor, and Sheila and Dan Lynch, who faithfully work with youth and adults in their congregation.

I am in debt to Pastor Chuck and Andrea Daley, who quickened in me a thirst for the gospel when I was a teenager, and encouraged me to trust in God for strength and hope. They both died young, and I will thank them in person when I see them in God's kingdom.

The congregations I have served have taught me much about ministry and how God works in people's daily lives. My internship congregation in Texas was the first place I realized that God might want me to work with young people. I am grateful to the people of Advent, Calvary, and Mission congregations, and particularly to those who filled out the questionnaire and agreed to be interviewed. I continue to learn from their lives and their words.

Thank you to those at Mission who supported me in this work during the first four years of the Doctor of Ministry program. My Journey Partner Team read drafts of the thesis and offered helpful suggestions until the day I left for a new call. Thanks to Nancy

Engle, Tracy Fox, Gordon Gidlund, Lorraine Martin, and Monica Muldoon. The staff at Mission gave me time and space to write, read, study, and think. I am grateful to Stephanie Alexander, Carmen Berry, Paula McDonald, Kristin Naour, Meri Jo Petrivelli, Manuel Retamoza, Scott Skinner, and Sara Zimmerly for their help in this endeavor.

Thank you to the congregations and people of the synod where I now am bishop. I am particularly indebted to the staff: Hitoshi Adachi, Terry Tuvey Allen, Rachel Line, Terri Robertson, Carol Youngman, and Ron Zoesch. They ensured synod work was accomplished while I attended seminars in Minnesota and took days off to write.

Thanks to my cohort and professors for encouraging me when I thought I would not be able to finish this doctoral program. Dr. Alvin Luedke and Dr. Craig Van Gelder patiently awaited my posts, and responded quickly with answers to questions. Chris Alexander, David Anderson, Ryan Brodin, Sarah Cordray, Yolanda Denson-Byers, Beth Warpmaeker, and Jeff Wilson urged me to find time for data analysis and writing. I would never have finished without their support and assistance.

Finally, thank you to two families of close friends. A single man like me does not survive without communities of people who welcome him into their lives. Peter and Kathy Braafladt and their sons Jacob and Lucas treat me like I'm a part of their family. Sharan and Janae Koger do the same, and Sharan's late husband, Larry Koger, was not only my close friend, he was a neighboring youth pastor when we both were starting out in Word and Sacrament ministry. Together, we learned how to do youth ministry, and it is to his memory that I dedicate this work.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AC	Active Christian
DMin	Doctor of Ministry
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
IC	Inactive Christian
IRB	Institutional Review Board of Luther Seminary
NC	Non-Christian
NSYR	National Study of Youth and Religion

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH

Introduction to Research Subject

I have been a pastor for over thirty years, and have served much of that time in youth ministry. My first call was as Associate Pastor in charge of youth ministry at Advent Lutheran Church in a suburb of Orange County, California, where I served from August 1986 – April 1992.[1] Advent's youth group grew during my tenure from an average of about twelve to almost thirty young people who would meet on Sunday evenings. Participants met for fellowship, worship, Bible study, spiritual growth, and servant projects. I moved to a farming community in central California after that and served as solo pastor in Calvary Lutheran Church from April 1992 – August 1997. That youth group also grew during my time of service, as friends invited friends for Sunday evening meetings that consisted mostly of Bible study and games. I served on Youth Leadership Committees in the larger church during my time both in Orange County and in central California, helping to plan youth gatherings and leadership training events for middle-school and high school aged students from Lutheran congregations.

I became solo pastor of Mission Lutheran Church in September 1997 in a suburban neighborhood of San Diego County, California, and my daily involvement in youth ministry stopped due to the presence of a paid youth worker and later a called pastor of Youth and Family. While I did not plan and participate regularly in the senior

[1] Pseudonyms are used in this thesis for all proper names of persons and congregations.

high school youth group, I did work to reshape confirmation curriculum and continued to share teaching responsibilities for middle-school aged youth. The youth ministry grew at Mission during my tenure, and in May 2015 we confirmed twenty-two young people, a large number for a Lutheran church in southern California.

One could argue that the numerical growth of these youth ministry programs would be evidence that they were successful. Numbers alone, however, are not a sufficient measure of success in ministry. Christian youth ministry seeks to encourage lifelong faith in the Triune God that is undergirded by practices of worship, Bible study, prayer, fellowship, and service. If the youth ministry I have been engaged in were to be evaluated by this measure, I fear the ministry would be judged a failure. Many of the young people I have worked with no longer attend church. Many no longer profess faith in the Triune God. Others, however, do profess faith and still others are raising their children in the church.

I remember clearly the first time I was shocked to discover that one of the faithful youth members at Advent decided she no longer believed. Alana attended the 1988 National Youth Gathering in San Antonio and had a spiritual awakening there. She expressed her faith in God in a variety of ways following that gathering, and was a regular at youth group until her high school graduation in 1989. She went away to college, and during Christmas break of 1990, I called and invited her to lunch so I could catch up with her. At that lunch she told me she no longer believed, that life was hard and God no longer seemed real to her. Also at the 1988 National Gathering was Mark, who found his faith reinforced by what he experienced there. He and I are still in touch, and he

and his wife and children are now faithful members of a Methodist church in a major city in the southeastern region of the United States, where they now live.

Alana's and Mark's stories are but two examples of experiences that have been repeated many times in my work as a pastor. These stories moved me to undertake a research project examining the different spiritual paths taken by various youth with whom I have worked. I have used a variety of methods throughout the years to share faith with members of youth groups. I was interested in knowing if certain youth ministry practices were more helpful in encouraging lifelong faith and Christian practices among the young people I served. I wondered if, by looking back at what helped young people develop faith in the past, I could encourage practices that would more reliably shape faith for the young people I work with now and will work with in the future.

Research Question

My research question is:

> *To what extent have the youth ministry practices utilized during my tenure as pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Orange County, California; Calvary Lutheran Church, in central California; and Mission Lutheran Church in San Diego County, California; shaped, or failed to shape, the faith and Christian practices of adults who as teenagers were active participants in those youth groups?*

Independent Variable

The independent variable is the variety of youth ministry practices utilized during my tenure as pastor at the three congregations. Confirmation instruction was held for middle-school children in all three. Advent paired each confirmand with an adult and together they read the gospel of Luke, meeting regularly over the summer prior to their Confirmation day to discuss what they read. These students also wrote one-page

statements of faith, and attended youth retreats and middle-school youth gatherings. I wrote my own confirmation curriculum while working at Calvary and held conferences with parents and students prior to Confirmation day so that young people could share their faith with me. There were occasional retreats and overnight lock-ins, and students were encouraged to attend an annual middle-school youth gathering. Materials utilized at Mission included Faith Inkubators' Confirmation Curriculum, which was implemented from Fall 2000 – Spring 2004 and was reintroduced in Fall 2015, and Augsburg Fortress' *Here We Stand* curriculum which we used from Fall 2004 – Spring 2015.[2] Students were encouraged to attend confirmation camp, a middle-school youth gathering, and an annual winter retreat. They wrote three- to five-page faith statements which they presented at weekend services two to three weeks prior to Confirmation day.

High school ministries at all three congregations consisted of Bible study, games, attendance at ELCA National Youth Gatherings, fund raising activities, worship services, prayer, and servant projects. The emphasis tended to be on games, which brought youth to Sunday night meetings, but each group meeting included prayer plus some form of Bible study or worship.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the faith and Christian practices, or lack thereof, of adults who as teenagers were faithful participants in their youth groups. I was interested in knowing if the independent variable of youth ministry practices shaped the faith of

[2] "Faith Inkubators Confirmation Curriculum," Stillwater, MN: Faith Inkubators, 2000-2004, http://www.faithink.com/ (accessed June 29, 2015); "Here We Stand Confirmation Curriculum," Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004 - 2015, http://www.herewestandconfirmation.org/ (accessed June 29, 2015).

those who are faithful, practicing Christians, as well as discovering if the practices had little to no effect on the faith and practices of those who as adults are not members of a worshiping community. I also wanted to know if there were practices that discouraged former youth group participants from practicing their faith as adults. I wanted to know if the results of the research would show that certain practices were more helpful in producing life-long faith and participation in congregations. If so, the findings could be used to emphasize those practices in my current ministry setting.

Intervening Variables

I considered including participation in other church activities, such as serving as an Assisting Minister at worship or volunteering for multi-generational servant projects, as part of the independent variable. I decided, however, to consider these activities as intervening variables that needed to be taken into account in the research. I wanted to focus on youth ministry rather than other church activities to keep the research from getting too broad. Another intervening variable was the age and generation to which the participants belong. The students with whom I worked belonged to Generation X (also known as Gen Xers) and Generation Y (more commonly known as Millennials).[3] The research indicated that the faith journeys of Gen Xers differed in some ways from the spiritual experiences of those who were Millennials.

Other factors that functioned as intervening variables consisted of experiences that either supported or thwarted the development of faith for the subjects of the research during their adolescent years. These included the support of parents and other family

[3] Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research," Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015, http://www.people-press.org/files/2015/09/09-3-2015-Generations-explainer-release.pdf (accessed November 15, 2015), 3.

members in encouraging them to become people of faith, frequency of attendance at worship, service opportunities both within and outside the congregation, and positive and negative experiences of church during their teenage years. Factors in their lives following youth group may also have affected their spiritual journeys. These intervening variables included the level of education they attained, the type of college they attended, their marital status, the faith (or lack thereof) of a spouse or life-partner, whether or not they had children, and positive and negative experiences of the church as adults.

Importance of the Research

This research question is one of the main reasons I entered the Doctor of Ministry program in Congregational Mission and Leadership. I have wondered for a number of years how it could be that a faith I witnessed blossom and grow could disappear when a teen became an adult. It was, and is, important to me to find ways to encourage practices that allow the young people with whom I work to experience the lifelong help and hope that the Triune God alone can give.

The question could help congregations in my synod focus their youth ministry resources. Youth in my synod spend a lot of time fund-raising for very expensive servant trips and youth gatherings. The 2015 combined servant event in Chicago and trip to the ELCA National Youth Gathering in Detroit at my previous congregation cost $1500 per youth. I have no problem spending this money if the trip resulted in experiences that enabled a young person to have a meaningful encounter with God, especially if such an encounter encouraged depth of faith. I still wondered, however, if youth ministry resources, including the use of time and talent in addition to money, might be better allocated.

I believe this research could be of help to the church as a whole because it was designed to point to practices that deepen faith among young people. I imagine church leaders are as prone as I am to indulge in what Peter Nardi calls "Everyday Thinking," with its emphasis on individual biases and unscientific generalizations.[4] More scientific thinking, governed by social science research protocols, was utilized to produce data that could help develop new youth ministry priorities. The research is not generalizable beyond the population I am studying due to the fact that I utilized a purposive sample, but it raises questions another researcher might want to take up with a probability sample.[5] The research suggested practices that may have deepened faith among these adults, which may be useful to other researchers in the church as they compare what they have found with the sample I studied.

Historical Background

Two intervening variables were important enough to examine on their own, and they form the historical background for the research. The first consisted of the separate histories of each of the congregations I served. Advent, Calvary, and Mission all were shaped by past experiences with pastors and previous youth ministry leaders, and those histories, in turn, helped mold the ministry setting in which I worked. I sketch briefly in chapter two a portrait of each congregation, giving accounts of what the people of those communities experienced prior to my ministry, what I did among them particularly in the

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[4] Peter M. Nardi, *Doing Survey Research: A Guide to Quantitative Methods*, 3rd ed. (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 2-6.

[5] Ibid., 124-125.

area of youth ministry, and, in the case of Advent and Calvary, what happened to the churches and the youth ministry after I left.

The second intervening variable was the religious milieu of twenty-first century American culture. I surveyed and interviewed the subjects of the research in 2015 and 2016, during an era when it became increasingly common to hear people say they did not have a religion and did not believe in God.[6] I chose to focus on one study which described the decline in religious beliefs and behaviors over a seven-year period, the *U.S. Landscape Religious Study* conducted by Pew Research in 2007 and 2014.[7] The results of this study provided a background to the religious culture in which the adults I surveyed currently lived.

Theoretical Lenses

I used *Believing, Behaving, and Belonging* and *Generations Theory* as major theoretical lenses to frame the results of the research. Also significant were the frames of *Postmodernism, the Rise of Nones and Liminals, Adult Servant Leadership*, and *Cultural Views of God*. I turn now to a brief overview of these frames.

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[6] "The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing." Pew Research Center, “America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population; Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow,” Washington: Pew Research Center, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/ (accessed November 15, 2015), 3.

[7] The findings of the U.S. Landscape Religious Study are found in the following two articles: Pew Research Center, “U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious: Modest Drop in Overall Rates of Belief and Practice, but Religiously Affiliated Americans Are as Observant as Before,” Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015, http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/ (accessed November 15, 2015); and Pew Research Center, “America's Changing Religious Landscape.”

Believing, Behaving, Belonging

The adults I studied *belonged* to youth groups while they were adolescents in which they confessed their *belief* in God and were encouraged to participate in Christian *behaviors* such as worship attendance, prayer, and service to others. The research found that some still belonged to a church, believed in God, and engaged in Christian practices, but many exhibited some variation of the three. Some believed but did not belong to church, others were open to prayer and meditation but doubted there was a God, while others belonged to a church but rarely worshiped or served in any significant way. The frame of *Believing, Behaving, and Belonging* addressed these findings.

I used works by Kenda Creasy Dean, David Kinnaman, and Diana Butler Bass to examine this frame.[8] These authors examine various studies that point to the drop in faith of young adults and suggest different possible solutions. Dean and Kinnaman both agree that the basic issue is one of faith formation, with Dean arguing for a change in the ways the church transmits the faith, while Kinnaman sees a need for the church to counter the effects of secular culture in order to do a more effective job of helping young people become disciples.[9] They focus on believing and argue that in order for young people to believe, the church needs to change its behavior. Butler Bass, in contrast, argues that the church should stress belonging as of primary importance, followed by behaving and,

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[8] Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 2010); David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011); Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening*, 1st ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2012).

[9] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 7; Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 21.

finally, believing.[10] She does not call for countering the effects of secular culture for she sees God at work in secular culture, calling the church to a new way of faith that brings greater meaning to both young people and their elders.[11] All three authors argue that believing, behaving, and belonging are important, but differ in how these concepts interact to support life-long Christian faith.

Generations Theory

Generations Theory helps explain why practices that enabled me to have faith may not have worked for the youth I pastored since I am of a different generation than those I served. It also helps shed light on the different faith journeys of those who were born in the late 1960s and 1970s versus those who were born in the 1980s and later. I used Pew Research's explanation of Generations Theory to define what generational cohorts are, and to explain how different generations are shaped by life-cycle effects, period effects and cohort effects.[12]

Pew Research notes that there are differences between the Silent Generation (born 1928-1945), Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (also known as Baby Busters, Gen X, or Xers) and Millennials (also referred to as Mosaics or Generation Y).[13] Most generations theorists, including Pew, argue that members of Generation X were

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[10] Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 204-209. This thesis cites works by both Diana Butler Bass and Dorothy Bass. I will refer to Diana Butler Bass as "Butler Bass" and to Dorothy Bass as "Bass" in order to distinguish them from one another.

[11] Ibid., 7.

[12] Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research," 1, 4-5.

[13] Ibid., 2-3.

born from 1965-1980.[14] These young people would have graduated from high school between 1983-1998, which means that the students I served at Advent from 1986-1992, and many of those I served at Calvary from 1992-1997, were members of Generation X. They are followed by Millennials, who were born from 1981-2000.[15] A few of those I served at Calvary, and all of the young people at Mission were Millennials.

Donald E. Miller and Arpi Misha Miller provide a sketch of Generation X, while Jean M. Twenge is helpful in describing Millennials.[16] Twenge is also helpful in comparing and contrasting the Silent Generation and Baby Boomers with Generation X and Millennials. One of the key differences is the increasing emphasis on individualism, which began with Baby Boomers, and increased among Gen Xers and Millennials.[17] Generations theory helps to explain why Gen Xers and Millennials have a difficult time with religion in general. The research I did noted differences between the two generations of young people I served, and this frame helped me analyze the data I uncovered.

Postmodernism

The frame of *Postmodernism* sheds light on the mindset of the Gen Xers and Millennials I interviewed. The subjects of the research were comfortable speaking of

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[14] Ibid., 3. Another research study that defines Generation X as those born from 1965-1980 is "Understanding Generational Differences," Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2009, http://opi.mt.gov/pub/rti/EssentialComponents/Leadership/Present/Understanding%20Generational%20Differences.pdf (accessed August 13, 2015). Not all generation theorists would agree with this span of years. Miller and Miller date Generation X as those born from 1961-1981. Donald E. Miller and Arpi Misha Miller, "Introduction: Understanding Generation X," in *Gen X Religion*, ed. Richard W. Flory and Donald E. Miller (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

[15] Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research," 3.

[16] Miller and Miller, "Introduction: Understanding Generation X," 1-12; Jean M. Twenge, *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled--and More Miserable Than Ever Before* (New York: Atria Paperback, 2014).

[17] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 21-56.

their individual faith journeys and usually did not suggest that others should follow their example, but were comfortable with each individual having a separate spiritual path. This is a characteristic of postmodern thought, and I used works by Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, Craig Van Gelder, and Phyllis Tickle to describe postmodernism.[18]

Postmodern thought celebrates otherness and heterogeneity.[19] This means that, for post-moderns, a variety of perspectives is the norm.[20] Post-moderns argue that views of reality are shaped by how people subjectively interpret their own experiences, and that each view of reality can be equally valid.[21] Tickle notes that one of the key questions for postmodern Christians is the question of authority, particularly how Scripture functions as an authority in their individual lives.[22] This explains why it is often difficult for post-moderns, such as the Xers and Millennials with whom I have worked, to embrace the faith claims of the Bible and, thus, of the church, as being valid for themselves and others.

The Rise of *Nones* and *Liminals*

Some of those I researched seemed ambivalent about the Christian faith. Some called themselves Christian but rarely went to church or engaged in faith-based practices, while others said they had no religion yet prayed occasionally or attended worship on an

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[18] Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, Critical Perspectives (New York: Guilford Press, 1997); Craig Van Gelder, "The Hermenuetics of Leading in Mission," *Journal of Religious Leadership* Vol. 3, no. 1 & 2 (2004); Craig Van Gelder, "Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics," *Journal of Religious Leadership* Vol. 3, no. 1 & 2 (2004); Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

[19] Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 13.

[20] Van Gelder, "The Hermenuetics of Leading in Mission," 141.

[21] Van Gelder, "Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics," 53.

[22] Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 98-101.

irregular basis. Those who said they had no religion are known as *nones*, people who, when asked by pollsters to name their religious affiliation, respond by saying "none."[23] Some of these *nones* are *liminals*, persons who vary their answer from *none* to a particular religion and back again when asked about religious affiliation. This means that they rotate in and out of churches, sometimes feeling they are affiliated, sometimes not. Robert Putnam and David Campbell describe *liminals*, and David Kinnaman sorts them into two groups: nomads who wander from the faith, and exiles who believe in God but become disillusioned by the church.[24]

Adult Servant Leadership

Many of those I surveyed and interviewed spoke of the importance of the adults who served as youth group sponsors. Some cited great appreciation for their mentors, youth workers, and youth pastors, while others were more critical. It was clear that those who benefitted from youth-adult interaction were those whose sponsors acted as servant leaders. I used works by James Kouzes and Barry Posner, and by James Autry, to define servant leadership, as well as insights from Lee Bolman and Terrance Deal to fit servant leadership into the greater framework of the youth ministry organization.[25] I also noted the different roles of the youth leadership team, which is responsible for the overall

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[23] Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), Kindle Edition, Kindle location 1938.

[24] Ibid., Kindle location 2113-2123; Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 61-65, 73-88.

[25] James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Make Extraordinary Things Happen in Organizations*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012); James A. Autry, *The Servant Leader: How to Build a Creative Team, Develop Great Morale, and Improve Bottom-Line Performance*, 1st ed. (Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2001); Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *Reframing Organizations: Artistry, Choice, and Leadership*, 5th ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2013), Kindle Edition.

health of the youth ministry, and of the individual adult guide or mentor, who works in small groups and one-on-one with adolescents. To do so, I utilized works by Denny Rydberg and Jessicah Duckworth.[26]

Cultural Views of God

The effectiveness of servant-leader adults could not, at times, overcome the rejection of the faith by those I interviewed. Many expressed views that reflected not so much the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith that I had tried to teach, but other understandings of God that are taught not so much by churches as by culture. The final theoretical lens used in this thesis, therefore, is an examination of cultural views of God. Dean describes Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, a group of beliefs about God that the 2003-05 National Study of Youth and Religion surfaced as the primary faith system learned by Christian adolescents.[27] The hallmarks of this faith system are belief in a Creator who wants us to be nice to everyone and who is uninvolved in our lives unless we ask for help, the tenet that good people go to heaven when they die, and the assertion that the central goal of life is to be happy and feel good about oneself.[28] This central goal is counter to the Christian faith, allowing young people to think God wants to help them do what they want, rather than calling them to a life of discipleship.[29]

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[26] Denny Rydberg, *Building Community in Youth Groups* (Loveland, CO: Group Books, 1985); Jessicah Krey Duckworth, *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013).

[27] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 3-15; "The National Study of Youth and Religion," Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2015, http://youthandreligion.nd.edu (accessed September 16, 2015).

[28] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 14.

[29] Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Agile Church: Spirit-Led Innovation in an Uncertain Age* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2014), 25.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not the only cultural view of God. Baylor University researchers found that Americans of differing faiths, Jews, Christians, and Muslims, divided within their faith traditions along similar lines. Some Jews, Christians, and Muslims believed in an Authoritative God, who is engaged in the world and judgmental; others confessed faith in a Benevolent God, who is engaged but not judgmental; others described a Critical God who is disengaged from the world but is judgmental; while still others spoke of a Distant God, who is disengaged and nonjudgmental.[30] These conflicting concepts of God at times made belief a stumbling block for those I researched.

Biblical and Theological Lenses

The concepts of *believing, behaving, and belonging* provided a framework for the biblical and theological lenses used in this thesis. For the biblical lenses, I paired *believing* with Jesus' parable of the Persistent Widow from Luke 18; *behaving* with the life stories of King Solomon and Joseph the Patriarch; and *belonging* with the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin from Luke 15. For the theological lenses, I explored issues of *believing* with the doctrine of the Sovereignty of God; *behaving* with a discussion about Christian practices; and *belonging* with an examination of the theological concept of the *missio Dei.*

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[30] Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, *America's Four Gods: What We Say About God--& What That Says About Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24.

Biblical Lenses

Believing—The Persistent Widow

Some of those I researched do not believe in God because they do not understand how a loving God can allow injustice and suffering to continue to flourish in the world. The parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1-8) contains Jesus' call to be persistent in prayer even when justice is delayed. It ends with the words, "And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8b).[31] I have asked myself that question a number of times as I have witnessed formerly faithful youth group members walk away from the church in adulthood. This parable has resonance for those I researched and for me.

I referenced articles by Donald Penny, Julie Perry, Stephen Curkpatrick, and James Metzger to analyze this parable, all of whom note that it is odd that Jesus compares a just God to an unjust judge.[32] Penny and Perry view the parable as showing God in a favorable light, Penny arguing that Jesus is utilizing a classic "from lesser to greater" comparison between the judge and God, while Perry claims that God is unjust because a God of grace gives us more than we deserve.[33] Curkpatrick and Metzger disagree. Curkpatrick argues that Luke provided an inadequate framework for the story which

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[31] All quotations, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. *The Harper Collins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Harold W. Attridge, Wayne A. Meeks, and Jouette M. Bassler, Fully rev. and updated. Student ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 2006).

[32] Donald Penny, "Persistence in Prayer: Luke 18:1-8," *Review & Expositor* 104, no. 4 (2007): 740; Julie R Perry, "God as an Unjust Judge?: A Sermon on Luke 18:1-8," ibid.109, no. 2 (2012): 299; Stephen Curkpatrick, "Dissonance in Luke 18:1-8," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 121, no. 1 (2012): 115-116; James A Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?: Reading Luke 11:5-13 & 18:1-8 with a Hermeneutic of Suffering," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 32, no. 1 (2010): 33-34.

[33] Penny, "Persistence in Prayer," 740; Perry, "God as an Unjust Judge?," 299.

resulted in a jarring dissonance between what Jesus was purportedly trying to teach and what the audience actually heard.[34] Metzger claims that Jesus actually believed God was an unjust deity who failed to hear the cries of those in need of daily sustenance.[35] Some of those whom I interviewed do not believe that God is unjust—they simply believe the presence of suffering in the world means there is no God.

Behaving—Solomon and Joseph

Those I interviewed were raised to engage in Christian practices, such as worship, prayer, and service to others. Some, like Solomon, fell away from those practices as they grew older. Others, like Joseph the Patriarch, found their faith a comfort in times of hardship and distress. The stories of Solomon and Joseph demonstrate how faith-filled practices aid Christians to solidify their sense of belonging to a community and strengthen their faith in times of need.

I use works by Yong Ho Jeon and Harry Wendt to examine Solomon's departure from the faith, focusing on both the faith practices in which he was engaged and the ways in which his lack of trust in God was revealed by other actions as recorded in his biblical story.[36] Joseph's faith, which was revealed in the midst of suffering, is examined with the help of an article by Hyun Chul Paul Kim.[37] The stories of these two men reveal how Christian practices help sustain faith and a sense of belonging to God's people.

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[34] Curkpatrick, "Dissonance in Luke 18:1-8," 107-108.

[35] Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?," 37.

[36] Yong Ho Jeon, "The Retroactive Re-Evaluation Technique with Pharaoh's Daughter and the Nature of Solomon's Corruption in 1 Kings 1-12," *Tyndale Bulletin* 62, no. 1 (2011).

[37] Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "Reading the Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) as a Diaspora Narrative," *The Catholic Bible Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (2013).

Belonging—Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

Some of those I researched belonged to a Christian community, while others did not. Some found a greater sense of community away from the church, out in the world. I examined the phenomenon of belonging utilizing the biblical parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin from Luke 15. Jesus told these parables because the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled when Jesus treated tax collectors and sinners as if they belonged to the kingdom of God. I utilized the work of David Tiede to place the religious leaders' objection to Jesus' largesse in its proper historical context, and then compared these stories to the experience of those who used to belong to youth group.[38] They, like the tax collectors and sinners, are beloved by God and welcomed into community. The parable of the lost sheep is a reminder that God is one who goes outside of the church walls to seek and save the lost, and the parable of the lost coin indicates that one can remain in the household of faith, like some of those I interviewed, and still be lost and in need of God's help.

Theological Lenses

Believing—The Sovereignty of God

Some of those I interviewed who either professed a lack of faith or admitted to doubts wondered why the world is the way it is. Why is there so much injustice and suffering? Why does God not intervene? The traditional answer to these questions is that

[38] David L. Tiede, *Luke*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988).

God limits God's power in order to allow for human freedom.[39] This begs the question of how much God limits God's power, and for what purpose. One can also ask how it is that we can know God in the first place.

The doctrine of divine sovereignty was designed to answer those questions. I examine this doctrine using insights from Martin Luther and John Calvin, as well as an essay by Bruce McCormack, whose thought on this subject is heavily influenced by the work of Karl Barth.[40] I articulate the differences between the Lutheran, Calvinist, and Arminian doctrines of divine sovereignty and human freedom, and share McCormack's discussion of whether human beings know God from above or from below. I note that Calvin locates the sovereignty of God within the first article of the Apostles' Creed, under creation, while McCormack locates it under Christology, the second article.[41]

I argue, using the work of Michael Welker, that the doctrine of the sovereignty of God is best located under the third article of the Creed, as the Spirit is the way God's rule is experienced on earth.[42] Welker's insight that the Spirit gathers the church into a "force field" that empowers believers to do God's will while preserving their freedom is, in my

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[39] For a brief overview of the history of thought on the interrelationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom, see David M. Ciocchi, "Suspending the Debate About Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51, no. 3 (2008): 573-577.

[40] Martin Luther, *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will: A New Translation of De Servo Arbitrio (1525) Martin Luther's Reply to Erasmus of Rotterdam*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1957); Martin Luther, "The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther," in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert, trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959); Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, The Library of Christian Classics, 20-21, edited by John T. McNeill, 2 vols. (Philadelphia,: Westminster Press, 1960); Bruce L. McCormack, "The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

[41] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 35; McCormack, "The Actuality of God," 225.

[42] Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, English-language ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

opinion, a more faithful understanding of the biblical teaching about God's reign than the more deterministic, neo-Calvinist positions held by some modern-day Christians.[43] This representation of the doctrine of divine sovereignty allows for God to be at work in the world, but also allows for human freedom, including the freedom to inflict suffering on others, either intentionally or unintentionally.

Behaving—Christian Practices

Faith does not consist merely of thoughts about God, but is both shaped by and reflected in the actions people take. The lives the research subjects have lived and the things they have done have affected their faith. Dwight Zscheile writes that when Jesus called the disciples to follow him, the learning that transpired was less informational than formational.[44] Ordinary men and women were formed into disciples by the things they did as a community.

I use the lens of Christian Practices to examine the things the research subjects did, or failed to do, in order to sustain their faith and sense of belonging to a Christian community. I use works by Craig Dykstra, Dorothy Bass, Dwight Zscheile, and Diana Butler Bass, to guide this discussion.[45] Dykstra and Bass define Christian practices as "things Christian people do together over time in response to and in light of God's active

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[43] Ibid., 240; For an example of a modern Christian resource that reflects a neo-Calvinist, deterministic understanding of the sovereignty of God, see Church Initiative, *Guilt and Anger (2014), GriefShare* (Wake Forest, NC: Church Initiative, 2014), DVD, 7.

[44] Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 46.

[45] Craig Dykstra and Dorothy C. Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," in *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997, 2010); Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2nd ed., The Practices of Faith Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010); Zscheile, *The Agile Church*; Bass, *Christianity after Religion*.

presence for the life of the world in Christ Jesus."[46] Different authors emphasize different practices. The book *Practicing Our Faith*, edited by Bass, includes chapters on such practices as hospitality, keeping Sabbath, and forgiveness.[47] Zscheile urges the practices of "listening to Scripture, learning to pray and attend to God, and interpreting God's movement in our daily lives" in order to inspire imaginative reflection on God's presence in the world.[48] Butler Bass divides Christian practices into two categories, "practices of devotion," which are activities that show love for God, and "practices of ethics," which are things we do to share love with our neighbors.[49]

Youth ministers use a variety of Christian practices, employing these activities to help youth group members grow in faith and feel a sense of belonging. Denny Rydberg and Wayne Rice focus on community building in youth ministry, while Mark Yaconelli uses contemplative practices for faith formation.[50] Kenda Creasy Dean, noting that many adolescents have difficulty sharing their faith, argues for practices that place a greater emphasis on helping teenagers learn to speak about Jesus.[51]

Christian practices can help develop a lasting faith. The research examined whether the youth ministry I've been engaged in has utilized such practices appropriately,

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[46] Dykstra and Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," 5.

[47] Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, ix-x.

[48] Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 104.

[49] Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 148.

[50] Rydberg, *Building Community in Youth Groups*, 11; Wayne Rice, *Up Close and Personal: How to Build Community in Your Youth Group* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1989), 10; Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 23-25.

[51] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 142.

showing that some practices may work better than others in helping young people discover a lasting connection with the Triune God lived out in a community of faith.

Belonging—The *Missio Dei*

Some of those I studied found their sense of community coming less from the church than from interactions with others in the world. The doctrine of the *missio Dei* argues that God is at work not only in the church, but in all parts of the world, seeking to bring healing and wholeness to all. I use works by David Bosch, Lesslie Newbigin, Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile, and Alan Roxburgh to describe the *missio Dei.*[52] Bosch defines the *missio Dei* as being "God's self-revelation as the One who loves the world, God's involvement in and with the world, the nature and activity of God, which embraces both the church and the world, and in which the church is privileged to participate."[53] Newbigin wrote, "I am committed to believing that every part of the created world and every human being are already related to Jesus."[54] This means that God is already out in the world, relating to all whether they respond in faith or not.

The church, therefore, does not exist to bring God to the world, for God is already in the world. Instead, the church exists by the power of the Holy Spirit, who brought it into being in order to equip it for ministry and sent it out into the world to participate in

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[52] David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series no 16, Twentieth anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995); Alan J. Roxburgh, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood*, Allelon Missional Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011); Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007); Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), Kindle Edition.

[53] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

[54] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 174.

what God is already doing.[55] The Spirit is currently preparing the church in the United States to live out the *missio Dei* in a context that is often indifferent to religious faith. We are called to new and different practices that force us to reach beyond our comfort zones in order to be a part of God's work in our neighborhoods.[56]

The lens of *missio Dei* called for me to listen carefully and non-judgmentally to responses of those in the research sample. Some were hostile to the faith, others indifferent, while others were believing, practicing Christians. All, however, shared their spiritual experiences with me, providing me not necessarily with what I wanted to hear, but with what God wanted me to hear. I learned during this study to be attentive and to listen for God.

Social Science Methodology

I used a mixed methods sequential explanatory approach of social science research for this study.[57] I began by tracking down former faithful youth group members utilizing Facebook, email, and other resources. I contacted them, requesting they participate in a survey which would ask participants if they were a believer in the Christian God, a believer in any sort of god, or spiritual in any way. I also asked about their current practices of prayer, worship, Bible reading, fellowship, and service. After analyzing the results, I selected six former youth group members for qualitative interviews: two who were faithful in worship, two who believed but did not often attend

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[55] Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 85.

[56] Roxburgh, for one, turns many traditional practices on their head. For example, he argues for a practice of hospitality that is less about welcoming others into the church doors than the church being willing to accept the hospitality of others in the neighborhood. Roxburgh, *Missional*, 139-141.

[57] John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2014), Kindle Location 5176-5215.

church, and two who were either agnostic or atheist. I wanted to know if, looking back, they found youth group important and what they learned about God there. I also wanted to ask if what was done in youth group helped to shape their present faith and practices, and what key experiences after youth group shaped their thoughts and beliefs about God and the church. From this, I assessed what patterns emerged, and what youth group practices were more helpful in supporting a lifelong experience of faith.

Research Design

The first part of the research project consisted of a simple explanatory research method utilizing a questionnaire to survey a sample of former youth group members. The population included all adults eighteen years of age and older who were faithful members of the youth groups at Advent, Calvary, and Mission during the time I served those congregations. The sample was a nonprobability convenience sample since I was only able to survey those whom I could contact and who agreed to be a part of the research. Thus, the results of the research will not be generalizable to other populations, such as to former youth group members from other churches.[58]

I used a questionnaire that operationalized the independent, dependent, and intervening variables (see appendix A). I field-tested the quantitative instrument on Gen Xers and Millennials who were not a part of the research population and utilized their feedback to revise the questions. I then sent the questionnaire to the convenience sample, using SurveyMonkey to distribute the survey instrument.[59] I asked respondents if they were willing to allow me to interview them and, if they were, to type in their contact

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[58] Nardi, *Doing Survey Research*, 124-125.

[59] "SurveyMonkey," Palo Alto, CA: SurveyMonkey, Inc., www.surveymonkey.com.

information. I shared the results of the questionnaire with a *journey partner* team consisting of members of Mission who have supported and advised me in the Doctor of Ministry program while I was their pastor.

The second part of this sequential explanatory project consisted of interviews of a subset of the convenience sample from the quantitative stage. The six individuals I interviewed were a nonprobability quota sample, as I selected representatives from three different groups: those who responded they believed in God and were involved with a church, those who reported they believed in God but were not a part of a church, and those who said they did not believe in God and did not belong to a church. I developed a protocol based on the results of the questionnaire, and field-tested the instrument on one Millennial female and one Generation X male, utilizing their feedback to revise the interview questions (see appendix B). I conducted the interviews in person, traveling to where the former youth group members currently live. I audio-recorded these interviews, and transcribed them myself. I analyzed the data, looking for emerging themes. I utilized pseudonyms to protect the identities of those who participated in the research.

Analysis

I analyzed the data from the quantitative survey using descriptive statistical methods, aided by tools from IBM's SPSS program.[60] I reported the total number of respondents, and shared information on several nominal groups.[61] I reported the total number of Gen Xers who took the survey, and the total number of Millennials; the total number of male and female respondents; as well as the totals from each of the three

[60] IBM SPSS Statistics 23, IBM Corporation, Armonk, NY.

[61] Nardi, *Doing Survey Research*, 55-56.

congregations. I used cross-tabulation tables to compare the responses of those from Advent church, with those who responded from Calvary, and those who responded from Mission.[62] I provided comparisons between male and female respondents both within congregations and across congregations. I also cross-tabulated the differences between generations within congregations and across congregations. I compared the effectiveness of practices both within and across congregations. I reported mean and median responses from Likert scale questions and cross-tabulated those responses both within and across congregations by gender and generation.[63] I also compared the responses of those who have faith and attend church, with those who have faith and do not attend, and with those who do not profess faith. I looked for patterns to emerge, either within or across gender groups, generations, congregations, or current faith journeys, that would help to answer the research question.

The results of the survey helped me refine the questions I used in the qualitative interviews. I transcribed and coded the interviews, using Kathy Charmaz's coding process to analyze the data.[64] The interviews provided richness and depth to the research, and helped me to understand the data gathered by the questionnaire. The results of the quantitative and the qualitative research combined to help me answer the research question as to which youth ministry practices were most helpful in developing life-long Christian faith, behaviors, and patterns of belonging.

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[62] Ibid., 161.

[63] Ibid., 140, 142-143.

[64] Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2014), 107-161.

Other Matters

Definition of Key Terms

Active Christians: Those persons who describe themselves as Christians and who attend worship more than two times a year.

Baby Boom generation: An inclusive term for those born during the years 1946-1964. Also known as *Baby Boomers*

Christian faith: Belief and trust in the Triune God.

Christian practices: Things people do, either individually or in groups, that nourish and give witness to their Christian faith. Such practices include prayer, Bible reading, Bible study, worship, participation in a Christian church, and service to others, to name just a few.

Confirmation: A program of Christian instruction designed to apply Lutheran doctrinal teaching to everyday life. For the population I am surveying, Confirmation took place during the middle-school, or 6th-8th grade, years.

Confirmation day: The day on which students conclude the period of Confirmation instruction by publicly professing faith in the Triune God in a church service which utilizes a Rite of Confirmation.

Confirmation group: Middle-school students, attached to a particular congregation, who meet together for instruction in the Lutheran understanding of the Christian faith. Also referred to as a *Middle-school group.*

Generation X: An inclusive term for those born during the years 1965-1980. Also known as *Gen Xers*, *Xers*, and *Busters*.

Greatest Generation: An inclusive term for those who were born prior to 1928.

High school youth group: A group of students in the 9th–12th grades, attached to a particular congregation, who meet for activities such as games, Bible study, and service.

Inactive Christians: Those persons who describe themselves as Christians but attend worship two or fewer times per year.

Millennials: An inclusive term for those born during the years 1981-2000. Also known as *Generation Y* and *Mosaics*.

Non-Christians: Those persons who describe themselves either as non-believers, or as believers in God but not in the Christian faith.

Silent Generation: An inclusive term for those born during the years 1928-1945.

Spiritual journey: The experiences that have led individuals and groups into an understanding of their spirituality.

Spiritual practices: Things people do, either individually or in groups, that nourish and give witness to their spirituality.

Spirituality: An inclusive term for any belief system that reflects upon and gives witness to an individual's or group's understanding of the greater meaning and purpose of human life.

Youth group: A generic term for a regular gathering of both Confirmation and high school aged adolescents who are attached to a particular congregation.

Ethical Concerns

This research conformed to the ethical standards and requirements of Luther Seminary. The Institutional Review Board of Luther Seminary (IRB) reviewed this proposal, and I conformed to all requirements of that Board. The IRB mandates that all research on human subjects conform to the standards of the Belmont Report, which was

published in 1979 to provide guidelines in protecting human beings who participate as research subjects.[65] The Belmont Report calls for ethical procedures in studying human behavior, requiring the following:

> **Respect for Persons,** meaning that the researcher will respect the dignity and autonomy of all human subjects, particularly caring for those who are most vulnerable;
> **Benefice,** which calls for researchers to do all they can to minimize possible risks and maximize anticipated benefits for those whom they research; and
> **Justice,** which means that the benefits and burdens of the research will be fairly distributed.[66]

I used every available measure to safeguard the confidentiality of participants and to ensure that no participants were harmed during the research in order to adhere to these requirements. Pseudonyms were utilized, and all data, journals, and codebooks are being kept in password protected computer files or locked cabinets in my home. I have not and will not share data, except through generalized reporting utilizing pseudonyms to protect the participants. All data will be destroyed on May 31, 2020, three years after the submission of the thesis.

Participation in the project was voluntary. All participants received an implied consent letter prior to participating in the survey which stated that by answering the questionnaire, they were implying consent to participate in the research (see appendix D). Those who agreed to an interview were asked to sign an informed consent letter prior to the interview (see appendix E). The letters assured participants that they could cease participation at any time, and that their relationship with the congregation in which they were youth group members, with Luther Seminary, or with me, would not be negatively

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[65] "The Belmont Report," Washington, DC: United States Department of Health and Human Services, 1979, http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html (accessed July 24, 2015).

[66] "I.R.B. Policies and Procedures," Saint Paul, MN: Luther Seminary, http://www.luthersem.edu/irb/policies.aspx?m=6084 (accessed July 24, 2015).

impacted were they to opt out of the project. The benefits of participation were shared with participants and pertained only to the findings of the study. Participants did not receive any financial or other benefit beyond the knowledge and good feeling that comes from helping a researcher learn something about the subject of inquiry.

I was aware at all times during this research that, as the former and, for some, current pastor of those who agreed to participate in this research, there were power differentials between me and those I surveyed and/or interviewed. I am aware that I desire all to have faith in the Triune God, a desire that was not shared by some in the sample. I did my best not to let that desire, or any power I may have wielded, to affect the participants in any adverse way. I did what I could to minimize any feelings of guilt or shame that may have inadvertently been brought up by the questionnaire or the interview protocol. Instead, I strove to put them at ease and tried to create a climate in which they were encouraged to answer all questions openly and honestly.

Summary

The chapters that follow describe in detail what I have outlined here. Chapter two contains historical backgrounds both of the different congregations I served and of the religious climate of the mid-2010s. Chapter three examines the theoretical lenses, while chapter four gives more detail about the biblical and theological lenses. Chapter five describes the research methodology. Chapter six contains the findings of the research and chapter seven presents my conclusions.

I have been privileged over the past thirty years to work with amazing young people who, no matter their current faith journey, shared their lives with me and trusted me to help them learn about the Christian faith. This project has allowed me to reconnect

with many of them and to hear how the history of their youth group, along with their own personal histories, have shaped their spiritual journeys. Their histories were impacted by both the history of the churches where they participated in youth group, and by the current state of religious faith in the United States. I turn to a discussion of those subjects in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Introduction

The adults I studied all attended youth groups while they were adolescents and engaged in practices that either shaped, or failed to shape, their faith and Christian behaviors today. Exactly what effect those practices had on their current faith is the subject of the research; however, more than just youth ministry shaped their current beliefs and behaviors. Environmental and cultural factors experienced both during their adolescence and as adults also played a role. This chapter examines two of these factors. I begin by sketching briefly a key environmental factor for many of these adults: the history of the congregations at which they participated in youth groups. I then examine the cultural changes surrounding religious beliefs rooted in the history of the first years of the twenty-first century. Many social science studies have examined these cultural changes, and I look at one study, the *U.S. Landscape Religious Study* conducted by Pew Research in 2007 and 2014, to provide information on the current religious environment in America.[1] I end with a brief summary of these environmental and cultural histories.

[1] Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape."; Pew Research Center, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious."

The Histories of the Congregations

Advent, Calvary, and Mission Lutheran Churches are all unique congregations with individual histories and experiences that shaped their youth ministries. I provide in what follows a brief historical sketch of each congregation, focusing on the youth ministry that took place prior to my arrival. I then discuss what happened among the youth during my time of service and, in the case of Advent and Calvary, describe what happened to the youth ministry and the congregation after I left.

Advent Lutheran Church

Advent Lutheran Church was formed in 1960 in a suburb of Orange County. The founding pastor, Pastor Ted, served Advent for seventeen years and during his tenure the congregation grew to an average attendance of over seven hundred in worship on a Sunday.[2] The congregation trained seminary interns and one of those interns was called to be their first Associate Pastor. Pastor Jay was a skilled musician and he discovered that a number of the high school students in the congregation had musical skills. He developed a youth choir that traveled throughout the country and gave concerts each summer. The choir grew to more than one hundred members during the three years Pastor Jay served Advent, and continued for a time after he left. The choir and the number of youth involved were a point of pride for the congregation.

Pastor Jay departed to serve another congregation in the late 1970s and, since his new congregation was located only ten miles away, more than fifty of Advent's regular attenders moved with him. The Evangelical Free church three miles away called a new pastor with a national reputation at about the same time Pastor Jay left and, slowly,

[2] Pastor Ted, like all names in this thesis, is a pseudonym.

members of Advent began to trickle out the door to that church. Pastor Ted took a new call in the late 1970s and, by the time he left, attendance at Advent had dropped by one hundred regular attenders. The drop in attendance, however, was not felt significantly until after Pastor Ted's departure, when many other families departed, claiming Advent did not feel the same without Pastor Ted.

The youth choir continued for a time, but by the early 1980s, without Pastor Jay's influence, the group disbanded. A new Associate Pastor was called who looked and sounded very much like Pastor Jay, but he lacked charisma and group-building skills. The congregation continued to decline in attendance and was averaging 275 in worship when I arrived.

I was called in 1986 to serve with the third Senior Pastor in Advent's history. I arrived six months after Pastor Edwin, following my seminary graduation. I had little experience with youth ministry, having never served as a camp counselor or as a youth worker. I had not thought I liked youth ministry until my internship, at which time I discovered I enjoyed working with young people. I returned to seminary and took a youth ministry class, but knew little about how to organize a youth group. I made a lot of early mistakes and, for a time, youth group attendance remained small. I inherited a clique of six youth who attended the same school, enjoyed each other's company, and were not particularly welcoming to others. I also inherited those who came to youth group because their parents forced them to do so. A married couple were the sponsors during my first year of ministry, but dropped out during my second.

I had little idea of how to break down the clique and encourage a more welcoming atmosphere, but an opportunity arrived. Advent had a tradition of sending youth to

National Youth Gatherings, and one took place in 1988. Twelve young people signed up, the six in the clique plus six others, and I recruited two adults to go with me as sponsors. I attended a workshop that gave me some group building skills, and I divided the group of fifteen into three groups of five. Each group consisted of one adult, two youth from the clique, and two other youth. I told those who would attend the gathering that Sunday night meetings were mandatory, and utilized group-building exercises from Denny Rydberg's *Building Community in Youth Groups* at those meetings.[3] The groups participated in the exercises, began to trust each other, and started to share openly their positive and negative life experiences. One group or another would miss the closing prayer each week after our one-hour meetings because they were still talking with and supporting one another in their small groups. By the time we left for the gathering, the clique was no longer exclusive and the group felt more cohesive.

The gathering week itself provided a spiritual high for the group. I had not realized when the travel agent booked our return flight that we would miss closing worship. We decided to hold our own worship service in one of our hotel rooms prior to leaving for the airport. This mistake in booking produced one of the most memorable experiences of the week. The worship service, which was led by the youth, was incredibly moving, with the group discussing how much they had grown in love for God and for each other. It was then, and remains to this day, a high point for me in youth ministry.

The group returned and, surprisingly, the excitement from the experience continued. Group members invited friends to Sunday night meetings, we continued to use

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[3] Rydberg, *Building Community in Youth Groups*.

group-building techniques, and the group at Advent grew during my tenure to an average of about thirty youth and three adults attending weekly Sunday-night meetings. I left Advent in 1992, but the adults who had worked with me remained and continued to lead the group after my departure. A few years after I left, a faction of the congregation gathered to try to oust Pastor Edwin, the Senior Pastor with whom I had worked, from his position. He survived the experience, but a year later he took a new call, and the congregational conflict led some families of the youth with whom I had worked to leave as well. The key adult leader of the youth group went through a divorce at about the same time and moved out of the area, leaving the youth group with new adult leadership. Some of the former youth contacted me about doing their weddings, and since Advent was in chaos for a few years, I agreed and performed weddings for a few former youth group members. I am still in touch with these people today, and most of them are raising their families in Christian congregations.

Calvary Lutheran Church

Calvary Lutheran Church was formed in the 1930s in a small farming community in central California. The congregation never grew much, and by the time I arrived they had held steady at an average worship attendance of fifty people for many years. The congregation had some sort of pastoral malfeasance in the 1940s. Parishioners knew it had happened, but those who knew the details had died and no one could recall exactly what the pastor had done. The result of that pastor's action lived on long after the memory of the actual event, for pastors were not trusted by the congregation. Many pastors stayed only a few years before moving on—in the thirty-five years in which

Advent had three Senior Pastors, Calvary had more than a dozen—which led to more distrust of the pastoral office.

Calvary called itself "The Small Congregation that Loves One Another," but the truth was they had trouble living in love. There were two factions in the congregation, and while they loved one another in their own faction, they were not hesitant to act cruelly toward those in the other group. One faction, whom I will call the traditionalists, favored more traditional worship and a more respectful attitude from young people, while the other faction, the newbies, favored more youth-friendly worship and more freedom for young people.

I arrived on Easter Sunday in 1992 and learned that a Sunday night youth group for middle- and high school aged youth had been started a year earlier by one of the mothers. I joined with the group, helping to lead Bible studies and coordinate games. Youth invited their friends and soon more families were attending church. Attendance on Sunday mornings went up to the mid-nineties and, since the church could only hold eighty comfortably, we went to two services. This did not lead, however, to the two factions joining together. A year after my arrival, as attendance was growing and youth group attendance had doubled, a request was made that fifty of the one thousand dollars the congregation anticipated receiving over and above the previous year's budget be allocated to youth ministry. The argument over that amount of money lasted more than an hour, and when the vote was taken, the increase was voted down by a slim margin. That night I sided with the youth folks, though I often could understand the viewpoint of the traditionalists. The young people we were attracting were often rude to their elders, and their parents rarely corrected them.

Another incident highlighted the conflict between the groups, and the confusing nature of how to defuse such arguments. Three elementary-school-aged children from the neighborhood, having witnessed the games night for middle- and high school youth, asked if they could participate. They were told the games were for older children, but they could come to Sunday School and church, which they did. Their mother was in prison and their father treated them with benign neglect, so they attended by themselves. They had no idea how to behave in worship. The traditionalists complained about their behavior, with a few saying they should not attend church without a parent to watch over them. The newbies were offended by the complaints of the traditionalists, but did nothing to help the children in worship. One of the traditionalists, realizing the children would remain, began to sit with them to teach them how to sing hymns, sit quietly during the sermon, recite the Lord's Prayer, and otherwise participate in worship. I had asked the newbies to help the children find their way through the service, but they all told me they needed to care for their own children. I have always found it ironic that the traditionalists actually did the work of caring for these children whom they thought should not be in church without a parent in the first place.

I helped the youth raise funds for the 1994 National Youth Gathering and for a 1996 Regional Gathering. Fund-raising was at times difficult. The traditionalists didn't mind giving money for fund-raising activities, but always thought the youth did not work very hard for the money they requested. The youth enjoyed the gatherings, but I did not experience with them the spiritual high I had experienced with the group from Advent.

The groups could come together to oppose the pastor, as happened to me in 1996 when I was targeted by a traditionalist and a newbie for not caring enough about their

ministries. I weathered the storm but at times wondered if I would survive the conflict. I left Calvary in 1997, by which time the average attendance at worship had gone back down to about seventy-five each Sunday. The youth group continued to gather about twelve young people on Sunday nights for a time after my departure, but conflict arose over the pastor who followed me and, about two years after I left, many of the families left the congregation. They were again averaging fifty people at worship three years after my departure. A couple of the young people asked if I would return to perform their weddings, but I refused. There were reasons why I refused to do for the youth at Calvary what I had done for those at Advent. First, the workload at Calvary was light enough that I had the freedom to perform weddings for the Advent youth, while I was much busier in my new call at Mission and did not have the time to return. I also had learned more about boundaries, and realized that the church frowned on pastors returning to do such work as it often hindered the congregation from fully accepting a new minister. I did not keep in touch with any of the youth from Calvary after I left the congregation.

Mission Lutheran Church

I began my ministry as a solo pastor at Mission Lutheran Church in 1997. The congregation was formed in 1960 (the same year as Advent) in a suburban neighborhood of San Diego County. Mission had four Senior pastors, two Associates, and one Co-Lead Pastor in its history prior to my arrival. The first three Senior pastors all served eight years, the fourth served for twelve, and the congregation had a long history of solid youth ministry. Mission had a large youth group in the early 1990s headed by a paid youth worker, Joe, who attracted many young people to the high school group. He led the youth group to make t-shirts which had the words *Pray Naked* printed in bold letters on the

front, while the back of the shirt proclaimed *Be Yourself In God's Presence.* The shirt scandalized some members of the congregation, although it was a Christian article of clothing that the young people not only wore proudly to school, but also defended by explaining its meaning to others. Joe's time with the youth group ended abruptly when it was found that he was having an affair with the mother of a youth group member. The early 1990s were a time of economic distress in San Diego, so the congregation decided to save money by hiring a part-time rather than a full-time youth worker. Julie, the woman they hired, loved the youth but did not have Joe's group-building skills. By the time I arrived, the high school youth group had dwindled to an average of twelve for Sunday night meetings.

Julie remained on staff until 2004. We worked together to revamp Confirmation ministry, recruiting more adults to join high school youth in leading small same-gender groups for sixth-, seventh- and eighth-grade students. I rarely participated in the Sunday night high school meetings, and they continued to gather about twelve throughout Julie's tenure. The church, on the other hand, was growing, largely because of an influx of members due to the failure of other Lutheran churches nearby. Confirmation attendance more than doubled, and giving increased dramatically. Julie resigned in 2004, and the congregation decided to call an Associate Pastor, Pastor Ray, to lead youth ministries. The group grew under his leadership and he has spearheaded annual youth trips. High school students travel to Mexico each summer to serve one week at an orphanage the congregation supports. The group has also attended National and Regional youth gatherings and, in the years when a gathering is not offered, has traveled to places as

diverse as northern California or Oklahoma to engage in servant projects. Pastor Ray has served Mission for the past twelve years and continues to serve there today.

Mission is incredibly supportive of youth ministry. The congregation takes pride in the work Pastor Ray does not only among the youth of the congregation, but also in the larger church, where he has become a recognized leader in youth ministry. One example of the supportiveness of youth ministry came in the midst of a million dollar building program in 1999. The congregation chose to divert $30,000 that could have served as part of a down payment on the new fellowship building in order to remodel a portion of another building so that the church could open a preschool. They did this because they saw the need for the preschool, and wanted to support youth ministry among the youngest community members. Young people and those who ministered among them were valued and praised for their work.

The U.S. Landscape Religious Study

The adults who were members of youth groups in Advent, Calvary, and Mission were shaped not only by the environment of their congregations, but also by the religious culture of America. This religious culture has undergone significant change in the twenty-first century. Numerous studies undertaken in the 2000s on the state of religion in America have come to the same conclusion: young adults in the United States are increasingly professing a lack of faith and leaving the Christian church.[4] This finding is borne out in the research I did for this thesis, as a number of formerly faithful youth

[4] Examples used in this thesis include the Faith Matters survey cited in Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, Kindle location 217-234; fourteen surveys undertaken by the Barna group from 1995-2007 as commissioned by the Fermi Project and reported in David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity ... And Why It Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 250-251; and the Faith Journey and Omni poll surveys also undertaken by the Barna group from 2007-2011 as reported in Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 246-249.

group members either do not attend church or do not profess faith in the Triune God. I turn now to data from one social science study, the *U.S. Landscape Religious Study* conducted by the Pew Research group in 2007 and 2014, to give historical context for the culture in which the adults I studied currently live.

The second *U.S. Landscape Religious Study*, conducted by Pew Research Center from June 4 – September 30, 2014, found that in seven years, the number of Americans who said they were Christian had declined by a surprising five million persons.[5] The first Pew study, which was conducted in 2007, reported that approximately 178 million American adults named Christianity as their faith; by 2014 that number had gone down to about 173 million. The percentage of those in the general population who claimed Christianity as their faith dropped from 78.4% in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014.[6] Five million is also the number of adults that Pew estimates have left mainline Protestant churches, though this does not mean that everyone who left the faith was a mainline Protestant, as some mainline Protestants have died while others have exchanged their church for an evangelical or Catholic one.[7]

Pew also reported that between 2007 and 2014 the number of those who claimed no affiliation to a religion, otherwise known as *nones*, grew by more than nineteen million, from 16.1% to 22.8% of the general population.[8] The study shows that while there is a drop in religious affiliation among all age groups, young adults are particularly

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[5] Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," 7. The website allows for a report to be downloaded and the page numbers listed here and in other footnotes for Pew Research findings refer to the page of the downloadable report.

[6] Ibid., 3.

[7] Ibid., 8.

[8] Ibid., 3.

adding to the number of *nones*. The median age of the unaffiliated dropped from thirty-eight to thirty-six during this seven-year period, while the median age of those who are members of mainline Protestant churches rose from fifty to fifty-two.[9] *Nones* are getting younger while mainline Protestants are getting older, and the numbers of Millennials who are unaffiliated outstrip those of other generations. "Fully 36% of young Millennials (those between the ages of 18 and 24) are religiously unaffiliated, as are 34% of older Millennials (ages 25-33). And fewer than six-in-ten Millennials identify with any branch of Christianity, compared with seven-in-ten or more among older generations, including Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers."[10] This does not mean, however, that the news about Boomers and Xers is good for the church. Faithful Christians from those generations have also dropped since 2007. The percentage of Xers who claim either no affiliation or say they are atheist or agnostic grew four points, from 19% to 23%, while the percentage for Baby Boomers rose three points, from 14% to 17%. Even members of the Silent Generation, those born from 1928-1945, are increasingly unaffiliated, with their numbers rising from 9% to 11% within their age cohort.[11]

Pew research adds that those who claim no particular religion are not necessarily atheists or agnostics. The majority of *nones*, 61% in 2014, say they believe in God, but this number is down from 70% in 2007.[12] Pew also found that the *nones* of 2014 are less religiously observant than those of 2007. They pray less often and attend worship less

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[9] Ibid., 5-6.

[10] Ibid., 11. The "-" in Gen-Xers is used by Pew research, but not by other authors, such as Miller and Miller. Outside of quotations from Pew, I will use the term "Gen Xer" without the dash.

[11] Ibid., 12.

[12] Pew Research Center, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," 4.

often. Pew found that in 2014, 13% of the unaffiliated said that religion was *very important* to them, which may seem surprisingly high given their lack of affiliation, but is still down three percentage points from when the same question was asked in 2007. This means that the nation as a whole is less religious than it was just seven years earlier. The Pew researchers note: "The growth of the 'nones' as a share of the population, coupled with their declining levels of religious observance, is tugging down the nation's overall rates of religious belief and practice."[13]

Those who are unaffiliated are not necessarily unfamiliar with church. Almost one-in-five of all who either claim no religion or say they are atheist or agnostic was raised in the church. There is some movement from lack of affiliation to membership in a faith community, as almost half of adults who were raised without a faith now claim one. But they number only 4.3% of the population, which means that for every one convert to a religion, more than four have left a faith.[14] The adults I studied live in a world that is less religious than it was just nine years earlier.

Summary

The participants in this research were affected by the history of the congregations they attended. Some experienced conflict in the church, some experienced a lack of warmth from older members, while others were nurtured and supported by the faith community as a whole. Some had profound spiritual experiences while others did not. They now live in a world where lack of faith in God and lack of church affiliation is

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[13] Ibid., 5.

[14] Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," 12.

increasing in large numbers among people their age. I turn next to theoretical lenses to understand currents in the culture that have shaped their spiritual journeys.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL LENSES

Introduction

The spiritual journeys of the adults I studied were affected by more than the history of their congregations and the religious context of modern-day American culture. They were also shaped by other currents—theoretical, theological, and biblical—that form lenses through which the research results can be examined. I describe theoretical lenses in this chapter, and biblical and theological lenses in the next.

I first examine two theoretical lenses which act as major foci for this study. The first major lens, *Believing, Behaving, and Belonging*, compares the works of Kenda Creasy Dean, David Kinnaman, and Diana Butler Bass. These authors examine the current religious culture and use the categories of believing, behaving, and belonging both to describe declining levels of religious faith and practice and to prescribe differing solutions. The second lens, *Generations Theory*, seeks to explain why the faith practices of those born in the 1950s differ from those born in the 1970s and those born in the 1980s. These two lenses are followed by other theoretical lenses which, while not as important or significant to the research, help to explain the culture and influences encountered by the adults I studied. Those lenses are *Postmodernism, the Rise of Nones and Liminals*, *Adult Servant Leadership*, and *Cultural Views of God.*

Believing, Behaving, and Belonging

The adults I studied *belonged* to a youth group when they were adolescents. They learned in that youth group about the faith of the church, and were encouraged to *believe* in the Triune God. They also were urged to *behave* as Christians, to engage in practices such as worship, prayer, Bible reading, and service to others. The youth ministry in which they were raised stressed believing, behaving, and belonging, yet many of them now no longer believe in God, no longer engage in Christian behaviors, and/or no longer belong to Christian congregations. They are not alone. Pew Research Center has reported that five million fewer Americans claimed Christianity as their faith in 2014 than in 2007.[1] What happened to these five million former Christians? Why did they leave?

Kenda Creasy Dean, David Kinnaman, and Diana Butler Bass have separately examined various studies and come up with a variety of conclusions. All three blame the church's inability to share the gospel appropriately amid the cultural climate of the twenty-first century, yet all three argue for different solutions. Dean sees the problem as one of faith formation, arguing that the church needs to change its methods of sharing the gospel. She is more interested in changing the culture of the church than in examining how that culture is affected by external societal forces. She advocates for youth ministry that models a "consequential faith," which grows by "confessing a creed, belonging to a community, and pursuing God's purpose and hope," claiming that such a consequential faith is not what churches are teaching their teens.[2]

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[1] Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," 7.

[2] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 7.

Kinnaman agrees with Dean that the problem is one of believing, but he is more interested than Dean in noting the effects of contemporary American culture on the development of faith. He believes that the church has failed to make disciples in a culture filled with rapid and disorienting change.[3] Butler Bass blames the church for not keeping pace with culture.[4] "All sorts of people—even mature faithful Christians—are finding conventional religion increasingly less satisfying, are attending church less regularly, and are longing for new expressions of spiritual community."[5] She argues for a new way of doing church that takes into account these longings.[6]

Dean analyzed the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), conducted among adolescents from 2003-2005, to gauge the depth of faith of teenagers in America. Her conclusion: "American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. One more thing: we're responsible."[7] She notes that the religious behavior of teens mirrors that of adults, who embrace a "do-good, feel good spirituality that has little to do with the Triune God of Christian tradition and even less to do with loving Jesus Christ enough to follow him into the world."[8] Not all religious groups have such a lackadaisical faith. The NSYR revealed that a higher percentage of Mormons than Protestant or Catholic Christians gave witness to their faith by living out

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[3] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 21.

[4] Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 15.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid., 7.

[7] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 3.

[8] Ibid., 4.

their beliefs in ways that brought meaning and purpose to their lives.[9] Why are Mormons more devoted to their faith? Dean argues that Mormons utilize four "cultural tools" to help them remain faithful to their traditions: they know and can articulate what they believe, they find themselves to be a part of a greater community of believers, they feel called to live a life of purpose and meaning based on their faith, and their faith gives them hope for the future.[10]

Dean argues that Trinitarian Christians have different aims than Mormons, that while Mormons seek to help their children embody a Mormon way of life, Christians see themselves as called to follow Christ into the world by loving God and neighbor. "Jesus did not call people to come to church; he called people to follow him."[11] Dean, however, admires the Mormon church's use of cultural tools, claiming the Christian church should use the same tools to help young people develop a lasting faith. She argues that the church, in order to make disciples, is called to help young people do four things. The church needs to help teens state clearly what they believe, guiding them to articulate faith in a God who is personally and powerfully involved in their individual lives. The church is to nurture community among young people in a particular congregation so that they know they belong to something greater than themselves. The church is to help teens behave as Christians, modeling for them God's call to love their neighbors by putting the needs of others above their own wants and desires. The church, finally, is called to help

[9] Ibid., 50-52.

[10] Ibid., 49.

[11] Ibid., 60.

young people understand that since God is active in the present, God will also be active in the future, so they can face the future with hope.[12]

Kinnaman, who is the President of the Barna Group, a private research company, sought to answer the question as to why so many young people are dropping out of the church by overseeing a mixed methods research project from 2007-2011. He and his team surveyed and interviewed young adults aged eighteen to twenty-nine years old, asking them questions about their faith and their relationship with the church. He also utilized data from other studies that were conducted over two decades prior to his own research.[13] He argues that Millennials, whom he calls *Mosaics*, are leaving because the church has failed them:

> A generation of young Christians believes that the churches in which they were raised are not safe and hospitable places to express doubts. Many feel that they have been offered slick or half-baked answers to their thorny, honest questions, and they are rejecting the "talking heads" and "talking points" they see among the older generations.[14]

The key question for Kinnaman is, "How can we follow Jesus—and help young people faithfully follow Jesus—in a dramatically changing culture?"[15] He argues that the answer is to be found by examining the changes in culture that have shaped Millennials, and,

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[12] Ibid., 70-79.

[13] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 246-249.

[14] Ibid., 11. The Barna group uses the term "Mosaics" rather than Millennials because they believe the term, which brings to mind a mosaic made up of different pieces of multi-colored tiles, better reflects that generation's "eclectic relationships, thinking styles, and learning format, among other things." Ibid., 246. I will use the more commonly-used term "Millennials" for "Mosaics" throughout this paper.

[15] Ibid., 12.

referencing John 17, by helping them live as disciples who are in, but not of, the world in which that culture flourishes.[16]

How is the culture of Millennials different from cultures that preceded it? Kinnaman writes of differences centering on issues of access, alienation, and authority.[17] Access refers to the ability to interact with the world using technology. Technology allows people to fact-check their preachers as they are delivering sermons, check in with friends who live continents away, and communicate with others continuously. People accustomed to technological access cry out for greater participation in the development of their spirituality. They are less interested in hearing what others think about God, and more interested in expressing what they think:

> Technological access allows them to experience and examine content originating from nonbiblical worldviews, giving them ample reasons to question the nature of truth. It generates extraordinary distractions and invites them to be less linear and logical in their thought processes. It empowers them to think as participants, not just as consumers, of media. And it makes them both more connected and more isolated than generations before them.[18]

Access leads people to desire more participation in the formation of their spiritual lives, but alienation has paradoxically made them less likely to participate as adult members at church or, indeed, to participate in any part of society. Millennials are skeptical about institutions, including the church. They long for intimacy, but they flee from community.[19]

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[16] Ibid., 11-12.

[17] Ibid., 39.

[18] Ibid., 42.

[19] Ibid., 44-50.

They are particularly skeptical of authority. The church has little intrinsic authority for these young adults. They are more likely to ask a religious question of Google than they are of a pastor. They believe that truth is relative, and that what is true for one person's faith and spiritual growth may not be true for another's.[20]

Kinnaman argues that the church can make disciples of people living in this cultural context, but only if the church engages them intentionally. To do so, the church must understand how to use technology to help develop a personal faith, cultivate life-giving relationships to counter alienation, and see questions of authority as opportunities to discuss who God is and how God gives meaning and purpose to human lives.[21]

Kinnaman further argues that the church must work at three particular aspects of disciple-making to help counter the negative cultural influence of access, alienation, and lack of trust in authority. First, the church must work at building community by building relationships, particularly intergenerational relationships, in order to help mentor young people in the Christian faith. He notes that many young people do not have any adult friends other than their parents, and do not believe that older adults understand their doubts and concerns about Christianity.[22] Second, the church must help young people connect their work with their faith. Many, particularly those whose careers and studies are in the physical sciences, experience the church as being opposed to their work. Kinnaman urges the church to help young people understand that their careers are

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[20] Ibid., 50-56.

[21] Ibid., 57.

[22] Ibid., 29.

vocations—callings from God to serve the world in whatever capacity—and to trust that God is the God of science as well as of religion.[23]

Third, Kinnaman calls for the church to help young people learn the difference between information and wisdom. Information conveys ideas about God while wisdom brings about a relationship with God that leads to an obedient way of life. "For example, many young Christians admire the words and works of Jesus (information) but do not *know* him as Lord and God (wisdom). They read and respect the Bible (information) but they do not perceive that its words lay claim to their obedience (wisdom)."[24] Kinnaman argues that in order to make disciples of the next generation, the church must emphasize relationships, connect secular work with Christian vocation, and help young adults move beyond information to wisdom.

Kinnaman notes increasing alienation and questioning of authority among Millennials but does not examine in depth why these qualities have grown in recent years. Butler Bass fills in the gaps, arguing that such alienation and questioning is happening among all age groups and seeking explanations as to why. She notes that from 1990–2000, the American public told pollsters they had confidence in religious leaders and religious institutions, but data from the General Service Survey records a twelve percent drop in such confidence in the decade from 2001-2010.[25] What happened? A period Butler Bass calls the *Horrible Decade* took place.[26] Events during this decade ate away at Americans' confidence in Christianity specifically, and in religion as a whole.

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[23] Ibid., 29-30.

[24] Ibid., 31. The emphasis is in the original text.

[25] Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 81-82.

[26] Ibid., 76.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks were blamed on religious fanatics, and people began to wonder if religion in general might encourage such fanaticism, questioning if religion might do more harm than good.[27] Trust in church leaders was shaken in 2002 when the *Boston Globe* broke the news about the clergy sex scandal in the Roman Catholic Church, proving that the hierarchy had been more interested in shielding predatory priests than in either caring for past victims or protecting potential future ones.[28] The 2003 ordination of Gene V. Robinson as the first homosexual bishop of the Episcopal Church erupted in ugly fights which proved to many that "Christianity is mean, bigoted and makes people behave badly."[29] The 2004 re-election of George W. Bush, which occurred with the help of religious conservatives, seemed like a victory for evangelicalism but began to underscore a widening divide between rightwing Christian leaders and the culture and values of young adults.[30]

Millennials increasingly equated the Christian church with religious conservatives during the *Horrible Decade.* Disagreements with "Christian" positions on same-sex relationships, care for the environment, and appropriate responses to global poverty, to name a few, alienated many from the church.[31] The number of Americans who had turned their back on religious institutions was so great that when the economic recession hit in 2008, churches were already dealing with dwindling resources. The churches could not, therefore, give the kind of assistance in helping those harmed by the recession that they

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[27] Ibid., 77-78.

[28] Ibid., 78-79.

[29] Ibid., 79-80.

[30] Ibid., 80.

[31] Ibid., 80-81.

could have provided a decade earlier. The inability of churches to provide such aid contributed to a widening feeling that religion was irrelevant to the average American's daily life. Butler Bass argues that while the economic recession began in 2008, the church's recession started in 2001. She claims the effects of this recession are still being felt in the church today.[32]

What did churches do in response to this recession? Butler Bass argues that many continued to conduct business as usual which led to discontent among formerly faithful churchgoers. The result of all this is that people dropped out of church as they could not find a church that helped them in their spiritual quests.[33] Butler Bass does not view this unhappiness with the church as necessarily harmful, arguing that such discontent can actually help Christians find a new path forward. She notes that many of the discontented and religiously unaffiliated are young adults, and wonders if their dim view of the church may reveal a spiritual longing:

> Somewhere these young adults have evidently heard that Christianity is supposed to be a religion about love, forgiveness and practicing what Jesus preached and that faith should give meaning to real life. American churches come up short. Thus, their discontent about what is may reflect a deeper longing for a better sort of Christianity, one that embodies Jesus' teaching and life in a way that makes a real difference in the world.[34]

How can the church provide this better sort of Christianity? Not by telling those who are discontented what they are to believe, according to Butler Bass. She argues, in opposition to Dean and Kinnaman, that neither better teaching of an authentic Christian creed (Dean) nor better application of that creed to the issues of access, alienation, and

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[32] Ibid., 80-82.

[33] Ibid., 83.

[34] Ibid., 87.

authority (Kinnaman), will bring about the Christianity that is needed. She would not begin with believing and behaving, as do Dean and Kinnaman, though she argues belief and behavior are important. She argues that an authentic experiential Christianity which meets the needs of today can be fostered if the church begins with belonging, then moves to behaving, and finally deals with believing.[35] She writes that this was the way faith came to the disciples. They were first called to follow Jesus and belong to a band of disciples. They were next called to behave as disciples by learning to pray, listening to Christ's teaching, and participating in his healing and preaching ministry. Only after they belonged and behaved were they asked to believe, as Peter was asked by Jesus in Mark 8, "Who do you say that I am?" Butler Bass argues that people are coming to faith today as the disciples did, by first experiencing community and Christian practices, belonging and behaving, resulting in believing.[36] Such an experiential Christianity signals a new "Age of the Spirit," and results in a new way of being Christian that can meet the religious and spiritual needs of twenty-first century Americans.[37]

Dean, Kinnaman, and Butler Bass all focus on the concepts of believing, behaving, and belonging, but differ with each other in how these concepts can be used to encourage a lasting faith. The youth ministry I have engaged in over the years has always put belonging first, trying to help young people feel they are a part of a community that loves and supports them, but youth ministry has also assumed that the reason young people are willing to belong is because they already have faith. Such an assumption

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[35] Ibid., 208.

[36] Ibid., 204-209.

[37] Ibid., 214.

clearly does not reflect reality in this day and time. Believing, behaving, and belonging are such important concepts that they function as a major lens, one that casts a shadow over every other lens in this research. There is, however, one other major lens, *Generations Theory*, that casts a similar shadow. I turn to that lens now.

Generations Theory

Generational Analysis

Pew Research Center has found that age is a key factor in understanding and predicting an individual's perspectives and behaviors. Age gives researchers two pieces of information about individuals: their place in the life cycle (young, middle-aged, or older) and their belonging to a group of people who over time have experienced similar cultural and environmental factors that have shaped all members of their group in common ways. Pew refers to this sort of group as an age cohort. One common way to put together age cohorts is by combining them into generations. A generation typically consists of people who were born within a period of fifteen-to-twenty years and who were shaped by cultural forces in similar ways.[38]

Pew names six generations of living Americans in their generational analysis. The Greatest Generation was born prior to 1928. They fought in World War II and, in the words of Ronald Reagan, "saved the world."[39] Most of the members of this generation have died, and at only 2% of the general population, Pew no longer reports statistics on them as there are not enough of them to gather a scientific sample utilizing public opinion

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[38] Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research," 1.

[39] Ibid., 3.

surveys.[40] The Silent Generation was born from 1928-45. They were too young to fight in the war, and *Time* magazine in 1951 called them "Silent" because instead of fighting to change society, they conformed to society's expectations and were civic minded.[41] The Baby Boom generation was named because of the large number of babies that were born between 1946 and 1964. The Baby Boom began when men returned from World War II and started fathering children, and ended when the birth control pill became readily available and birth rates dropped in the years that followed.[42] Generation X (or Gen Xers) is the term most widely used for those born from 1965-1980. The birth rate during these years was relatively low compared to that of Baby Boomers and of Millennials. Millennials are those born after 1980. Their birth rates were higher than those of Generation X, echoing the rates of the Baby Boom of 1946-1964.[43]

Generations theorists note that three factors can result in either differing or similar opinions and attitudes among age cohorts. The first is the life-cycle effect. Certain attitudes and behaviors seem to be governed by whether an individual is young, middle-aged, or older. Pew cites the example of political participation. Baby Boomers are more likely to vote and be politically active than are Millennials, but when Baby Boomers were younger, the Silent and Greatest Generations were more likely to vote. This is considered a life-cycle effect as studies have consistently shown that people of all generations are politically active at higher rates as they age.[44]

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 2-3.

[43] Ibid., 3.

[44] Ibid., 4.

The second factor is called the period effect. Period effects take place when larger societal factors influence people of all ages to change thoughts and behaviors at the same time. An example of this is the drop in trust of government that took place in the aftermath of both the Vietnam War and the Watergate hearings. Cynicism about the trustworthiness of government occurred across multiple generations at the same time. It was an effect of that period of time.[45]

The third factor is the cohort effect. The experiences shared by those of a similar age shape their attitudes and actions. Those of other generations who did not share a particular experience are unlikely to have the same attitudes as those inside the cohort. The Great Depression, for example, had a cohort effect as it shaped the habits and attitudes of the Greatest Generation and the Silent Generation in ways that Baby Boomers never experienced.[46]

Different researchers may look at the same data and ascribe to it different effects. Kinnaman notes that some church leaders think young adults who have dropped out of church are experiencing a life-cycle effect, arguing that once they marry and have children, they will be ready to return to church.[47] Kinnaman and Dean disagree with this analysis, seeing not a life-cycle effect, but a cohort effect, the failure of the church to properly share the faith with those of a younger generation. Their solutions are about helping an older generation of Christians reach out to those who are younger.[48] Butler Bass, on the other hand, sees a period effect. She notes that larger numbers of young

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid., 5.

[47] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 32.

[48] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 3; Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 17.

adults are not returning to church, but also recognizes that older churchgoers are dropping out as well. She sees the issue as not one of changing youth ministry strategies but of changing the church as a whole.[49]

The Silent Generation and Baby Boomers

What do we know about the different generations? How are Gen Xers and Millennials, the subjects of this research, different from the generations that came before them? One of the key differences, according to Jean M. Twenge, is the differing conception of the importance of the self among the generations. She notes that the Silent Generation, like the Greatest Generation before it, reflected a sense not of individuality but of conformity with the rules of society. Men dressed in similar suits with white shirts and ties at work, while women wore skirts of identical length.[50] People were considered odd if they were not married by the age of twenty-five, and they almost always married within their race and religion. People were expected to have children and live out the gender roles society gave them. "Overall, duty and responsibility were held more important than individual wants and needs."[51]

Baby Boomers, on the other hand, rejected conformity for a greater sense of individuality. They prized meaning and self-fulfillment over duty to the community, and embarked on a quest to find meaning in life by focusing on the self.[52] The focus on the self, however, was paradoxically almost always carried out in groups. Boomers gathered

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[49] Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 88.

[50] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 21.

[51] Ibid., 23.

[52] Ibid., 59-60.

with one another to figure out what it meant to be an individual, whether in encounter groups, group therapy, or protest groups. They took the first steps toward individualism, but their real contribution to an individualistic sense of self was in how they raised their children.[53]

Generation X and Millennials

The 1970s were a difficult decade for children. Divorce rates doubled between 1965 and 1977. Many children were raised by single parents and were latchkey kids, whose only babysitter was the TV as they came home to an empty house. Parents were often exhausted, and while they extolled the value of quality time with their children, their children often experienced a lack of time with their parents. Many Gen Xers grew up alienated from their parents, and with a greater sense of self as a separate entity from family and community than was experienced by the generation that preceded them.[54]

Also fueling Gen Xers' sense of individuality was their familiarity with technology. Computers began to be a staple in the home as Gen Xers were growing up. The computer allowed Xers to express their individuality in new forms. "Gen Xers are no longer bound in their self-expression by the print media and linear thinking. Digital imaging allows for visual self-expression that only the privileged classes could afford a half century ago."[55]

This individualism manifested itself in a variety of ways. A common outward manifestation was the embrace of tattoos and body piercings as a means of self-

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[53] Ibid., 62.

[54] Miller and Miller, "Introduction: Understanding Generation X," 4.

[55] Ibid., 5.

expression.[56] Tattoos and body piercings are not free, but Gen Xers were willing to pay for them, and for other items that enabled them to express their individuality. Miller and Miller note that, as a whole, Gen Xers tend to be materialistic, perhaps as a result of all the advertising they saw as they watched TV at home alone, or possibly as a result of their parents assuaging their guilt by buying their children what they asked for instead of spending time with them.[57]

Millennials, on the other hand, tended to have parents who were much more involved in their lives. Early Millennials were born during the Reagan years when American society rejected much of the experimentation of the 1960s and 70s, and sought to replace it with more traditional values.[58] Parents became more involved in their children's lives, but with different goals. Parents from the Silent Generation taught their children to respect authority, while parents of Millennials battled authority on behalf of their children. Parents from past generations, for example, supported teachers and rarely asked a teacher to change a grade, while parents of the Millennial generation tended to battle teachers if they felt their child was not getting the grade that would help them achieve their goals.[59] Millennials in general are closer to their parents than were Gen

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[56] Ibid., 6.

[57] Ibid. One of the downsides of Generations Theory is that all members of a particular generation get tarred by the same brush. Not every Gen Xer had neglectful parents. Not every Gen Xer has tattoos or is materialistic. But taking the generation as a whole, enough of its members experienced these circumstances to produce the cohort effect that Miller and Miller report.

[58] Putnam and Campbell describe this as an aftershock, noting the difference it made in religious attitudes and behaviors. Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, Kindle location 1611.

[59] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 309-310.

Xers. They consider their parents to be friends, and many report that their parents are their only adult friends.[60]

Another difference between Gen Xers and Millennials is seen in their levels of self-esteem. The difficult childhood years of many Gen Xers led to low self-esteem for those born before 1970. Twenge studied years of results of the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory, which tested levels of self-esteem on children ages nine to thirteen. The average child in 1979 scored lower on this inventory than did 81% of children in the mid-1960s.[61] Soon after, however, self-esteem scores began to rise. This happened because self-esteem curriculum appeared in schools in the 1980s, perhaps in response to the low scores of the late 1970s.[62] Gen Xers who experienced that curriculum began to report higher levels of self-esteem through the 1980s, and by the mid-1990s, the average college male had higher self-esteem than 86% of college men in 1968.[63] Scores rose even higher for Millennials, with the most frequent score in 2008 for college students being a perfect score of 40.[64] Millennials have been taught in school that they are special, and they believe it.

The belief that one is special brings with it high expectations. Twenge notes that in the Google database of American books, the phrase "you can be anything you want to be" increased twelve times between 1970 and 2008, and Millennials subscribe to that

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[60] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 29.

[61] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 69.

[62] Ibid., 70.

[63] Ibid., 67.

[64] Ibid., 68.

notion.[65] Their confidence in themselves has led Millennials to assume that they will have fulfilling, well-paying jobs and happy lives.[66] The reality, however, does not always live up to the expectation. Two examples of this appeared recently in my ministry. A Millennial college graduate wrote a devotion for a Stewardship campaign about how God helped her when she was looking for a job. She expressed her disappointment that others in her class found work before she did, but that she was determined to seek a job in her field because she felt she deserved it, and the notion that she might have to do something else seemed unjust to her. A few months earlier I met with a young man who was very disappointed when his annual review resulted in only a 5% increase in salary rather than the 10% increase he thought he deserved. He felt disrespected by the company for not recognizing his gifts and skills. The beliefs of these two young adults track with the beliefs of their generation. They believe that they are special and deserve to do work they enjoy at a rate of pay they desire. They experience disappointment and sometimes depression when things do not work out as they hope.

Millennials postpone adult roles, such as marriage and starting a family, longer than previous generations, sometimes for economic reasons, but often because they desire to put themselves first and fulfill their own goals before settling down.[67] The culture has encouraged them to believe they must love themselves before they can love other people, and that it is their job to make themselves happy. They are taught they should not rely on others to make them happy, nor should others rely on them.[68] Twenge notes that this puts

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[65] Ibid., 107.

[66] Ibid., 111.

[67] Ibid., 115.

[68] Ibid., 129-130.

a lot of stress on members of this cohort. "The growing tendency to put self first leads to unparalleled freedom, but it also creates enormous pressure to stand alone."[69]

Millennials and Gen Xers are both characterized by their tolerance of differences in sexuality, religion, and lifestyle choices. This may come from the fact that their generations are racially and ethnically the most diverse of all American generations.[70] It may also be due to the individualism that is prized by their cohorts, as individualism calls people not to judge others based on societal values. Xers and Millennials are intolerant only of those who are intolerant.[71] Many of them view the church as intolerant in general, and as anti-homosexual, judgmental, and hypocritical in particular.[72]

Millennials and Gen Xers exhibit increased beliefs in individualism. Dean, Kinnaman, and Butler Bass have all agreed that in order to reverse the trend of people leaving the church, some combination of behaving, believing, and belonging will need to be addressed. Belonging, it seems to me, may be the most difficult one of the three to address to these cohorts, as they have been taught that they should not need others and that community should be forged only on their own terms.

Generations Theory influences much of the analysis of the data I gathered. The young people with whom I worked have many of the traits that are shared across their generational cohorts. The lenses of *Believing, Behaving, and Belonging*, and of *Generations Theory*, frame the results of the research in helpful ways, but they are not the

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[69] Ibid., 149.

[70]Millennials consist of 57% of non-Hispanic whites, 21% Hispanics, 16% Black, and 9% Asian. Generation X, in contrast, has 61% non-Hispanic whites. For Boomers, that number is 72%; for Silents, 78%. Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research," 9.

[71] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 31-32.

[72] Kinnaman and Lyons, *Unchristian*, 29-30.

only lenses utilized. I turn now to other theoretical lenses, beginning with the philosophy that encouraged Gen Xers and Millennials in their quests for individualism.

Postmodernism

The individualism increasingly experienced by Gen Xers and Millennials did not arise in a vacuum. The oldest Baby Boomers were just entering adulthood when a new way of thinking began to emerge in the 1960s that promoted individualism. This new way of thinking, known as postmodernism, would replace positivism as culture's widely accepted theory of epistemology. Positivism had argued that there was an objective reality that could be understood through a singular perspective. All a thinker had to do was to use the correct method, such as Descartes' use of rationalism or Hume's emphasis on empiricism, and the result would be an objective, verifiable picture of reality.[73] Positivism held sway during the modern era, which Steven Best and Douglas Kellner argue lasted from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century. The modern era was characterized by "a search for universal truths and values" and "attempts to construct unifying and comprehensive schemes of knowledge."[74]

A number of factors contributed to the end of the modern, positivist era, including the prominence of new scientific theories (such as the theory of relativity, quantum mechanics, and the incompleteness theory in mathematics) and new political theories (such as liberation movements that rejected the Marxist emphasis on class struggle as the sole means of achieving a more just society).[75] Postmodernism became a prominent force

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[73] Van Gelder, "Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics," 47.

[74] Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 18.

[75] Ibid., 7-10.

in the 1980s, as people became more aware of those who were different from them thanks to technology and the increased presence of immigrants in all areas of the world.[76]

Postmodernism focuses on otherness and difference.[77] It rejects the positivist notion that there is an objective reality that can be experienced in the same way by all humanity and argues instead that views of reality are shaped by how people interpret their experiences. Positivists asked how claims of knowledge about reality can be scientifically verified, but post-moderns ask how it is that we interpret what we have experienced.[78] These interpretations are relative, because all people use their own values and perspectives to help them in this interpretative task.[79] Post-moderns, therefore, do not often seek universal truths, but look for and express their own truth, and allow others to look for and express their own differing truth as well. Diversity of viewpoints is the norm.[80]

Postmodernism clearly affects the way in which the church shares what it believes. The truths we confess, such as the existence of the Triune God and the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, must be filtered through the experiences of post-moderns, such as Gen Xers and Millennials (and older adults, since postmodernism has a period, not just a cohort, effect), if they are to be accepted. Dean, Kinnaman, and Butler Bass write of the importance of belonging, behaving, and believing. Postmodernism makes the believing part of that equation more complex.

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[76] Ibid., 13-14.

[77] Ibid., 14.

[78] Van Gelder, "Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics," 53.

[79] Ibid., 55.

[80] Van Gelder, "The Hermenuetics of Leading in Mission," 141.

Phyllis Tickle writes that postmodernism is one of the keys to understanding what she calls "the Great Emergence," arguing that every five hundred years in the Christian West a Great Emergence took place that affected every aspect of human life, and that such a Great Emergence is taking place now.[81] The most recent of these Emergences, the Reformation, based its authority not on Popes or the church, but on Scripture alone.[82] The authority of *sola scriptura* has been upheld for the last five hundred years, but is being challenged today.[83] The challenge to this authority actually began, according to Tickle, more than a century ago, as some Christians began to question the morality of the institution of slavery despite the fact that the Bible sanctioned it.[84]

The challenge to biblical authority continued in World War II, as women worked while their husbands were at war. This began a return to work for women that led, ultimately, to the ordination of women in some churches, a practice the Bible strictly forbids.[85] The Bible also forbids divorce, but the experiences of Christians who were either abused or simply unhappy in marriage, combined with postmodernism's emphasis on the individual, allowed for the acceptance not only of divorced laypeople but also of divorced clergy.[86] Post-moderns, including the youth with whom I have worked, no

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[81] Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 14, 19-26. She cites as previous Great Emergences the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the resulting division of Christianity from Judaism, the increasing use of the monastic system by Gregory the Great to preserve Christian writings in the 500s, the Great Schism of 1054 which divided the Church of the East from that of the West, and the Great Reformation of the 1500s which divided Protestants from Catholics.

[82] Ibid., 45-46.

[83] Ibid., 46.

[84] Ibid., 98-99.

[85] Ibid., 107-112, 100-101.

[86] Ibid., 100.

longer simply accept the Bible as an authority. They instead ask what kind of authority the Bible is, and whether this ancient document should have any sway over their lives. This way of thinking has many of them wondering if the church is the right place for them, with some vacillating as to whether they have a religion or not. I turn now to the lens that examines that vacillation.

The Rise of *Nones* and *Liminals*

Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell conducted the Faith Matters surveys in 2006 and 2007. They surveyed an initial group of over 3,000 adults in the summer of 2006, then invited the same group to take a shorter survey a year later.[87] They found that while the percentage of *nones*, those who claimed no religious affiliation, remained stable between 2006 and 2007 (15.9% and 16.2% respectively), only 70% of these individuals gave the same response as they had the year before. Thirty percent of the respondents who said they had no religion changed their response to say they did have one, and were replaced by another 30% who said they had a religion in 2006, but when asked for their religion in 2007, answered "none."[88] Putnam and Campbell call these respondents *liminals*, which is Latin for "threshold," because they seemed to stand on the threshold of a religious practice, not fully in nor fully out.[89] The authors discovered that *liminals* did not report any change in their practices. "They prayed as often in both years, believed in

[87] The authors write that their second survey had a response rate of 62%, which was roughly equivalent to the second survey rate of the General Social Survey. Since fewer numbers of young and less religious people chose to participate in the survey a second time, the authors weighted the responses to counteract any bias that might show up in the data. Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, Kindle location 8952-9064.

[88] Ibid., Kindle location 2113.

[89] Ibid., Kindle location 2123.

God just as fervently (or just as tentatively), they went to church virtually as often. … The only thing that changed was how they described their religious identity."[90]

Kinnaman noted roughly the same phenomenon in the Barna group's research on Millennials. He separated *liminals* into two groups, nomads and exiles. Nomads wander from the faith for a period of time. They may return in the future, they may not. They tend to describe themselves as Christian, but see Christian practices, including worship, as optional. They are not angry about the church; their faith has simply faded, and they often experiment with other forms of spirituality.[91]

Kinnaman defines exiles as "those who grew up in the church and are now physically or emotionally disconnected in some way, but who also remain energized to pursue God-honoring lives."[92] Exiles typically see God more at work in the world than do the congregations they have left. They do not reject the tradition of faith, but reject the shallow and slick answers some churches give to the questions and doubts they bring. They are concerned about their peers, and do not like it when churches are judgmental about people they love. Finally, they do not find their churches helpful in connecting their walk with God with their daily experiences, seeking particularly to find spiritual meaning in their work lives.[93]

Kinnaman describes another group of *nones*, whom he calls prodigals, that showed up in his research. Prodigals are not *liminals*. They used to be involved in church but have left entirely, either for another faith, or for no faith at all, describing themselves

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[90] Ibid., Kindle location 2122.

[91] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 63-65.

[92] Ibid., 75.

[93] Ibid., 77-78.

as atheists or agnostics. They often feel resentment towards Christians and Christianity, experience a sense of freedom and relief when they leave their congregations, and only regret the pain their exit has caused their parents.[94]

Prodigals will most likely not come back to church, while nomads and exiles, since they are *liminals*, may be open to returning. The key to reaching *liminals* is in the behaving and belonging aspects of the *Believing, Behaving, Belonging* triad. Exiles are looking for churches that behave differently than those they have attended, while nomads, in their individuality, may have a tough time making a commitment to a faith community. Their return may be contingent on the behavior and acceptance of others in the faith community, some of whom would be a part of their generational cohort, others of whom would be older or younger. I turn now to a lens that examines the impact that older members of the church may have had on some of these adults when they attended youth group as teenagers.

Adult Servant Leadership

An unanticipated result of the research was the number of responses that noted the importance of adult leaders in Confirmation and high school youth groups. The subjects of the study at times praised the pastoral and lay leadership, citing the lasting effect of mentors, guides, and pastors on their lives. Others were critical of adult sponsors when they were not open to questions from, or deeper friendships with, the youth they served. I examine the role of pastors and other adult leaders through the lens of Adult Servant Leadership, beginning with the works of James Kouzes and Barry Posner, and of James Autry. I turn next to the complementary but somewhat different roles of the leadership

[94] Ibid., 68-69.

team, which has responsibility for the ministry as a whole, and of mentors or sponsors, who work more with small groups or with individual youth.

James Kouzes and Barry Posner have examined issues of leadership since 1982, asking two different questions of two differing groups of people.[95] They asked leaders: "What did you do when you were at your personal best as a leader?"[96] They also asked followers what they wanted and respected in a leader.[97] They discovered five practices that leaders and followers agreed resulted in good leadership. Good leaders "model the way" by defining and affirming an organization's core values, and behaving in ways that are consistent with those values.[98] They "inspire a shared vision" by helping those who follow to imagine and build a preferred future for the organization.[99] The best leaders "challenge the process" and "enable others to act" by encouraging innovation and building trust among those in the organization.[100] These leaders also "encourage the heart" by showing appreciation for those who work with them and creating a community of supportive relationships among the members of their teams.[101] Kouzes and Posner argue that anyone can learn these skills, but that good leadership requires more: "Accepting the leadership challenge requires practice, reflection, humility, and

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[95] Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 2-5.

[96] Ibid., 2.

[97] Ibid., 5.

[98] Ibid., 16-17.

[99] Ibid., 17-19.

[100] Ibid., 19-23.

[101] Ibid., 23-25.

commitment to making a difference. And, in the end, we conclude that leadership is not an affair of the head. Leadership is an affair of the heart."[102]

James Autry would agree. He argues that business management is not a job, but a calling which asks leaders to recognize that the well-being of those who work for them is often dependent on how well leaders do their jobs.[103] He argues that the most effective way to lead is to envision oneself as a servant leader, as one who leads in service of others.[104] He lists five ways of being that exemplify the characteristics of a servant leader: "be authentic, be vulnerable, be accepting, be present, be useful."[105] Authenticity calls leaders to be who they are and not to pretend to be something they are not, while vulnerability allows leaders to be open about their doubts, concerns, and fears for the organization and those with whom they work.[106] Leaders are accepting when they allow for disagreement and focus disputes on ideas and issues, not on personalities.[107] Being present means leaders are available to their people, to listen and share honestly in their concerns, while being useful means they help others to achieve their personal goals while also focusing on management's objectives.[108] Autry, like Kouzes and Posner, notes that

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[102] Ibid., 6.

[103] Autry, *The Servant Leader*, xv.

[104] Ibid., xiv-xv.

[105] Ibid., 10.

[106] Ibid., 10-16.

[107] Ibid., 17.

[108] Ibid., 18-20.

these characteristics can be learned, but more is needed if they are to be applied. He, like the two previous authors, argues that, "Leadership requires love."[109]

Adult leaders of youth groups, in my experience, do their best work when they see themselves as servant leaders, as those who act in love for the good of the adolescents among whom they work. There is, however, a difference in how this servant leadership is carried out between the role of the leadership team, which consists of the pastor or youth worker plus the youth leadership board, and the role of other adult mentors and sponsors. The youth leadership team is responsible for the health of the entire ministry, while the adult mentors or sponsors work more in small groups and one-on-one with youth group members.

How does their work differ? Often the youth leadership team must step back and ask if the ministry is fulfilling its purpose, even if it is meeting the needs of those who currently attend youth group. The youth group I inherited at Advent met the needs of six young people, including the elected youth group president, who enjoyed each other's company, went to the same high school, and had formed an impenetrable clique. It did not meet the needs of many other high school youth. The power and relational issues were complex, and it took some time to figure out how to proceed.

I wish I was able to have access at that time to the work of Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal who note that there are four conceptual frames that can help leaders analyze what is happening in any given organization. The structural frame focuses on an organization's policies and procedures, while the human resources frame looks to the

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[109] Ibid., 21.

emotional well-being of the members of the organization.[110] The political frame helps leaders see where power is held and how it is used, and the symbolic frame guides discussions of deeper meaning undergirding an organization's existence.[111] Advent's leadership team saw that too much power existed in the clique, and broke down the clique by inviting youth both in and outside of the clique to participate in a group-building process. The structure of the youth group was changed by asking graduating seniors to nominate the following year's officers, so that the best leader, not the most popular, became the youth group president. The group grew as a result of those changes, leading to more positive feelings in the human resources frame, and the group became more open to welcoming newcomers, mirroring the openness of God to all that is a part of the symbolic frame. The leadership group did this with no notion of the frames, but with an ability to see what was needed to help the group fulfill its mission, and the willingness to take the right steps for the health of the group as a whole.

Adult mentors, on the other hand, work to meet the needs of those who attend youth group regularly by engaging in small group and one-on-one discussions. Mission uses adult mentors in its Confirmation program among middle-school youth. They meet weekly with six-to-eight same-gender middle-school students for dinner, Bible study, discussions about life issues, and games. Lance Erickson and James Phillips define mentors as "nonparental adults who take a special interest in the lives of youth by providing advice, emotional support, or by serving as role models."[112] The authors note

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[110] Bolman and Deal, *Reframing Organizations*, Kindle location 731-744.

[111] Ibid., Kindle location 745-759.

[112] Lance D. Erickson and James W. Phillips, "The Effect of Religious-Based Mentoring on Educational Attainment: More Than Just a Spiritual High?," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 3 (2012): 571.

that such youth-adult relationships often have positive outcomes for the young people who are mentored.[113] This mentoring works best, however, when adults see themselves less as teachers and experts, and more as friends who model a Christian way of life. Erickson and Phillips write, "when adults who follow the moral order characteristic of religion become mentors, their example and instruction provide youth with a role model of how to be successful despite experiencing life's challenges."[114]

The adult mentors have a different role than the leadership team, but both work toward the same goal: to provide servant leadership so that young people can grow in belief in the Triune God, in behaviors that reflect that faith, and in a sense of belonging to a church. Mentors often learn as much as do the young people they serve. Jessicah Duckworth, writing about adults who act as mentors to other adults in a catechetical program, notes that the mentors (or "sponsors," as she calls them) in that program often speak of how their faith life has been enhanced by mentoring another: "Their own sense of belonging to the congregation and participating in the worship and small groups for study and reflection was transformed through the process."[115] Duckworth also notes that some sponsors, like a number of mentors in the youth ministries I have served, are not always equipped with a deep knowledge of the catechism.[116] This means that what is shared about God may reflect not the Christian faith as the church teaches it, but cultural views of God that the mentor has picked up by living in modern society. The love and

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[113] Ibid.

[114] Ibid., 572.

[115] Duckworth, *Wide Welcome: How the Unsettling Presence of Newcomers Can Save the Church*, *104*.

[116] Ibid.

care that come to young people through mentoring relationships, along with the teaching of the pastor and the ongoing training of the adults, help to mitigate this outcome. The views of God that are taught not by the church but by culture, however, remain strong and can affect the faith of young people. I turn now to an examination of those views.

Cultural Views of God

The National Study of Youth and Religion asked teenagers questions about their faith during the years 2003-2005. The faith that most teenagers professed was not Christianity, but an alternative belief-system that researchers named Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.[117] Dean lists the following as the five guiding beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism:

1) A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4) God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
5) Good people go to heaven when they die.[118]

The third tenet regarding happiness and feeling good about oneself is clearly in sync with the self-esteem taught to Millennials, and the fourth tenet about God not being involved in day-to-day life conforms nicely with the individualism of that cohort. It is obvious why this would be an attractive faith to today's Millennials as it mirrors many of the things they have been taught to believe. Dean points out, however, that it is not the same as the Christian faith, which calls an individual to become a disciple, to live as a part of the

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[117] "The National Study of Youth and Religion."

[118] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 14.

body of Christ, and to love God by loving others as Christ's representatives in the world.[119]

One of the findings of the NSYR was that the vast majority of teenagers were inarticulate when it came to stating what they believed. The researchers concluded they had trouble talking about the faith because no one had taught them how to do so, nor provided them with opportunities to practice.[120] There may be a period effect for this inability to articulate the faith apart from the lack of practice. The Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking, a standard objective measure of creativity, shows creative thinking scores as a whole have declined between 1966 and 2008, and that scores for elaboration, the ability to explain why one thinks as she or he does, has declined for all age groups from 1984-2008. Researcher Kyung Hee Kim concludes from this that "over the last thirty years … people of all ages, kindergarteners through adults, have been steadily losing their ability to elaborate upon ideas" and thus are less able than in previous decades to engage in the type of reflective thinking needed to articulate faith.[121]

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism may have been the majority religion among Millennials when they were adolescents, but it is not the only conception of God. Baylor University researchers have interviewed Americans of different faiths, such as Christians, Jews, and Muslims, and found that rather than dividing up by religion, each faith had four distinct views of God. Christians, Jews, and Muslims all either believed in the Authoritarian God, who is engaged in the world and judgmental (31% of believers held

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[119] Ibid., 6.

[120] Ibid., 19.

[121] Kyung Hee Kim, "The Creativity Crisis: The Decrease in Creativity Scores on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking," *Creativity Research Journal* 23 (2011): 292.

this view), the Benevolent God, who is engaged but not judgmental (23%), the Critical God, who is disengaged from the world but judgmental (16%), or the Distant God, who is disengaged and nonjudgmental (24%).[122] The question becomes, which view of God is being rejected by Gen Xers and Millennials who leave the church? Which view of God is embraced by those who stay? Both Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and these four views of God would be addressed by the believing aspect of the *Believing, Behaving, Belonging* triad that Kinnaman, Dean, and Butler Bass discuss.

Summary

Kinnaman's, Dean's and Butler Bass' analyses of the church's loss of young people all have valid points. I am most inclined to follow Butler Bass' lead. Belonging is always the first order of business for youth ministry, and I have worked for almost thirty years to create safe spaces of belonging for young people so that they can ask questions of faith without fear of criticism. The postmodern era, in which Gen Xers, Millennials, and the population as a whole experience increasing benefits and stresses caused by individualism, cries out for an experiential faith of the sort that Butler Bass describes. That faith, however, has to have a clearly Christian content. Dean and Kinnaman are correct in arguing that the church needs to transmit a faith that connects young people not to some individualized spiritual experience, but to the Triune God whose Spirit is at work in the world. The transmission of this sort of Christian faith is aided by the care and participation of adult servant leaders who understand the difference between the church's views of the Trinity and cultural understandings about God. It is also supported by

[122] Froese and Bader, *America's Four Gods*, 24.

biblical and theological lenses that undergird the activities of *Believing, Behaving, and Belonging*. These biblical and theological lenses are the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

The biblical and theological lenses which frame the research help to shed light on the variety of faith and Christian practices of the former youth group members who were the subject of this research. Some of those who participated in the study believed in God, belonged to a community of faith, and behaved in traditionally Christian ways, such as regularly attending worship. Others believed in God but did not belong to a community of faith, and while they engaged in individual practices such as personal prayer, they did not participate with others in any corporate practices. Others did not believe in God, did not belong to a community of faith, but were open to spiritual practices such as meditation and service to those in need. Still others belonged to a community of faith but expressed doubts about God.

The lenses in this chapter, therefore, correspond to the believing, behaving, and belonging aspects of Christianity as outlined in chapter three. I begin with biblical lenses. The believing aspect is reflected in the parable of the persistent widow from Luke 18. This parable surprisingly compares God to an unjust judge and culminates in Jesus' question: "When the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8). The behaving aspect is illuminated by an examination of the ways King Solomon and Joseph the Patriarch practiced, or failed to practice, the faith they professed. Belonging is addressed by looking at the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin from Luke 15, which indicate that God is the one who gathers lost people into community.

I next turn to theological lenses. Believing is covered by a discussion of how God rules in this world through an overview of the theological concept of the sovereignty of God. Behaving is addressed by an examination of Christian practices, the ways in which believing and belonging are shaped by what Christians actually do. A discussion of the *missio Dei*, the theological concept that God's mission is greater than the church, and that God is active in the world among all sorts of people in all kinds of different environments, is utilized to illuminate issues of belonging.

Biblical Lenses

Believing—The Persistent Widow

"And yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8b). The preceding question has been a persistent one in my ministry for many years. A goal of this research project was to figure out why so many young people with whom I have worked have walked away from a faith they used to profess. I have asked with Jesus if any who have faith will be left. An examination of the Bible passage in which this verse is contained, therefore, is a fruitful way to frame the results of the research.

Jesus tells a parable of a widow who has suffered some sort of injustice. We are not told what the exact nature of her complaint was, but only know that she sought redress.[1] She unfortunately had to deal with an unjust judge, a man "who neither feared God nor had respect for people" (Luke 18:2b), and thus was unwilling to grant the widow justice. We can assume, though the parable does not actually state this, that the widow

[1] Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?," 46.

was powerless and had nothing at her disposal to persuade the judge to change his mind.[2] She had no male protector to go to court for her, and no money with which to bribe the magistrate.[3] All she had was her persistence. The judge at first was persistent as well, but finally caved, either due to her relentlessness or to the fact that his reputation might have taken a hit had he continued to refuse justice to her.[4] He said, "Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming" (Luke 18:4b-5).

Luke begins the parable by writing that the Lord told it to encourage persistence in prayer. Jesus sums up the parable by saying, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him, day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them" (Luke 18:6-8a). Jesus thus compares God to an unjust judge.

What are we to make of such a comparison? Donald Penny argues that Jesus is making a classic "lesser to greater" comparison between the judge and God, that if an unjust judge will relent and grant justice, surely God will be more than willing to do the same for those who persistently pray.[5] He bolsters the argument by noting that the word the NRSV translates "quickly" can also be translated "suddenly," meaning the promise is not necessarily of swift justice in a temporal sense but of surprising justice, "like a bolt

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[2] This is argued by Penny, "Persistence in Prayer," 739; and by Perry, "God as an Unjust Judge?," 298.

[3] Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?," 46; Penny, "Persistence in Prayer," 740.

[4] Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?," 47.

[5] Penny, "Persistence in Prayer," 740-741.

from the blue," given in God's time.[6] Julie Perry draws a greater contrast, arguing that God is even more unjust than the unjust judge, but with a different aim. God's injustice consists in giving people not what they deserve but more than they deserve because God is a God of grace.[7]

Stephen Curkpatrick finds such "lesser to greater" comparisons unconvincing, arguing that the dissonance formed by trying to compare a just and loving God with an unjust and uncaring judge is due to the fact that Luke has inadequately framed the parable.[8] He argues the parable was originally about a powerless widow overcoming an unjust magistrate, illustrating how God's presence helped the Christian community to confront unjust systems. The frame Luke gave to the parable shifted the emphasis from the widow to the judge, and inaccurately shifted the original meaning of the story from the triumph of God's justice to an exhortation to prayer and continued faith.[9] The parable, according to Curkpatrick, really does not speak to issues of prayer and faith.

James A. Metzger argues, contrary to Penny and Perry, that Jesus allowed an unfavorable portrayal of God in this text because many people in Jesus' day viewed God unfavorably. Metzger uses suffering as a lens to analyze the text, claiming that "many, because of chronic illness or pain and/or an inability to secure adequate material sustenance, were simply unable to conceive of the deity as beneficent, providential or loving."[10] He argues that through the parable Jesus both encourages such sufferers to

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[6] Ibid., 741.

[7] Perry, "God as an Unjust Judge?," 299-300.

[8] Curkpatrick, "Dissonance in Luke 18:1-8," 115-116.

[9] Ibid., 121.

[10] Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?," 37.

continue in conversation with God and attempts to present God as caring about their plight. He uses the word "attempts" because "it is not at all clear Jesus himself is entirely convinced of God's benevolence or justice."[11] Metzger thus answers Curkpatrick's argument that the parable is inadequately framed by suggesting Jesus himself framed the parable that way because he, like the sufferers, had some doubts as to God's goodness. God is like the unjust judge because, like the judge, "he is deaf to the cries of the suffering and oppressed and generally unconcerned with humanity's wellbeing."[12]

Metzger and Perry both compare this parable with another parable about prayer contained in Luke 11:5-13 in which a man begs a neighbor late at night to provide food for an unexpected guest. The neighbor does not wish to get out of bed to provide aid, but he does so because of the man's persistent requests. Jesus ends this parable by saying "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13). Perry argues that the Spirit is what people really need, noting that the early church prayed for deliverance from persecution and rarely received it, but "they did, however, get what they needed most: God's loving presence and the strength and resilience to deal with the extreme difficulties of their lives."[13] Metzger views the teaching of this parable less positively. He first notes that Jesus calls his disciples evil, asking "Can we be confident that a deity who views us as 'evil' will have our well-being in mind and consistently be a source of good?"[14] He further and more significantly doubts that the gift of the Holy

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[11] Ibid., 38.

[12] Ibid., 48.

[13] Perry, "God as an Unjust Judge?," 299.

[14] Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?," 43-44.

Spirit does those who suffer any good. He argues that what the sufferer needs is daily provision of food and justice, not "a holy spirit."[15]

Penny and Perry give a traditional Christian interpretation to the parable, while Curkpatrick and Metzger provide perspectives that speak to post-Christian, post-modern views of God and the Bible.[16] Curkpatrick argues that Luke framed the parable incorrectly. This corresponds to the post-modern desire to ask how the Bible is an authority, a question with which the subjects of this research wrestle. Metzger goes right to the question about God that many Millennials and Gen Xers have asked me over the years, namely, why would a God who cares for the world allow it to be filled with suffering? Metzger, in an otherwise well-footnoted article, does not cite support for his belief that those who suffer meaninglessly in the world find it difficult to believe in a deity who allows them to live a life of sorrow and want. Christianity actually is growing in the global South—in Africa, South America, and parts of Asia—where suffering from poverty and disease, the kind of suffering that Metzger claims brings about lack of faith, proliferates.[17] It strikes me that the lack of faith of which Metzger writes arises less among those who actually suffer than among those who do not, such as residents of the affluent global North who witness the suffering of others and wonder why God does not do something about it.

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[15] Ibid., 44.

[16] David Tiede agrees with Penny and Perry's analysis that God is to be understood in contrast, rather than in similarity, to the unjust judge. Tiede, *Luke*, 305.

[17] Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Burning Center, Porous Borders: The Church in a Globalized World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 98. Fernandez notes that in 1900, 83% of Christians lived in the global north. By the year 2000, 61% of Christians lived in the global south, a number that is predicted to rise to 70% by 2050.

I would argue that the gift of the Holy Spirit is the way in which God is at work to solve the world's problems of suffering, disease, and want. I agree with Perry that the Spirit allows sufferers to see God at work in their lives despite their troubles, but would also argue that the Spirit guides Christians in the affluent North to share what they have and to work for justice alongside those who experience deprivation in ways they do not. Many Millennials and Xers, however, would agree with Metzger that the Spirit seems a poor answer to the problems of the world. Surely a God who cares for the world and has the power to alleviate suffering would do more than God is doing, these people often tell me. This question leads them to question the beliefs of the Christian faith, and makes them less likely to engage in behaviors such as prayer or worship attendance.

Behaving—Solomon and Joseph

The stories of King Solomon and Joseph the Patriarch provide biblical examples of how behavior affects fidelity to God. Both men heard of the faith in their youth, which gives them something in common with those I researched. Solomon prayed and worshiped the God of Israel, but ultimately left the faith. Joseph did not seem to take the faith seriously as a young man, but expressed a profound faith during and after periods of intense suffering. Some of those I studied lost their faith, like Solomon. Others experienced suffering which either helped their faith to grow, like Joseph, or caused them to decide God was not with them. The lives of Solomon and Joseph, therefore, shed light on the faith journeys of many of those I researched.

Solomon, the son of King David and Bathsheba, inherited the throne upon his father's death. The portrait of Solomon given in 1 Kings 1-10 seems, on the surface, to reflect a positive view of Solomon's relationship with the Lord, as he practiced the faith

through worship (1 Kings 3:3-4) and prayer (1 Kings 8:23-61). 1 Kings 3 states that Solomon loved the Lord and that the Lord was pleased when Solomon, in response to the Lord asking him what he wanted, requested wisdom rather than long life or riches. Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem, and led Israel in prayer when the temple was dedicated (1 Kings 8:23-61). The Lord blessed the temple on its dedication, filling the structure with the cloud of God's presence (1Kings 8:10-11), just as the cloud of God's presence led the people of Israel through the wilderness during the exodus (Ex 40:34-38). Yong Ho Jeon notes that Solomon's reign, in a sense, completed the exodus. Moses initially told Pharaoh that the Hebrews were called by God to go a three-day journey into the wilderness to worship the Lord (Ex 5:3):

> The implication of sacrificing and serving the Israelite God, stopping forced labor, is that they are God's people, not Pharaoh's. Therefore, the building of the permanent temple for sacrificing to and serving the Israelite God by Solomon in the Promised Land has the significance that the Israelites have now accomplished their exodus in its full sense, as they have peace and safety to serve their God without any hindrance.[18]

This Solomon, however, who loved the Lord and completed the exodus, is criticized in 1 Kings 11 for being an idol worshipper. What happened? Jeon argues that throughout Solomon's reign there are not only signs of completion of the exodus, but also of a metaphorical *return to Egypt*, an act of unfaithfulness toward God.[19] This began with Solomon's marriage to Pharaoh's daughter (1 Kings 3:1) and continued with the forced labor he conscripted to build both the temple and his own palace (1 Kings 5:13), an echo of the forced labor of the Israelites in Egypt.[20] Solomon forced Jeroboam to go into exile

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[18] Jeon, "The Retroactive Re-Evaluation Technique with Pharaoh's Daughter and the Nature of Solomon's Corruption in 1 Kings 1-12," 30.

[19] Ibid., 32.

[20] Ibid., 31-32.

just as Pharaoh forced Moses to leave his home. Jeroboam, like Moses, returned from exile to deliver the Israelites, at least ten tribes of them, from a king who was oppressing them just as Pharaoh had oppressed the Hebrews prior to the exodus (1 Kings 12).[21]

Other scholars who do not pick up on the *return to Egypt* motif note signs that Solomon trusted in himself and his wisdom rather than in the Lord. He gave away ten cities in Galilee to King Hiram of Tyre though God had given the Promised Land not to the kings of Israel but to all of God's people, which meant Solomon had no right to give away any part of the land (1 Kings 9:11).[22] His marriage to the daughter of Pharaoh was characterized as an alliance with Pharaoh, betraying a lack of trust in God to protect the kingdom.[23] The marriages to foreign women, which were forbidden by the law (Deut 7:3) and led to the very idolatry the Bible warned against, were the culmination of many practices that indicated a heart that had turned from God. Solomon was raised to be a part of God's covenant people and began with a love for the Lord, but his practices of putting himself and his privilege first led him away from the faith. The research has shown that, in the same way, some former youth group members who were taught practices such as prayer and worship ended up outside the church due to other influences that were more effective in shaping their behavior as adults.

Joseph, like Solomon, was raised in the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but his faith was not much in evidence when he was first introduced. Only after he had undergone suffering did he recognize that God was with him. The first time the Bible

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[21] Ibid., 32.

[22] Harry Wendt, *Crossways Section Two: From the Conquest to the Babylonian Exile*, Crossways!, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: Crossways International, 1994), 57.

[23] Ibid.

records him speaking of God was as a slave when the wife of his master, Potiphar, sought to seduce him. He replied that he would not be disloyal to the master who, though a slave owner, had been good to him, saying, "How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" (Gen 39:9b). He was falsely imprisoned after that, which is arguably worse than being a slave, and there met Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker who, while imprisoned, told him dreams they did not understand. Joseph replied, "Do not interpretations belong to God?" (Gen 40:8b). He invoked God's name when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream, telling the king that through the dream, God was warning Pharaoh what was about to take place (Gen 41:25). He told his brothers, who sold him into slavery and were afraid that, after their father died, Joseph would exact revenge: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Gen 50:20). Joseph discerned God at work in his life, and acted on that discernment by practicing loyalty and forgiveness.

Two points are interesting about Joseph's character. First, it is in his suffering that he discerns God at work. One can assume that in an Egyptian prison Joseph would have suffered a lack of daily food and justice, the very circumstances that Metzger claims would lead to a lack of faith in the goodness of God.[24] Joseph did not experience such a lack of faith; instead, contrary to Metzger's argument, suffering helped Joseph see God at work in his life. Some of those I studied, like Joseph, saw God at work in their lives despite the bad things that happened to them. Others did not. Perhaps youth ministry could do a better job of providing Christian practices that enable youth and adults to endure suffering and to look for God's help in the midst of difficulties.

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[24] Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?," 44.

Second, Hyun Chul Paul Kim argues that Joseph is an outsider in Egypt. He has been kicked out by his family, and is not sure if he can trust them enough to return. He does not really belong in Egypt either, as he retains his Hebrew heritage even while assimilating as an Egyptian.[25] He is akin, therefore, to the "exiles" described by Kinnaman, who leave the church feeling like outsiders but who long for a community devoted to God.[26] The practices of Joseph's brothers, particularly Judah's willingness to suffer by going to jail rather than harm his father through the loss of Benjamin, provide a model for church members seeking practices that would attract exiles back to the community of faith, to a sense of belonging with God's people in today's world.

Belonging—Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin speak to the issue of belonging, of who exactly is included in the community of faith. Luke 15 begins with Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners. The Pharisees grumbled at this, particularly incensed that Jesus chose to eat with the unrepentant. David Tiede writes that it is unfair to ridicule the Pharisees as legalists who were unwilling to forgive. "The Pharisees and their scribes were serious students of the Scriptures pursuing a reform of Israel. They were also calling Israel to repentance, but for them it was a call to strict observance of the commands of God given by Moses."[27] The law called for Israel to distinguish between the common and the holy (Lev 10:10), and the Pharisees believed Jesus was welcoming the unholy:

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[25] Kim, "Reading the Joseph Story (Genesis 37-50) as a Diaspora Narrative," 229-230

[26] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 75.

[27] Tiede, *Luke*, 127.

> What is most shocking about Jesus is that neither he nor his disciples made repentance a prior condition to the call to discipleship or to table fellowship. The Pharisees were also eager to gather the lost of Israel, but repentance and purification and observance of the scriptural commands would need to precede table fellowship, let alone discipleship.[28]

The Pharisees demanded first repentance, then proof of that repentance through a reformed life, before issuing a welcome to a seat at the table among the holy.

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin indicate that God is unwilling to wait for people to repent of sin, but instead chooses to go after the unholy. Both parables are pretty similar. The first parable begins as a man loses one out of one hundred sheep. He leaves the ninety-nine and searches for the one until he finds it. He is not just relieved when he finds the sheep, but is overjoyed, and in his joy throws a party for his friends and neighbors. Jesus ends the parable by saying, "there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7). The second begins similarly. A woman loses one of ten coins in her house. She sweeps and cleans the house until the lost coin is found. She, in her joy, also throws a party for her friends and neighbors, and Jesus states, "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10).

Both parables begin with Jesus asking, in slightly different words, "Who among you would not seek the lost until you found it?" (Luke 15:4,8).[29] Good question. Tiede points out that some commentators question the logic of putting ninety-nine sheep at risk to save just one, and I wonder if the woman did not spend much of the value of the coin

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[28] Ibid.

[29] The actual text of Luke 15:4 is, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" Luke 15:8 reads, "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?"

she found to throw the party for friends and neighbors.[30] The truth is many, no doubt, would not leave the ninety-nine nor spend the money on a celebration. God, however, is different. Tiede writes, "These parables are glimpses into the heart of God. They are drawn from human experience, but experience in which determination, extravagance, and joy exceed normal practice."[31] God is one who is determined to bring God's presence and love to all, and has a particular heart for those who are not seen as belonging to the household of faith.

The parable of the lost sheep clearly fits in with this research as those whom Kinnaman calls "exiles," "nomads," and "prodigals" can be seen as sheep who have wandered away.[32] God does not abandon them, nor does the Lord await their return to Christian community, but actively goes out into the world to seek them. The parable of the lost coin offers a slightly different view. The coin never leaves the household, but is lost nonetheless. The lost-ness of the coin foreshadows the lost-ness of the older brother in the parable to follow, the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The missing coin is a reminder that one does not need to leave the household of faith in order to be lost. There are those within the Christian community, *liminals* and modern-day Pharisees, who are equally as lost as the nomads, exiles, and prodigals that correspond to the lost sheep.[33] God came to earth in Jesus to seek and save all who are lost, both inside and outside the household of faith.

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[30] Tiede, *Luke*, 274-275.

[31] Ibid., 275.

[32] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 59-88.

[33] For information on "liminals," see Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, Kindle location 2109-2127.

Theological Lenses

Believing—The Sovereignty of God

Introductory Remarks

How is God actually at work in the world? An answer to this is found in the doctrine of the sovereignty of God. This doctrine claims that God is the king, or sovereign, of the cosmos, and is working out a plan for the redemption of the world. The biblical basis for God's sovereignty, according to Stephen N. Williams, is to be found in passages such as the following: "For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great king over all the earth" (Ps 47:2); "the LORD will be king over all the earth" (Zech 14:9); and Jesus' proclamation: "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last" (Rev 22:13).[34] Henri A. Blocher argues that the cross, which should have been a sign of failure, is an example of God's sovereign purpose and divine plan.[35] N.T. Wright grounds the doctrine of God's sovereignty in the resurrection of Jesus, which is the pivotal event in God's plan of salvation, arguing that the resurrection proves "the living God is not limited by the entropic possibilities visible within the cosmos as it is but has and will continue to act as its Sovereign, to judge it and save it."[36] The doctrine of the sovereignty of God claims that God rules the world and is working out a plan of salvation. I imagine most Christians would affirm these claims. Debated within this doctrine, however, are the

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[34] Stephen N. Williams, "The Sovereignty of God," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 169-170.

[35] Henri A. Blocher, "God and the Cross," in *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008).

[36] N.T. Wright, "Christian Origins and the Question of God," ibid., 32.

questions of how much control God exerts as sovereign, how much freedom human beings have within creaturely existence, and how it is that human beings can know God.

Many who espouse the doctrine of divine sovereignty, particularly those who call themselves Evangelicals, see human freedom as quite limited. One example of how this doctrine functions among Evangelicals comes from an educational video series called *GriefShare. GriefShare* provides a framework to gather those who mourn the deaths of loved ones for the purpose of mutual support and education about the grief process. One of the videos in the series addresses the guilt that survivors often feel after those they love have died. Those who mourn may wonder if there was anything they could have done to prolong or possibly save their loved ones' lives. The answer *GriefShare* gives to this question is "no," there is nothing you can do to prolong your loved one's life, or even your own life.[37] Why not? The answer is that God, in God's sovereignty, has decided how long everyone will live to the very minute. *GriefShare* bases this belief on Psalm 139:16b which reads, "In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed." This verse and the doctrine of God's sovereignty are proof to the makers of the *GriefShare* program that nothing anyone does can add even a single moment to an individual's life.[38]

I about fell out of my chair when I first watched this video. I found myself thinking that if this were true, I would drink more beer and stop worrying about my liver. The claim on its face seemed absurd to me for, if it were true that God has already determined the minute one will die, there would be no reason to exercise, to look both

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[37] Church Initiative, *Guilt and Anger (2006), GriefShare* (Wake Forest, NC: Church Initiative, 2006), DVD, 7.

[38] Ibid.

ways when crossing the street, or to fasten one's seatbelt. I further have witnessed in my ministry God give to dying people the ability to prolong their lives in order to see a loved one who was delayed in arriving, or to die once family members have left the room. I expressed to a *GriefShare* representative my inability to use this video for my grief groups due to the absurdity of the doctrine, and was told I was not the only person to express that viewpoint. I was therefore surprised when a new version of the *GriefShare* program was produced in 2014 in which, instead of revising this doctrine, a great deal of time was spent defending this application of the sovereignty of God.[39] The belief that God has a plan and is working out that plan in the lives of individual believers was too important to the makers of *GriefShare* to alter due to the complaints of a few mainline Protestants like me.

It is not only materials like *GriefShare*, however, that put forward the doctrine of sovereignty in this way. A funeral director, following a graveside service I conducted in December of 2015, addressed the family at the close of the service. He knew the deceased had died suddenly, during what was supposed to be a routine heart bypass procedure, and he sought to comfort the family by reminding them of the sovereignty of God. He went on to tell them that their loved one's death was a part of God's perfect plan. Some who shared his faith reacted positively to his words, while others were more skeptical. I admit that I was skeptical. That sad but relatively peaceful death may indeed have been part of God's perfect plan, but what of those who died in Auschwitz, or due to death squad activities in 1980s Latin America, or today at the hands of ISIS or Boko Haram? Are those deaths part of God's perfect plan? If so, we ask with Metzger in his

[39] Church Initiative, *Guilt and Anger (2014)*.

examination of Luke 18, what kind of God is this who plans for such evil to come upon human beings?[40]

I begin, in the discussion which follows, with two issues debated by those who adhere to the doctrine of the sovereignty of God: how much control does God have over our lives versus how much freedom human beings have, and how much we can infer about God from what God has made versus how much of God can only be known through God's revelation. I then proceed to a proposal of how to view God's activity in the world utilizing insights gained from the debate.

Issues in the Sovereignty Debate

Williams writes that the sovereignty of God "is the grand theme of Scripture and cause for the highest praise of which the human heart is capable," yet also notes this doctrine causes concern to many: "For 'sovereignty' connotes authority and fiat, direction and control, not to mention insuperable power."[41] Particularly at issue in a world filled with evil is the amount of control the doctrine of sovereignty attributes to God, and what is granted to human freedom.[42]

Different theologians have defined the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom in various ways. Luther saw God's sovereignty at work in salvation, denying that humanity had any freedom when it came to justification before God, but arguing humanity had limited freedom regarding the things of the earth:

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[40] Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?," 48.

[41] Williams, "The Sovereignty of God," 168.

[42] Ibid., 172-175.

> We may still in good faith teach people … to credit man with 'free will' in respect, not of what is above him, but of what is below him. That is to say, man should realize that in regard to his money and his possessions he has a right to use them, to do or leave undone, according to his own 'free will'—though that very 'free will' is overruled by the free will of God alone, according to his own pleasure.[43]

Humanity's free will regarding things below is affirmed in Luther's discussion of the third and fourth petitions of the Lord's Prayer in the *Large Catechism.* Christians pray *thy will be done* because evil things happen on earth. Luther blamed evil on the work of the devil, arguing that the will of God was done through faithful Christians and the will of the devil done by those he did not consider Christian, such as bishops, tyrants, and heretics.[44] The fact that God's will was not always done perfectly was made clear in his explanation of the fourth petition, *give us this day our daily bread*, in which Luther blamed the devil for human suffering:

> He is not satisfied to obstruct and overthrow spiritual order, so that he may deceive men with his lies and bring them under his power, but he also prevents and hinders the establishment of any kind of government or honorable and peaceful relations on earth. That is why he causes so much contention, murder, sedition, and war, why he sends tempest and hail to destroy crops and cattle, why he poisons the air, etc.[45]

Luther, thus, saw God's sovereignty at work in securing salvation for the elect and in providing all good things whether through nature or through human agency, but saw Satan at work in natural disasters and in encouraging human beings to use their limited free will to cause murder, sedition, and other calamities.

Calvin, on the other hand, was more willing to allow that murder and other such calamities are a part of God's will:

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[43] Luther, *Martin Luther on the Bondage of the Will*, 107.

[44] Luther, "The Large Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther," 429.

[45] Ibid., 431.

> Suppose a man falls among thieves, or wild beasts; is shipwrecked at sea by a sudden gale; is killed by a falling house or tree. Suppose another man wandering through the desert finds help in his straits; having been tossed by the waves, reaches harbor; miraculously escapes death by a finger's breadth. Carnal reason ascribes all such happenings, whether prosperous or adverse, to fortune. But anyone who has been taught by Christ's lips that all the hairs of his head are numbered (Matt 10:30) will look farther afield for a cause, and will consider that all events are governed by God's secret plan.[46]

Calvin saw all that happened as being under the active omnipotence of God, believing that God's providence governs all that happens on earth, from earthquakes and sea storms to the fates of individuals.[47] Calvin argued that human death occurred not just with the foreknowledge but also by the express will of God: "Let us imagine, for example, a merchant who, entering a wood with a company of faithful men, unwisely wanders away from his companions and in his wandering comes upon a robber's den, falls among the thieves, and is slain. His death was not only foreseen by God's eye, but also determined by his decree."[48] Thus, for Calvin, God's sovereignty extends over things above and things below, over salvation as well as what happens in this world, and there is no free will accorded to humanity.

Bruce McCormack notes Arminianism provides a third way of thinking about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom. Luther and Calvin held that salvation was completely God's action, not dependent on human free will. Arminians, in contrast, claimed that God's Holy Spirit invites humanity to come to salvation, but

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[46] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 198-199.

[47] Ibid., 203-207.

[48] Ibid., 208-209.

human beings must participate in gaining salvation by exercising free will in choosing to believe in God.[49]

The doctrine of sovereignty evident in the 2006 *GriefShare* videos combined strands of Calvinism with Arminianism. It argued for the definite plan of God, which is unaltered by human freedom, except in the realm of salvation. The 2006 *GriefShare* videos encouraged individuals to use their free will to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior while arguing human beings had no free will to extend the moment of their death due to the predetermined plan of God.[50]

Another issue in the debate of divine sovereignty has to do with epistemological methods of knowing God. The question simply stated is this: Can we know God through observing how God works in creation or is God only reliably known through divine revelation? Can the Millennials and Gen Xers with whom I have worked learn about God through what they see in the world, or not?

McCormack compares classical theism with process theism. Classical theists argue that God is perfect and that nothing that happens in the world can affect God's being, for any change to a perfect being would bring about imperfection.[51] Process theists, on the other hand, argue that God is in a relationship of continuity with the world and is affected and changed by what happens within creation.[52] McCormack argues that while each position sounds like a contradiction of the other, both are based on the same

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[49] McCormack, "The Actuality of God," 202.

[50] Church Initiative, *Guilt and Anger (2006)*. The 2006 videos had numerous segments, such as the one in the cited video, encouraging viewers to make a confession of faith. The 2014 version has deleted all such segments while still promoting their view of divine sovereignty.

[51] McCormack, "The Actuality of God," 186.

[52] Ibid., 187.

epistemological principle. Both compare God to what can be seen in creation, whether that comparison denies, or perceives, similarity to the created order: "Both are exercises in metaphysics because both take up a starting point 'from below' in some creaturely reality or magnitude and proceed through a process of inferential reasoning to establish the nature of divine reality."[53] McCormack champions a different alternative utilizing the work of Karl Barth, arguing that knowledge of God is to be grounded in Christology alone. He rejects any epistemology that seeks to define God by starting from below: "If talk of God is really to be possible, then it must begin and end with the event in which God gives himself his own being—as Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit."[54]

Sovereignty and Freedom in the Spirit

Calvin discussed divine providence in Book One of the *Institutes*, "The Knowledge of God the Creator," and thus ascribed sovereignty to the first person of the Trinity.[55] McCormack argues that knowledge of God, and of God's sovereignty, is to begin with Christology, through examining the person and work of Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity.[56] I propose a third alternative, locating the sovereignty of God and its relationship to human freedom under the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Locating God's sovereignty in the person of the Spirit allows for God's will to be done and for there to be a place for human freedom. It also helps explain how verses like "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD" (Isa

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[53] Ibid., 188.

[54] Ibid., 211.

[55] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 35.

[56] McCormack, "The Actuality of God," 225.

55:8), which emphasize the differences between God and humanity, can be used in harmony with verses like "So God created humankind in his image" (Gen 1:27), which stress humanity's likeness to God.

Michael Welker argues that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit places people into a "force field that is seized, moved and renewed from many sides—a force field of which they are members and bearers, but which they cannot bear, shape, be responsible for, and enliven alone."[57] The force field of the Spirit, as described by Welker, neither takes away from human freedom nor denies the sovereign will of God, but instead combines both together. Individual persons with specific gifts are enlisted to serve in order to give witness to God's presence and activity in the world.[58]

The Spirit also renders irrelevant the argument as to whether we know God first from above or below, as it enables us to see the work of God both in Christ and in the world around us. Welker writes, "The Spirit effects and makes use of particular forms of understanding so that people in finite structural patterns of life and experience can relate themselves to the fullness of this power of the Spirit and can attest to its real presence and action."[59] The Spirit, in other words, reveals the dispute as to whether one can know God primarily from above or primarily from below to be invalid, as both together reveal God at work in the world.

An example of this combination of seeing God from above and from below comes from my own ministry. I found while serving Calvary in central California that almost

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[57] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 228.

[58] Ibid., 241.

[59] Ibid., 240.

twenty-five of the ninety people who attended worship weekly were living in households with active alcoholics or drug addicts. Most of these folks suffered in silence and denial, but six wanted to have a Christian study about the effects of addiction on faith and relationships. I agreed to meet with them and together we read Melody Beattie's book, *Codependent No More.* The first chapter describes a woman, whose husband is in recovery, dealing with her feelings about the marriage after many years of his drinking. She no longer loved her husband, and was really angry with him.[60] The participants in the group, both male and female, told me they felt exactly like her. I discovered as the group continued to meet that what families of addicts do is try to control the situation and the addict in order to feel like they have some control over their own lives.[61] They over-function for their loved ones, seeking to manage every aspect of their lives to keep them from using. One consequence of such micromanagement was that love left the relationship.

I reflected on our Christian teaching that God is love. I found myself thinking that if God is love, and if love and micromanagement cannot co-exist in the human heart, could it be that love and micromanagement cannot co-exist for God? This could be a reason why God allows evil to exist in the world, even as the Holy Spirit works to change hearts to reject wickedness in favor of love and grace. I thought perhaps the reason we cannot both micromanage and love another is because we are created in the image of God. I have come to believe through reading the scriptures and paying particular attention to the story of Jesus that love and this form of control are incompatible not just for

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[60] Melody Beattie, *Codependent No More: How to Stop Controlling Others and Start Caring for Yourself*, 2nd ed. (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1992), 11-16.

[61] Ibid., 73-80.

humanity, but also for God. God does not micromanage people in order to battle evil in this world because God chooses to be a God of love. God has a plan to bring all things together in Christ (Eph 1:8b-10), but God does not over-function in bringing that plan to fruition. God instead works with human beings, calling them to love one another, giving them the Spirit to change sinful human hearts from evil to love, but never stopping humanity from doing evil by micromanaging the world. God is not a God who utilizes that kind of control because God chooses to be a God of love. The sovereignty of God, therefore, does not consist of God working out a divine plan by determining all human events, for God is not a God of micromanagement, but of love.

The Spirit helps us to see this God of love at work both in the world and in Scripture, and to combine experience with revelation to help us to understand who God is and how God works. The Spirit also helps humanity to be about God's work of justice and mercy, thus enabling others to see God through us. Welker writes, "The Spirit of God is a power that delivers and liberates human beings. This power delivers human beings out of individual and communal distress and oppression, whether acute or chronic. Wherever the Spirit of God acts, there is liberation and freedom."[62] The Spirit of God that Metzger and many Gen Xers and Millennials see as a poor substitute for daily sustenance and justice, is the one who changes human hearts and gathers people together into a force field that alone can sustainably produce the changes necessary to bring about a world in which all have daily provisions and justice. The Spirit alone is the one who brings to fruition God's plan to gather all things together. The Spirit is the way in which God's sovereignty is experienced on earth.

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[62] Welker, *God the Spirit*, 336.

Behaving—Christian Practices

God's Spirit helps us to live in the freedom God gives us, but calls us also to behave in ways, known as Christian practices, that show love for God and for others. What are these practices? Craig Dykstra and Dorothy Bass write, "Christian practices are things Christian people do together over time in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world in Jesus Christ."[63] These behaviors are, thus, concrete acts that have been proven over time both to meet human needs and to help people discern God's presence and power in their midst.[64] Dykstra and Bass emphasize that practices are communal activities that are done with others. Even those practices that appear to be done individually, such as prayer or meditation, are supported by a community of faith that encourages its members to engage in these practices as part of their individual walk of faith.[65] Practices are behaviors that reveal one belongs to a community of faith.

Butler Bass divides Christian practices into two categories, "practices of devotion," which are activities that show love for God, and "practices of ethics," which are things we do to share love with our neighbors.[66] Devotional practices include individual and communal prayer, personal and corporate Bible study, fasting, meditation, and attendance at public worship, to name a few. They help Christians deepen their awareness of God's presence and experience a more fulfilling inner life.[67] Ethical

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[63] Dykstra and Bass, "Times of Yearning, Practices of Faith," 5.

[64] Ibid., 6.

[65] Ibid., 7.

[66] Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 148.

[67] Ibid.

practices include feeding, clothing, and housing the poor; providing care and medical services for the sick; engaging in peacemaking; showing hospitality; sharing forgiveness; and giving freely from one's resources. These practices share God's love and care with the world.[68]

Bass argues that these practices lead into an abundant way of life, a gift of God in the midst of everyday existence.[69] Such abundance does not come automatically or easily. Groups that engage in Christian practices are every bit as likely to be riddled with error and sin as the rest of humanity, according to Bass.[70] One of the pitfalls of engaging in practices can be the development of a sinful legalism, which exhorts the practitioner to do these activities in exactly the right way in order to experience their benefits. This puts more anxiety on Christian communities and discourages them from leaning on the Holy Spirit, which is exactly the opposite of the goal of engaging in Christian practices. Bass writes, "To practice our faith is not a matter of trying very, very hard to keep things under control. … Instead, in trying to engage in such practices faithfully and well, we seek to enter more fully into receptivity and responsiveness, to others and to God."[71]

It is as important to state what practices *are not* as to state what they *are*, according to Butler Bass. Practices are not the latest church growth gimmick, nor a program that will attract the unchurched to worship and service. "Practices are fluid faith,

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[68] Ibid.

[69] Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, xiii.

[70] Ibid., xviii.

[71] Ibid., xviii-xix.

a spiritual path, and a way of life. They are messy, inventive, and open-ended. They are not intended to be appealing (even if they often are); they are intended to be faithful."[72]

Bass agrees that practices can be messy. "In many ways, messy everyday practices, embraced humbly yet boldly, are precisely the forms of life that bear help and grace and companionship and challenge amid the actual complexity of contemporary society."[73] Dwight Zscheile argues this messiness is unavoidable, due to the fact that discipleship comes about via formation, not information. The original disciples learned by following Jesus, hearing his message, going out on missions, trying things out, and, at times, failing.[74] This sort of messy learning process was filled with misunderstandings and confusion, yet the Spirit equipped these disciples, despite an early church conflicted over the treatment of widows and the inclusion of Gentiles, so that God's mission moved forward.[75]

Youth ministry utilizes practices both to build community and to deepen faith. The behaving aspect of youth ministry, thus, is used to strengthen youth group members in believing and belonging. Wayne Rice argues for the importance of community building in youth ministry. "Forming relationships … is more important than programs. You can have the most gifted leaders and the best programs, activities, and resources, yet fail in youth ministry because the relational needs of the kids aren't met."[76] He outlines nine components of community building: discovering each other, playing together,

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[72] Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 167.

[73] Bass, *Practicing Our Faith*, xix.

[74] Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 46.

[75] Ibid., 46-50.

[76] Rice, *Up Close and Personal*, 10.

communicating with each other, affirming each other, spending time together, serving together, learning together, worshiping God, and ministering to one another.[77] Denny Rydberg agrees that community building is paramount, and has a five-part strategy for group building. He begins with bond-building activities, followed by opportunities for youth to open up and share with one another. Youth are next taught to affirm one another, then the group is stretched through the use of retreats and servant projects. This leads to deeper sharing and goal setting as a youth group.[78]

Both Rice and Rydberg published their words in the 1980s, and both assumed youth group members already had faith. Rydberg wrote, "I'd like to see youth group members excited about their relationship with Jesus Christ," noting that he hoped youth group activities would result in members achieving "a lifelong, dynamic, growing, maturing relationship with the Lord of their lives."[79] Rice put it more bluntly: "In the Christian community, what we have in common is faith in Jesus Christ."[80] Faith was the prerequisite for belonging to a youth group, according to these two authors.

Mark Yaconelli, in contrast, argues that faith formation is the primary focus of youth ministry, at least the youth ministry in which he was engaged in the mid-2000s. He promotes the use of contemplative practices such as the Ignatian *examen*, in which youth are asked: "How is God present in this experience? What is God's invitation to you in

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[77] Ibid., 20-25.

[78] Rydberg, *Building Community in Youth Groups*, 11-13.

[79] Ibid., 8.

[80] Rice, *Up Close and Personal*, 10.

this experience?"[81] Yaconelli claims that by using such practices, the youth in his group "found their daily lives more imbued with a sense of God's love and presence."[82]

All practices have their efficacy in transmitting faith, but one practice in particular has emerged in the literature and in the research as needing attention. Dean writes of the inability of teenagers to articulate what they believe.[83] Zscheile agrees: "Contemporary culture has shaped people's imaginations such that they struggle to connect their personal stories and the world's story to God's story."[84] Attention to all the practices is needed, but the research indicates that a particular emphasis on helping people tell how God's story helps them understand their personal life and journey of faith would have helped those who are the subject of this study.

Belonging—The *Missio Dei*

Telling God's story helps people see how God is shaping them in the faith, and enables them to reach out to others in order to live in community. God is one who seeks to bring all into community with the Trinity and with others. How does God do this? Different churches respond to this question in different ways. Craig Van Gelder describes the self-understanding of three broad categories of churches. The Established Church sees itself as the primary place where God can be found. This way of understanding the church has Christians telling others they can experience God by coming to worship or to

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[81] Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 192.

[82] Ibid., 193.

[83] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 146.

[84] Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 29.

Bible study with other faithful believers.[85] The Corporate Church understands itself as existing for the purpose of doing God's work out in the world. This understanding sees the church as bringing God to the world rather than asking the world to come to the church.[86] Both these views have something in common: they picture God as working exclusively through the church. Whether the world comes to church or the church goes to the world, the belief in both these views is that, without the church, the world would have no experience of God.

The third view of church, the Missional Church, rejects this ecclesio-centric view. The Missional Church argues that God is already out in the world, and that the church is called to participate in what God is already doing among both the unchurched and the churched in our cities and neighborhoods.[87] The world is the center of God's activity, as God seeks to bring the benefits of the kingdom to all of creation. The church is not the center of God's work, but through the power of the Holy Spirit bears witness to that work and shares in it. "The church's self-understanding of being missional is grounded in the work of the Spirit of God, who calls the church into existence as a gathered community, equips and prepares it, and sends it into the world to participate fully in God's mission."[88] This view sees the church as called to join in the *missio Dei,* in God's mission, to participate in what God is already doing out in the world.

The concept of the *missio Dei* gained in prominence in the 1960s. A theological conception of mission based on the Great Commission was the primary mode of thinking

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[85] Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 72.

[86] Ibid.

[87] Ibid., 84-85.

[88] Ibid., 85.

about missional work prior to the 1960s, based on Jesus' command to "Go into all nations, baptizing … and teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you" as recorded at the end of the gospel of Matthew.[89] This view of mission was ecclesio-centric as it claimed that mission began with the church, and Christocentric in that it saw mission as fulfilling Jesus' command.[90] Two theological developments enabled the church to rethink this definition of mission. Renewed attention to the theology of the Trinity, particularly by Karl Barth following World War I, constituted the first development and focused on the Triune God as a sending God.[91] This Trinitarian theology argued that the Father sent the Son into the world, the Father and the Son sent the Spirit, and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit sent, and continued to send, the church into the world. Mission, therefore, was not conceived in Christocentric terms, but arose from the very nature of the Triune God.[92] This Trinitarian theology caused the displacement of the church as the originator of mission. Van Gelder and Zscheile write, "The church could no longer serve as a starting point in thinking about mission. Instead, the church was now understood as being the result of God's mission."[93]

The second theological development was a renewed interest in the biblical concept of the *reign of God.* This concept came to be understood as the primary content of the message of Jesus as contained in the scriptures.[94] The reign of God that Jesus

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[89] Van Gelder and Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective*, Kindle location 817.

[90] Ibid., Kindle location 812.

[91] Ibid., Kindle location 777.

[92] Ibid., Kindle location 782.

[93] Ibid., Kindle location 784.

[94] Ibid., Kindle location 808.

preached resulted not only in a community of disciples that came to be known as the church, but also in healing and hope for the world as a whole. Van Gelder and Zscheile claim that the renewed emphasis on the reign of God allowed mission to be viewed more holistically. They write that this view had two major implications for missiology:

> First, it was now necessary to keep the entire gospel message in perspective when considering the redemptive work of God in the world. Narrower concepts of the gospel, such as viewing it in terms of individualized salvation focusing primarily on securing eternal life, were regarded as inadequate to convey the fullness of the good news as announced by Jesus. Second, it was now necessary to frame God's mission in relation to the reign of God as announced by Jesus and, thereby, to understand the church as deriving from this larger redemptive work of God in the world—the *missio Dei.*[95]

The church does not therefore do mission as one of the many ministries in which it is engaged. The church exists for the sake of mission. Mission is a part of what the church is, not something the church does.[96] David Bosch writes, "Mission is therefore seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument of that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa."[97] Bosch further argues that the world already has encountered the Triune God through the power of the Spirit. The church does not bring God to the world, nor invite the world to come to God. The church, in its missionary activity, "encounters a humanity and a world in which God's salvation has already been operative secretly, through the Spirit."[98]

This definition of the church does not mean the church does not have an important role to play in proclaiming and embodying the kingdom of God. It does mean, however,

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[95] Ibid., Kindle location 826.

[96] Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 85-86.

[97] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 400.

[98] Ibid., 401.

that outward manifestations of success and morality are not the ways in which the church embodies Christ. Lesslie Newbigin argues that the church embodies Christ's reign through its faithfulness in sharing love even while suffering:

> The church represents the presence of the reign of God in the life of the world … in the sense that it is the place where the mystery of the kingdom present in the dying and rising of Jesus is made present here and now so that all people, righteous and unrighteousness, are enabled to taste and share the love of God before whom all are unrighteous and all are accepted as righteous.[99]

Newbigin's insight is of particular significance to this research. Many young adults have been turned off by the church's hyper-moralistic stance on issues such as same-sex relationships, as well as by the church's concern to placate their own members and thus protect their cash flow, rather than show love and care for those who are considered outsiders. The faith to die in order to rise again, and to risk one's life out of love for outsiders, embodies the reign of God in ways that would make more sense to some of those who were subjects of this research.

The *missio Dei* calls the church to be less interested in securing its future than in fidelity to God. Alan J. Roxburgh notes that the church needs to stop thinking about its own survival, arguing that congregations are called to build communities not on their campuses, but out in the world. He urges congregations to use Luke's telling of the sending of the seventy as a model for Christian mission in the *missio Dei.* Congregations often gather goods to build structures for ministry, provide hospitality to strangers, and ask others to see signs of the kingdom in what they are doing. Jesus, by contrast, sent his disciples, telling them to bring nothing with them, receive the hospitality of others, and point to signs of God's kingdom in the world:

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[99] Newbigin, *The Open Secret*, 54.

> God is on the move. The kingdom is much bigger than our little, tribal, cultural enclaves, and the world is in crisis. The Lord of creation is out there ahead of us, he has left the temple and is calling the church to follow in a risky path of leaving behind its baggage, becoming like a stranger in need, and receiving hospitality from the very ones we assume are the candidates of our evangelism plans.[100]

The church, by doing such things, would more clearly see God at work in the world.

This does not mean that the church is unimportant or unneeded in God's mission. The church is necessary as the community that is uniquely suited to participate in the *missio Dei*, both by worshiping and praying to God, as well as by seeing God at work in its neighborhood. Bosch writes that it is appropriate to "perceive the church as an ellipse with two foci. In and around the first, it acknowledges and enjoys the source of its life; this is where worship and prayer are emphasized. From and through the second focus the church engages and challenges the world."[101]

The church, however, is also called to see itself as a community that participates in the shaping of other communities that may never be called church. Dwight Zscheile writes that the heart of the Christian message is that God meets us where we are. God meets us to open our eyes to the ways the Spirit is at work in our lives and in our world. God also meets us to call us into community. "We see that at the heart of God's purpose is the creation and restoration of communities of justice and mercy in which all may flourish. If God meets us where we are, the church too is led by the Spirit to meet its neighbors where they are in a posture of learning, reciprocity, and vulnerability."[102]

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[100] Roxburgh, *Missional*, 162.

[101] Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 395.

[102] Zscheile, *The Agile Church*, 35-36.

God's purpose in creating and restoring communities of justice and mercy may happen within the church, or outside of it. I found myself a part of a community I never anticipated joining. A friend of mine opened a pub within walking distance of the church I used to serve, and I went there many times to enjoy a pint and support my friend. I never expected to become a part of any sort of pub community, but that is what happened. I found myself listening to others, most of whom were Gen Xers, explain why they do not believe in God, or why they left the church. I shared with them stories of my life, both good and bad, and they did the same with me. These *nones* and *dones* asked me to pray with them during custody battles, knee surgeries, and family troubles. One guy who told me he absolutely did not believe in God when I first met him came to speak to me about the ways he saw God at work in his life. I was not the only person of faith in this community; others also prayed for those they knew and shared care and compassion. I was not the leader of this pub community, but I was a part of it, and it sometimes functioned very similarly to church. The research demonstrated that there are communities other than church that nourish the lives of the young people with whom I used to work, communities that are signs of the *missio Dei.*

Summary

The biblical and theological frames work with the theoretical lenses to provide insight into the beliefs, behaviors, and sense of belonging of those I studied. Some in the research doubted God because of the suffering of the world, while others saw God at work in spite of the suffering. Some used Christian practices they had learned as young people, such as prayer, worship, and service, to deepen their faith in God and their commitment to a Christian community. Others were like modern-day King Solomons,

seeing those practices as inadequate to sustain faith in God. A deep sense of belonging was experienced by some in Christian congregations, while others had different kinds of groups in which they found acceptance and love. I designed the research to examine these issues of believing, behaving, and belonging. The way in which the research was designed is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

"Every story matters."[1] That is the conclusion of Kinnaman, whose analysis of the reasons why young adults are leaving the church was reported in chapter three of this thesis. He writes, "One of the things we learned from this research is that there is more than one way to drop out and more than one way to stay faithful. Every person goes on a unique journey related to his or her faith and spirituality, and *every story matters.*"[2] Kinnaman used social science research methodology to unearth each of these unique stories, designing his instruments to remove his own biases in order to hear clearly what young adults were telling him about their faith journeys.[3] I have used social science research methods to gather the data in this thesis for the same reason: to accurately reflect the individual faith stories of those I studied.

This chapter explains the design of the research. I begin by reviewing my research question, focusing on the independent, dependent, and intervening variables. Next comes an overview of the research methodology I used and why I chose to use that method, followed by an examination of the biblical and theological perspectives that undergirded

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[1] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 25.

[2] Ibid. Emphasis in the original.

[3] Ibid., 246-248.

that methodology. A discussion of the nuts and bolts of the research follows, which begins by defining the population for the study and explaining why I chose the sample I used. I then describe the research instruments I implemented and how they were tested prior to their use, and end with an overview of how I analyzed the data I received.

Research Question

The research question that guided this study was:

> *To what extent have the youth ministry practices utilized during my tenure as pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Orange County, California; Calvary Lutheran Church, in central California; and Mission Lutheran Church in San Diego County, California; shaped, or failed to shape, the faith and Christian practices of adults who as teenagers were active participants in those youth groups?*

I was interested in finding out what helps young people develop patterns of believing in the Triune God, of behaving as Christians by engaging in both devotional and ethical practices, and of belonging to a Christian faith community. I decided that one way to figure out what works was to research what worked in the past to develop those beliefs, behaviors, and habits of belonging for adults who as young people were members of middle-school and high school youth groups in churches I served. I wanted, simultaneously, to research what does not work to shape the faith and Christian habits of today's youth by finding out what did not work in the past.

Research Methodology

I chose to use a mixed methods sequential explanatory social science methodology for this research. The approach was mixed methods, meaning it used both quantitative and qualitative research instruments to gather data.[4] Quantitative research

[4] Creswell, *Research Design*, Kindle location 931.

methods use instruments like questionnaires, often among larger numbers of people, to measure and assess issues that are being examined.[5] Qualitative research utilizes interviews and observations of smaller numbers of people in order to better understand why people respond to issues the way they do.[6] I used both a questionnaire and an interview protocol to gather information on the faith and Christian practices of the adults in this study. The questionnaire was sent to many former youth group members, while the interviews were limited to six people.

The method was sequential explanatory because it did not utilize the quantitative and qualitative instruments at the same time. The quantitative instrument was implemented first, and the data gathered from that research method informed what questions were asked during the qualitative phase of the research.[7] The method was explanatory because it sought to provide an in-depth explanation as to why subjects responded as they did to the questions on the initial survey.[8] Nardi writes, "*Explanatory research* is designed to answer the 'why' question: why there is a range of behaviors or opinions held among people surveyed."[9]

I chose the sequential explanatory method because I wanted both to gauge the breadth of opinions surrounding issues of believing, behaving, and belonging, and to dig more deeply into the thoughts of a few of the survey respondents to better understand

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[5] Nardi, *Doing Survey Research*, 19.

[6] Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2012), Kindle Edition, Kindle location 370.

[7] Creswell, *Research Design*, Kindle location 5176.

[8] Ibid., Kindle location 5181.

[9] Nardi, *Doing Survey Research*, 11. Emphasis in the original.

what shaped their beliefs and practices. I could have chosen a sequential exploratory method, which would have begun with the interviews and concluded with the questionnaire.[10] Such an approach would have been helpful in designing the questionnaire, and would have possibly allowed for greater depth in the answers provided by the survey. I chose not to go that route for a very practical reason. I wanted to interview two people who believed in God and were active in church, two people who believed in God but did not worship or volunteer regularly in a congregation, and two people who did not believe in God. The questionnaire asked the respondents not only to self-identify as belonging to one of those categories, but also to input contact information if they were willing to be interviewed for the qualitative portion of the research. Such self-identification would have been impossible using a sequential exploratory method.

Biblical/Theological Perspective on the Methodology

Social science methodologies have been developed to listen to the variety of interpretations post-moderns have of reality and, through study of the results, to come to conclusions based upon the various opinions. Mixed methods studies are often used to unearth insights into what groups of people experience. Van Gelder writes, "What is important to the researcher … is to expand the number of lenses being used to study a particular issue. The intent is to use the variety of methods to overcome or neutralize particular biases inherent within particular methods."[11] I have used the sequential explanatory method to listen carefully to the adults I am studying in order to better comprehend their experiences as youth group members, and their present reality as

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[10] Creswell, *Research Design*, Kindle location 5220.

[11] Van Gelder, "Method in Light of Scriptures and in Relation to Hermeneutics," 68.

people with a variety of spiritual beliefs. This method helped me, in spite of my own biases and my desire that all would have faith in the Triune God, to listen and come to a greater understanding of the practices and events that have shaped the spiritual lives of those I studied.

I sought to do more, however, than simply understand their experiences and present spirituality. I sought more importantly to listen for God's voice in this research. Two key Bible passages guided my belief that in listening to the Gen Xers and Millennials I surveyed and interviewed, I was listening for God. The creation account states that human beings are created in the image of God: "So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them" (Gen 1:27). David Fergusson uses this verse to claim that "All people image God and can do so in mundane ways that relate to the typical quotidian features of embodied social existence."[12] This means that every human being has traits and characteristics that reflect the image of God, and that those traits and characteristics are revealed in their everyday language and behaviors. Researchers can thus glimpse God's work and action in every person they study.

The other passage speaks of the image of Christ that is implanted within believers through the power of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul writes, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:19b-20a). This verse testifies to the presence of Christ Jesus incarnate within ordinary, everyday people.

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[12] David Fergusson, "Humans Created According to the *Imago Dei*: An Alternative Proposal," *Zygos* 48, no. 2 (2013). It should be noted that not all commentators agree with Fergusson on what it means for human beings to be created in the image of God. For an overview of the history of exegesis of this verse, see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 147-155.

This does not mean that an individual always reveals God in their words or actions. Human beings are, as Luther wrote in his commentary on Galatians, both saints and sinners at the same time.[13] Miroslav Volf agrees that human beings are still individually themselves even as Christ lives in and through them, writing, "through the Holy Spirit, Christ is internal to Christians as persons without suspending their status as selves."[14] Human beings are still individuals who are capable of sin, but they also bear the image of God who continually reveals God's self through ordinary, everyday people.

The image of God which is given to all humanity, and the incarnate presence of Christ which is a gift of the Holy Spirit, make it possible to catch glimpses of God through listening to and observing the actions of human beings in this world. The sequential explanatory method I utilized enabled me to lay aside my own biases in order to listen carefully to what the subjects of the study were saying. By listening to them, I was able to listen for the voice of God.

Research Design and Population

A sequential explanatory research method begins with a survey of the population sample. I developed a questionnaire and sent it to the subjects of the study via SurveyMonkey (see appendix A).[15] I developed a proposed interview protocol for the qualitative phase of the research at the same time, and later revised the protocol based on the results of the quantitative research (see appendix B). The survey went live on

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[13] Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, Chapters 1-4*, Luther's Works, edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, 75 vols., vol. 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1535), 9.

[14] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 188.

[15] "SurveyMonkey."

SurveyMonkey on November 16, 2015. I had originally planned to close the survey in late January, but after consulting with my advisors, I chose to leave the survey open until the end of March, in order to give myself more time to contact former youth group members and request they take the survey. I made a preliminary analysis of the responses I received by the end of January 2016 in order to revise the interview protocol and made those revisions in February 2016. I informed those who filled out the questionnaire that I would contact a select few for an in-depth interview on the subject of the effects of youth ministry on their current faith and life. I requested they indicate their willingness to participate in such an interview by entering their contact information. I examined the names of those who were willing to be interviewed, selecting six individuals. The six were a mixture of Gen Xers and Millennials, two who indicated they believed in God and were a part of a church, two who believed but did not regularly attend church, and two who did not believe and were not attached to a church.

The population for this study consisted of a purposive sample of adults who as adolescents were members of youth groups at churches where I served. I began to gather the research with an initial contact by email, asking if prospective participants would be willing to take the survey (see appendix C). I occasionally had only a cell number or a Facebook page as contact information, and in those cases I texted or messaged the individual, telling them briefly that I was in a Doctor of Ministry program doing research and could use their help. I then asked if they were willing to send me an email address in order to learn more about the project, and sent those who wanted more information the email request. The request gave information about the survey and asked if I could send it to them. When the participant agreed to help with the research, I sent a link to the

questionnaire via SurveyMonkey to the same email address. I personalized the email message in SurveyMonkey by writing the participant's first name at the top, followed by an implied consent letter which was the basis of the SurveyMonkey email message (see appendix D). I also used an informed consent form for those I interviewed, emailing the form to them a few days prior to the interview. I then reviewed the informed consent form with each interviewee in person and asked them to sign the form prior to asking the first question in the protocol (see appendix E).

I received initial contact information about former youth group members using a variety of methods. I had remained in contact with a few of the former youth group members from Advent Lutheran and thus had either email addresses, cell phone numbers, or access to them via Facebook. I also stayed in contact with some of the parents of the Advent group, and I emailed them, asking them for their children's contact information. Those who were willing to take the survey also sent me email addresses or cell phone numbers for their former youth group friends with whom they were still in touch. I also contacted the current pastor at Advent to request they run an announcement that I was doing research for a Doctor of Ministry program and requesting that former youth group members let me know if they were interested. I contacted twenty-six members of the former Advent Lutheran youth group, received permission to send the survey to twenty-one of them, and eighteen completed the survey.

I tried to use Facebook to contact those I worked with at Calvary, but had less luck than I did with Advent. I only found two on Facebook, and only one responded to my message asking for their participation. I wrote to one of the parents, the mother of two of the boys in the group who was also the main parental sponsor of the youth ministry

while I was there. She sent me contact information for her children, and suggested ways to contact other adults. I asked the current pastor at Calvary to add an announcement to their bulletin that I was in a doctoral program and wanted to interview former youth group members. The announcement was read by one of the parents who sent me contact information for her daughter. I sent five surveys to members of Calvary and four were completed.

I used the church database at Mission to contact as many former youth group members as I could find, and asked parents of youth who either no longer lived in the area or who had dropped out of church years earlier to provide email addresses. I sent seventy-two requests for help, received permission to send the survey to forty-six of them, and thirty-seven of them completed it. A total of fifty-nine former youth group members filled out the survey, of whom twenty-nine were male and twenty-six female.

The survey asked participants who were willing to be interviewed to identify themselves and include contact information. Thirty-nine of the fifty-nine left contact information. I culled through this information to request interviews of two people who believed in God and were active in church, two people who believed but were not active in church, and two people who did not believe in God. Interviews began in May 2016 and concluded in July of that same year.

Instruments

I used two instruments in this research: a questionnaire to gather data for the quantitative portion of the research, and an interview protocol which was used for the qualitative portion. I developed the questionnaire over the summer of 2015, and submitted it for review by members of my DMin cohort and my faculty advisor in

October of the same year. I revised the questionnaire based on their feedback, then asked ten adults to field test it for me by October 31, 2015. Eight completed the instrument, four of whom were Gen Xers and four Millennials, with a gender makeup of five females and three males. Seven of these were from Mission, though none had attended youth group in the congregation while I was their pastor, and one was the daughter of a good friend who had attended youth group in her former church. I utilized the feedback from the field tests to make minor modifications to the questionnaire (the final form of the questionnaire is available in appendix A).

The questionnaire went live on November 16, 2015, and stayed open until March 31, 2016. I initially planned to close the survey on January 25, 2016, but after consulting with my advisors, decided to keep the survey open until March 31. I sent reminders on January 17 and January 24 to those who, after initially agreeing to fill out the questionnaire, failed to complete it, warning them that the survey would close on January 25. I sent another email on February 3 informing those who had not responded that the survey would remain open until March 31. I then contacted the pastors at Advent and Calvary and asked them to run announcements about the research with my contact information. I contacted six other former youth group members from February 3 – March 31, and four of them completed the questionnaire. A total of fifty-nine persons participated in the quantitative portion of the research.

I developed a proposed interview protocol at the same time as I constructed the questionnaire. It was also reviewed by my DMin advisor and cohort, and I revised it based on their input. I field tested it with only one person, my godson, a Millennial in his mid-twenties, in late October 2015 and used his recommendations to rewrite one of the

questions. I then waited until after I had gathered data from the questionnaire to revise it one last time. The survey indicated that adult youth group leaders constituted a variable in the research, a result I had not foreseen. I revised the interview protocol to include a question about the role of adults in the development of each participant's spiritual journey during adolescence to examine what role I and other adult sponsors may have played. I field tested the protocol on two more individuals, one female Millennial and one Gen X male, made further revisions (see appendix B for the final form of the interview protocol), and began the interviews in May 2016.

Analysis of the Data

I downloaded the data gathered via the quantitative survey from SurveyMonkey into an Excel worksheet. I cleaned the data, and moved the answers to the three open-ended questions into a Microsoft Word document for later coding. The questionnaire asked participants to write in their birth year; I assigned a numerical value of one for all who were born from 1965-1979 to indicate they belonged to Generation X, and a numerical value of two for those born from 1980-1997 to indicate they were Millennials, so that I could analyze the results by generation.

The questionnaire asked respondents to describe their current spirituality using seven different categories, ranging from those who believed in the Triune God and worshiped at least once-a-month, to those who did not believe and were not open to spirituality or spiritual practices. I combined those seven categories into three, assigning a numerical value of one for those who were Christian and attended church more than twice a year, two for those who were Christian but attended worship twice or fewer times a year, and a numerical value of three for those who described themselves as not

Christian. Those with a value of one were grouped as active Christians, the twos as inactive Christians, and the threes as non-Christians.

I analyzed the data from the quantitative survey using descriptive statistical methods, aided by tools from IBM's SPSS program.[16] I noted the total number of participants (N), the total number of Gen Xers who took the survey, and the total number of Millennials. I reported the total number of male and female respondents, as well as the totals from each of the three congregations. I found cross-tabulation, or *crossstabs,* to be a helpful tool in viewing the differences between generations, genders, and the individual congregations. Nardi writes, "Crosstabs are ideally suited to nominal or ordinal measured variables or to interval/ratio data with a very limited number of discrete values."[17] I used cross-tabulation tables to compare the responses of active, inactive, and non-Christians in the sample as a whole. I also used crosstabs to compare those in each self-description group from Advent, with those who responded from Calvary, and those who responded from Mission. I provided comparisons between male and female respondents both within congregations and across congregations. I also cross-tabulated the differences between generations within congregations and across congregations. These tables provided insights into the faith walks of different segments of the population I studied.

I used Likert scale comparisons to help discover practices that either helped or hindered the development of faith both within and across congregations. I reported mean responses from questions which asked respondents to identify which practices were important in developing their current spirituality, and from questions that requested

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[16] IBM SPSS Statistics 23.

[17] Nardi, *Doing Survey Research*, 161.

participants to rank how church and life experiences had been influential in shaping their faith and Christian behaviors.[18] I cross-tabulated the means to these questions both within and across congregations by self-description groups. These comparisons and cross-tabulations helped identify patterns within the data, and these patterns helped to answer the question as to which youth ministry practices were most helpful in developing life-long Christian faith and behaviors.

I recorded the qualitative interviews and transcribed them myself. I coded both the interviews and the open-ended questions from the quantitative survey using Kathy Charmaz's process to analyze the data.[19] The first level consisted of initial coding, which emerged as I examined actions within the data. Charmaz writes, "coding for actions curbs our tendencies to make conceptual leaps and to adopt extant theories *before* we have done the necessary analytic work."[20] I began with word-by-word coding, then proceeded to line-by-line coding, using a gerund to describe the actions in each line of the transcripts. Charmaz argues that line-by-line coding "helps to define implicit meanings and actions, gives researchers directions to explore, spurs making comparisons between data, and suggests emergent links between processes in the data to pursue and check."[21] I followed by coding the transcripts incident-by-incident, comparing and contrasting the experiences of those I interviewed. I finally developed *in vivo* codes which utilized the actual words and phrases spoken by those I interviewed. *In vivo* codes flag commonly used terms that hold deep meanings, and innovative or insider terms that capture the perspectives of the

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[18] Ibid., 140, 142-143.

[19] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 109-161.

[20] Ibid., 117. Emphasis in the original.

[21] Ibid., 121.

various research subjects.[22] The initial coding kept me interacting with the data rather than drawing my own conclusions too quickly as to its meaning.

I then moved on to a second phase of focused coding in which I began to analyze the data using the initial word-by-word, line-by-line, incident-by-incident, and *in vivo* codes. Charmaz writes, "Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely."[23] I first combined *in vivo* codes to develop focused codes. This process, as indicated by its name, helped me focus on patterns that seemed most relevant, trimming away codes that seemed to hold less promise for the study.[24] I then developed axial codes by grouping the focused codes into categories and subcategories in order to form a framework for the research results.[25] The final step in the process was to develop theoretical codes, which sought to explain the interrelationship between the axial codes and helped me organize the results of the interviews into a coherent whole.[26]

Summary

Every story matters. I designed the research so that I could give each story and each person the attention they deserved. The survey allowed me to learn of the breadth of youth group experiences and modern-day practices of those I researched, while the interviews added depth and texture to the results of the survey. I also listened for God's

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[22] Ibid., 134.

[23] Ibid., 138.

[24] Ibid., 141.

[25] Ibid., 148.

[26] Ibid., 150.

guidance through these stories, learning from the past in order to find ways to assist the faith development of young people in youth groups I will serve in the future. The methodology helped me to frame the results of the research. Those results are presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

RESULTS OF STUDY AND INTERPRETATION

Introduction

All the former youth group members who shared their stories through this research project did so initially by filling out a questionnaire. This instrument contained a variety of questions designed to elicit quantitative data, such as Likert scale comparisons and queries about how often the participants engaged in spiritual practices including praying and attending worship. It also posed three open-ended questions which produced qualitative data. A paragraph at the end of the questionnaire explained that I wanted to interview a subset of those who had filled out the instrument.

I asked participants to write in their names and contact information if they were willing to meet with me to discuss both their youth group experiences and their current spiritual life. I chose six of those who indicated a willingness to go deeper into how their youth group experiences shaped their current faith and spiritual practices. Two of these were active Christians, very involved in their churches; two were inactive Christians who either rarely or never attend church; and two described themselves as non-Christians, one of whom attends worship with his parents fairly regularly while the other does not affiliate with the church at all.

The interview protocol was designed at the same time as the questionnaire, then rewritten following an initial read-through of the results of the questionnaire. I realized during this early phase of analysis that adult leadership emerged as a key issue for a

number of respondents, so a new theoretical lens of Adult Servant Leadership was added to the thesis, and questions were designed in the interview protocol to discuss the role of adult leaders. I used the IBM SPSS program to analyze the quantitative results of the questionnaire, and used Kathy Charmaz's coding method for the qualitative data.[1] The data were analyzed to answer the research question for this project:

> *To what extent have the youth ministry practices utilized during my tenure as pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Orange County, California; Calvary Lutheran Church, in central California; and Mission Lutheran Church in San Diego County, California; shaped, or failed to shape, the faith and Christian practices of adults who as teenagers were active participants in those youth groups?*

I begin this chapter with an overview of those who participated in the research. This is followed by a quantitative analysis of the data from the questionnaire. The results of the open-ended questions are analyzed next, with each question coded separately for clarity. I end with a presentation of the data gleaned from the interviews. These interviews were not coded by each separate question, as was the case with the open-ended items on the questionnaire, but instead were coded for themes as they emerged in the various interviews.

Data from the Questionnaire

The Participants

The total number of participants (N) who filled out the survey was fifty-nine. The breakdown of numbers of participants from each congregation is listed in table 6.1 below. More than half of the fifty-nine participants were from Mission Lutheran, while only four were members of Calvary. This made sense, as more than half of my ministry—nineteen

[1] IBM SPSS Statistics 23; Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 109-161.

of my thirty years—was spent at Mission, while Calvary was a very small congregation where I only served for a little over five years.

Table 6.1. Church Attended

	Respondents	Percent of Total
Advent	18	30.5%
Calvary	4	6.8%
Mission	37	62.7%

Thirty-two of those who responded were male, which made up 54.2% of the sample, while twenty-seven, or 45.8%, were female. The breakdown of genders within church affiliation is listed in table 6.2, with the percentage of male or female within the congregation shown below the number. Percentages are to be read down the column.

Table 6.2. Church Affiliation by Gender

	Advent	Calvary	Mission	Total
Male	12 66.7%	3 75.0%	17 45.9%	32 54.2%
Female	6 33.3%	1 25.0%	20 54.1%	27 45.8%

All those who completed the questionnaire were members either of Generation X or were Millennials. The breakdown of generations is contained in table 6.3 below. Twenty, or 33.9%, of the participants were Gen Xers, while thirty-nine, or 66.1%, were Millennials. All eighteen of the Advent alumni were Gen Xers, and all thirty-seven of those from Mission were Millennials. The participants from Calvary split evenly between the generations, as two were Xers and two were Millennials.

Table 6.3. Church Affiliation by Generation

	Advent	Calvary	Mission	Total Percentage
Generation X	18	2	0	33.9%
Millennials	0	2	39	66.1%

I asked how many of the participants had children. Most of those who responded were not parents. Table 6.4 shows the breakdown based on the number of children each of the respondents had. Forty of those who responded, more than two-thirds of those who participated in the research, did not have children.

Table 6.4. Number of Children

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Zero Children	40	67.8%	67.8%
One Child	5	8.5%	76.3%
Two Children	4	6.8%	83.1%
Three Children	7	11.9%	94.9%
Four Children	3	5.1%	100.0%

The vast majority of those who had no children were from Mission Lutheran, as shown in table 6.5 below. Thirteen of the eighteen from Advent (72.2% of the total from that church), as well as all four who responded from Calvary (100% from that congregation) were parents. Table 6.5 gives the percentage of those who have children within each congregational group. An analysis of the nineteen respondents from all three congregations who had children reveals that five of them (26.3%) had one child, four (21.1%) had two, seven (36.8%) were raising three, and three (15.8%) were rearing four. None of the participants had more than four children.

Table 6.5. Number of Children by Church Affiliation

	Advent	Calvary	Mission	Total
Zero Children	5 27.8%	0 0.0%	35 94.6%	40 67.8%
One Child	3 16.7%	1 25.0%	1 2.7%	5 8.5%
Two Children	4 22.2%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	4 6.8%

Table 6.5. Number of Children by Church Affiliation (cont.)

	Advent	Calvary	Mission	Total
Three Children	4 22.2%	2 50.0%	1 2.7%	7 11.9%
Four Children	2 11.1%	1 25.0%	0 0.0%	3 5.1%
Total	18 100.0%	4 100.0%	37 100.0%	59 100.0%

The majority of those who responded went on to higher education following their high school years. Over 86% attended college, and 50.8% obtained a college degree. The breakdown of highest educational achievement for those who participated is in table 6.6.

Table 6.6. Highest Education Level

	Frequency	Percentage
Attended High School	1	1.7%
Graduated High School/Obtained GED	7	11.9%
Attended College	21	35.6%
Graduated College	23	39.0%
Attended Post-Graduate School	1	1.7%
Attained Post Graduate Degree	6	10.2%

The sample for this study consisted of slightly more men than women, almost twice as many Millennials as Gen Xers, and mostly higher educated adults who had no children. Over half of the sample was from Mission, with 30.0% from Advent and 6.8% from Calvary. I turn now to an analysis of the quantitative data compiled from the survey, cross-tabulating and comparing means across and within congregations to look for answers to the research question.

Quantitative Analysis

I begin the quantitative analysis by examining the entire sample as a whole. I cross-tabulated and compared means between the dependent variable, the self-description

of the current faith and spirituality of the respondents, with a variety of independent and intervening variables. I did not separate out results from the individual congregations, as I combine in this section the responses of those from all three churches. A comparison between congregations will follow in the next section.

All Congregations

The dependent variable for the research question was the current faith and Christian practices of the former youth group members. One question in particular asked about each person's current faith and Christian practices, requesting the subjects to define themselves and their spirituality. There were seven possible responses: two for active Christians, two for inactive Christians, and three for non-Christians. Table 6.7 shows the responses for the sample as a whole.

Table 6.7. Self-Description of Current Spirituality and Practices

Description	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
I am a Christian, very active in a church (worship and/or volunteer at least once a month)	18	30.5%
I am a Christian, somewhat active in a church (worship and/or volunteer at least 3 times a year)	14	23.7%
I am a Christian but only attend church 1-2 times a year.	7	11.9%
I am a Christian, but not active in a church.	10	16.9%
I am not a Christian, but a believer in God.	3	5.1%
I am not a believer in God but am open to spirituality and spiritual practices.	5	8.5%
I am not a believer in God and am not open to spirituality or spiritual practices.	2	3.4%

I combined the self-descriptions into three main categories. The first two self-descriptions were combined and classified as active Christians (N = 32), the second two

were combined and comprised inactive Christians (N = 17), and the final three were labeled as non-Christians (N = 10), as shown in table 6.8 below. The majority of those who took the survey, 54.2%, described themselves as active Christians, while another 28.8% self-identified as Christians who either rarely or never attended church. Only 17.0% said they were non-Christian, with 5.1% of this group claiming a belief in God, another 8.5% stating that while they did not believe in God they were open to spirituality and spiritual practices, and only two persons, 3.4% of the total, declaring they did not believe and were not open to spirituality or spiritual practices (see table 6.7 above).

Table 6.8. Self-Description Clustered into Major Categories

	Number of Participants	Percentage of Participants
Active Christians	32	54.2%
Inactive Christians	17	28.8%
Non-Christians	10	17.0%

Table 6.9 below shows the number of those in the seven categories of self-description cross-tabulated by generation. Percentages are given within generations and are to be read down the column. No Gen Xers stated that they did not believe in God, while seven Millennials (17.9%) replied that they were not believers. A Pearson chi-square test conducted on this cross-tabulation indicated there was no statistically significant correlation between self-description and generation.

Table 6.9. Original Self-Description by Generation

Description	Generation X	Millennials
I am a Christian, very active in a church (worship and/or volunteer at least once a month)	7 35.0%	11 28.2%
I am a Christian, somewhat active in a church (worship and/or volunteer at least 3 times a year)	7 35.0%	7 17.9%
I am a Christian but only attend church 1-2 times a year.	1 5.0%	6 15.4%

Table 6.9. Original Self-Description by Generation (cont.)

Description	Generation X	Millennials
I am a Christian, but not active in a church.	3 15.0%	7 17.9%
I am not a Christian, but a believer in God.	2 10.0%	1 2.6%
I am not a believer in God but am open to spirituality and spiritual practices.	0 0.0%	5 12.8%
I am not a believer in God and am not open to spirituality or spiritual practices.	0 0.0%	2 5.1%

Table 6.10 below shows the number and percentages of Gen Xers and Millennials clustered under the three major categories of self-description. The percentages are by generation and are to be read down the column. A total of 70.0% of Generation X members described themselves as active Christians, while 46.2% of Millennials shared that description. A Pearson chi-square test conducted on this cross-tabulation indicated that there was no statistically significant correlation between self-description and generation, yet it is interesting to note the difference between the Gen Xers and the Millennials in this sample.

Table 6.10. Self-Description Categories by Generation

	Generation X	Millennials
Active Christians	14 70.0%	18 46.2%
Inactive Christians	4 20.0%	13 33.3%
Non-Christians	2 10.0%	8 20.5%

Findings of the Research on the Sample as a Whole

All respondents described themselves as either active Christians, inactive Christians, or non-Christians. I cross-tabulated these groups, conducting Pearson chi-

square tests on all the cross-tabulations and reporting all statistically significant relationships between any of the variables below.[2] I conducted ANOVA tests comparing the means for ordinal and interval variables against the three main self-description categories.[3] I show any statistically significant relationships in bold print in the tables below, and discuss their meaning. I also point out instances that, though not statistically significant, caused me to wonder if the data were pointing to a possible connection between the variables and the current faith and practices of those in the sample.

The participants noted whether they were involved in the Confirmation and high school youth groups in their congregation. I cross-tabulated those results by self-descriptions. Table 6.11 below shows the results. It is interesting to note the drop in participation from Confirmation class, where all groups had almost 100% participation, to high school youth group. The active Christians showed the smallest decline, with only two of thirty (6.3%) indicating they did not attend high school youth group. In contrast, over 1/3 of the inactive Christians, 35.3%, did not attend youth group after confirmation. It is also interesting to note that eight of the ten non-Christians (80.0%) were involved in youth group in high school. This simply means they went to youth group and does not mean they had faith during this point of their adolescence, as the results of the qualitative research in the interviews below demonstrates.

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[2] For an overview of chi-square calculations, see Nardi, *Doing Survey Research*, 164-168.

[3] For an overview of ANOVA calculations, see ibid., 192-197.

Table 6.11. Participation in Youth Group by Current Self-Description

	Active Christian	Inactive Christian	Non-Christian	Total
Confirmation Yes	31	17	10	58
Confirmation No	1	0	0	1
HS Youth Group Yes	**30**	**11**	**8**	**49**
HS Youth Group No	**2**	**6**	**2**	**10**

Pearson chi-square tests revealed statistically significant results for some of these variables. The effects of high school youth group attendance and self-description groups are not independent and so these variables are contingent upon each other. These variables have a significant effect on each other, $X^2_{(2)} = 6.733$, p = .035. Values for inactive Christians deviate significantly from the expected amounts. The actual count for inactive Christians who did attend high school youth group was 11 while the expected count was 14.1. The actual count for inactives who did not attend was 6 and the expected count was 2.9. Currently inactive Christians were less likely to attend high school youth group in statistically significant numbers. This may have been the genesis of their inactivity.

The count for active Christians also looks significant, but the gap between actual and expected counts is not as great a percentage of the entire self-description group as the similar gap for inactives. The count for active Christians who attended high school youth group was 30 while the expected count was 26.6. The actual count for those who did not attend was 2 and the expected count was 5.2. The difference between the actual and expected counts could indicate that today's active Christians in the sample were more likely to have attended high school youth group. The counts for non-Christians were within the expected range, with the actual count of those attending totaling 8 while the

expected count was 8.3. The actual count for those who did not attend was 2 while the expected count was 1.7.

The questionnaire next asked about worship attendance during adolescence. Respondents were asked how often they attended worship during their middle-school years, with 1 = at least once a week, 2 = at least once a month, 3 = at least once a quarter, 4 = fewer than once a quarter, and 5 = I did not go to worship during middle-school. Table 6.12 below shows how often respondents attended worship during middle-school. The percentages are listed within self-descriptions below the actual number of persons and are to be read down the column. The final row contains the mean answer for each self-description category.

Table 6.12. Middle-School Worship Attendance by Self-Description

	Active Christian	Inactive Christian	Non-Christian
Weekly	26 81.3%	11 64.7%	9 90.0%
Once-a-month	6 18.8%	4 23.5%	1 10.0%
Once-a-quarter	0 0.0%	2 11.8%	0 0.0%
Mean	1.188	1.471	1.100

All of the active Christians and non-Christians, during their middle-school years, attended worship at least once a month, with a whopping 81.3% of active Christians and 90% of non-Christians in attendance. None of the respondents attended worship during middle-school less often than once a quarter. The inactive Christians had a total of 64.7% attending weekly, 23.5% attending once-a-month, and 11.8% attending once-a-quarter, again showing that lesser activity at church began at an earlier age for this group. A one-way ANOVA conducted on this data showed no statistically significant results.

High school worship was a different matter. Respondents were asked how often they attended worship during their high school years, with the responses the same as those in table 6.12 above. Table 6.13 below shows the numbers for high school worship. The percentages are listed within self-descriptions below the actual number of persons and are to be read down the column. The final row contains the mean answer for each self-description category.

Table 6.13. High School Worship Attendance by Self-Description

	Active Christian	**Inactive Christian**	Non-Christian
Weekly	22 68.8%	**3** **17.6%**	7 70.0%
Once-a-month	9 28.1%	**7** **41.2%**	1 10.0%
Once-a-quarter	0 0.0%	**3** **17.6%**	1 10.0%
Fewer than once-a-quarter	0 0.0%	**3** **17.6%**	0 0.0%
Did not attend worship	1 3.1%	**1** **5.9%**	1 10.0%
Mean	1.238	**2.583**	1.167

I conducted a one-way ANOVA test comparing means within groups and discovered there were significant differences in high school worship attendance between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 56)} = 6.792$, $p = .002$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 1.238) and non-Christians (mean = 1.167) are not significantly different from each other in levels of worship attendance. These self-description groups are statistically different from inactive Christians (mean = 2.583). Those who are currently inactive Christians worshiped less frequently when they were in high school than did either the active Christians or non-Christians at the same age.

It is interesting to note that the mean for high worship attendance of current non-Christians, at 1.167, was lower than that for active Christians (mean = 1.283) which indicates that in high school, the current non-Christians attended worship more often than did the currently active Christians. The current non-Christians attended worship in high school at a higher rate than did both the other groups.

The questionnaire next asked about the respondents' participation in a variety of middle-school activities apart from Confirmation class itself. The number of those who responded "yes" to that question and the percentage of total respondents within the self-description group, are cross-tabulated in table 6.14 below. This question is the first of many that did not contain fifty-nine valid responses, as some respondents chose not to answer these questions. I have put a column for the total number of valid responses (N) into the tables that follow for categories where there are missing answers.

Table 6.14. Middle-school Activities by Self-Description

	N	Active Christian	Inactive Christian	Non-Christian
Confirmation Retreats	59	28 87.5%	14 82.4%	10 100.0%
Middle-school Youth Gatherings	59	27 84.4%	16 94.1%	9 90.0%
One-on-One mentoring with an Adult Volunteer	58	16 51.6%	6 35.3%	4 40.0%
Confirmation Summer Camp	57	11 36.7%	6 35.3%	4 40.0%
Other Offsite Activities	59	25 78.1%	14 82.4%	10 100.0%

Pearson chi-square tests done during the cross-tabulation indicated there were no statistically significant relationships between these variables. A descriptive comparison of variables in table 6.14 indicates that the only variable that might make some difference is

one-on-one mentoring. A slight majority of active Christians had such an experience whereas a minority of inactive and non-Christians were mentored one-on-one by an adult. The percentages, however, are pretty close (51.6% active, compared to 40.0% non-Christian and 35.3% inactive) so the difference this variable makes might not be much.

I next asked about high school activities, and table 6.15 below shows the findings in the same format as table 6.14 above. A higher percentage of active Christians participated in Youth Gatherings, Servant Trips, and Other Offsite Activities, but not by much over non-Christians. The non-Christians who responded to the survey clearly were highly active in their youth group. They maintained consistently higher percentages in activities over inactive Christians and, in some cases, higher percentages than active Christians. This would seem to indicate the youth group practices listed below, in and of themselves, had little effect on the current faith and practices of today's non-Christians.

Table 6.15. High School Activities by Self-Description

	N	Active Christians	Inactive Christians	Non-Christians
Summer Camp	57	9 30.0%	3 17.6%	4 40.0%
Regional and/or National Youth Gatherings	**59**	**26** **81.3%**	**8** **47.1%**	**7** **70.0%**
Servant Trips	58	18 58.1%	5 29.4%	5 50.0%
Retreats	58	22 71.0%	10 58.8%	7 70.0%
Leadership Meetings or Retreats	**58**	**22** **71.0%**	**4** **23.5%**	**8** **80.0%**
Other Offsite Activities	55	23 79.3%	8 50.0%	6 60.0%

Pearson chi-square tests revealed statistically significant results for some of these variables. The effects of Regional and/or National Youth Gatherings and self-description

groups are not independent and so these variables are contingent upon each other. These variables have a significant effect on each other, $X^2_{(2)} = 6.123$, p = .047. Values for inactive Christians deviated significantly from the expected amounts. The count for inactive Christians who attended gatherings was 8 while the expected count was 11.8. The actual count for those who did not attend was 9, and the expected count was 5.2.

The count for active Christians also looks significant, but the gap between actual and expected counts is not as great a percentage of the entire self-description group than the similar gap for inactives. The count for active Christians who attended gatherings is 26, while the expected count is 22.2. The count for active Christians who did not attend gatherings is 6, while the expected count is 9.8. The counts for non-Christians were within the expected range, with the actual count of those attending totaling 7 while the expected count was 6.9. The actual count for those who did not attend was 3 while the expected count was 3.1.

The difference in actual and expected counts for the active Christians seems to indicate that attendance at youth gatherings influenced teenagers to become active Christians. Conversely, the difference in actual and expected counts for inactive Christians seems to indicate that lack of attendance at youth gatherings led teenagers to become less active in the practice of their faith.

The effects of high school youth leadership meetings and retreats and self-description groups also are not independent and so these variables are contingent upon each other. These variables have a significant effect on each other, $X^2_{(2)} = 12.463$, p = .002. There are gaps between actual and expected counts for all three groups, but the values for inactive Christians deviate most significantly from the expected amounts. The

count for inactive Christians who participated in leadership meetings and retreats was 4 while it was expected to be 10. Conversely, the count for inactive Christians who did not participate was 13 but expected to be 7.

The actual count for active Christians who participated in leadership meetings and retreats was 22, while it was expected to be 18.2. The count for active Christians who did not participate was 9 and was expected to be 12.8. More non-Christians attended than expected, as the actual count was 8 and the expected count 5.9. The actual count for non-Christians who did not attend was 2, whereas the expected count was 4.1. Eighty percent of non-Christians were present for these meetings, while a little lower percentage, about 71.0%, of active Christians, attended. It would be difficult to argue that the same retreat made one group more attached to their faith while it turned the other group away. It is more likely that the truly significant numbers here are those that reveal the lack of involvement of inactives who later in life would describe themselves as Christians but would not be regularly involved in a church community.

Among other activities undertaken during adolescence that may have affected the spirituality and practices of today's adults are the ways in which they served the church outside of youth group. The questionnaire asked about this service with the responses in table 6.16 below.

Table 6.16. Other Church Service by Self-Description

	N	Active Christian	Inactive Christian	Non-Christian
Assisting Minister at Worship	57	6 20.0%	2 11.8%	0 0.0%
Reader at Worship	58	8 25.8%	2 11.8%	2 20.0%
Teacher of Sunday School	56	4 13.8%	3 17.6%	0 0.0%

Table 6.16. Other Church Service by Self-Description (cont.)

	N	Active Christian	Inactive Christian	Non-Christian
Teacher/Helper at Vacation Bible School	58	20 64.5%	7 41.2%	4 40.0%
Guide/Mentor/Helper at Confirmation	**57**	**4** **13.3%**	**1** **5.9%**	**5** **50.0%**
Other Activities	59	20 62.5%	14 82.4%	6 60.0%

A Pearson chi-square test indicates that the variable of Confirmation Guide/Mentor/Helper is statistically significant. The effects of Confirmation Guide/Mentor/Helper and self-description groups are not independent and so these variables are contingent upon each other. These variables have a significant effect on each other, $X^2_{(2)} = 9.248$, p = .010. Values for non-Christians deviate significantly from the expected amounts. The count for non-Christians who served in the Confirmation ministry was 5, while the expected count was 1.8. The count for those who did not serve was 5, while the expected count was 8.2. Values for active and inactive Christians were within the expected range. The actual count for active Christians who participated was 4 as contrasted with an expected count of 5.3, while the expected count for those who did not serve was 26, with an expected count of 24.7. The actual count for inactive Christians who served was 1 while the expected count was 3, and the actual count for those who did not serve was 16 with an expected count of 14.

It is a bit alarming to see how many non-Christians (50.0%) ended up teaching or serving in some way in Confirmation, while the numbers for active Christians (13.3%) and inactives (5.9%) are small in comparison. This could perhaps have been due to a desire to help those struggling with the faith to have another chance to examine it, or it

could be a factor of the high level of church activity among the current non-Christians while they were in high school youth group, a factor the data have shown throughout this study.

Also interesting is the higher percentage of active Christians who served as Vacation Bible School helpers. Pearson chi-square tests on this variable did not return statistically significant results, but a descriptive analysis reveals that 64.5% of active Christians served as VBS helpers, compared to levels in the 40% range for inactive and non-Christians. Vacation Bible School in the churches I served was run by lay volunteers who recruited and trained the staff. Confirmation was supervised by the pastors, who did the recruiting and training. Perhaps the priesthood of all believers does a better job at producing lifelong, active Christians than do those of us whose vocation is Christian ministry.

The questionnaire next asked a series of questions about the importance of various youth ministry practices in contributing to the respondents' current faith and spirituality. The questions used a Likert scale, where 1= not important, 2 = somewhat important, 3 = important, and 4 = very important. I compared and contrasted the mean responses within self-description categories as listed in table 6.17 below. I have put the number of valid responses (N) for each self-description category in table 6.17 as some responded *I don't know* while others left the answer blank. Those responses were not included in the calculation of the mean value for each group.

Table 6.17. Importance of Youth Ministry Practices to Current Spirituality

	Active Christian Mean N=32	Inactive Christian Mean N=17	Non-Christian Mean N=10
Worship	3.194 N=31	2.824 N=17	2.667 N=9
Bible Study	2.897 N=29	2.412 N=17	2.556 N=9
Prayer with Others	**2.767 N=30**	**2.706 N=17**	**2.000 N=9**
Playing Games	2.594 N=32	2.235 N=17	2.778 N=9
Spending Time with Youth Group Friends	3.375 N=32	2.882 N=17	3.300 N=10
Singing	2.484 N=31	2.000 N=17	2.250 N=8
Retreats	3.300 N=30	2.882 N=17	2.667 N=9
Camp	2.760 N=25	2.571 N=14	1.875 N=8
Regional and/or National Youth Gatherings	3.323 N=31	2.667 N=15	2.800 N=10
Servant Trips	3.182 N=22	2.385 N=13	2.571 N=7
Leadership Retreats	2.733 N=15	2.167 N=12	2.000 N=7

This table contains some illuminating information. Worship, prayer with others, and camp rank lower in importance to the non-Christian sample than to the active and inactive Christians. Spending time with youth group friends is as important to the non-Christians as to the active Christians, while the inactives rate it lower in importance. Playing games ranks highest with non-Christians, lowest with inactive Christians. It appears from this table that non-Christians valued the activities that fostered community over those that deepened traditional Christian spirituality, while the inactives seemed to put a higher value on the spiritual over those practices that built community. Active Christians seemed to value both equally.

ANOVA tests on this data set indicated there was one statistically significant variable. There were significant differences in prayer with others between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 53)} = 3.627$, $p = .033$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 2.767) and inactive Christians (mean = 2.706) are not significantly different from each other in levels of prayer with others. These self-description groups are statistically different from non-Christians (mean = 2.000). Those who are currently non-Christians found prayer with others significantly less important to their current spirituality and spiritual practice than did active and inactive Christians.

Another set of variables consisted of practices used personally rather than corporately during the adolescence of those who took the survey. These devotional practices were encouraged by youth ministry, but depended on the initiative of individual youth group members to engage in them on their own. The questionnaire asked about the importance of these practices on the respondents' current spirituality using a Likert scale as in table 6.17 above, where 1 = not important and 4 = very important. I compare and contrast the means between the three self-described groups in table 6.18 below.

Table 6.18. Importance of Personal Practices in Adolescence by Self-Description

	Active Christian Mean N=32	Inactive Christian Mean N=17	Non-Christian Mean N=10
Personal prayer	**2.935 N=31**	**2.647 N=17**	**1.700 N=10**
Devotional Bible Reading	2.097 N=31	1.706 N=17	1.400 N=10
Singing or Playing an Instrument in a Choir or Musical Group	2.034 N=29	1.562 N=16	2.111 N=9
Giving Financial Offerings to the Church	**2.100 N=30**	**1.875 N=16**	**1.300 N=10**
Participating in Servant Projects Outside of Youth Group	2.786 N=28	2.188 N=16	2.125 N=8

Table 6.18. Importance of Personal Practices in Adolescence by Self-Description (cont.)

	Active Christian Mean N=32	Inactive Christian Mean N=17	Non-Christian Mean N=10
Participating at Church Outside of Youth Group	2.900 N=30	2.353 N=17	2.222 N=9

A descriptive analysis reveals the non-Christian group again found less importance in traditional Christian practices, such as personal prayer, devotional Bible reading, and giving financial offerings to the church, than did the other two groups. They rated more highly communal practices, such as singing in a choir or playing in a band, or participating either in servant projects or in other activities at church. It is not surprising that those who describe themselves as non-Christians would value less highly those practices that seek to invoke the presence of the Triune God. It is interesting that they rank the communal aspects of church almost as highly as active Christians, and often more highly than inactive Christians.

A one-way ANOVA test conducted on this data set revealed two statistically significant findings. There was a significant difference in the importance of personal prayer between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 55)} = 8.854$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 2.935) and inactive Christians (mean = 2.647) are not significantly different from each other in levels of personal prayer. These self-description groups are statistically different from non-Christians (mean = 1.700). Those who are currently non-Christians found personal prayer significantly less important to their current spirituality than did active and inactive Christians.

There was also a significant difference in the importance of giving financial offerings in high school between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 53)} = 3.687$, $p = .032$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 2.100) and inactive Christians (mean = 1.875) are not significantly different from each other in levels of giving financial offerings. These self-description groups are statistically different from non-Christians (mean = 1.300). Those who are currently non-Christians found giving financial offerings to a church significantly less important to their current spirituality than did active and inactive Christians.

Non-Christians in the study seemed to value community, so one might wonder if they were attached to a church or other faith community despite their self-description. The questionnaire asked respondents to describe their faith community. The responses, cross-tabulated by self-description, are in table 6.19 below.

Table 6.19. Current Faith Community

	Active Christian	Inactive Christian	Non-Christian
A Christian Church	31	10	0
A faith community (church) of another religion	0	2	0
Not attached to a faith community	1	5	10

Clearly the non-Christians are not coming to churches of any kind for community or for any other reason. They must be seeking community in other places if they still value time with others, as seems probable given the data collected. It is not a surprise, however, that those who are not Christian would choose not to attach themselves to a community that is dedicated to the Christian faith. The surprising number on this chart is the one active Christian who is not attached to a faith community, despite the fact that the

response this person gave to the self-description question was that of being a Christian somewhat involved in a church. Perhaps this person is currently seeking a church home.

The questionnaire then asked how frequently the respondents engaged currently in Christian practices such as prayer, worship attendance, and engaging in servant projects. The Likert scale for these questions had the following answers: 1 = at least once a week, 2 = at least once a month, 3 = at least once a quarter, 4 = at least once a year, and 5 = never. I compared the means for these answers between self-description categories as listed in table 6.20 below. Keep in mind that in this case, in contrast to the means for the questions on the importance of practices during adolescence, the lower the mean the more often the person currently engages in these practices. All of the findings in this table are statistically significant and, therefore, I did not print any of the categories in bold letters.

Table 6.20. Current Spiritual Practices

	Active Christian Mean N=32	Inactive Christian Mean N=17	Non-Christian Mean N=10
Attend Worship	2.094	4.118	4.300
Read the Bible	2.813	4.118	4.800
Engage in Personal Prayer	1.688	2.471	4.300
Pray with Others (including Family Members)	2.281	3.176	4.400
Engage in Service Projects	3.594	4.588	4.500
Give a Financial Offering to the Church	2.812	4.353	5.000
Volunteer at a Church	2.937	4.824	5.000

A descriptive analysis indicates the gulf between active Christians and inactive and non-Christians widens here. The difference in means between inactive and non-Christians is only evident in the amount of time the inactives spend in prayer. The inactive and non-Christians have similar mean responses to questions about their

frequency of attending worship, engaging in servant projects, giving financial offerings and volunteering at a church, though all of the non-Christians responded that they never gave financially or volunteered at a church while some of the inactives indicated they did these things some of the time. Faith practices such as servant projects, which do not necessarily have to be done through a church, are engaged in much more often by active Christians than by inactive and non-Christians.

A one-way ANOVA conducted on this data set resulted in the finding that all seven of these current practices were statistically significant. There were significant differences in the how often respondents currently attend worship between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 56)} = 38.627$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that inactive Christians (mean = 4.118) and non-Christians (mean = 4.300) are not significantly different from each other in levels of prayer with others. These self-description groups are statistically different from active Christians (mean = 2.094). The mean for inactive and non-Christians indicates they attend worship between once-a-year and never, while the mean for active Christians signifies they attend almost once-a-month.

There were significant differences in how often respondents currently engage in Bible reading between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 56)} = 10.965$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that inactive Christians (mean = 4.118) and non-Christians (mean = 4.800) are not significantly different from each other in how often they read the Bible. These self-description groups are statistically different from active Christians (mean = 1.688). Active Christians read the Bible much more frequently than do inactive and non-Christians.

There were significant differences in how often respondents currently engage in personal prayer between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 56)} = 20.570$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that all three groups differ from one another. Active Christians (mean = 1.688) differ from inactive Christians (mean = 2.471, $p = .024$) and non-Christians (mean = 4.300, $p < .000$). Inactive Christians are also significantly different from non-Christians ($p < .000$). On average, active Christians pray at least once a month and inactives at least once a quarter while non-Christians pray less often than once-a-year.

There were significant differences in how often respondents currently engaged in prayer with others between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 56)} = 11.051$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that all three groups differ from one another. Active Christians (mean = 2.281) differ from inactive Christians (mean = 3.176, $p = .023$) and non-Christians (mean = 4.400, $p < .000$). Inactive Christians are also significantly different from non-Christians ($p = .020$). Active Christians pray with others significantly more often do inactive Christians, who pray with others in statistically significant higher numbers than do non-Christians.

There were significant differences in how often respondents currently participate in servant projects such as feeding the homeless between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 56)} = 6.798$, $p = .006$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that inactive Christians (mean = 4.588) and non-Christians (mean = 4.500) are not significantly different from each other in how often they engage in service projects. These self-description groups are statistically different from active Christians (mean = 3.594). Active Christians do not engage in servant projects often, averaging between once-a-quarter and once-a-year, but this is

more often than inactives and non-Christians. These two groups participate in such events less than once-a-year, if ever.

There were significant differences in how often respondents currently gave financial offerings to a church between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 56)} = 25.076$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that inactive Christians (mean = 4.353) and non-Christians (mean = 5.000) were not significantly different from each other in how often they gave financial offerings. These self-description groups are statistically different from active Christians (mean = 2.812). On average, active Christians give a financial offering at least once-a-quarter, while inactive Christians give less than once-a-year and non-Christians never give a financial offering to a church.

There were significant differences in how often respondents currently volunteered at a church between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 56)} = 27.980$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that inactive Christians (mean = 4.824) and non-Christians (mean = 5.000) are not significantly different from each other in how often they volunteer. These self-description groups are statistically different from active Christians (mean = 2.937). On average, active Christians volunteer at a church at least once-a-quarter, while inactive Christians do so less than once-a-year and non-Christians do so never.

I also asked the participants to rank the importance of a variety of influences on shaping what they believed about God, faith, and spirituality. These Likert scale questions used the following answers: 1 = Not Important, 2 = Somewhat Important, 3 = Important, and 4 = Very Important; thus, the higher the mean score, the greater the influence. The means for these answers were calculated for each self-described group,

and are listed in table 6.21 below. Some of the respondents replied *I don't know* or skipped this question, so the N value is listed for each group.

Table 6.21. Shapers of Current Faith and Spirituality

	Active Christian Mean	Inactive Christian Mean	Non-Christian Mean
Parents' Faith and Example	3.438 N=32	3.294 N=17	2.875 N=8
Spouse's/Partner's Beliefs	**3.318** **N=21**	**1.818** **N=11**	**2.333** **N=6**
Positive Experiences of Church from ages 1-17	3.531 N=32	3.529 N=17	2.889 N=9
Negative Experiences of Church from ages 1-17	2.667 N=24	2.333 N=15	1.875 N=8
Positive Experiences of Church during Adulthood	**3.533** **N=30**	**2.588** **N=17**	**2.000** **N=6**
Negative Experiences of Church during Adulthood	**2.640** **N=25**	**2.267** **N=15**	**1.333** **N=6**
Life Experiences Outside of Church from ages 1-17	3.187 N=32	3.294 N=17	3.333 N=9
Life Experiences Outside of Church during adulthood	3.323 N=31	3.437 N=16	3.444 N=9

A descriptive analysis that looks at the value of the means indicates the active and inactive Christians had higher mean scores for the influence of their parents' faith and example, and for positive experiences of church during childhood, than did the non-Christian group. It is intriguing that the influence of a spouse's or partner's faith, or lack thereof, was greater for active Christians than for inactive or non-Christians. It is interesting to note that the mean score for inactives was the lowest in this category. It could be that inactives are married to spouses who are active in practicing their faith, or it could be their spouses do not believe but their lack of faith does not influence the believing, though rarely-practicing, spouse.

A one-way ANOVA conducted on this data set resulted in finding that three of the variables from table 6.21 were statistically significant. There were significant differences in the importance of a spouse's or partner's beliefs on the respondent's current spirituality between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 35)} = 11.081$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that inactive Christians (mean = 1.818) and non-Christians (mean = 2.333) are not significantly different from each other in rating the importance of their spouse's or partner's beliefs on their current spirituality. These self-description groups are statistically different from active Christians (mean = 3.318). Active Christians are more likely to be influenced by the beliefs and practices of their spouses and partners than are inactive and non-Christians.

There were significant differences in the importance of positive experiences of church during adulthood between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 50)} = 12.116$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that inactive Christians (mean = 2.588) and non-Christians (mean = 2.000) are not significantly different from each other in the importance they attach to positive experiences they have had at church as adults. These self-description groups are statistically different from active Christians (mean = 3.533). Active Christians rated positive experiences of church during adulthood as more important than did inactive or non-Christians, which may be the reason they remain active in their congregations.

There were significant differences in the importance of negative experiences of church during adulthood between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 43)} = 3.928$, $p = .027$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 2.640) and inactive Christians (mean = 2.267) are not significantly different from each other in the importance they attach to negative experiences they have had at church as adults. These self-description

groups are statistically different from non-Christians (mean = 1.333). Active and inactive Christians rate negative experiences of church during adulthood as more important to their current spirituality than do non-Christians. I found this result to be surprising, as one would think negative experiences of church during adulthood may have turned off non-Christians. Instead, it seems likely that active and inactive Christians have shaped their spirituality in light of negative experiences, which may mean they rejected the negative beliefs or practices of other Christians as they solidified their own beliefs. More about this sort of influence will be examined in the qualitative data based on the interviews I conducted with six of the respondents.

All three groups ranked life experiences outside of church both during childhood and adolescence, and during adulthood, among the greatest influences on what they believed. For non-Christians, these were the greatest influences, the only categories that scored higher than a three, which meant they considered these experiences as important or very important in shaping their current spirituality. For active Christians, these two categories were of equal importance with positive experiences within church throughout their lives, as well as with the influence of their parents and spouses. They considered all of these to be important or very important. Inactive Christians ranked most highly life experiences outside of church both during childhood and adolescence, life experiences during adulthood, the influence of parents, and positive experiences of church during childhood and adolescence. The mean score indicated that most of the inactives ranked these either important or very important.

It is interesting that for non-Christians, life experiences, rather than relationships, seemed to have been most important in shaping their lack of faith. Perhaps these life

experiences included relationships with people other than parents, or spouses/partners, or members of a church community. Perhaps this reveals the influence of post-modernism, with its greater emphasis on individuality and its freedom to diverge from inherited communities such as families and churches.

I turn now to questions of gender, number of children, education level, and type of college attended to see how these variables may have affected the self-description of the sample. I cross-tabulated gender by self-description; the results are in table 6.22 below. There seems to be little difference between males and females in the self-description categories. There is a higher percentage of women who consider themselves inactive Christians than men, and a higher percentage of men who consider themselves non-Christian than women, but the differences in percentages are not large.

Table 6.22. Gender by Self-Description

	Active Christian	Inactive Christian	Non-Christian
Male	18 56.3%	7 21.9%	7 21.9%
Female	14 51.9%	10 37.0%	3 11.1%

I also cross-tabulated number of children by self-description to see if those who were parents were more or less likely to be active in church than those who were not. Table 6.23 below shows the results, with percentages within classification groups that should be read down the column. More than two-thirds of those who took the questionnaire, forty of fifty-nine or 67.8%, have no children. Of those who have children, 63.2% are active Christians, 26.3% are inactive, and 10.3% describe themselves as non-Christians. These percentages are not that different from those who have no children, where twenty persons, or 50% of the total number of those who have no children,

describe themselves as active Christians, twelve persons or 30.0% as inactive Christians, and eight persons or 20.0% as non-Christians. A one-way ANOVA conducted on this data indicated no statistically significant relationship between number of children and self-description group.

Table 6.23. Number of Children by Self-Description

	Active Christian	Inactive Christian	Non-Christian	Total
Zero Children	20 62.5%	12 70.6%	8 80.0%	40 67.8%
One Child	3 9.4%	1 5.9%	1 10.0%	5 8.5%
Two Children	2 6.3%	1 5.9%	1 10.0%	4 6.8%
Three Children	4 12.5%	3 17.6%	0 0.0%	7 11.9%
Four Children	3 9.4%	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	3 5.1%

Perhaps the greater percentage of active Christians among those who have children, as well as the greater percentage of non-Christians among those who have no children, could be a factor of parenthood and the desire to turn to God when one became a father or mother. However, other factors, such as generation, could make a difference. I cross-tabulated generations by number of children to see if Millennials had fewer children than Gen Xers. If so, the greater number of non-Christians among those who had no children could be a factor of the individual's generation rather than due to their not being a parent. Table 6.24 below contains that comparison. The percentages listed are within generation, and should be read down each column.

Table 6.24. Number of Children by Generation

	Generation X	Millennials
Zero Children	5 25.0%	35 89.7%
One Child	3 15.0%	2 5.1%
Two Children	4 20.0%	0 0.0%
Three Children	5 25.0%	2 5.1%
Four Children	3 15.0%	0 0.0%

A whopping 89.7% of the Millennials who responded to this questionnaire have no children while 75.0% of Gen Xers are parents. Those who responded to the survey who are parents of children are more likely to be both Gen Xers and active Christians. Table 6.7 above already indicated that a higher percentage of Millennials (20.5%) claimed to be non-Christian as opposed to only 10.0% of Gen Xers, who, while describing themselves as non-Christian, still claimed a belief in God. It is impossible to tell if parenthood, or being a member of Generation X, or some combination of both, is responsible for the higher percentage of active Christians in this group.

I turn next to educational level, examining if that variable may have had some influence on the self-description of the sample. I cross-tabulated the highest level of education attained by self-description, with the results in table 6.25 below. I added percentages within education levels, to be read down each column, to better see what significance education may have had on the faith and practices of the respondents.

Table 6.25. Educational Level by Self-Description

	Active Christian	**Inactive Christian**	Non-Christian
Attended High School	0 0.0%	**1** **5.9%**	0 0.0%
Graduated High School/Obtained GED	3 9.4%	**4** **23.5%**	0 0.0%
Attended College	12 37.5%	**6** **35.3%**	3 30.0%
Graduated College	13 40.6%	**6** **35.3%**	4 40.0%
Attended Post-Graduate School	1 3.1%	**0** **0.0%**	0 0.0%
Obtained Post-Graduate Degree	3 9.4%	**0** **0.0%**	3 30.0%
Mean Values	3.66	**3.00**	4.30

The non-Christian group had a higher percentage of those who graduated college or did post-graduate work (70.0%) compared to active Christians (53.1%) and inactives (35.3%). It could be that higher education makes it more difficult to confess faith and join a faith community. The raw numbers, however, show an equal number of active Christians, three to be exact, who obtained post-graduate degrees as non-Christians. The mean value for educational level, however, is higher for non-Christians than for active Christians.

A one-way ANOVA indicated there were significant differences in highest education level attained by respondents between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 56)} = 5.063$, $p = .010$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 3.66) and non-Christians (mean = 4.30) are not significantly different from each other in highest education levels. These self-description groups are statistically different from inactive Christians (mean = 3.00). Inactive Christians attained a lower educational level at a statistically significant rate than did the active and non-Christians. The ANOVA test

failed to indicate a statistically significant difference between active Christians and non-Christians, despite the higher percentage of non-Christians who did post-graduate work.

I finally examined whether the type of college attended may have had an effect on the faith and Christian practices of today's adults. I asked participants if they attended four different types of institutions, recognizing that one person could have attended more than one of these types of institutions during their college career. The results are listed in table 6.25 below.

Table 6.26. Type of College Attended

Type of College or University	**Active Christian N=32**	**Inactive Christian N=17**	**Non-Christian N=10**
Community College	15-Yes 10-No	6-Yes 10-No	7-Yes 1-No
State College or University	10-Yes 14-No	7-Yes 9-No	4-Yes 5-No
Public University	6-Yes 14-No	0-Yes 15-No	2-Yes 7-No
Private, Secular College	3-Yes 17-No	1-Yes 14-No	0-Yes 8-No
Private Denominational College	3-Yes 16-No	0-Yes 15-No	2-Yes 6-No

Pearson chi-square tests conducted on each of these variables revealed no statistically significant relationship between any of the types of educational institutions and the self-description of the respondents. A comparison of percentages within each self-description category by college attended showed little difference between active Christians and non-Christians in types of schools they attended. Forty-two percent of active Christians and 47% of non-Christians attended a State College or University, while 30% of active Christians and 22% of non-Christians attended Public Universities, and 16% of active Christians and 25% of non-Christians attended private denominational

colleges. Inactive Christians attended all types of colleges at lower percentages, which corresponds to the findings of the higher educational level data above. The type of college attended seemed to have had little influence on whether the respondents are active or non-Christians.

Summary of the Research on the Sample as a Whole

The data on the sample as a whole give clues as to what shapes active, inactive and non-Christians. Inactive Christians began their inactivity during adolescence as they attended worship, went to youth retreats and gatherings, and participated in other volunteer activities in much lower numbers than did members of the other two groups. They valued more highly the spiritual learning they received than the community they experienced in youth group. Prayer, both personal and with others, was the only Christian practice they currently engaged in more frequently than non-Christians.

Non-Christians appreciated youth group practices that encouraged community rather than spirituality, but their lack of faith was more influenced by life experiences than by their relationships with their families or their spouses. They continued to actively attend worship and youth group during their high school years, but now are not affiliated with any sort of faith community. Active Christians, in contrast, attended worship regularly in high school; currently engage in practices such as prayer, Bible reading, worship attendance, and financial giving more regularly than do members of the other two groups; and are highly influenced by their parents and spouses or partners who have helped them shape their faith.

Comparison of the Three Congregations

The three congregations I served had different youth ministries. Some of the practices, such as playing games and praying with others, were utilized at all three congregations, while others, such as leadership retreats and one-on-one mentoring, were utilized more at some than at others. I begin this section by examining whether any congregation was more successful at producing active Christians than the other two. I then turn to a comparison of statistically significant findings within each congregation. I analyzed all the data within congregations for statistically significant relationships between the dependent variable and the other variables. I show the results in cross-tabulation tables that compare the three congregations.

Calvary's sample size was unfortunately so small that Pearson chi-square tests and one-way ANOVAs did not reveal any statistically significant results, but the other two congregations had sample sizes large enough for such results to be found. I wondered if the same variables were statistically significant both at Advent and at Mission and, if so, if a descriptive analysis of Calvary's data would reveal the result might have been similar had more people filled out the questionnaire.

Findings of the Research in Comparing the Congregations

Did any of the congregations produce active Christians at a greater rate than others? I cross-tabulated the self-description groups against each congregation to find the answer to that question. The results are in table 6.27 below. The percentages are given within each congregation and should be read down the column. It is interesting to note that all of the respondents from Advent professed a belief in God, though two of them

considered themselves non-Christians. None of the respondents from Calvary described themselves as unbelievers, while eight of the ten non-Christians were from Mission.

Table 6.27. Congregation by Self-Description

Description	Advent	Calvary	Mission
I am a Christian, very active in a church (worship and/or volunteer at least once a month)	6 33.3%	1 25.0%	11 29.7%
I am a Christian, somewhat active in a church (worship and/or volunteer at least 3 times a year)	6 33.3%	1 25.0%	7 18.9%
I am a Christian but only attend church 1-2 times a year.	1 5.6%	1 25.0%	5 13.5%
I am a Christian, but not active in a church.	3 16.7%	1 25.0%	6 16.2%
I am not a Christian, but a believer in God.	2 11.1%	0 0.0%	1 2.7%
I am not a believer in God but am open to spirituality and spiritual practices.	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	5 13.5%
I am not a believer in God and am not open to spirituality or spiritual practices.	0 0.0%	0 0.0%	2 3.4%

I combined the seven self-description groups into the three major categories of active Christian, inactive Christian, and non-Christian, as show in table 6.28 below. The results from Calvary look the best since no one from that church identified as a non-Christian. The sample size for Calvary, however, is small, and it could be that if more had responded, there would have been those who professed a lack of faith. Advent had the largest percentage of those who are still active, Mission the smallest, but that may have been more a product of the fact that this is a purposive snowball sample and those who responded to me from Advent almost twenty-five years after I left that congregation may have been those who still had faith. A Pearson chi-square test conducted on this data showed no statistically significant relationship between the variables of congregation and self-description. The results of the youth ministry at all three congregations, at least in

producing active Christians who practice their faith both communally and individually, did not seem to differ much, at least according to table 6.28.

Table 6.28. Major Categories by Congregation

	Advent	Calvary	Mission
Active Christian	12 66.7%	2 50.0%	18 48.6%
Inactive Christian	4 22.2%	2 50.0%	11 29.7%
Non-Christian	2 11.1%	0 0.0%	8 21.6%

I turn now to statistically significant results within individual congregations. I compared the means for how often respondents attended worship during middle-school by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.29 below, where 1 = weekly, 2 = at least once a month, 3 = at least once a quarter, 4 = fewer than once a quarter, and 5 = I did not attend worship during middle-school. A one-way ANOVA indicated there were significant differences in worship attendance during middle-school by respondents from Advent between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 15)} = 5.833$, $p = .013$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 1.000) and non-Christians (mean =1.000) are not significantly different from each other in their frequency of worship during middle-school. These self-description groups are statistically different from inactive Christians (mean = 1.500).

Table 6.29. Middle-school Worship Attendance within Congregations

	Active Christian Means and N	Inactive Christian Means and N	Non-Christian Means and N
Advent N=18	**1.000 N=12**	**1.500 N=4**	**1.000 N=2**
Calvary N=4	1.000 N=2	1.000 N=2	0.000 N=0

Table 6.29. Middle-school Worship Attendance within Congregations (cont.)

	Active Christian Means and N	Inactive Christian Means and N	Non-Christian Means and N
Mission N=37	1.333 N=18	1.545 N=11	1.125 N=8

I compared this finding to the rate of middle-school worship between self-description groups from Calvary and Mission. A one-way ANOVA conducted on the values from Mission showed no statistically significant results between the variables of middle-school worship attendance and self-description groups. A descriptive analysis revealed the mean value for frequency of attendance for inactive Christians from Mission was slightly above that for active and non-Christians. The mean values for Calvary were exactly the same for both active and inactive Christians. Only at Advent was the relationship between middle-school worship attendance and self-description groups statistically significant.

Table 6.30 below shows the mean values for frequency of worship during high school years by self-description groups within congregations. The same scale as used in table 6.29 above is used here. A one-way ANOVA test of the data from Advent indicated there were significant differences in worship attendance during high school by respondents between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 15)} = 10.500$, $p = .001$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 1.000) and non-Christians (mean = 1.000) are not significantly different from each other in their frequency of worship during high school. These self-description groups are statistically different from inactive Christians (mean = 2.500).

Table 6.30. High School Worship Attendance within Congregations

	Means for Active Christians	Means for Inactive Christians	Means for Non-Christians
Advent N=18	**1.000 N=12**	**2.500 N=4**	**1.000 N=2**
Calvary N=4	1.500 N=2	2.000 N=2	0.000 N=0
Mission N=37	1.667 N=18	2.636 N=11	1.875 N=8

Analysis of the data from Mission again did not reveal a similar result. A one-way ANOVA showed the difference between inactive Christians and active and non-Christians was not statistically significant at Mission. The active and non-Christians from Advent worshiped once-a-week, while the inactives worshiped less than once a month. The actives worshiped between once-a-week and once-a-month at Calvary, while the actives and non-Christians at Mission worshiped between once-a-week and once-a-month and the inactives between once-a-month and once-a-quarter. There was a higher rate of absence at worship among inactives at all congregations, but only at Advent was that number statistically significant.

I cross-tabulated confirmation retreat attendance by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.31 below, where the frequency indicates the number within each self-description group who attended confirmation retreats.

Table 6.31. Confirmation Retreats within Congregations

	Active Christian Frequency	Inactive Christian Frequency	Non-Christian Frequency
Advent N=18	8 Expected=9.3	4 Expected=3.1	2 Expected=1.6
Calvary N=4	2 Expected=2	2 Expected=2	0 Expected=0

Table 6.31. Confirmation Retreats within Congregations (cont.)

	Active Christian Frequency	Inactive Christian Frequency	Non-Christian Frequency
Mission N=37	**18 Expected=16.5**	**8 Expected=10.1**	**8 Expected=7.4**

Pearson chi-square tests revealed statistically significant results for one of the variables within one of the congregations. The effects of confirmation retreat attendance and self-description groups within Mission are not independent and so these variables are contingent upon each other. These variables have a significant effect on each other, $X^2_{(2)} = 7.717$, p = .021. Pearson chi-square tests conducted on the data from the other two congregations do not produce similarly statistically significant results. Fewer currently inactive Christians attended confirmation retreats at Mission than expected, and more currently active Christians attended these events than expected.

I cross-tabulated attendance at high school leadership meetings or retreats by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.32 below with the frequency indicating the number of those within each congregation who attended these meetings or retreats.

Table 6.32. High School Leadership Meetings or Retreats within Congregations

	Active Christian Frequency	Inactive Christian Frequency	Non-Christian Frequency
Advent N=18	10 Expected=8.0	1 Expected=2.7	1 Expected=1.3
Calvary N=4	2 Expected=1.0	0 Expected=1.0	0 Expected=0
Mission N=37	**10 Expected=9.4**	**3 Expected=6.1**	**7 Expected=4.4**

Pearson chi-square tests revealed statistically significant results for one of the variables within one of the congregations. The effects of attendance at high school leadership meetings and retreats and self-description groups within Mission are not independent and so these variables are contingent upon each other. These variables have a significant effect on each other, $X^2_{(2)} = 6.943$, p = .031. Fewer inactive Christians from Mission attended these retreats than expected, and more non-Christians attended than expected. A Pearson chi-square test conducted on the data from Advent resulted in no statistically significant results. It is interesting that both active Christians from Calvary attended leadership meetings or retreats, while neither of the two inactive Christians did so.

I cross-tabulated serving as a high school mentor by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.33 below with the frequency indicating the number of those within each congregation who served as mentors. Pearson chi-square tests revealed statistically significant results for this variable within one of the congregations. The effects of serving as a confirmation mentor while in high school and self-description groups within Mission are not independent and so these variables are contingent upon each other. These variables have a significant effect on each other, $X^2_{(2)} = 6.875$, p = .032. Significantly more non-Christians served as mentors than expected, and fewer inactive Christians served as mentors than expected, in contrast to active Christians. This confirmation mentor program did not exist at Advent or Calvary, and given the high rate of those who became non-Christians after serving in this capacity, perhaps that was a good thing.

Table 6.33. Confirmation Mentor within Congregations

	Active Christian Frequency	Inactive Christian Frequency	Non-Christian Frequency
Advent N=18	0 Expected=0.0	0 Expected=0.0	0 Expected=0.0
Calvary N=4	0 Expected=0.0	0 Expected=0.0	0 Expected=0.0
Mission N=37	**4 Expected=4.7**	**1 Expected=3.1**	**5 Expected=2.2**

I compared the means for how important prayer with others was during high school youth group by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.34 below, where the higher the mean score, the more important was prayer with others to the respondents. A one-way ANOVA test of the data from Mission indicated there were significant differences in prayer with others during high school by respondents between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 32)} = 11.343$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 2.706) and inactive Christians (mean = 3.091) are not significantly different from each other in the importance of prayer with others during high school. These self-description groups are statistically different from non-Christians (mean = 1.875).

Table 6.34. Prayer with Others within Congregations

	Mean for Active Christians	Mean for Inactive Christians	Mean for Non-Christians
Advent N=18	2.818 N=12	2.250 N=4	2.500 N=2
Calvary N=4	3.000 N=2	1.500 N=2	0.000 N=0
Mission N=37	**2.706 N=17**	**3.091 N=11**	**1.857 N=7**

It is interesting that, at Mission, the importance of praying with others during high school for inactive Christians was higher than for those who are actively practicing their faith today. This is not true for Advent, where the active Christians have the highest mean, followed by the non-Christians. The higher value for non-Christians would be surprising were it not for the fact that those from Advent who said they were not Christians indicated that they still believed in God. The non-Christians from Advent are people of faith, just not people of Christian faith.

I compared the means for how important personal prayer (that is, praying done privately outside of youth group) was during high school by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.35 below, where the higher the mean score, the more important the respondents considered personal prayer. A one-way ANOVA test of the data from Mission indicated there were significant differences in personal prayer during high school by respondents between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 33)} = 11.766$, $p = .001$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 2.941) and inactive Christians (mean = 2.727) are not significantly different from each other in the importance of personal prayer during high school. These self-description groups are statistically different from non-Christians (mean = 1.500). A one-way ANOVA conducted on data from Advent did not yield similar results. The mean values within Calvary are much higher than for Mission or Advent, indicating that Calvary members found personal prayer to be more important during adolescence than did the other two congregations.

Table 6.35. Personal Prayer within Congregations

	Mean for Active Christians	Mean for Inactive Christians	Mean for Non-Christians
Advent N=18	2.750 N=12	2.250 N=4	2.500 N=2
Calvary N=4	4.000 N=2	3.000 N=2	0.000 N=0
Mission N=37	**2.941 N=17**	**2.727 N=11**	**1.500 N=8**

I compared the means for how important devotional Bible reading was during high school by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.36 below, where the higher the mean score, the more important the respondents considered devotional Bible reading.

Table 6.36. Devotional Bible Reading within Congregations

	Mean for Active Christians	Mean for Inactive Christians	Mean for Non-Christians
Advent N=18	2.000 N=12	1.250 N=4	3.000 N=2
Calvary N=4	2.000 N=2	1.500 N=2	0.000 N=0
Mission N=37	**2.176 N=17**	**1.909 N=11**	**1.000 N=8**

A one-way ANOVA test of the data from Mission indicated there were significant differences in devotional Bible reading during high school by respondents between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 33)} = 7.620$, $p = .002$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 2.176) and inactive Christians (mean =1.909) are not significantly different from each other in the importance of devotional Bible reading during high school. These self-description groups are statistically different from non-Christians (mean = 1.000).

A one-way ANOVA conducted on data from Advent did not yield similar results, but an examination of the data from that congregation produced an unexpected result. It is interesting that the highest mean for devotional Bible reading from any group in any congregation comes from the non-Christians of Advent. These non-Christian believers in God found Bible reading more important during high school than did their currently active Christian counterparts who attended youth group with them.

I compared the means for how important giving financial offerings was during high school by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.37 below, where the higher the mean score, the more important the respondents considered such giving. The highest mean score on the table is for the active Christians from Calvary, who found this practice more important than did their counterparts at Advent or Mission.

Table 6.37. Giving Financial Offerings within Congregations

	Mean for Active Christians	Mean for Inactive Christians	Mean for Non-Christians
Advent N=18	2.182 N=11	1.250 N=4	2.000 N=2
Calvary N=4	2.500 N=2	1.000 N=1	0.000 N=0
Mission N=37	**2.000 N=17**	**2.182 N=11**	**1.125 N=8**

A one-way ANOVA test of the data from Mission indicated there were significant differences in giving financial offerings during high school by respondents between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 33)} = 5.790$, $p = .007$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 2.000) and inactive Christians (mean = 2.182) are not significantly

different from each other in importance of giving financial offerings. These self-description groups are statistically different from non-Christians (mean = 1.125).

A one-way ANOVA test conducted on the data from Advent did not reveal a similar statistically significant result. The numbers from Advent indicate that both active Christian and non-Christian believers found this personal act of devotion more important than did the inactive Christians. These comparisons have shown that there is a difference between those who believe in God but are not Christian and those who do not believe in God.

Question seventeen on the questionnaire asked participants to rank the relative importance of a number of factors, some from their childhood and adolescence, and some from their adult lives, on their current faith and spirituality. Three of these factors turned up statistically significant results within congregations.

I compared the means for how important a spouse's or partner's beliefs were on the beliefs and practices of the respondents by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.38 below, where the higher the mean score, the more important the respondents considered their spouse's or partner's influence. A one-way ANOVA test of the data from Advent indicated there were significant differences in the importance of a spouse's or partner's beliefs on respondents between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 12)} = 16.322$, $p < .000$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 3.700) and non-Christians (mean = 3.000) are not significantly different from each other in importance of a spouse's or partner's beliefs. These self-description groups are statistically different from inactive Christians (mean = 1.333).

Table 6.38. Importance of a Spouse's Beliefs within Congregations

	Mean for Active Christians	Mean for Inactive Christians	Mean for Non-Christians
Advent N=18	**3.700 N=10**	**1.333 N=3**	**3.000 N=2**
Calvary N=4	3.500 N=2	2.500 N=2	0.000 N=0
Mission N=37	3.000 N=9	1.833 N=6	2.000 N=4

A one-way ANOVA test conducted on the data from Mission failed to yield any statistically significant results. It is interesting, however, to note that the active Christians of each congregation, plus the non-Christians from Advent, rated their spouse's or partner's beliefs with a mean score at or above important, while inactives from both Advent and Mission rated it somewhere between not important and somewhat important. Perhaps inactives practice their faith privately so it does not matter what their spouses believe. If faith does not result in practices other than private prayer, it has little effect on the spouse or partner of the believer.

I compared the means for how important positive experiences of church during childhood and adolescence were on the beliefs and practices of respondents by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.39 below, where the higher the mean score, the more important the respondents considered their positive experiences of church during childhood. A one-way ANOVA test of the data from Mission indicated there were significant differences in the importance of positive experiences of church during childhood and adolescence between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 33)} = 4.752$, $p = .015$. The *post hoc* tests indicated that active Christians (mean = 3.500) and inactive Christians (mean = 3.727) are not significantly different from each

other in importance of positive church experiences during childhood. These self-description groups are statistically different from non-Christians (mean = 2.714).

Table 6.39. Positive Childhood Experiences of Church within Congregations

	Mean for Active Christians	Mean for Inactive Christians	Mean for Non-Christians
Advent N=18	3.500 N=12	3.500 N=4	3.500 N=2
Calvary N=4	4.000 N=2	2.500 N=2	0.000 N=0
Mission N=37	**3.500 N=18**	**3.727 N=11**	**2.714 N=7**

A one-way ANOVA test conducted on the data from Advent did not yield similarly statistically significant results. Advent's mean scores, on the contrary, are the same across the board. The mean score for all of Advent's self-described groups found positive experiences of church during childhood and adolescence to be between important and very important. The mean for Calvary indicates the two active Christians both ranked this variable as being very important to their current faith and spirituality. Only the inactive Christians from Calvary and the non-Christians from Mission had mean scores indicating these positive experiences were less than important.

I compared the means for how important positive experiences of church during adulthood were on the beliefs and practices of the respondents by self-description groups within congregations. The results are in table 6.40 below, where the higher the mean score, the more important the respondents considered their positive experiences of church during adulthood. A one-way ANOVA test of the data from Mission indicated there were significant differences in the importance of positive adult experiences of church on respondents between self-description groups, $F_{(2, 30)} = 7.495$, $p = .002$. The *post hoc* tests

indicated that active Christians (mean = 3.471) were statistically different from both inactive Christians (mean = 2.818) and from non-Christians (mean = 1.800). The inactive Christians were also statistically different from the non-Christians.

Table 6.40. Adult Positive Experiences of Church within Congregations

	Mean for Active Christians	Mean for Inactive Christians	Mean for Non-Christians
Advent N=18	3.545 N=11	2.500 N=4	3.000 N=1
Calvary N=4	4.000 N=2	1.500 N=2	0.000 N=0
Mission N=37	**3.471 N=17**	**2.818 N=11**	**1.800 N=5**

A one-way ANOVA conducted on the data from Advent failed to yield any statistically significant results. The raw numbers, however, indicate that the difference in mean scores between active and inactive Christians is about the same as the difference in mean scores between the actives and inactives from Mission. The active Christians from Calvary also rank this factor much more highly than do the inactives. The data seem to indicate that those who are active Christians today have found that positive experiences of church during adulthood are more important to them than they are to inactive Christians. This could be because the inactives attend church rarely and, thus, do not have as many positive experiences.

Summary of Comparison between Congregations

A comparison of the data from Advent, Calvary, and Mission reveals that there is no statistically significant answer to the question of what kind of youth ministry practices might produce active adult faith and Christian practices reliably across congregations. Data from Advent revealed such factors as middle and high school worship attendance

and the importance of a spouse's or partner's faith to be statistically significant, while data from Mission indicated the importance confirmation and leadership retreats, prayer with others, personal prayer and devotional Bible reading, to name a few. Active Christians at Calvary were more likely to have been in leadership during their youth group years, and ranked the influence of their spouses and partners and the positive experiences they have had at church throughout their lives as important to their current faith and spirituality. No single factor emerged as significant across congregations. I turn now to a qualitative analysis of the open-ended questions on the survey to see what can be learned from the answers I received.

Open-Ended Questions

The questionnaire contained three open-ended questions that I analyzed using qualitative methods. The three questions were: *(1) Tell me one thing you most appreciated about youth group. Why?*, *(2) Tell me one thing about youth group you would have changed. Why?*, and *(3) Please share anything else about your youth group experience you would like me to know*. I analyzed the answers to these questions separately, using Kathy Charmaz's method of coding.[4] I coded the responses within self-description categories, to see what themes emerged for active Christians, inactive Christians, and non-Christians. I first coded the questions word-by-word, line-by-line and incident-by incident. I then put together *in vivo* codes, using the actual words and phrases written by the respondents. I clustered similar *in vivo* codes together to create focused codes, as shown in the tables under each question, showing focused codes for each of the different self-description categories. I then used the focused codes from all three self-

[4] Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 109-161.

described groups to create axial codes for the sample as a whole. These axial codes reflect the major themes discussed by the respondents.

Aspects of Youth Group Appreciated by Respondents

Fifty-six of the fifty-nine respondents answered the question: *Tell me one thing you appreciated about Youth Group. Why?* Thirty-one of these were active Christians, fifteen were inactives, and ten were non-Christians. The focused codes for the active Christian group are contained in table 6.41. Table 6.42 contains the focused codes for inactive Christians, while table 6.43 contains focused codes for those who describe themselves as not Christian. Under the focused codes in each of the tables are the *in vivo* codes that emerged from the study. Numbers in parenthesis following the *in vivo* codes show how often that word or phrase was repeated in the data.

Table 6.41. What Active Christians Appreciated about Youth Group

Focused Code 1: Being in Community Close knit group Friends (5) Connect with others Small enough to all know each other (2) Being part of a community Growing up with the same people	**Focused Code 2: Doing Service** Serving others unconditionally Servant projects Understanding cultural/economic differences Opportunities to help others
Focused Code 3: Forming Christian Faith Talking about the Bible (2) Talking through questions Sharing similar beliefs Feeling closer to God Serving the Lord	**Focused Code 4: Feeling Safe and Accepted** Support we gave each other I was encouraged and accepted Supervised way to get away from parents Safe haven from my personal life Safe atmosphere Place I could be completely myself
Focused Code 5: Having the Same Values Same values (2) Like-minded people, one thing in common	**Focused Code 6: Experiencing Caring Adult Leaders** Youth Pastor Adult volunteers

Table 6.41. What Active Christians Appreciated About Youth Group (cont.)

Focused Code 7: Going on Youth Trips
Gatherings (5)
Enjoyed youth grips (4)
Servant Projects
Servant Trips (2)
Retreats

Table 6.42. What Inactive Christians Appreciated About Youth Group

Focused Code 1: Being in Community	**Focused Code 2: Forming Christian Faith**
Community (2)	Made me want to learn about God
Being with friends (2)	Understanding of the Bible (2)
Learning about each other	Learning about God in a fun environment
Great group of peers	Worship without judgment
Everyone knew you	Helped me become closer to God
Always had someone to talk to	Everything it taught me about my faith
Family feeling	Visiting places like Lake Tahoe and finding God in nature
	Having same ideas about God
Focused Code 3: Experiencing Caring Adult Leaders	**Focused Code 4: Feeling Safe and Accepted**
Mentors	A fun and positive experience
Pastors	Safe to just be me
Teachers	

Table 6.43. What Non-Christians Appreciated About Youth Group

Focused Code 1: Being in Community	**Focused Code 2: Feeling Safe and Accepted**
Friends (4)	Never felt pressured to believe in God
Knowing others in a less superficial way	Unconditional love
Being around peers	Social support
Family (2)	
Positive sense of community (2)	
Focused Code 3: Engaging in Ministry Practices	**Focused Code 4: Experiencing Caring Adult Leaders**
General exposure to religion	Adult leaders
Service trips (2)	Pastor’s enthusiasm and commitment
National Gatherings	

All three groups appreciated the community youth group gave them, the safe atmosphere that they experienced, and the adult leaders who helped to make the group what it was. It is interesting to note that the inactive Christians were as appreciative of the community formed in youth group as were the active Christians and the non-Christians. This is a bit surprising given the findings of the quantitative data. Both the active and inactive Christians appreciated the faith formation aspects of youth group, whereas only one of the non-Christians expressed gratitude for the exposure to religion they received. It is also interesting to note that many active Christians and two non-Christians mentioned servant trips as being something they most appreciated, while none of the inactive Christians mentioned service trips or projects at all.

Table 6.44. Axial Codes: What All Respondents Appreciated About Youth Group

Axial Code 1: Being in Community	**Axial Code 2: Forming Christian Faith**	**Axial Code 3: Doing Youth Ministry Activities**	**Axial Code 4: Experiencing Caring Adult Leadership**
Being in Community (AC, IC, NC)	Forming Christian Faith (AC, IC)	Doing Service (AC)	Experiencing Caring Adult Leaders (AC, IC, NC)
Having the Same values (AC)	Engaging in Ministry Practices (NC)	Going on Youth Trips (AC)	
Feeling Safe and Accepted (AC, IC, NC)		Engaging in Ministry Practices (NC)	

Axial codes were formed out of the focused codes from the three groups. Table 6.44 above contains the axials, with focused codes underneath. In parentheses after each focused code is an abbreviation for the subgroup from which that focused code emerged.

The abbreviations are AC for Active Christians, IC for Inactive Christians, and NC for Non-Christians.

All three groups valued being in community and feeling safe and accepted. One active Christian wrote “no matter what the topic of discussion, we all shared in the experience together and I felt that made us the close group we are.” An inactive Christian shared, “Youth group was something that I remember always looking forward to. It was a place where I got to meet with friends and have a positive and fun experience.” One of the non-Christians wrote, “Youth group was the only social support (and unconditional love) I had during very challenging years of being bullied at school and at home.” All three showed a large level of appreciation for the safe, positive community they experienced with their peers.

Two of the three groups appreciated faith formation. Only the non-Christians failed to list this as a positive, though one non-Christian expressed gratitude for the general introduction to religion. One of the inactive Christians saw faith formation working hand-in-hand with community, stating, “I appreciated learning about God and discovering my faith in such a fun environment with such a great group of teachers and peers.” One of the active Christians wrote, “I really liked how the Bible studies were divided into our small groups. The small groups allowed it to be much more personal.”

Two of the three groups appreciated youth ministry activities, with active Christians and non-Christians focused on trips to do service projects and to National Youth Gatherings. One active Christian expanded on the value of the trips, writing, “I got to see different aspects of life while traveling and being of service to others unconditionally, which felt like I was not only serving the Lord, but understanding

cultural and economic differences." The youth ministry activities, thus, helped support the faith formation.

All three groups expressed appreciation for the adult leaders. One of the non-Christians shared the importance of the lay couple who led youth group: "They were always there for me and my brothers and gave us a happy place that was a reprieve from our home life." One of the active Christians wrote, "In any young person's life, there are teachers, pastors, coaches that are afforded a tremendous opportunity to influence young minds. I was privileged to have one of each, but of the three, I would say my youth pastor had the biggest impact on my life long term."

The data show the appreciation former members of the youth groups had for positive community, faith formation, youth ministry activities, and adult leadership. There were some things about youth group, however, that former members would have changed if they could. I turn now to those items.

Aspects of Youth Group Former Members Would Have Changed

Fifty-one of the fifty-nine respondents answered the question *Tell me one thing about youth group you would have changed. Why?* Twenty-seven were active Christians, fifteen were inactives, and nine were non-Christians. I coded these as I did the previous question, with focused codes over *in vivo codes* contained in table 6.45 for active Christians, table 6.46 for inactives, and table 6.47 for non-Christians.

Table 6.45. What Active Christians Would Have Changed About Youth Group

Focused Code 1: Forming Christian Faith	**Focused Code 2: Having Personal Regrets**
Equip to defend the faith (2)	Wish I had attended a retreat
More Bible study (5)	Wish I had participated in more summer trips
More on-on-one mentoring	
Discuss real, important, scary issues	

Table 6.45 What Active Christians Would Have Changed About Youth Group (cont.)

Focused Code 3: Engaging in Youth Group Activities More work in and for the community Give reason to remain attached to church after high school Involvement in church activities outside of youth group More variety at youth group meetings New games	**Focused Code 4: Wanting Caring Adults** God is love, but it felt like the adults didn't want to know all of us. Schedule activities with other adults
Focused Code 5: Altering Time/Venue Hold meetings at different houses Hold meetings on other than Sunday night	**Focused Code 6: Changing Nothing** Nothing (5)

Table 6.46. What Inactive Christians Would Have Changed About Youth Group

Focused Code 1: Forming Christian Faith Relatable Bible readings More about God More youth discussion on Bible	**Focused Code 2: Engaging in Youth Group Activities** Longer meeting times More time for group time
Focused Code 3: Having Personal Regrets Did not focus on religious studies as I should have Wish there were more kids in my group	**Focused Code 4: Seeking Help for After High School** Have something to connect to church after high school Teach how to seek a new church
Focused Code 5: Changing Nothing Nothing (6)	

Table 6.47. What Non-Christians Would Have Changed About Youth Group

Focused Code 1: Forming Spirituality More time discussing spiritual life and ideas of faith Update Sermon Note form to dig deeper Better Bible studies for larger group Some took the Bible too literally Open up tough issues with religion	**Focused Code 2: Engaging in Youth Group Activities** Do service projects in the community More variety of activities

Table 6.47. What Non-Christians Would Have Changed About Youth Group (cont.)

Focused Code 3: Longing for Community	**Focused Code 4: Changing Nothing**
I felt left out	Nothing (2)

It is interesting to note that all three groups would have changed the way faith formation was done in youth group, and used remarkably similar words to express a desire to discuss tough issues. An active Christian wrote:

> We didn't discuss the real, important, and often scary things that youth were going through. Friends (both in and out of youth group) had pregnancy scares, were experimenting with drugs, were dealing with depression. Most us were starting to date, and I was coming out to myself as gay and dating, too. We talked around those subjects at youth group and in church—no adults ever brought those subjects up so no youth did, either.

A non-Christian agreed: "I would have liked more time spent discussing our spiritual life and the ideas of faith. Maybe opening up about the tough issues a teen has with religion could have helped me even more in my twenties." There was a desire to connect the faith with the tough issues of life.

There was also the desire to learn more about the faith itself. An active Christian wrote, "The church must do a better job of helping kids understand and be able to articulate why they believe what they believe." An inactive Christian shared, "I would have liked there to be more about God and scripture." A non-Christian thought the disparity between teachings in lay-led high school youth group and the pastor-led confirmation class tended to create doubters: "There are discrepancies between church and individuals teaching in confirmation and the high school group. This creates a vacuum where doubts in authority especially in adolescents can manifest and/or flourish."

All three groups asked for a change in activities. Some requested more group time, others new games, and still others more community and service work. Two of the

three groups had people who expressed personal regrets. An ongoing frustration of youth ministry is convincing young people to take advantage of the experiences that are offered them. This focused code, though not about a change in youth ministry per se, may signal a need to figure out how to market youth group to adolescents so that they do not regret choices they make. Finally, a total of thirteen—five active Christians, six inactives, and two non-Christians—said they would change nothing about youth group. They liked their experience just as it was.

I added the comment from the one non-Christian about feeling left out in a Community focused code, though one comment can hardly be considered a code. I left it in, however, because this is the only place in all the quantitative and qualitative data where anyone said they felt left out. This could mean either that the youth group did an excellent job at building community, or that there is a flaw in the research design that did not allow that sentiment to rise to the surface more frequently.

The axial codes that I derived from all three groups, with focused codes clustered underneath, are contained in table 6.48 below. It is intriguing that even among the non-Christians, there was a desire for a spiritual formation process that had more depth. This corresponds to the yearning for adult leaders who would have encouraged the discussion of how faith could have related to the important issues adolescents were facing. The need was expressed to help participants find a way to continue their faith journey after high school by training them what to look for in a new church. However, also in this sample were those who thought nothing should be changed, that their youth group experience was complete as it was.

Table 6.48. Axial Codes: What All Groups Would Change About Youth Group

Axial Code 1: Forming Spirituality	**Axial Code 2: Having Personal Regrets**	**Axial Code 3: Changing Nothing**	**Axial Code 4: Engaging in Youth Group Activities**
Forming Christian Faith (AC, IC) Forming Spirituality (NC)	Having Personal Regrets (AC, IC)	Changing Nothing (AC, IC, NC)	Engaging in Youth Group Activities (AC, IC, NC) Altering Time/Venue (AC) Longing for Community (NC) Wanting Caring Adults (AC) Seeking Help for After High School (IC)

Anything Else?

The final open-ended question asked responders: *Please share anything else about your youth group experience you would like me to know.* Thirty-three of the fifty-nine respondents wrote an answer to this question. Eighteen were active Christians, eight were inactive, and six described themselves as non-Christians. I coded these as I did the previous two questions, with focused codes over *in vivo* codes within the three groupings. Tables 6.49, 6.50, and 6.51 show the results.

Table 6.49. Active Christians, Anything Else?

Focused Code 1: Enjoying Community	**Focused Code 2: Going on Trips**
I remember my group fondly Very close friends (2) Safest place I felt during high school	Trips were fun I had the time of my life and most memories are from youth trips I missed a lot by not going on two summer youth trips

Table 6.49. Active Christians, Anything Else? (cont.)

Focused Code 3: Experiencing Caring Adult Leadership	**Focused Code 4: Forming Christian Faith**
Pastor put me into leadership Pastor made me realize I could do anything Pastors are great at organizing it Thankful for time the volunteers invest	Youth group gave me a willingness to work with youth today Church is very important to me Better understanding on my higher power, Jesus Christ I learned to be unconditional and respectful I have a better understanding of the world
Focused Code 5: Wishing for More Substance	
Youth group not meaningful except for servant trips Would be great to add worship part to youth group More Bible teaching	

Table 6.50. Inactive Christians, Anything Else?

Focused Code 1: Experiencing Caring Adult Leadership	**Focused Code 2: Appreciating Youth Ministry**
Pastors were young, supportive, protective and had a sense of humor Enjoyed hearing camp leaders' stories Wonderful leaders	Some of my best memories, especially retreats and conferences I want my children to be involved I would not change a thing Games were how we could relate
Focused Code 3: Forming Christian Faith	**Focused Code 4: Enjoying Community**
Like talking about real life and our religion Enabled me to learn about God, religion, and my own spirituality while having fun It was how I worshiped God	A fun and safe place I met new people, hung out with friends

Table 6.51. Non-Christians, Anything Else?

Focused Code 1: Enjoying Community	**Focused Code 2: Forming Spiritual Identity**
Made friendships possible Fortunate to have experience of support and love	Important for my spirituality Helped me identify what I want to say about myself and my religion

Table 6.51. Non-Christians, Anything Else? (cont.)

Focused Code 1: Enjoying Community (cont.)	**Focused Code 2: Forming Spiritual Identity (cont.)**
Still have friends from that time Great time with people that I may never Have met or befriended in high school	Allowed for independent thought and exploration of issues such as homosexuality and doubting faith
Focused Code 3: Appreciation for Youth Ministry	
Kept my brother from committing suicide Fond memories (3)	

It is interesting that the active Christians expressed a wish for more substance from their youth group experience. The inactive and non-Christians had only praise for what they experienced. The antipathy toward youth group that one might expect from non-Christians did not turn up in this sample.

The active and inactive Christians both cited the importance of caring adult leadership. One active Christian wrote, “I was a shy kid in high school, quiet and just went along with the group. The pastor put me in positions of leadership that helped me get over my shyness. I was never willing to step out of the shadow until the pastor put his faith and trust in me.” An inactive Christian shared, “Very grateful to have had such wonderful leaders and the opportunity to attend youth group.”

Faith formation was again a common code among all three groups, although among active Christians there was also an appreciation for how youth group formed not just their faith but a Christian way of life. One respondent wrote:

> Not only do I have a better understanding of my Higher Power that is Jesus Christ, but I do feel like I have learned a better understanding of the world. I’ve learned to be unconditional and respectful, which in return brings back a sense of well-being and happiness that I wouldn’t have felt without having had youth group.

In contrast, the inactive and non-Christians expressed mostly thankfulness for the way the group helped shape their personal faith and spirituality, rather than any change in behavior.

All three groups also cited enjoying community as a major benefit of the group. An inactive Christian wrote “I always looked forward to going on Sunday nights to the high school youth group. If anything it was a fun and safe place where I got to meet new people and hang out with friends.” An active Christian shared, “I had a small group of friends from school, but my community of people was church and youth group. This was very important to me.” And a non-Christian wrote, “I met people there I am still friends with to this day.”

Table 6.52. Axial Codes, Anything Else?

Axial Code 1: Enjoying Community	**Axial Code 2: Forming Faith and Christian Life**	**Axial Code 3: Appreciating Youth Ministry**	**Axial Code 4: Experiencing Caring Adult Leadership**
Community (AC, IC, NC)	Faith and Christian Life Formation (AC) Faith Formation (IC, NC) Wish for More Substance (AC)	Appreciation for Youth Ministry (IC, NC) Trips (AC)	Adult Leadership (AC, IC)

Table 6.52 above shows how I combined the focused codes from these three groups into axial codes encompassing the sample as a whole. It is interesting to note that while the inactive and non-Christians scattered their compliments about youth group in a variety of categories, such as having fond memories of the group and hoping that one’s children would be involved in a youth group in the future, the Active Christians clustered

their compliments around the trips. It could be that the trips forged faith, formed bonds with others, and awakened a desire to serve in the world. These trips may be a variable that did impact the current faith and practices of these active Christians.

Summary of Findings from Open-Ended Questions

The axial codes for questions one and three, which by and large elicited positive feedback about youth ministry experiences, are almost identical. The axials for the first question are *Being in Community*, *Forming Christian Faith*, *Engaging in Youth Ministry Activities*, and *Experiencing Caring Adult Leadership*. The axials for the third question are *Enjoying Community*, *Forming Faith and Christian Life*, *Appreciating Youth Ministry*, and *Experiencing Caring Adult Leadership*. The axials for the second question, which invited participants to express what they would have changed about their youth group experience, do not contain categories for Adult Leadership or Community. Both of those appeared as focused codes, but they were supported by only one *in vivo* code apiece, so there was no reason to make them into axials. Instead, the axials for question two were *Forming Spirituality*, *Having Personal Regrets*, *Changing Nothing*, and *Engaging in Youth Group Activities*.

The respondents had, for the most part, positive memories of their youth group community and the adults who led the groups. They also appreciated much about the faith formation that took place, while wishing at times for more depth. They enjoyed many of the activities that the youth group engaged in, but some wished for more meaning behind the activities. The active Christians and non-Christians were more likely to be critical of faith formation than were the inactives, possibly because both groups

have wrestled more with the faith. I turn now to the interviews conducted with six of the respondents.

Data from the Interviews

I interviewed six of the respondents, two active Christians, two inactive Christians, and two non-Christians. I transcribed the interviews and coded them for themes that could help answer my research question. The findings are recorded below. I begin by introducing the six who agreed to be interviewed, sketching briefly their biographies. I next examine the focused codes that arose from a number of *in vivo* codes at length, using examples from the interviews to add depth and meaning to the data. I then combine the focused codes into axial codes, and explain their interrelationships. The axial codes are used to present theoretical codes, diagramming the results of the research. I end with a summary of my findings.

Biographies of Those Interviewed

The questionnaire informed respondents that I was interested in conducting in-person interviews with a small number of former youth group members. Spaces were provided for those interested in participating in such an interview to enter their contact information. Thirty-nine of the fifty-nine participants volunteered by entering their contact information. I chose to interview six, two active Christians, two inactive Christians, and two non-Christians. Names and brief biographical sketches of those I interviewed are listed in table 6.53 below.

Table 6.53. Interview Participants

Name	Self-Description	Church	Year Born	Generation	Family
Trevor	Active Christian	Advent	1975	Xer	Married Four Children
Chloe	Active Christian	Mission	1994	Millennial	Unmarried No Children
Sean	Inactive Christian	Calvary	1981	Millennial	Married Previously Divorced Three Children, One from First Marriage
Bridget	Inactive Christian	Mission	1991	Millennial	Unmarried No Children
Megan	Non-Christian	Mission	1985	Millennial	Unmarried No Children
Evan	Non-Christian	Mission	1995	Millennial	Unmarried No Children

I only interviewed one Generation X member, but Sean was born in 1981, just one year into the Millennial generation, and can be seen as a bridge between the two generations.[5] Four of those I interviewed were from Mission, with only one from Advent and one from Calvary. A better mix of congregations and generations would have strengthened the thesis, but the stories these individuals told were compelling and added depth to the findings of the quantitative section.

Trevor is the sole Gen Xer. He went to college at an Ivy League University on the East Coast, and received an engineering degree. He decided, after a couple of years working as an engineer, to apply for a job with the FBI, where he is currently employed. He broke his back in 2015 in a work-related accident. He was told at first that he might not walk again, but he is ambulatory though he suffered a lot of nerve damage. He is a

[5] I have followed Pew Research Center which defines members of Generation X as having been born in the years 1965-1980. Pew Research Center, "The Whys and Hows of Generations Research," 3; Miller and Miller, however, argue that members of Generation X were born during the years 1961-1981, which would make Sean a Gen Xer. Miller and Miller, "Introduction: Understanding Generation X," 3.

member of a Lutheran congregation from the same denomination as Advent, but has left Advent as an adult. He is married to a woman he met at Advent, and they have four children whom they are home-schooling.

Chloe is a recent graduate of one of the Universities of California. She was in fifth grade when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. Her mother was declared cancer-free as Chloe entered the sixth grade, which was when youth from Mission began confirmation instruction. She sang both in a praise band and as a soloist during her time at Mission. Just after the interview, she accepted a job offer that relocated her to Texas.

Sean is the only Calvary member to be interviewed. He serves as a civilian fire fighter in the military. He was divorced, and that first marriage produced one child, who is now eleven years old. He is remarried and with his current wife has two children, ages three and one at the time of the interview in the summer of 2016. His wife also was previously divorced, but had no children with her first husband.

Bridget received her degree at a California State University in southern California. She is a dancer and has taught dance for many years. She told me in the interview that she had just left a job teaching movement for children at a local YMCA for employment running children's programs on a cruise ship.

Megan had a couple of rough years after high school. She attended college at one of the University of California campuses, but a toxic relationship with a boyfriend left her suicidal and depressed. She returned to her hometown, got her life together, and eventually graduated from a California State University with a degree in Women's Studies and a minor in Spanish. She is self-employed as a dog groomer, but is taking

classes to become a translator, and has a serious boyfriend who is a native of, and still lives in, a South American country.

Evan, at twenty years old, was the youngest person I interviewed. He attained the rank of Eagle Scout during high school and over the summers is employed by the Boy Scouts at a camp near his hometown. He attends a community college full-time during the school year, and works part-time for his father in a catering business while going to school.

Focused Codes

I personally transcribed all the interviews and coded them word-by-word, line-by-line, and incident-by-incident. I gathered these codes into 382 *in vivo* codes and used those *in vivo* codes to produce eight focused codes (see appendix F for a list of all *in vivo* codes clustered beneath focused codes). The focused codes are

- *Being in Community*
- *Experiencing Caring Adults*
- *Having/Not Having a Supportive Family*
- *Practicing the Faith*
- *Feeling God Personally Present*
- *Persevering through Suffering*
- *Seeing God in the World*
- *Responding to Judgmental Believers.*

I examine each code in depth in the section that follows.

Being in Community

Most of those I interviewed appreciated the community they experienced in youth group, as seventy-six of the *in vivo* codes were about the bonds these adults formed with their peers while they were adolescents. Making friends was a key component of that community. Chloe said, “I made a lot of friends at Mission. We went through

confirmation together and coming back to youth group and kind of reuniting because we didn't go to the same high school. It was good to be back with them and participate in all the activities and have that friendship continue on, stay strong." Sean agreed: "It was one of the places I could connect with my friends on a weekly basis. It was something I looked forward to every single week." Megan told me that Sunday nights were "pretty great," and when I asked what made them great, she replied, "Getting to be with my friends. It was just a positive place to be." She later told me that one of the lasting benefits from youth group was that she continued to remain close with many of those from the group, saying "Those friendships were some of the most real friendships I had."

Many of the respondents spoke of the importance of being around like-minded people and expressed an appreciation for a community that shared the same values. Bridget thought that youth gatherings were awesome, saying she enjoyed "just being with a large group of people that share the same beliefs." Chloe told me that being with people who shared similar beliefs helped sustain her faith. "I like having that community and people you can talk to. Like-minded people can make it a more enjoyable time." Trevor spoke of the importance of this sort of community at his current church in helping his adult faith to mature. "You build roots and you grow and you learn about people that are like-minded with you, and you commune with them and you become attached to them, and they like you and you like them, and you want to be there for them, and that kind of puts you more and more involved."

Megan spoke of her desire to be a part of a like-minded group, stating that if she had faith, it would be great to have a church community. "It would be nice if there was some sort of alternative that wasn't faith-related, that was, I don't know, a group of like-

minded people." She clarified what she meant by like-minded, saying she wished there was a group of people who were environmentally and politically liberal, and who were kind and supportive. "It would be nice to have a specific group of people, like-minded in that sense, to have a community. But there is no such community that I know of that's not based around churches."

The sense of community they experienced helped the respondents to feel positive about the churches in which they attended youth group. Megan, who had little good to say about religion as a whole, told me, "The church was my fun place." She realized that she didn't have faith when she wrote her faith statement at the end of confirmation, but continued to be involved in youth group throughout her high school years. She said, "This was my community and I wasn't going to stop coming." Sean recalled that when he was an adolescent there were some church people who gave him dirty looks if they felt he wasn't behaving well. Despite that, he remembered the church with fondness because he said that in youth group, "I had my positive community."

Experiencing Caring Adults

There were fewer *in vivo* codes that spoke of the importance of caring adults, but twenty-five statements indicated that the respondents remembered their youth group sponsors with respect and fondness. Trevor recalled that he didn't realize as an adolescent how much time the adult volunteers took from their lives in order to meet with the youth once or twice a week. He said, "Especially now as an adult, I look back now and think 'these are guys with jobs and with responsibilities outside of church.' They didn't have to be there. … They were doing it out of the goodness of their heart, and I remember those people being very influential and helpful."

Evan found his confirmation guide to be there for him, saying that he was very understanding. He still greets his guide when he comes to church, noting that this adult is "the only person I see from my youth group program anymore." Bridget credited her confirmation guide and her youth pastor (not me, but the Associate Pastor I worked with) as being significant in her spiritual formation, saying, "They made it fun and enjoyable."

Megan spoke warmly of the difference it made in her life to be in youth group with the youth worker and her husband who served the church at that time. Megan's household was not a happy one during her high school years. She told me she had a loving mother, but a cold and distant father, and her parents did not model the kind of marriage or family life that she wanted to emulate. She found that model of married life in the youth worker and her husband. She said they "were the most positive, biggest influences of my youth in general." She particularly liked seeing how they treated one another. She told me that in witnessing them, she thought, "Wow, this is what I want someday, this is what I wish I had at home. This is true love for each other, this is how to influence people younger than you, and be a positive force for other people's lives."

I received a fair share of praise as well for my role in the lives of these former youth group members. Trevor said that I was one of the key people to influence his spirituality during his adolescence. Speaking of other pastors, he said, "I didn't feel that they were talking, would ever talk to us, on a level that was more human. It was more, 'I'm up here, you're down there, I'm enlightened and you're not.'" He said that, in contrast, I spoke to the group on their level and he found me to be a regular guy with whom he could identify. Sean and Chloe also named me as a key influence in shaping them spiritually during their middle and high school years.

The caring adults mentioned by those I interviewed did not only consist of youth pastors, youth leaders, and adult volunteers. Chloe and Trevor both singled out the music directors of their respective churches as being highly influential. Chloe was given opportunities to sing with the praise band in high school, and she was grateful to the music director at Mission. She praised him for working with her, saying "A way I am able to worship and give back to the church is through music, so being involved in music through my time here at Mission has also been something that has definitely helped my journey."

Trevor was recruited to play handbells by Advent's Music Director. This Music Director left her job at Advent a few years after I took a new call and ended up as a volunteer musician in the same church that Trevor now attends. He spoke of the huge amount of respect and love he has for her, saying, "She was an inspiration. … One of the big influences" in his faith journey as a youngster.

Having/Not Having a Supportive Family

The role that parents and spouses played in the lives of the respondents shaped their current faith and practices. Thirty-two *in vivo* codes dealt with the role of families in the spiritual lives of those I interviewed. Families usually were supportive of Christian spirituality and practices, but in some cases parents, in particular, were not particularly effective at supporting their children's growth in faith.

Dads and moms played a big role in encouraging their children to participate at church. Sean's mom started the youth group at Calvary, and was one of the faithful adult sponsors throughout my years as their pastor. Sean says "My mom was the driving force behind our spirituality." He noted that his dad was verbally supportive but often did not

attend church, while his mom was there regularly and encouraged him to attend church and grow in faith.

Evan's dad drove him to confirmation. They lived a distance from Mission, and traffic in San Diego county can be pretty heavy, so they had a lot of time in the car together following confirmation. "We'd always talk about and discuss what we had learned and talked about that day." Evan's dad was understanding about his lack of faith, mainly because he had experienced much the same thing when he was a teenager. "He talks about where he at my age also had, I don't want to say a crisis of faith, but he just didn't have the belief or the openness to really want to go to church." Evan's father, despite his feelings when he was Evan's age, wanted his son to attend worship with the family. "He's like 'I want you to come to your own conclusion or your own belief on this. But I still want you to join us and be part of it.'" Evan's mom was less involved in his spiritual life. She was raised Roman Catholic, attended parochial schools, and had three aunts who were nuns, but attended a Lutheran church because Evan's father was not willing to go to her church. Her religious upbringing, however, did not translate into being someone Evan could talk to about religion. "I just never went to her to talk to her about these things so I just mostly talked to Dad."

Bridget was also encouraged by her father to come to church and attend youth group. She was not old enough to drive when she first attended confirmation and youth group. "My dad would drop me off, it wasn't exactly a choice, not that I didn't want to be here, but it was something that he wanted me to do, and because of that, because I was here on a weekly basis, I felt closer to God." Her father continued in her adult life to encourage her to go to church, but her mother dropped out of worship attendance after

her children finished confirmation. Bridget explained that her mother's example currently has more impact on her than her dad's. "I am really close to my mom, and Mom doesn't attend church or anything like that. And so, you know, I think the more distance I have with my dad, the less I think about it."

Megan's parents attended church together for a few years at Mission, but her dad decided he wanted to find a different worshiping community when Megan was a young girl. He worshiped, at times, with Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic congregations, among others, while Megan's mother and her brothers set down roots at Mission. She said, "My mom never pushed. She just brought me. My dad felt like he had some weird obligation to raise me religious until I turned eighteen, and then that was the end of his parental duties." He didn't really care which church she went to, only that she attended worship services. She occasionally would sleep in on Sundays, and her mom would wake her before her dad got home and encourage her to dress so that her father would believe she had gone to church. She felt, as an adult, that her father's behavior was odd, but didn't feel that he was too coercive because he never spoke to her about religion or faith. "He wasn't forcing me the way that I hear a lot of other people are forced into religion." Megan loved youth group and being in community, despite her lack of faith, and usually attended without complaining. "This was my mom's and my community from birth," she said, noting that the church was completely apart from her dad.

Both Chloe and Trevor noted that their parents brought them to church. Chloe said, "My parents were very involved" in encouraging her to worship and engage in servant projects. Trevor, however, was a little critical of his parents who, while they brought him to church, were not as engaged in the faith as he thinks, in retrospect, they

should have been. “They didn’t give the direction that would help establish the conviction that I think a high school kid needs to defend his faith or, before defending it, to agree with it within themselves and to secondly be able to defend it to other people.”

Trevor credits his wife for helping his faith to grow. Trevor met his wife at Advent, or rather, re-met her as an adult since they knew each other slightly as children, when her older brother was one of Trevor’s high school youth group buddies. Trevor’s wife attended private Christian school throughout her high school years. She home-schools their four children, seeking to add faith to the curriculum. Trevor says of his wife, “She has been just an amazing example of what I think a Christian should be. She’s been the main inspiration for me above probably anything else.”

Sean seeks to provide his children with the same kind of experience that his mom gave him during his youth group years. “I believe it’s important for my children to get to know God, and to get some spirituality. There’s not just the religious portion of it. To me there is a grounding. I think it keeps people grounded.” He said of his children, “I hope that they can find a community of people that care for them and are willing to help and guide them in the right direction, besides myself and my wife.” He seeks to be a supportive dad as he hopes his children will grow in faith.

Practicing the Faith

Sixty-six *in vivo* codes described the ways in which the respondents engaged in Christian practices both during their years in youth group and in their adult lives. I will examine both separately. I begin with youth group practices and conclude with the ways in which respondents currently live out their spirituality.

Youth Group Practices

Many of the participants spoke fondly of trips and retreats they had taken, often citing trips as the thing they most appreciated about youth group. Trevor remembered not only the trips themselves, but also the benefits of being away from his day-to-day reality. “I think the trips were huge. Any time you can, you were able to take us out of our comfort zone, get us as an isolated audience, away from distractions that were down here, helped to bond the group together. … I thought those were fantastic.” He said he thought such trips would be even more important for young people today. “Take the kids up there, take their phones away, take their internet away, take anything that can distract them away, and let them focus on community with their friends … because I think that a peer-to-peer relationship is important for kids at that age.”

Bridget told me the trips, particularly to National Youth Gatherings, were what she most appreciated about youth group. “Definitely the youth conferences are what I remember the most. The week-long of learning things and being with like people, and that was really cool.” She also expressed affection for the smaller trips with only her own youth group. “I feel that even on the camping trips, the ones that weren’t so large, I made friends that I still keep in contact with, and … I just feel like I’ve learned a lot.” Megan also ranked the trips highly. “I really, really loved those summer youth trips, especially since my home life was not awesome. It was nice to have a place that was separate and happy.”

Chloe was the most engaged of our two active Christians in faith practices during her adolescence. She prayed daily, engaged in servant projects both with the youth group and with other groups, served as a youth representative to the local judicatory youth

board, worshiped weekly, and sang in the praise band. Trevor did not take Christians practices nearly as seriously as did Chloe. He attended worship, sang in the choir, and prayed whenever he needed something. He admits that he is more diligent in his devotional life today than he was when he was in high school.

The inactive Christians I interviewed, Sean and Bridget, both attended worship weekly during their high school years, which is a different pattern from many of the inactives who filled out the questionnaire. Sean prayed every night during adolescence and engaged in servant projects with the youth group. Bridget prayed whenever she needed something, and occasionally joined on a servant project.

Evan and Megan, the non-Christians, also both attended worship weekly. Megan participated in servant projects with the youth group, while Evan helped a Baptist church near his home with a program for elementary and middle-school students. He helped the youth memorize Scripture verses and learn Bible stories, and kept quiet about the fact that he did not believe in God. He also led Scout Zone interdenominational worship services at Boy Scout camp. Neither Evan nor Megan prayed outside of confirmation or youth group, as they did not believe there was a God who would hear them.

Adult Practices

Chloe continued to practice her faith, both on her own and with others in a church community, in her adult life. She told me she prays daily, reads devotionals, and tries to be the best example of a Christian she can be. She sometimes has to defend her faith to others, but tries to do so not by preaching, but by being a good example, a person who is willing to talk about the faith in a nonjudgmental manner.

Trevor's faith practices are much more important to him as an adult than as a child. When he was a youth group member, he only prayed for things he wanted. He told me that now, "I pray every day and a lot of times it's just prayers of thanks, most of it just thank you for my wife, my kids, it's thank you for my being alive, thank you for the things that you have given me." He reads the Bible regularly, and reads other Christian books. He and his wife often read a book together and discuss it as a way to build their faith in God and their relationship with each other. He and his wife have formed a Bible study group with others in their church and, when I interviewed him, they were developing a curriculum based on apologetics, on defending the faith. He told me the group was interested in apologetics because they wanted to equip their children by giving them sensible reasons for believing as they do. "If you help build a foundation for the kids, to say, when you're confronted by people who say 'the universe was not created by God,' there's some facts that will help. There's some facts that will help defend your position, and help you solidify your position." Particularly, he saw the Big Bang theory as fitting in with the Biblical teaching that God creates out of nothing.

Sean continues to pray daily, but that's the only thing he does to sustain his faith. He told me that he and his wife hope to return to church when their children, who were ages one and three at the time of the interview, are a little older. Bridget engages very infrequently in Christian practices. I asked her what she did to continue shaping her spiritually and she replied, "I don't think there's anything I do to continue shaping me spiritually." She noted that she attends worship on Christmas and Easter, prays when she needs something or someone she cares about is sick, gives donations to charities, and tries to help other people. She at first expressed that the reason she does not attend

worship more is that she's too busy, but later admitted, "If I wanted to make the time I could make the time. I just feel that as I've gotten older it's become less and less important to me. And I'm not exactly sure why."

Evan attends church with his parents because they ask him to do so. He helps, as a staff member at a Boy Scout camp, with the Scout Zone interdenominational service when they need help. Beyond that, he does not engage in Christian practices. Megan engages in no faith practices. She does not attend church despite the fact that she misses the people. She said, "I feel like it's disrespectful to be saying things that I don't believe in the presence of people that do believe them. I feel like, I don't know, like I'm a big liar."

Feeling God's Presence Personally

What truly separated the Christians from the non-Christians in this study is that the believers have felt at different points in their lives that God is with them, while the unbelievers have not experienced the presence of God in a similar way. One of the questions in the interview protocol asked what have been the respondents' most significant experiences of either the presence or absence of God. Sixty-nine of the *in vivo* codes reflected those experiences.

Chloe had two experiences of the presence of God at a very young age. A fierce wildfire that destroyed the houses of four of Mission's members threatened Chloe's home when she was in fourth grade. She prayed and her house was saved, and it was the first time that she said she felt "God was there for me." A year later she overheard a voicemail telling her mom that her mammogram tests showed there might be a tumor. Chloe prayed that her mom would be all right, only to be told by her parents a week later that her

mother had cancer. At first she prayed, “How could you let this happen?” but kept on praying because she knew “God wouldn’t desert me.” Her mom’s treatments were successful in arresting the cancer, and when Chloe was told she was cancer-free, she felt that prayer really worked and that God was there for her.

Trevor’s most significant experience of God came not in his youth, but as an adult. He was in a work-related accident that caused a spinal injury and he was at first told he would not walk again. A surgeon was called to take his case and perform a risky operation. He met the doctor and said, “The first thing I noticed was the cross hanging around his neck. This calm came over me when I saw that. We spoke at length about the surgery and everything else, and I could go on and on and on about how the presence of God was there in that room.”

Sean teared up as he spoke of his most significant experience of God’s presence. He was serving in the military far from home when he received word that his first wife had been cheating on him. He felt very much alone and sensed that his whole world was falling apart. He called his boss, who told him not to go anywhere, that he would be right over. He came and took Sean to his house, and the next day at work, the rest of his workmates surrounded him with friendship and care. “I think there was some aspect of spirituality there,” he told me. When I asked if he felt God was present, he said, “Yeah, I would say that.” He went on to note that none of his friends were religious. They would not have thought they embodied the presence of God, but Sean saw it differently. “Once I established those friendships, which didn’t take long, I knew it was going to be okay. Maybe it was God’s way of telling me, ‘It’s going to be okay.’”

Bridget said, “I feel like, as I’ve gotten older, I do feel the presence of God often.” She mostly feels God’s presence when she prays and receives what she requested. She prayed for an aunt who was sick, and her aunt got well. She prayed for a different job when she was unhappy at work and was hired as a director of children’s activities on a cruise ship. “I feel like someone’s there helping me and guiding me and things are going to happen the way that God intended them, and so oftentimes I feel a big presence of him.”

Megan, on the other hand, never felt the presence of God, either in youth group or in her adult life. She described her lack of spirituality as an adolescent, saying “I just felt like nothing was really happening inside of me. It was like I was going along with what I was told and waiting for something to happen or to feel something and I just never did.” She continued with church because she loved youth group, stating “This was my community and I wasn’t going to stop coming because this was one of the few things that made me happy away from my house. But I felt nothing.” When asked about her current spirituality, she replied, “I don’t even really consider myself a spiritual person. I have trouble understanding what the title is because again I feel like I feel nothing.”

Evan also said that he mostly felt nothing. “I never felt that connection with any spiritual level so I went through these programs for my parents and grandmother.” He told me that he learned stories from the Bible but said, “I never thought it applied to me, or that I felt a deeper connection to any of this.” He followed this up, however, by saying that a repeated experience did move him. “The one time I felt, I don’t know, connected, was a weird time.” He went on to tell me that his uncle died young. When the prayers were said on Sundays at Mission, the congregation took a few moments of silence for

parishioners to pray for those who were on their minds. Evan would take time during the silence to think of his uncle. “I guess the closest times I ever felt to him were when we had the moments of silence.” He talked more to his uncle than to God during those moments, but those moments were meaningful. “I don’t on a regular basis think about my uncle … but whenever we had those moments in church thinking about loved ones, possibly lost, and hope the best for them, that was probably the time where I felt closest to having some form of faith or belief.”

Persevering through Suffering

Forty-four of the *in vivo* codes reflected the views of those I interviewed on how God helped, or failed to help, them in times of suffering. Chloe and her family were good friends with a family whose mother also had cancer. A few years after her own mother was pronounced cancer-free, their friend died, leaving a husband and two daughters younger than Chloe. She said that when older people die, it’s sad, but when younger people succumb “it’s really difficult to handle.” She comforted herself with the thought that her friend, who had battled cancer numerous times, was not suffering any more. It helped that her friend’s youngest daughter told Chloe, “My mommy’s in heaven now.” She said, “If they weren’t sad about it and they were at peace with it, then we had to be at peace with it as well.”

Chloe also grieved the deaths of three friends who died during the first two years of her college career. She acknowledged it had been a difficult for her, but her faith helped her in her grief: “Because I have been through loss and had rooted myself so much in faith, I had that comfort that they were in heaven … and not suffering anymore.” Chloe is comforted not only by heaven, but also by a sense that God has a reason for why things

happen in this life. “At times where I’ve prayed for things, what I had hoped for didn’t come true, I was able to find there’s always a reason for this, and then I would figure out what the reason was and that would bring me comfort, just knowing that they were now in the hands of God.”

Trevor and his wife persevered through a lot of suffering in their life. He told me the accident had increased their faith, saying, “I think we’ve gotten deeper since then, because anytime you suffer, you know, Romans, ‘suffering breeds perseverance, perseverance builds character, and character builds hope,’ right? And that’s I think why we’ve gone through little hurdles here and there.” One of those hurdles was a financial crisis where they had two homes and could not keep up the payments. “That was a hardship, that was some suffering that required us to figure out how to persevere and I think that all of the combination of those types of events draw you closer and closer and closer to God.”

I asked Trevor if he had experienced the absence of God. He replied that some people may have thought that a good God would never have allowed the accident to happen, but he disagreed. He said, “People are fallible. People make poor choices. Free choice is a root of a lot of evil. And it was my free choice that got me into this mess.” He told me that he doesn’t see God as one who protects humanity from the consequences of our actions: “God’s not in the business of reaching down and preventing anything bad from happening to people.” He does, however, think God utilizes our choices to help us in our lives. “I think he is in the business of using things that happen to you or that you cause to make you better—to teach you, to shape you the way he wants you.” Trevor saw God actively at work in his life, helping make him a better person.

Sean also saw God at work through the bad things that happened in his life. He was miserable when his first marriage broke up and spoke of it as being "the hardest time in my life." He also said that if his first marriage had not ended, he would not have been with his current wife. "The positives, I would say, my wife and I, just the timing when we met … I feel like that was a positive that came out of something that was potentially negative." When I asked if he felt God was a part of that, he replied, "I do. There's no reason why we should have met other than that."

Bridget did not have many compelling stories about hardship in her life. She did note that things don't always go well for her. She said, "When things don't go my way, I don't blame God." Bridget told me, as reported in the focused code about feeling the presence of God above, that when she prays and things go well for her, she feels God helping her. Here she noted that she does not blame God during times of struggle, but she did not indicate that she felt God was with her when things did not turn out the way she would have wanted, or that God might have a reason or lesson for her to learn through difficult times.

Evan did not speak of suffering in his interview, perhaps due to the fact that, at age twenty, he has not yet experienced a great deal of suffering. Megan, however, discussed suffering in a couple of ways. She told me about youth group, "My home life was not awesome, and it was great to have a place that was separate and happy," but she did not see that separate and happy place as a gift from God.

She felt that religion actually encourages people not to try to alleviate human suffering. "I would say, I feel like religion gives people an excuse not to care about other people, to think that things are God's plan, and to pray for people rather than being

politically active." She did not believe that prayer made a difference to people in need. "Like people praying for things and saying that good things have happened because they've prayed, then when bad things happen it's because God has a plan or is testing them or any number of other things. And none of it makes any sense to me as to why such good things could happen to one person and bad things happen to another." Megan's views are in opposition to those of Chloe, who always looks for a reason why something bad took place, or Trevor, who sees God using the bad to help make people better. Megan, in contrast, saw the bad that happened in the world as the fault of people, and thought people, rather than God, should solve these problems.

Seeing God in the World

I asked Bridget what significant experiences she had of the presence or absence of God, and as we talked about her faith and her life, she said something really interesting. She told me, "Real life seems more important than just something that you are believing in." She did not, in short, connect her faith with her day-to-day life. I found that thirty-five of the *in vivo* codes revealed whether the respondents had an ability to see God at work in the world, and connect God to circumstances that took place in their daily lives.

Trevor, Chloe, and Sean all saw God at work not only at church but also in other aspects of their lives. Trevor saw God at work bringing medical professionals to him following his accident. He thought both the surgeon and his physical therapist were gifts from God sent to help him heal. He also saw God guiding him to use his experience to make a difference for others. Trevor is a woodworker and, prior to the accident, had made for his wife a small replica of their congregation's unique wooden cross. She had suggested he make more so that others from the congregation might have a cross to hang

in their homes, but Trevor had not figured out when or why he would do such a thing. He said that in the hospital, as he was thankful for the news that he would walk again, it came to him what he could do with the crosses. He thought to himself while lying in bed, "I'm going to make a bunch of them, and we're going to sell them, and we're going to make money to raise funds for disabled veterans who are stuck in wheelchairs for the rest of their lives." He sold 200 of the crosses at his church and raised over $50,000 to help wounded warriors. Trevor told me that this was not his idea, but that "God made that happen."

Trevor saw God at work in his life in other ways. He spoke about the joy that he had in giving financially to God's work, stating, "It's not my money. It's God's money." He also saw God at work through science, and wanted to help his children see God at work in similar ways. He thought the Big Bang theory validated the biblical tenet that God is one who creates out of nothing. He argued that human beings from different cultures around the world innately know the difference between right and wrong. "And where does that come from? It comes from your Creator." Trevor saw God at work in his life, and in the world at large.

Chloe also saw God at work in her day-to-day life. She told me that she was tempted to give up on prayer in fifth grade when, after praying for her mom to be cancer-free, she discovered her mom had the illness. She decided, however, that she needed to pray, saying, "If I'm working and God is working, I feel like two is stronger." She saw God working, and when at times things didn't work out the way she wanted, as when her family's friend died, she believed there was a reason things happened as they did. She saw God at work in the lives of others, as well as in her own life.

Sean also believed that God worked in his daily life. He said, “To me, there is a—call it a grounding. I think it keeps people grounded. It helps you make good decisions and it just helps out with life.” He was particularly grateful that God helped him make good decisions to avoid going down a different road. Two of the youth he had known from confirmation, including one who was his best friend at the time, were in jail when I interviewed him. His former best friend was chemically dependent, and Sean asked, “How did he become addicted to drugs and alcohol and all these things, and how did I not? I had my parents there but I think there was something else that was able to do it for me.” That something else for him was God.

Megan did not see any grounds for believing that God or faith had an impact on daily life, except possibly for one aspect: “I feel like the positive thing about religion would be when people die that people can kind of have more peace with it and sometimes I wish that I had that because death is so difficult.” She thought that faith, in this way, could have some meaning for daily life. Megan, however, also saw negatives about the belief in life after death: “The flip side of that would be that I feel that maybe people don’t put enough value into the life that we have here on earth because they think that there is something better.”

Bridget expanded on her answer that she didn’t think faith was as important as real life. She told me that the busy-ness of her life robbed her of time to reflect on faith or God. “It’s in the back of my mind,” she said, but faith is not something she thinks about all that often. She added, “The overall importance of it has taken a back seat in my life,” but she had trouble articulating why. She told me she loved the feeling she got when attending worship even though she rarely went to church. Bridget, unlike Megan, saw

God at work when she called out in prayer. She, however, was also unlike Trevor, Chloe, and Sean, for she did not see God at work in her daily life unless she requested God's help.

Responding to Judgmental Believers

The quantitative data indicated that active and inactive Christians considered negative experiences with churches to be a more important factor in influencing their faith and spirituality than were these experiences for non-Christians. The interviews, however, showed the non-Christians more likely to discuss their negative views of judgmental Christians. Thirty-five *in vivo* codes were about the unease three of those I interviewed had with Christians they perceived to be condemning of others. Two of these were Evan and Megan, the non-Christians, and the third was Chloe, one of the active Christians.

Evan was unhappy with the number of Christians he witnessed who were willing to condemn Muslims. He noted that Islam, like Christianity, taught people to love and accept each other, and that Islamic leaders condemned terrorists who claimed the evil they did was in God's name. He said, "Why are we labeling an entire population just because of the acts of the small or the few that are extremist views at the most."

Evan encountered a number of intolerant believers through his work with the Boy Scouts. He was unhappy to discover, as a high school student, that the Boy Scouts would not accept gay leaders or members. That policy changed in recent years, and he found churches withdrawing support from the organization by denying troops a place to meet as the Scouts began to accept homosexuals into their ranks. He thought this was in opposition to what he was taught Christians were supposed to believe. "They would say,

‘Hey, Christians just condemned the gays now because they’re quoting this verse’ and I’m like, ‘But wait. Aren’t we all supposed to be about acceptance and forgiveness and everything, and God loves everybody who accepts him?’”

He was also angered by a Christian Scout Master who was not in favor of hiring women to serve as staff members at Boy Scout camp and who treated the female staff members poorly as a result. He thought to himself, “Wow, that’s a lot of acceptance you’re showing there.” He defended the Scout Master’s right to believe whatever he wanted but was appalled by the way the man acted on his beliefs. He said, “I can’t tell him what to believe … but he shouldn’t say that.” The intolerance he saw confirmed in his mind his lack of faith, saying, “Religion is just not much for me in general.”

Megan also indicated her disgust with Christians who were judgmental towards other people. She was asked if she had a positive or negative view of the congregation in which she was raised, and she said she had a very positive view of Mission. She was asked what she thought of religion in general, and she replied that she saw it as being very negative. She thought that religious people as a whole were mostly intolerant, saying, “People use religion as an excuse to promote racism or classism or homophobia.” She viewed Mission as a complete contrast to other churches: “The people here are actually caring, they’re actually not homophobic, actually are not racist, actually care about everybody.” She concluded, “I feel almost like this specific church is an island of awesomeness in a sea of non-awesome religiousness.”

Chloe encountered a number of judgmental Christians during her college years. She looked for a church, but the first one she attended condemned gays and others in ways she thought were counter to her beliefs. She said, “I struggled with the

judgmentalism of other Christians." She also tried to model a different way. "I would see this is how some people view all Christians. This is who they think that we are. So then I would go out there and try and show them, like 'I'm Christian. I love God and I believe in Jesus, but I also believe that you can't judge people like this.'" She spoke of how Mission taught her that Christianity means you accept and love all people, and said she sought to model that not by preaching, but by the way she lived her life. She said, "I was a breath of fresh air to some of what a Christian could be."

The focused codes enabled me to examine eight themes that emerged as being important to those I interviewed. How do those themes interrelate and help provide an answer to my research question? I turn now to how I combined the focused codes into axial codes. I then use the axials to create theoretical codes which enabled me to diagram the data into a process that illustrates how faith, or lack of faith, is formed and sustained.

Axial and Theoretical Codes

I combined the eight focused codes into four axial codes:

- *Participating in a Caring Community*
- *Practicing the Christian Faith*
- *Sensing God at Work in my Personal Life*
- *Experiencing God's Presence in the World*

I begin this section with a discussion of the axial codes. I explain how they were formed and how they relate to both youth groups and to the adult lives of former youth group members. I then turn to an examination of how the codes relate to each other, including their importance, or lack thereof, among active, inactive, and non-Christians. I end by employing the axial codes to form theoretical codes which are used to diagram the

process that, according to the data from the interviews, may lead one to becoming an active Christian, an inactive Christian, or a non-Christian.

Axial Codes

Axial codes were formed by clustering similar focused codes together, as shown in table 6.54 below. Three of the focused codes were combined to form the first axial code *Participating in a Caring Community*. The focused code *Having/Not Having a Supportive Family* underscored the role of parents in bringing a child to youth group. The child made friends with peers in the group and experienced *Being in Community*, the second focused code for this group. The focused code *Experiencing Caring Adults* also belonged under this axial. Those I interviewed had fond memories of the adults who led groups and volunteered in the youth program, recalling how they bonded with these leaders. Participating in a Caring Community during youth group included supportive families, caring adults, and friends.

Table 6.54. Axial Codes from Interviews

Axial Codes:	**Participating in a Caring Community**	**Practicing the Christian Faith**	**Sensing God at Work in my Personal Life**	**Experiencing God's Activity in the World**
Focused Codes:	Being in Community	Practicing the Faith	Feeling God Personally Present	Seeing God in the World
	Experiencing Caring Adults			Responding to Judgmental Believers
	Having/Not Having a Supportive Family			Persevering through Suffering

Those who sought a church home as adults also wanted to participate in a caring community. They looked for friends, often like-minded people, to share their lives. They sought to support their own children in their walks of faith, and often received support from spouses in deepening roots in their church. The leaders of the community were often important to those who continued to attend church. Active Christians desired to find a caring community where they could practice their faith.

The second axial code is *Practicing the Christian Faith.* Youth group members were exposed to faith in the Triune God by participating in Christian practices. Many of these practices continued to be important to active Christians in their adult lives, such as personal and corporate prayer, worship, devotional Bible reading, group Bible study, and service to the neighbor, to name a few. Some youth group practices, such as playing games and attending National Youth Gatherings, were not emphasized in adult ministry. This axial code includes all practices, whether they were activities only in youth group, only in adult ministry, or in both settings.

Sensing God at Work in my Personal Life is the name of the third axial code. The focused code that led to this axial is *Feeling God Personally Present.* The data from the interviews indicated that those who had a sense that God was active in their lives, caring and watching out for them, were more likely to become adults who have faith than were those who did not sense God's presence. Lutheran theology claims it a mystery as to how a person becomes a believer, noting in the explanation to the third article of the Apostles' Creed in Luther's *Small Catechism* that it is the work of the Holy Spirit that calls people to faith.[6] It is a mystery as to why some people sense this calling and others do not.

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[6] Martin Luther, "The Small Catechism (1529)," in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 345.

Sensing God at Work in my Personal Life does not indicate that one must have had a mountaintop experience in order to experience faith. A person could simply have sensed that God was there, present, for the person in need. For some this sense came early in life, for others it appeared later. For some it came through community, as God worked through people in their lives, while for others it came through prayer, meditation, and Bible study. The sense that God was there, however it arrived, seemed to have been important for the believers I interviewed, while the sense that God was absent also seemed to be key for those who did not have faith.

The fourth axial code, *Experiencing God's Activity in the World*, combined three focused codes, *Seeing God in the World*, *Persevering through Suffering*, and *Responding to Judgmental Christians*. The research suggested that those who gave witness to the third axial, who sensed God's presence in their personal lives, were able to experience God's activity in the world more concretely than could those who did not sense God's presence personally. Those who saw God at work in their personal lives were able to see God in their day-to-day lives, particularly in the midst of suffering. They also were able to reject the claims of those who argued that God was judgmental rather than accepting while still maintaining their faith. Those without faith, who had not seen God at work in their personal lives, had a harder time discerning God's activity in the world around them, in the midst of suffering, or countering the arguments of judgmental believers.

The axial codes interrelate as follows. Youth group begins with the support of a caring community. Parents bring children to confirmation or to high school youth group. Participants meet friends and experience nurturing relationships with caring adults. The groups meet for Christian practices, to help participants grow in ability to pray, in

knowledge of the Bible, and in familiarity with worship. They also participate in practices such as servant projects, retreats, games, and other youth ministry activities. The activities help build community, and the community joins together for the activities.

The purpose of the practices is to help participants discern the presence of God in their lives. The data from the interviews indicated that those who discerned God's presence were more likely to have faith as adults than were those who were unable to discern such a presence. Those who did not discern such a presence in their personal lives were less likely to discern the presence of God in the world. This lack of sensing God in their lives seemed to have led, for non-Christians, to lessened participation in the community, lessened practices of the faith, and, ultimately, to leaving the church community as adults.

Some of those who did discern the presence of God in their personal lives sometimes also saw God at work in the wider world, while others did not. Those who did not may have been more likely to fall into inactivity as adults, both in worship attendance and in Christian practices, though they may still confess faith. Those who did see the work of God in the wider world may have been more likely to remain active in order to participate in what God is doing both in their personal lives and for the benefit of the world.

The results of the research suggested that, when all four axials were at work in a person's life, that individual was more likely to remain active in a church community as an adult. A person who encountered only the first three of the axials, *Experiencing Caring Community*, *Practicing the Faith*, *Sensing God at Work in my Personal Life*, and not the fourth, *Experiencing God's Activity in the World*, seemed more likely to fall into

inactivity during adulthood. A person who in adult life experienced only the second, third and fourth axials, that is, they sensed God's presence in their personal life participated in personal faith practices and experienced God's activity in the world also fell into inactivity as a result of them not forming an attachment to a caring Christian community. A person who only encountered the first two axials, and who did not see God at work either in their personal lives or in the world, seemed more likely not to have faith and not to be connected to a church community as an adult, no matter how much they loved youth group.

Theoretical Codes

I diagrammed the processes noted in the paragraph above using theoretical codes. I show the process the research suggested was followed by non-Christians in figure 6.1 below.

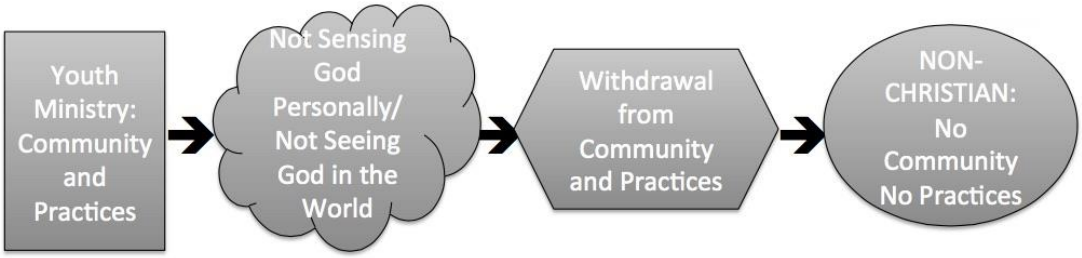

Figure 6.1. Process for Non-Christians

The figure begins with Christian Community and Practices together, as a youth group is a combination of community and practices. The arrow leads to a point where an individual fails to sense the presence of God in their personal life. The data suggested that those who do not sense the presence of God are more likely not to see God at work in the world. The result of this is often a withdrawal from practices and from living in

community with others who do sense God's presence. This leads, ultimately, to disengagement with the church and with acts of faith.

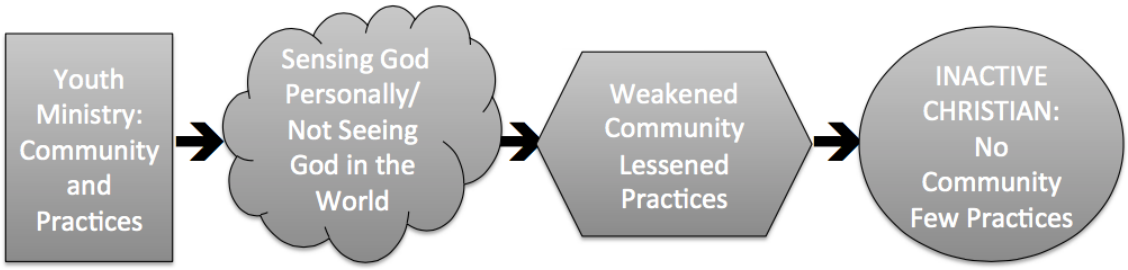

Figure 6.2. Process for Some Inactive Christians

The process followed by some inactive Christians is found in figure 6.2 above. Those who sense the presence of God may only see God at work when they pray. They may not experience God's activity in the larger world, and reduce God's sphere of influence to the realm of one's private life. The data from the interviews suggested that these persons are more likely to detach from the community and decrease their practices, mainly to prayer. This can lead to inactivity.

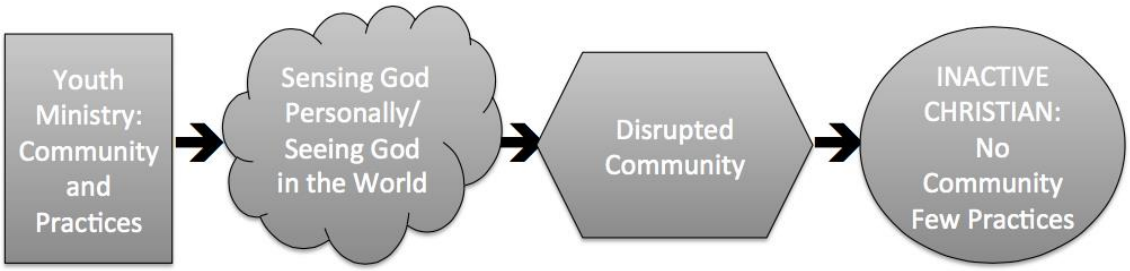

Figure 6.3. Process for Other Inactive Christians

Another path to inactivity may be followed by those who do sense the presence of God and witness God's activity in the world but experience a disruption in community, as diagrammed in figure 6.3 above. They may form other friendship groups that take the place of Christian community in providing support, acceptance, and welcome. This, too, can result in inactivity as the individual does not feel the need of a church community.

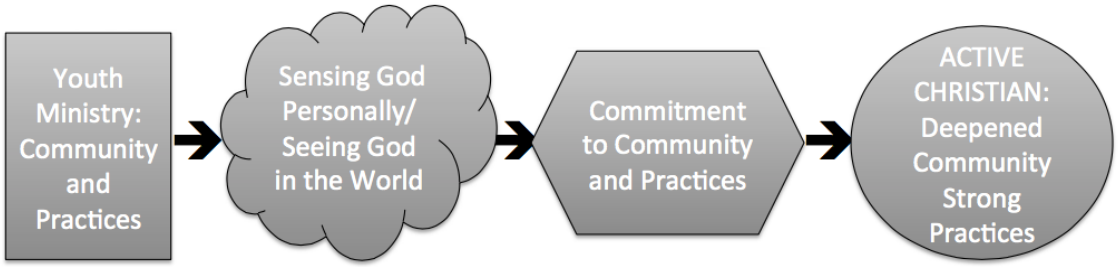

Figure 6.4. Process for Active Christians

Those who do sense the presence of God and experience God at work in the world may deepen their ties with their community. This could help them to continue to see God at work both in the world and in their personal lives and to renew their zeal for practices. This process is diagrammed in Figure 6.4 above. Active Christians discern the presence of God and see God at work in the world which can lead to deepened community and a greater use of practices.

Figure 6.5. Processes for All Three Groups

Figure 6.5 above shows the process for all self-description groups together. It is easier to define what happens for active Christians and non-Christians than it is for inactive Christians. The active Christians who were interviewed both experienced God's presence and saw God at work in the world, while the non-Christians felt and experienced neither of these. The inactive Christians either failed to see God at work in the world or suffered a disruption of community, suggesting there are many reasons why inactives do not practice the faith on a regular basis. More interviews may have resulted in more possible processes for inactive Christians. I turn next to a summary of the findings of the quantitative and qualitative research reported in this chapter.

Summary

The research question that guided this thesis is:

> *To what extent have the youth ministry practices utilized during my tenure as pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Orange County, California; Calvary Lutheran Church, in central California; and Mission Lutheran Church in San Diego County, California; shaped, or failed to shape, the faith and Christian practices of adults who as teenagers were active participants in those youth groups?*

The dependent variable is the faith and Christian practices of today's adults who were former members of the youth groups at churches I served. The first instrument used in this mixed methods sequential explanatory research project was a questionnaire which was filled out by fifty-nine former youth group members. One of the questions on the questionnaire asked respondents to self-identify as Christians or non-Christians, and to specify how often they attended church. I sorted their responses into three main categories: active Christians (those who self-identified as Christian and attended worship more than twice a year), inactive Christians (those who self-identified as Christian and

attended church two times or fewer each year), and non-Christians (those who self-identified as not being Christian).

The independent variable was the youth ministry practices utilized in the youth groups I served. I asked about participation in a variety of youth group activities, and requested that the respondents rank the importance of certain youth ministry practices in shaping their current faith and spirituality in order to see if any of the practices more reliably produced active Christians than did others. There were no variables that emerged as reliably producing active Christians. There were, however, differences that emerged between these three groups in the data analysis.

Inactive Christians were shown to have attended church and youth group less often than the other two groups during their middle and high schools years. Inactivity, for many of them, began during adolescence. Inactives ranked more highly those practices that nurtured their personal spirituality, such as prayer, over others that built community or served the neighbor. Non-Christians, in contrast, tended to rank those practices that built community above those that nurtured spirituality. They valued friendship with peers and support of adult leaders above any growth in spirituality. The active Christians tended to value both the spiritual practices and the community.

The research also revealed that inactive and non-Christians often were similar to each other in engaging in Christian practices as adults. Both groups rarely attended worship, undertook servant projects, gave financial offerings to a faith community, or volunteered at a church. The inactives differed from the non-Christians only in prayer, which they participated in much more frequently than did those without Christian faith. The active Christians, in contrast, participated more frequently in all these practices.

A comparison between the three congregations revealed several statistically significant relationships between variables within congregations, but did not result in reliably naming certain variables as being key in producing active Christians. There were some findings from this comparison that were intriguing. Data from all three churches revealed one similarity across all three congregations: young people who began to lessen their worship and youth group activity in high school were more likely to become inactive Christians as adults.

Advent, which consisted entirely of members of Generation X, most of whom were parents, were all people of faith. Two Advent members responded that they were not Christian, but both affirmed they believed in God. Calvary, which only had four respondents, two Gen Xers and two Millennials, all of whom were parents, had two active Christians and two inactive Christians. Both Gen Xers were active Christians, while both Millennials were inactive. Mission, whose sample consisted entirely of Millennials, most of whom were single, had seven who reported they did not believe in God. Tests on this data revealed there were no statistically significant relationships between the variables of generation or number of children and that of self-description. It is interesting to note, however, that the younger generation of mostly single people from Mission had 17.9% of their respondents affirm they did not believe in God, while the older generation at Advent had no one make that affirmation.

Three open-ended questions within the questionnaire asked respondents what they liked about youth group, what they would have changed, and if there was anything else about this topic they wanted to tell me. The data gathered from these open-ended questions revealed that active, inactive, and non-Christians all appreciated youth group

activities and the community they experienced. Many of the respondents from all three categories noted there was nothing they would change about their youth group experience, but this was not unanimous. A number of both active and non-Christians expressed a desire for more depth both in the teaching of spiritual practices and in discussing issues that would have been relevant to their day-to-day lives in middle and high school.

I conducted six interviews, two with active Christians, two with inactive Christians, and two with non-Christians. Coding revealed that all three groups had positive things to say about the sense of community and the activities they experienced. There seemed to be a difference between groups regarding their sense of God's activity both in their personal lives and in the world. Active and inactive Christians had experienced some sense of God's presence with them personally, while the non-Christians told me that, when it came to experiencing God's presence, they felt nothing. Active Christians were more likely to see God actively working in the world around them, while inactives were more likely to see God at work primarily in their personal lives.

The results of the research did not indicate that any one variable or combination of variables produced active Christian faith in the adult life of a former youth group member. They did cause me to wonder what practices might help a youth group member sense God's presence both personally and in the world, as those two seem to have been key factors in leading to adult faith and practices among those I interviewed. I turn now to a consideration of that question, as well as the conclusions I drew from the study, in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

I undertook this research project because I was curious about the effectiveness of the youth ministry in which I have been engaged for over thirty years. I wondered what had happened to the faith and spirituality of adults who as adolescents were members of youth groups in churches I had served. I also wanted to discover what effect, if any, various youth group practices had on shaping the faith and Christian practices of these adults. I designed a mixed methods sequential explanatory research project to help answer these questions. The data gleaned from a questionnaire gave an overview of the current faith and practices of these former youth group members, and provided insight into how a variety of youth group practices and other variables combined to produce the current spirituality of those who responded. Interviews with six of the respondents added depth and insight to the findings, giving clues as to how Christian faith, or lack thereof, developed in their lives.

This chapter contains the conclusions I came to as I examined the data from the research project. I begin with a summary of the findings from the study. I then turn to the theoretical, theological, and biblical lenses I used to frame the research, reflecting on how they relate to the data. I next discuss how relevant the study is to the population at large, considering the limits of generalizing these results to other groups while looking for patterns that might apply to other former youth group members. Questions that might be

answered by future, related studies, are considered next, and I conclude with a closing recap of what I learned.

Summary of Research Findings

The research question that guided this thesis was:

> *To what extent have the youth ministry practices utilized during my tenure as pastor of Advent Lutheran Church in Orange County, California; Calvary Lutheran Church, in central California; and Mission Lutheran Church in San Diego County, California; shaped, or failed to shape, the faith and Christian practices of adults who as teenagers were active participants in those youth groups?*

I designed a sequential explanatory research project to seek answers to that question. The project began with a questionnaire that was filled out by fifty-nine former youth group members. The respondents were asked to identify themselves by choosing one of seven different descriptions of faith practices, ranging from being a Christian very active in a church to being a non-Christian who is not open to spirituality or spiritual practices (see table 6.7). I combined the seven descriptions of faith practices into three major categories, classifying participants as active Christians (N = 32), inactive Christians (N = 17), and non-Christians (N = 10) (see table 6.8). I later interviewed six of the respondents, two active Christians, two inactive Christians, and two non-Christians.

The research was designed to investigate how a variety of youth ministry practices may have shaped the current faith and spiritual practices of people within these three groups. The research also examined how other Christian practices and life experiences may have influenced the spiritual journeys of these group members. I summarize the findings below, beginning with non-Christians, followed by inactive Christians, and ending with active Christians.

Non-Christians

The non-Christian sample consisted mainly of former youth group members from Mission, all of whom were Millennials (see table 6.3). Only two of the ten non-Christians were Gen Xers from Advent, but they both responded that while they were not Christian, they still believed in God (see table 6.9 and table 6.27). Seven of the ten non-Christians were Millennials from Mission who reported they did not believe in God (see table 6.9 and table 6.27). None of the non-Christians were from Calvary.

The research indicated that non-Christians were as active in church during their high school years as were currently active Christians. They attended worship as frequently (see table 6.13), met for youth group as regularly (see table 6.11), and went to National Youth Gatherings and Leadership retreats as often (see table 6.15) as those who still actively practice the faith. A higher percentage of non-Christians than active Christians served as mentors in the Confirmation program at Mission (see table 6.33), indicating that this group was very involved in their church's youth activities during their high school years.

The findings seemed to indicate that non-Christians valued the communal aspects of youth group over spiritual practices. They stated that playing games and spending time with youth group friends was more important to their current spirituality than Bible study or prayer with others (see table 6.17). They were asked how important to their current spirituality were practices outside of youth group, and ranked singing in choirs or playing in a band as more important than personal prayer (see table 6.18). The things they most appreciated about youth group were being in community and experiencing caring adult

leaders (see table 6.43). Community, not spirituality, was prized by this group, yet community in and of itself was not enough to keep them in church.

The qualitative interviews with two non-Christians indicated that the lack of a sense of God's presence in their lives affirmed for them that they had no faith. They both told me they felt nothing spiritually during their youth group experiences, though one of them said that during moments of silent prayer in church, he would sometimes feel some sort of spiritual connection as he thought about an uncle who died young. This lack of a sense of God's personal presence may have contributed to the fact that they did not experience God as acting in the world around them. They had at that time no sense of God's presence and activity, either personally or in the world at large. They also both were critical of Christians who used religion as an excuse to act in sexist and homophobic ways, though they noted that Mission, the church they attended, taught tolerance and acceptance.

Inactive Christians

Inactive Christians were those who said they were Christian but rarely, if ever, attended worship. Seventeen of the fifty-nine respondents, a little less than one-third of the sample, identified themselves as belonging to this category (see table 6.8). Seven of them said they attended church two or fewer times a year, which may have meant they attended on Christmas and Easter, while ten said they were Christian but had no church affiliation (see table 6.7). Four of them were Gen Xers, while thirteen were Millennials (see table 6.9). The four Gen Xers were from Advent, while two Millennials were from Calvary and eleven were from Mission (see tables 6.9 and 6.27). They attended college

and obtained degrees at statistically significant lower levels than did active Christians and non-Christians (see table 6.25).

Inactive Christians started to be less active at church in their high school years. They attended youth group and worship at statistically significant lower rates than did both active and non-Christians (see tables 6.11 and 6.13). They participated both in National and Regional Youth Gatherings, and leadership meetings and retreats less frequently than did members of the other two groups (see table 6.15). Inactivity, as a lifestyle, began for them immediately following middle-school and confirmation instruction.

They prized most highly youth group practices that nourished spirituality. They valued prayer with others, personal prayer, and giving financial offerings to the church at levels just slightly lower than that of active Christians, and at much higher levels than non-Christians (see tables 6.17 and 6.18). They valued time spent with friends in youth group at a mean between somewhat important and important, while the other two groups reported means of important to very important (see table 6.17). They also had the lowest mean score among all the groups for the importance of playing games, attending Regional and/or National Youth Gatherings, and participating in servant trips (see table 6.17). They prized personal spirituality more highly than the other two groups, and communal aspects of youth ministry at lower levels than the other two groups.

The only Christian practices they engaged in as adults more often than once-a-year were personal prayer and praying with others. The mean values for attending worship, reading the Bible, engaging in servant projects, giving financial offerings to the

church, and volunteering at a congregation were between once-a-year and never (see table 6.20).

Inactives responded to the open-ended question asking what they liked most about youth group by citing both community-building and faith formation activities (see table 6.42). Some of the inactives, when asked what they would have changed about youth group, wished they had been prepared to find a church after high school, and regretted not participating more (see table 6.46). They responded to the final open-ended question, which asked them to add anything else about their experience, by expressing appreciation for adult leadership, enjoying community, forming Christian faith, and youth ministry as a whole (see table 6.50).

The two inactive Christians I interviewed, Sean and Bridget, added insight to these findings. They both expressed that they had witnessed God at work in their personal lives. Sean had also noticed God at work in the world. His inactivity was due to the fact that, as an adult, he had not put effort into finding a community of faith, though he hoped his children would have the same kind of youth group experience that he had enjoyed. Bridget, on the other hand, saw God at work in her personal life, but thought that God was not particularly present in the real world in which she lived.

The research suggests that there are a variety of reasons why inactives become inactive. Some may start inactivity in high school and never return. Others may become inactive as they graduate high school, move away from home, and fail to find a new church community. Still others may see God as belonging to their personal sphere but not at work in the real world, and thus attach less importance to church attendance. Greater attention given to youth group practices that help participants see God as active in the

greater world, as well as in one's personal life, may have helped this last group of inactives practice their faith as active adult Christians.

Active Christians

This research classifies active Christians as those who attend church more frequently than two times a year. The majority of those who took the survey, thirty-two respondents or 54.2% of the entire sample, described themselves as active Christians (see table 6.8). Eighteen of the thirty-two active Christians, 30.5% of the sample of all three categories, reported they attend or volunteer at church at least once a month (see table 6.9). More than two-thirds of the Gen Xers, 70.0%, and just under half of the Millennials, 46.2%, described themselves as being a part of this group (see table 6.10). The sample from Advent consisted of 66.7% active Christians, while Calvary had 50.0% and Mission 48.6% (see table 6.28).

Active Christians attended worship regularly in their middle and high school years. All of the active Christians attended worship at least once a month in middle-school, and 96.9% attended at least once a month in high school (see tables 6.12 and 6.13). They attended National and/or Regional Youth Gatherings, and leadership retreats and meetings, in higher than expected numbers (see table 6.15). A majority of active Christians, 64.5%, served as helpers in Vacation Bible School, while fewer than 50% of inactives and non-Christians volunteered in that program (see table 6.16).

They ranked both faith formation and group-building activities during adolescence as important to their spiritual formation. Their mean scores for worship, bible study, prayer with others, spending time with youth group friends, singing, going on retreats, attending summer camp, and participating in servant projects indicated these

activities were more important to them as a group than they were to inactive or non-Christians (see table 6.17). They also ranked such personal or non-youth group activities as personal prayer, devotional bible reading, giving financial offerings, participating in servant groups outside of church, and participating at church outside of youth group more highly than did the others (see table 6.18).

Their current faith and spirituality has been shaped significantly by their parents' faith and example, the faith of their spouse/partner, positive experiences of church both during youth and adulthood, and life experiences outside of church during youth and adulthood (see table 6.21). They surprisingly ranked negative experiences of church during adulthood as a greater influence on their current spirituality, although less important than the other factors just cited, than did the other two groups (see table 6.21). This may be because their faith and practices were shaped in opposition to what they have heard from other Christians with whom they disagree.

Their answers to the open-ended questions on the questionnaire indicated they appreciated both the communal and faith building aspects of youth group (see table 6.41). Some wished the group had gone deeper into faith formation and had done more meaningful servant projects (see table 6.45). They were asked to tell me anything else they wanted me to know about their youth group experiences, and responded by praising the caring adult leadership they had received, expressing gratitude for the community they experienced, and wishing at times that the faith formation had been more intentional and gone deeper (see table 6.49).

The two qualitative interviews I conducted with active Christians showed that both of them sensed God's presence personally and experienced God at work in the

world. Trevor saw God at work in providing healing and help after his accident, guiding him to make good financial decisions, and working in the greater world through science and within all humankind. Chloe experienced God's help when she prayed as her mother battled cancer. The faith she received from that experience helped her deal with loss and grief as she mourned the deaths of close friends in her young life. She told me she rejects a Christianity that condemns others and tries to embody a different way of living the faith. Both Trevor and Chloe saw God as bringing people into their lives, and saw themselves as sent by God to help others.

Summary

Non-Christians did not sense God's presence with them in adolescence. They enjoyed the community provided by youth group, but community without faith did not enable them to remain in church. Inactive Christians sensed God's presence in their personal lives, but some of them did not experience God as active in the world. Active Christians both sensed God's presence in their lives and experienced God at work in the public sphere. These findings suggest youth ministry may want to put more emphasis on Christian practices that encourage adolescents to sense God's presence personally, and to articulate how God may be at work in the world around them.

Theoretical, Biblical, and Theological Lenses

I framed the research by examining six theoretical concepts, four biblical passages, and three theological themes. I used these lenses to develop the research instruments, thinking that they would have some relevance to the findings I would receive. I turn now to an examination of these lenses, relating them to the research findings to see how they illuminate the results.

Theoretical Concepts

I used six theoretical concepts as lenses to frame the research. These lenses were *Believing, Behaving, Belonging*; *Generations Theory*; *Postmodernism*; *the Rise of Nones and Liminals*; *Adult Servant Leadership*; and *Cultural Views of God*. I examine below each of the lenses, pointing out how the concepts emerged in the data that were gathered and how they were relevant to the findings.

Believing, Behaving, Belonging

The concepts of believing, behaving, and belonging emerged multiple times in the research. The four axial codes derived from the interviews belonged to these three categories. The first axial, Participating in a Caring Community, was all about belonging. Megan, one of the non-Christians I interviewed, spoke longingly of the community she had when she was a teenager and wished such a community was available in her adult life. She did not believe that a community such as the one she had in her youth was available to her. The only places where such communities existed, as far as she knew, were in churches, which she would not attend because she did not believe.

Those who responded to the questionnaire as a whole named community as one of the more important aspects of their youth group experience. An open-ended question asked what participants most appreciated about youth group. Many respondents cited friends, peers, caring adults, and community itself as what they most appreciated. Some wrote that they found youth group to be a safe place to share themselves with others. The sense of belonging was key to the youth group experience.

Behaving was also cited as something enjoyed by those who answered the open-ended question regarding what they appreciated about youth group. Many wrote they

appreciated the trips that were taken, and the games that were played. Sean, one of the inactive Christians I interviewed, told me he loved the games, feeling they were what drew him to youth group in the first place. Sean also told me he felt the time devoted to games allowed himself to be more open to the ending of youth group, when we would focus on God and matters of faith. Many others in the research noted the importance of trips and games in allowing them to hang out with peers and deepen friendships. The point of the kinds of behaviors that happened in youth group for these individuals was thus seen as deepening relationships with one another. Behavior served to enhance the sense of belonging.

Believing was often assumed, at least by me early in my youth ministry career. I assumed that those who attended confirmation already had some kind of faith in God, and confirmation was about building a community so they could explore that faith more deeply. Most high school youth had completed confirmation instruction, at the end of which they publicly confessed their faith. The goal of youth group was to deepen faith but the practices were mostly designed to deepen relationships, with the goal that through friendships with one another, young people would also experience friendship with God. What some experienced was only friendship with one another.

Diana Butler Bass argues that too many churches begin by insisting someone believe before they enter the door, then move to engaging the individual in Christian practices and end by leading to community.[1] She argues that the process should be reversed, that Christians should begin with belonging, then teach behaving, resulting in

[1] Bass, *Christianity after Religion*, 201.

believing.[2] Youth ministry, at least in my experience, has always emphasized belonging first. The research indicated, however, that in order for youth ministry to help quicken and deepen faith, belonging cannot be an end in itself. The goal would be to provide youth with a place of safety and belonging, then engage in behaviors that might open them to the possibility of God being present with them and actively at work in the world, resulting in faith. The research revealed that those who do not have faith as adults usually do not engage actively in the church. Those who do have faith sometimes do not engage actively in the church if they do not see God at work beyond a merely private realm. Those who do have faith and see God at work in the world are more likely to engage actively in church as adults. The research did show, however, that some who do have faith, engage in some Christian practices, and see God at work in the world, do not engage in church because their need for community is filled by others in their lives.

The movement between belonging, behaving, and believing is not simply a linear process. It is iterative, for the life of an active Christian is not a goal but a continuing process. One can begin with believing, or behaving, or belonging, and each of these can affect the other. The sense of belonging helps one trust the group and participate in activities the group decides to do, while the activities can strengthen the bonds between group members. The type of activities can awaken one to faith, and believing can validate the reason for participating in the activities. The experience of faith can tie youth group members to other like-minded, faith-filled people, and being with such a community can help to strengthen one's beliefs. Belonging can lead to both believing and behaving, behaving to both believing and belonging, and believing to both behaving and belonging.

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[2] Ibid., 204.

All three can be starting points in the life of a Christian, and all three can help strengthen an active Christian lifestyle.

Generations Theory

Generations theory also framed the research. A basic finding of generations theory is that members of Generation X and Millennials are increasingly individualistic, in ways that differ significantly from the generations that preceded them.[3] This can make it more difficult to join in community with others than it was for previous generations. Megan, a Millennial, told me she longed for community and loved the community and the people of Mission, the church in which she was raised. She also said she could no longer attend church because she did not have faith. The Silent Generation, those born from 1928-1945, would probably have made a different choice. This generation conformed to society's expectations, and did not insist on their own individuality.[4] A member of the Silent Generation who lacked faith as did Megan may have made a choice to come to church, participate in community, and keep silent about their inability to believe. Megan, as a Millennial, could not live with that kind of choice.

The ability to live without a supportive community other than family is a result of this growing individualism. Bridget and Sean both were willing to forgo a church community. Sean told me that his community consisted mostly of family and friends and that while he hoped to return to church so that his children would grow in faith, he did not express much longing for a Christian community. His family and friends were enough. Bridget told me she appreciated the community she forged with the youth group

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[3] Twenge, *Generation Me*, 21-56.

[4] Ibid., 3.

during her middle- and high school years, but expressed no longing for another faith-based group as an adult.

This increasing individualism among Millennials, in particular, that surfaced in the research makes it more difficult to encourage them to become active Christians than it was for previous generations. The research indicated that both Gen Xers and Millennials longed for communion with a group of like-minded people, but the prerequisite for such community was that the other be like-minded, that is, that they already view the world in the same way as the respondents. Community is much more difficult where such like-mindedness does not exist.

One way in which Millennials are like-minded is in their tolerance of others. They tend to exhibit intolerance only when they are confronted with the intolerance of another.[5] Evan, Megan, and Chloe all revealed this attitude. Evan would not criticize a Scout Master for his beliefs, but was very critical when the man acted on his beliefs by showing intolerance for others. Megan complained that people used their religion as a basis to act in racist and homophobic ways, citing that as a reason for her disdain for religion as a whole.

Chloe showed the way Christian faith and Millennial individualism can join together in how she confronted the judgmentalism of Christians in her university. She as an individual was unwilling to be a part of a community that was critical of wide swaths of society, and set out on her own to find a church community where she could worship and serve. She decided to model a different form of Christianity, one based on God's love

[5] Ibid., 31-32.

for all people. Her high self-esteem led her to have no qualms about claiming she was a breath of fresh air for others as to how a Christian could live.

Reaching Gen Xers and Millennials entails embodying a faith that is tolerant toward others. These generations have a difficult time joining in communities that do not exhibit their core values, and look for like-minded people with whom to associate. The research indicated that to reach these generations, a community of tolerance is a necessary prerequisite. They will not remain within the community, however, unless they have an experience of faith.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is a way of viewing the world that celebrates differences and otherness.[6] Post-moderns do not often seek universal truths, but look for and express their own truth, and allow others to look for and express their own differing truth as well.[7] The subjects of the interviews manifested signs of postmodern thought in their conversations with me. Evan, in particular, spoke for post-moderns when he argued for tolerance for Muslims, saying that Islam, like Christianity, preached that one should live in peace and harmony with one's neighbors. Evan was attached to three different forms of Christian churches in his childhood. His grandmother was a devout Roman Catholic, and he had three aunts who were nuns. He attended a children's program at a Baptist church near his home, and volunteered to help the program while he was in high school. He attended worship and confirmation instruction at Mission, in a Lutheran church. He liked the tolerance shown by Lutherans, but was unwilling to say that any one branch of

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[6] Best and Kellner, *The Postmodern Turn*, 18.

[7] Van Gelder, "The Hermenuetics of Leading in Mission," 141.

Christianity was better than any other. He also was unwilling to say that Christianity was better than Islam. He told me he did not believe in God, so he saw no religion as having a monopoly on truth claims. He viewed all religions as equally valid methods of interpreting one's own particular truth, though the intolerance shown by a number of Christians in particular affirmed in his mind his decision that religion was simply not for him.

Another aspect of postmodern thought is the rejection of a single source of authority for society as a whole. The Bible served as the source of authority for the West, according to Phyllis Tickle, since the Reformation, but the Bible's authority is now being questioned by postmodern people.[8] Evan questioned the use of the Bible by anti-gay Christians when he argued that using a verse of scripture to condemn an entire group of people was offensive to his notions of what is right. Chloe also argued against condemning gay people, but still saw the Bible as an authority in her life. What was the difference between Evan and Chloe?

The research indicated the difference between them was in how they viewed the activity of God in their personal lives and in the world. Chloe had a sense that God was present with her and looked out after her, which led her to see God also at work in the world. Evan had no sense of that presence of God, and had therefore no reason to expect God to be active in the world. The research indicated that to reach postmodern people, youth ministry needs to help them experience God's presence in some way. This allows post-moderns to view God as belonging to their own personal truth, a truth they can then

[8] Tickle, *The Great Emergence*, 46.

share with others. This also allows them to view the Bible as an authority in their lives, not to condemn others but as a resource in describing God's care and love.

The Rise of *Nones* and *Liminals*

Nones are those who, when asked by pollsters to name their religion, reply by saying "none," while *liminals* are those who sometimes claim a religion and at other times state they have no faith community.[9] David Kinnaman sorts *liminals* into two groups, *nomads* who wander from the faith without bearing any sort of animosity to the church, and *exiles* who leave the church because they are angry that faith communities are either unwelcoming of certain groups, or are unwilling to participate more fully in what God is doing beyond the congregation's walls.[10] Kinnaman also categorizes a group of *nones* as *prodigals.* These are adult who were raised in the faith but now consider themselves as atheists or agnostics, and are often quite angry at the church.[11]

Both a nomad and a prodigal turned up in the interviews. Bridget could be considered a nomad. She discussed how she wandered from the community of faith but was not sure why. She enjoyed church whenever she attended and had fond memories of her time in youth group, but faith was simply not as important to her as it had been when she was younger. The research suggested that in order to prevent an active Christian like Bridget from becoming a nomad, attention could be paid to practices that helped Bridget experience and articulate how she saw God at work in the public sphere. Bridget saw God at work in her private life, but not in real life. The ability to express God's presence in

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[9] Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, Kindle location 2123.

[10] Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 63-65, 75.

[11] Ibid., 68-69.

real life outside of her private sphere might have deepened her faith and helped her remain connected to a church.

Megan could be considered a prodigal. She was raised in the church, told me she considers herself an atheist, and was quite critical of religion as a whole. She was, however, not at all critical of Mission, the church in which she was raised, seeing it as an oasis of tolerance and goodness amid a desert of religious judgmentalism. Megan became an atheist because she did not experience the presence of God. Perhaps the use of practices that would have encouraged Megan to discern God's activity in her life could have been useful in preventing her from becoming a prodigal.

Adult Servant Leadership

James Autry lists five ways of being that exemplify the characteristics of a servant leader: "be authentic, be vulnerable, be accepting, be present, be useful."[12] The research revealed that, time and again, youth group members found their adult leaders exhibited these qualities. Trevor praised his youth pastor for being "a real guy," someone Trevor could relate to in a positive fashion. An answer to an open-ended question praised the youth pastor for trusting the respondent with a leadership role. The respondent noted that he was a "shy guy" in high school, but the leader's faith in him allowed him to gain confidence that helped him in his daily life. Another respondent said that, other than his parents, the youth pastor was the most significant adult in his adolescent life, more important than even the best coach and the best teacher.

Megan spoke of the significant difference the care and compassion that her youth leader and the youth leader's husband showed her had made in her life and in the life of

[12] Autry, *The Servant Leader*, 10.

her brothers. She told me that both of her brothers had contemplated committing suicide in high school, but the care and love of the youth leaders, as well as the community of the group, helped them to have hope for the future. She said that the youth leader and her husband showed her what a loving family was supposed to look like, a quality that she found lacking between her mother and father in the household in which she was raised.

Appreciation for adult leadership was praised, but there was little in the research to indicate that adult leaders helped those in the sample dedicate themselves to remaining active in the church and in faith practices after high school. Trevor and Chloe, the two active Christians, spoke not of youth group leaders but of the importance of music directors in their congregations in helping them remain involved through the music program. Adult leaders in the youth ministry programs in which I served were trained to build community, but there was little discussion about how to share faith. One former youth group member responded to an open-ended question about what she would have changed about youth group by saying she wished the adults had been more open to discussing significant adolescent issues like teenage pregnancy and homosexuality. The lack of discussions about how God and faith could influence one's views on these topics may have hindered some from seeing God at work in the world. Experiencing God's activity in the world was one of the components that led to living as an active Christian in adulthood, according to the findings from the interviews. Perhaps adults could have practiced sharing their own faith and the ways in which they saw God at work in the world. This might have aided the youth group members in becoming active Christians in their adult lives.

Cultural Views of God

The National Study of Youth and Religion, which was undertaken from 2003-05, found that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism was the primary belief system held by young people.[13] Kenda Creasy Dean lists the tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism as follows:

1) A god exists who created and orders the world and watches over life on earth.
2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4) God is not involved in my life except when I need God to resolve a problem.
5) Good people go to heaven when they die.[14]

She also notes that Moralistic Therapeutic Deists have difficulty articulating what they believe about God.[15] Bridget appeared to be, by these definitions, a Moralistic Therapeutic Deist. She did not see God at work in her life unless she called out in prayer. She believed that God watched out over life on earth, but did not see God much at work in the nitty-gritty of real life for her. She had trouble articulating what she believed throughout the interview, stating that she never thought about these things except when asked by people like me.

Dean argues that to counter the influence of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, teenagers need to have opportunities to speak of their faith, to practice telling others what they believe.[16] The research indicated that a prior step is needed before practicing the articulation of faith. Youth group members need to be able to experience God at work in

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[13] "The National Study of Youth and Religion."

[14] Dean, *Almost Christian*, 14.

[15] Ibid., 19.

[16] Ibid.

the world not just when they call out in prayer, but at all times. An experience of God in the greater world is necessary for if God is seen as only at work in a youth group member's private life, that young person is likely to remain a Moralistic Therapeutic Deist. Some attention needs to be paid to enabling a young person to realize God is not waiting for them to call but is at work in the world at all times.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is not the only cultural view of God in our current world. Baylor University researchers have concluded that there are four prominent cultural views of God's activity, all of which are held by persons of a variety of faith traditions. Jews, Christians, and Muslims all have adherents of these views, according to the researchers. People view God as authoritarian (actively involved in judging and changing the world), benevolent (actively involved in loving and changing the world), critical (judgmental but not active in the world), and distant (loving, but not active in the world).[17]

Three of these cultural views of God were present in the research data. Trevor, Chloe, and Sean expressed faith in the benevolent God. Chloe, Evan, and Megan all criticized judgmental Christians who believed in the authoritarian God, while Bridget seemed to believe in the distant God. The research again pointed to the ability to sense God's presence in one's personal life and experience God's activity in the world as foundational to articulating faith in a loving and active God.

An interrogation of links between the research findings and the theoretical frames returned time and again to the importance of helping youth people sense God's presence in their personal lives, and experience God's activity in the world. Experiencing God

[17] Froese and Bader, *America's Four Gods*, 24.

both privately and in the public sphere seems necessary for the development of an active adult Christian faith. Use of contemplative practices such as the Ignatian *examen*, labyrinth walks, and meditative prayer exercises, may help in developing this sense of God's presence in the public and private sphere.[18] I turn now to the biblical and theological frames to see how they interrelate with the data from the research.

Biblical and Theological Lenses

I used four biblical passages and three theological themes as lenses to frame the research. These biblical passages I examined were *The Persistent Widow*, *Solomon and Joseph*, and *the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin*. The theological themes I studied consisted of *The Sovereignty of God*, *Christian Practices*, and *The Missio Dei*. I examine below each of the lenses, pointing out how the concepts emerged in the research and how they were relevant to the findings.

The Persistent Widow

The meaning of the parable of the persistent widow has baffled scholars who struggle to understand this story. A widow seeks justice from an unjust judge who at first refuses to grant her request only to give in to her due to her persistence. Jesus says, ""Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him, day and night? Will he delay long in helping them? I tell you, he will quickly grant justice to them" (Luke 18:6-8a). Jesus thus compares God to an unjust judge.

[18] For more contemplative youth ministry practices, see Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*.

One scholar, James A. Metzger, argues that this unflattering portrayal of God was intentional on Jesus' part. Jesus was siding with those who suffered in this world and doubted God's love and care.[19] Metzger compares this parable with another teaching of Jesus from Luke 11 where Jesus tells the crowds, "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him" (Luke 11:13). Metzger argues that what sufferers needed was food and justice, not "a holy spirit."[20]

I wondered if the subjects of the research who did not have faith would bring up the suffering of others in the world as a reason for their doubts. They mostly did not. Megan did note that many Christian prefer praying to God than working to alleviate problems in the world, and felt that political action was a more appropriate response than asking for divine aid. She thought that religion kept people from actual caring for others in need. She did not, however, say that the problem of suffering kept her from believing. She did not believe because she had no sense of God's presence in her life.

Trevor, on the other hand, was the one member of the group who had gone through physical suffering. He broke his back, endured long-lasting nerve pain, yet never blamed God and never stopped praying. He told me that he prayed regularly, constantly, day and night. He said most of his prayers were ones of thanksgiving, for his wife, his children, and his friends. He found the comfort of the Holy Spirit despite his suffering, and experienced growth in faith. Trevor was like the widow who hung on and persisted,

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[19] Metzger, "God as F(r)iend?," 37.

[20] Ibid., 44.

but his persistence in prayer was a persistence in thankfulness for God's blessings despite his suffering and pain.

Solomon and Joseph

The biblical stories of King Solomon and Joseph the Patriarch were combined into one frame to provide a contrast in faith journeys. Solomon's story begins with him having a close personal relationship with God. God tells him to request anything he wants, and Solomon requests wisdom, which God grants in 1 Kings 3. Solomon builds the temple and God fills the sanctuary with a cloud, the same sort of cloud that was the visible sign of the invisible presence of God when the Israelites traveled in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land. One would think that such a personal relationship combined with outward signs of God's activity in the world would have produced a lasting faith in Solomon. It did not, and Solomon ended his life as an idol worshipper, unfaithful to the God who had appeared to him and spoken with him.

Youth group members who experienced God's presence yet have wandered away are reminiscent of Solomon. Bridget, for example, encountered God's presence during her time in youth group. She attended National Youth Gatherings, where she said it was an "awesome feeling" to know she was worshiping God with thousands of other like-minded people. Despite these experiences, she found herself wandering away from the faith. Solomon married foreign wives as his wisdom led him to think alliances of his own making rather than trust in God would help him extend his reign. Bridget left the church and faith practices for those things that she felt would benefit her more in what she called "real life." Bridget's faith journey was, in a way, similar to Solomon's.

Joseph the Patriarch, on the other hand, followed a different path. We first meet Joseph as a teenager, and he does not speak of God at all as he tells his brothers of dreams that they will one day bow down to him. Only after his brothers sell him into slavery does Joseph begin to recognize that God is with him. He ultimately reunites with and forgives his brothers, who doubt that forgiveness when their father dies, fearing that Joseph will take his revenge without worrying about his father's feelings. Joseph tells his brothers not to worry, that God did a great thing despite their evil intentions, saying, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20a). Joseph was enabled through suffering to see God at work both in his life and in the world.

Trevor and Chloe are both modern-day Josephs. Trevor's faith did not start strong as a teenager. It was only after he met his wife and was inspired by her example that he began to grow in faith, but key moments in the growth were triggered by suffering. He and his wife suffered a financial hardship when they had two mortgages and could not make ends meet. They suffered through his accident, wondering if he would walk again. He emerged with a faith that saw God at work in providing for his family financially, in healing him at the hospital, and in caring for him by sending health care professionals to help him following his accident. Trevor's suffering helped him to see the ways God was faithful no matter what happened.

Chloe experienced a similar journey. The suffering she endured was due to concerns for others more than for her own physical well-being. She suffered as she worried about her mother during her mom's treatments for cancer. She suffered as her family friend died and left two daughters younger than her. She suffered as she

experienced the death of three close friends during her time at the university. She continually saw God at work in her life, healing her mother, helping her friend's daughters, and guiding her as she dealt with grief and loss. Suffering, for Joseph, Trevor, and Chloe, was a catalyst for growth in faith.

The Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin

The parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin speak of how God seeks to draw all humanity into community. Jesus is eating with tax collectors and sinners, welcoming them to the table without requiring that they first repent of their sins. This incenses the Pharisees who deride Jesus for eating and drinking with these sinners. Jesus, in response to their disdain, tells these two parables. The lost sheep leaves the safety of the fold, while the lost coin remains in the household. These parables indicate that lost people, people who do not know of the care of God who seeks and saves the lost, can be found both inside and outside the household of faith.

Christians are still called in this world to seek and save the lost. Sometimes that is done by standing up to the Pharisees when they criticize others. Chloe embodied God's welcome to outsiders by opposing those who were judgmental toward others, and offering acceptance and grace to those she met. She told of how she put a bible verse on her Facebook page only to have a young man she knew from high school respond with a snarky answer. She deleted his response, then private-messaged him and told him that she would be willing to talk to him about his response. He apologized, and it opened up an opportunity for her to share why she believed and to invite him to be more open to the possibility that God exists in the world. She found herself empowered to seek the lost.

I wonder how many of the adults who worked with Megan's youth group realized how lost she was, how little she experienced the presence of God prior to her graduation from high school. I certainly did not. Now she is outside of the household of faith, looking back with nostalgia for a community she used to enjoy but which she feels she can no longer be a part of due to her lack of faith. She was a lost coin who became a lost sheep.

Evan is more of a lost coin at this point. He still attends church with his parents on an occasional basis. I was surprised to discover, as I examined the quantitative results and looked for non-Christians to interview, that Evan said he did not have Christian faith. I found that, in both his and Megan's case, I had failed to listen carefully enough to what was going on with each of them in their faith journey. I did not realize they lacked the sense of God's presence with them personally that was needed to help them experience faith. The data from the research reminded me that those of us who have faith need to listen more closely to others, and to allow them to express what they really feel about God rather than what we hope or assume they believe.

The former youth group members I interviewed exhibited behaviors, beliefs, and patterns of belonging that were referenced by the biblical passages that framed this research. Trevor was like the persistent widow, Bridget possibly like Solomon, Chloe and Trevor like Joseph, Megan and Evan like the lost sheep and the lost coin, Chloe like the one who seeks the lost. These bible passages have resonance in their lives and in the findings of this research. I turn now to the theological themes that framed this study.

The Sovereignty of God

The doctrine of the Sovereignty of God argues that God is the ruler of this world and thus is intimately involved in what happens on earth. Most Christians would agree with the above statement, but would disagree on how God rules. Some believe that God is working out a divine plan, and that everything that happens on earth is done with God's approval. The trouble with this doctrine is that evil things happen on earth, and the notion that God would approve evil is noxious to some. The notion that God controls all that takes place on earth can even turn people away from faith. I wondered if notions of how God is at work in the world, how God exercises sovereignty on earth, would emerge in the research.

Megan spoke of her dislike of the notion that everything that happens is God's plan. She believed that this way of thinking kept Christians from actually doing something to help prevent evil and extend justice to all. Her dislike of this way of thinking did not lead her away from faith, but it justified her absence from Christian community and her distancing herself from all who are religious. She thought the belief that God has a plan was harmful to humanity.

Chloe, on the other hand, was convinced there was always a reason why God allowed bad things to happen. She took comfort, for example, that her friends who had died young were safe in heaven, and trusted that God had a reason for allowing her friends to die. She did not believe that God caused it to happen, but trusted that God ruled to the extent that God could have prevented it from happening had God chosen to do so.

Trevor came closest to articulating the view of the sovereignty of God that I proposed in chapter four of this thesis, that God's rule be seen as the work of the Holy

Spirit who is present both in the world and in individual human lives. He said that he did not believe that God caused the accident that happened to him, just as he did not believe that God causes bad things to happen to anyone. He argued that the bad that happens is caused by human agency. He said, “God is not in the prevention business,” arguing that God does not stop humanity from making evil and foolish choices. He argued, instead, that God uses what happens to us to help us cling more closely to God and to make us better people.

Trevor also saw God’s rule as extending beyond the personal realm, and into such areas as science and anthropology. He saw the Big Bang theory as evidence of God’s creative power, and the innate sense of morality evident in differing societies throughout the world as a sign of God’s presence in every culture. He saw God as reigning in his own life, and in the world at large. He did not see God as controlling all that happens, but using what happens for God’s good purposes.

Christian Practices

Christian practices are the things people who believe in God encourage and support one another in doing, either individually or communally, that help them remain faithful. Practices are behaviors that are promote both communal and individual devotion, and help sustain community. These practices often have ancient roots and include things that Christians have done since Jesus rose from the dead, like worship, Bible study, prayer, sharing meals, and serving others.

The youth ministry practices in which I was engaged included going on youth trips, Bible studies, worship, games, servant events, and corporate prayer. The practices often emphasized the building of community, and assumed that youth participants already

had faith. Special practices were introduced to break down cliques and help outsiders feel welcome. Belonging, rather than believing, was the goal of most of the practices.

Life-long Christian faith, however, does not flourish, according to the findings of the research, unless participants sense God's presence with them personally and see signs of God's activity in the world. Trevor and Chloe, the two active Christians I interviewed, experienced God's presence both personally and in the world, and that led them to more meaningful faith and a deeper sense of community with their Christian friends. Megan and Evan, in contrast, did not sense God's presence either personally or in the world. They both told me that when it came to experiencing the presence of God, they felt nothing, although Evan said there were times he felt something stirring in him spiritually during moments of silence in church when he thought of his dead uncle.

I wonder if Evan might have felt more if the youth ministry had taken more time for ancient practices that use silence to help participants connect with God. Meditative prayer, silent retreats, and the *examen*, where participants note where they've witnessed the presence of God in the world around them, might have helped Evan, and others like him, to sense God's love and care.[21] Such practices might also have deepened the spirituality of inactives like Bridget and Sean, and helped someone like Bridget, who did not believe God was present in real life, to see signs of God's work in the world. I would utilize more of these practices were I to return to youth ministry.

The *Missio Dei*

The concept of *missio Dei* reminds Christians that God is not confined to church buildings nor does God only work through Christians, but God is already at work in the

[21] Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 189-196.

world. The *missio Dei* asks Christians to join in participating in what God is doing in the neighborhoods and communities beyond their church walls by sharing themselves with their neighbors. The church does not bring God to the world, but is sent by God into the world to encounter the many ways in which the Spirit of God is already at work. The church is called to embody God's presence through acts of faithful love for others, even when such love may lead to suffering. Christians suffer in love for others, and the love of God is seen through what they do.

The type of religion rejected by Evan and Megan is clearly not the *missio Dei.* These non-believers reject the judgmental hypocrisy of those who act not in love but in disapproval of others. Megan thought many church people used their faith as a rationalization for their homophobia, racism, and classism. Evan was angered by judgmentalism against women, Muslims, and gays that he saw coming from those who claimed to be Christian. Chloe, on the other hand, embodied God's love to the young man who posted a snarky response on her Facebook page, and to the intolerant Christians whose path she rejected during her university years. Trevor reached out to participate in what God was doing for those permanently disabled by war in making and selling crosses. The research indicates that there might be greater openness to spirituality, perhaps even to Christian faith, if people of faith saw themselves not as the ones who have all the answers but as those filled with Spirit sent into the world to participate with the Spirit in sharing God's love.

The theoretical, biblical and theological frames shed light on the findings of the research. God's call to seek the lost; participate with the Spirit in the world; deepen practices that nurture spirituality; encourage others to join with the church in believing,

behaving, and belonging; all were revealed by the research. I turn now to questions of generalizability and limitations of the research.

Generalizability and Limitations of Research

Can the results of this research be considered valid for populations of former youth group members from other congregations? Were there issues with the design or implementation of this project that, if differently configured, might have yielded a better answer to the research question? I turn now to a consideration of these questions. I begin with a discussion about the generalizability of the research findings, and turn next to a consideration of limitations of the research design and implementation.

Generalizability of the Research

The population for this study consisted of adults who as adolescents were members of youth groups at churches where I served. The results of this study, therefore, cannot be generalized as being valid at other Christian or even other Lutheran churches, because this is a purposive sample. Those who were surveyed and/or interviewed were chosen for a purpose, because they were members of congregations where I served.[22] Purposive sampling is an example of a nonprobability method which cannot be generalized to any part of the general public beyond the population being studied.[23] Probability sampling takes into account percentages of the population by gender and ethnicity, for example, and randomly selects the appropriate number of representatives of

[22] Nardi, *Doing Survey Research*, 125.

[23] Ibid., 124.

that population to participate in the research.[24] A random, probability sampling of the general Christian population or of a more specific Lutheran population would have to be done in order for the research to be considered as valid for Christian or Lutheran churches as a whole.

The results of the research are also not generalizable to the churches at which I have served, for the sample is also a convenience and a snowball sample. A convenience sample consists of those who are willing to participate, without representing the defined population.[25] Researchers use snowball sampling when they ask participants to identify others like them to take a survey, thus increasing numbers of respondents "like a snowball rolling down the hill that becomes larger and larger as it picks up more snow."[26]

My sample is a convenience sample because I did not examine the gender and ethnic make-up of the youth group members I had served to randomly choose a representative sample. I instead contacted as many adults who were former youth group members as I could find and asked them to take the survey. Those who were willing to do so participated in the research. They are not representative of former youth group members as a whole; they were simply those willing to help me in my research. I asked them to put me in contact with their former youth group friends, thus enlarging the convenience sample with snowball sampling. They responded by sending me contact information for friends I could not find in any other way.

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[24] Ibid., 116.

[25] Ibid., 124.

[26] Ibid., 126.

The outcomes of the research, while not generalizable beyond those who participated, did contain insights that could be tested in the youth groups in the future. The key outcomes of encouraging practices that provide space for young people to sense God's presence in a personal way, and that encourage them to look for God's activity in the public sphere, may help other youth group members develop a more active adult Christian faith. The sampling method employed in this research does not guarantee that such practices will reliably encourage such a faith, but the results helped me think in new ways about youth ministry and they may be similarly helpful to others. I turn now to an examination of the limitations of the research.

Limitations of the Research

There were limitations to this research project which affected the results. A key problem in statistical analysis arose due to the small number of former youth group members from Calvary who responded to the questionnaire. The sample size from Calvary was too small to run the Pearson Chi-Square and ANOVA tests that produced statistically significant results from Advent and Mission. I used Facebook and email to connect with former youth group members, but I should have picked up the phone and tried to get contact information for more of the youth from Calvary. A greater sample size from that congregation would have yielded a greater overall sample, which would have added insight into the findings.

I decided to interview two active Christians, two inactive Christians, and two non-Christians. I wanted to interview at least one person from each congregation, and hoped that three would be Gen Xers and three Millennials. I was successful in the first two, but failed in the third. I ended up interviewing five Millennials and only one Gen Xer, which

meant that the lens of *Generations Theory* was not as useful in framing the qualitative data as it otherwise might have been.

I was more interested in the dependent variable, the faith and Christian practices of today's adults, than in the independent variable, the practices utilized in youth ministry. I used the frame *Christian Practices* and only referred to a few books that focused on youth ministry practices that I read when I was a youth minister. A wider consideration of the various books and theories about what makes for effective youth ministry today would have been helpful in framing this research. I turn now to a discussion of topics that emerged in this research project that could bear more fruit if studied.

Questions for Future Research

This research project had its limitations. It was designed to test only the practices that were used in youth groups from churches I had served, asking if some of those practices more reliably produced active Christians, inactive Christians, or non-Christians, than did others. I looked for an answer to that question, but other questions emerged that were outside the scope of this study. Three questions, in particular, might bear fruit if studied further. They are:

1) What youth group practices might encourage a sense of God's presence in one's personal life?
2) What youth group practices might encourage an adolescent to experience God's activity in the world?
3) What factors outside of youth group have helped active Christians remain engaged in Christian community?

The youth group practices I utilized mostly emphasized group building and fun. Youth group nights used bible study methods that were designed more to help young people form bonds of friendship and a sense of community with one another than to

foster a sense of God's presence in their lives. Faith was assumed to be present in the lives of the young people, and if a friend who was unchurched came to youth group, I subscribed to a naïve belief that they would catch the faith from the sense of community. God works through other people, and a sense of community is indispensable in encouraging faith. Community in and of itself, however, does not produce a lasting, adult faith. The research suggests that young people need a sense that God is present in their personal lives.

What practices might help foster such a sense of faith? Evan's statement that the only time he felt something he could define as spiritual was when there was a moment for silent prayer in worship made me wonder if practices that utilized silence might be helpful. Meditative prayer, for example, which could be facilitated by a leader, might be a practice that could be done in youth group to help young people visualize God as present and helping them with their daily concerns. Periods of silence for journaling while on retreat, walking a labyrinth, and encouraging peers to share how they see God at work in their daily lives might be practices that could encourage the sense of God's presence. Future studies could examine the faith and practices of adults who experienced these in youth group, or researchers could try these types of practices in youth groups and study what long-term effects they may have in giving that sense of God's presence that the research suggests is necessary for life-long faith.

Trevor, Chloe, and Sean were better able than were Bridget, Evan, and Megan to articulate how they saw God at work in the world around them. The findings of the research seemed to indicate that experiencing God at work in the world was important in helping youth develop active Christian faith and practices as adults. One such practice

that might help young people articulate a sense of God's presence on the world could be an adaptation of the Ignatian *examen*, which would ask young people both to relate how they saw God at work in their lives that day and to give thanks for God's presence.[27] Adult leaders could ask young people on youth trips, particularly following servant projects, to reflect on where they saw God at work in the world during their time of service. Future studies could examine the long-term effects of these practices in those who experienced them in youth group.

The two active Christians I interviewed, Trevor and Chloe, both sensed God personally present and experienced God as active in the world, while the non-Christians, Evan and Megan, both did not. The inactive Christians, however, were different from each other. Sean could articulate both a sense of God's presence and how he experienced God at work in the world, but he was not an active Christian as he did not have a Christian community. He had a lot in common with Trevor and Chloe, but differed from them in that he did not attend church. Bridget, on the other hand, sensed God in her personal life, especially when she prayed, but did not experience God as present in the world.

I wondered why it was that Trevor and Chloe remained active in Christian community while Sean did not. One possible way to answer that question would be to ask what factors kept youth group members in the church as they transitioned from high school into college. Trevor and Chloe both spoke of the importance of music in keeping them involved, as Trevor played handbells and Chloe sang in a praise band. The research revealed that these were important to both Trevor and Chloe, causing me to wonder what

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[27] Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 192.

other variables might have similar importance in the lives of youth group members. Any knowledge that can be gained of ways in which the faith of a young person can blossom and grow into faithful, active, Christian living as adults would be helpful to youth ministers in the church. I turn now to a summary of these conclusions.

Summary

The findings of this research project suggest that helping young people both to sense God's presence in their personal lives and to experience God as active and at work in the world would better equip them to continue to have faith and engage in Christian practices as adults. The lens of *Believing, Behaving, Belonging* noted the importance of community and practices in the developing active Christian adults, but believing was a necessary component without which a young person would probably drop out of church as an adult. The findings of this research are not generalizable beyond the scope of the study, but the findings could be tested by a more purposive sample. Future researchers could utilize the findings to test if practices that were designed to help young people sense God's presence personally, and experience God's activity in the outside world, would indeed more reliably produce an active Christian faith as adults. I turn now to some personal reflections on this study and on my Doctor of Ministry experience as a whole.

EPILOGUE

I entered the Doctor of Ministry program in the spring of 2012 with some goals in mind. I had been ordained in 1986, and while church work was never easy, I felt for years that I had the gifts and skills needed to do the tasks I was called to accomplish. I had been taught to preach the gospel and share Lutheran theology. I learned how to develop mission and vision statements, and to recognize a congregation's core values, and used those skills in ministry. I worked with youth and adults, sharing faith and encouraging them to walk with God.

I had been noticing for a few years prior to entering the Doctor of Ministry program that the ministry skills I had developed did not seem to meet the needs of the church of today. My mother died in 2006, and my only niece passed away a year later, which plunged me into a fog of grief for a period of about two years. I emerged from that grief to realize the world had changed, the church was not meeting the needs of the world, and I was ill-equipped to make the kind of difference I felt God would want me to make.

One of the matters that most bothered me was the fact that many of the young people with whom I had worked in confirmation and high school youth groups throughout the years were no longer in church. Some of them no longer professed faith. Others seemed to appreciate the fact that the church was available if they needed something, such as a baptism or a funeral, but they had no desire to actively participate in a Christian community. I wondered if I had labored in vain, and wanted to gain skills that

would help me meet retain these young adults in the congregation, as well as to meet the challenges of leading a congregation in the twenty-first century. It was with those goals in mind that I sought to obtain my doctorate in Congregational Mission and Leadership.

I have found the program to be helpful in reframing much of what I had previously learned about congregational leadership. I appreciated learning new ways to approach the task of leadership, especially the distinction on how to lead an organization through adaptive, rather than technical, change. I found myself energized for ministry again.

I still, however, wondered about the lack of faith among the young people I had served. This research project has been both gratifying and humbling as I looked into what had happened to those former youth group members. I was gratified to find that many of these former youth group members were active in churches throughout the country. I was also grateful to learn that I and the other adults with whom I worked had made positive differences in the lives of many of these adults, even among those who no longer professed faith. I was humbled to discover that I may have contributed to the exodus of these former youth group members by narrowing the focus of youth group to community-building. I did not provide adequate opportunities for young people both to sense God's presence in their personal lives or to see God's activity in the world. The research findings suggested the lack of these may have contributed to youth group members leaving the church as adults.

I am comforted in the midst of this humbling observation by two core beliefs. First, I believe that God gives faith, and, second, I believe God never gives up. Others may be effective where I have fallen short, and I may be effective where others were not

able to transmit the faith. God never gives up, and continues to put me out there to share faith and hope with a world in need.

I was in the middle of this research project when my life changed abruptly. In May of 2016, I was elected bishop of one of the synods of the ELCA. My focus now has changed from ministry within one congregation to ministry with and among many congregations as they share God's strength and hope. I will attend both Regional and National Youth Gatherings in the near future, and will have, thanks to this thesis, topics of discussion to share with youth workers, youth pastors, and youth leaders. I hope some of these leaders will experiment with the findings of this research, and use more frequently and intentionally practices that may help a young person experience and articulate a sense of God's presence in both their personal lives and in the world around them.

I have appreciated greatly the opportunity to learn and grow with my cohort as we studied congregational mission and leadership. I am honored to have the opportunity to share the findings from this thesis with those who work with young people throughout my Synod. I look forward to my discussions with them, and trust that I will learn much from the young people, youth ministers, pastors, and church leaders whom I now am called to serve.

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

Thank you for agreeing to fill out this survey. I (Pastor Andy Taylor) will use the findings of this research to write a thesis about the effectiveness of youth ministry practices in fulfillment of a requirement for me to receive a Doctor of Ministry degree in Congregational Mission and Leadership from Luther Seminary. Your filling out the survey is implied consent to participate in the research. Your confidentiality will be maintained. Only summary data will be used. If you have any questions, feel free to contact me at email1@domainname.ext. If you wish to contact my faculty advisors, you may reach Dr. Craig Van Gelder at email2@domainname.ext or Dr. Alvin Luedke at email3@domainname.ext.

For this first part, please tell me a little about yourself when you were a teenager. Please answer these questions about activities that took place at the church where I served as your pastor. You may have attended other churches during your teenage years, but please answer only about the church you attended as listed in question number 1.

1. At which church did you attend youth group?
    a. _____ Advent Lutheran in Orange County
    b. _____ Calvary Lutheran in central California
    c. _____ Mission Lutheran in San Diego County

2. At that church, did you participate in
    a. Confirmation? _____ Yes _____ No
    b. High school youth group? _____ Yes _____ No

3. On average, how often did you attend worship services during your middle-school years? Please check only one:
    a. _____Weekly
    b. _____At least once a month
    c. _____At least once a quarter
    d. _____Fewer than once a quarter
    e. _____I did not attend worship services

4. On average, how often did you attend worship services during your high school years? Please check only one:
    a. _____Weekly
    b. _____At least once a month
    c. _____At least once a quarter
    d. _____Fewer than once a quarter
    e. _____I did not attend worship services

5. On average, how often did you attend Confirmation class? Please check only one:
    a. _____Weekly
    b. _____At least once a month
    c. _____At least once a quarter
    d. _____Fewer than once a quarter
    e. _____I did not attend Confirmation class

6. When you were in middle-school, did you participate in …
    a. Confirmation retreats _____Yes _____ No
    b. Middle-school youth gatherings _____Yes _____ No
    c. One-on-one mentoring with an adult volunteer _____ Yes _____ No
    d. Confirmation Summer Camp _____Yes _____ No
    e. Other offsite activities _____Yes _____ No

7. When you were in high school, did you participate in …
    a. Summer Camp _____Yes _____ No
    b. High school youth gatherings (Regional and National) _____Yes _____ No
    c. Servant Trips _____Yes _____ No
    d. High school retreats _____Yes _____ No
    e. High school youth group leadership meetings or retreats _____ Yes _____ No
    f. Other offsite activities _____Yes _____ No

8. During your high school years did you serve as a(n)...
    a. Assisting Minister at worship _____ Yes _____ No
    b. Reader at worship _____ Yes _____ No
    c. Teacher of Sunday School _____ Yes _____ No
    d. Teacher/Helper at Vacation Bible School _____ Yes _____ No
    e. Guide/Mentor/helper at Confirmation _____ Yes _____ No
    f. Please tell me what other activities, if any, you volunteered to do at church during your high school years:

9. How important in developing your spirituality were the following aspects of youth group to you?

	Not important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important	Don't know
Worship					
Bible study					
Prayer with others					
Playing games					
Spending time with youth group friends					
Singing					
Retreats					
Camp					
Regional and/or National Youth Gatherings					
Servant Trips					
Leadership retreats					

10. How important in developing your spirituality were the following non-youth group practices to you when you were a teenager?

	Not important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important	Don't know
Personal prayer					
Devotional Bible reading					
Singing or playing an instrument in a choir or music group					
Giving financial offerings to the church					
Participating in service projects outside of youth group					
Participating at church outside of youth group					

11. Tell me one thing about youth group that you most appreciated. Why?

12. Tell me one thing about youth group you would have changed. Why?

13. Please share anything else about your youth group experience you would like me to know:

Now, please tell me about yourself today.

14. Which of the following best describes you? Please check only one:
    a. _____I am a Christian, very active in a church (worship and/or volunteer at least once a month)
    b. _____I am a Christian, somewhat active in a church (worship and/or volunteer at least 3 times a year)
    c. _____I am a Christian, but only attend church 1-2 times a year
    d. _____I am a Christian, but not active in a church
    e. _____I am not a Christian, but a believer in God
    f. _____I am not a believer in God, but open to spirituality and spiritual practices.
    g. _____I am not a believer in God, and not open to spirituality or spiritual practices.

15. Which of the following best describes the faith community you are presently most attached to? Please check only one:
    a. _____A Christian church
    b. _____A faith community (church) of another religion
    c. _____I am not attached to a faith community

16. How often do you presently do the following?

	At least once a week	At least once a month	At least once a quarter	At least once a year	Never
Attend worship					
Read the Bible					
Engage in personal prayer					
Engage in service projects (such as feeding the homeless)					
Volunteer at a church					

17. Please rate the importance of the following in shaping what you believe about God, faith and spirituality. Please circle only one number:

	Not important	Somewhat important	Important	Very important	Not applicable
My parents' faith and example					
My spouse's partner's beliefs					
Positive experiences of church during childhood and adolescence (ages 1-17)					
Negative experiences of church during childhood and adolescence (ages 1-17)					
Positive experiences of church during adulthood (18 and older)					
Negative experiences of church during adulthood (18 and older)					
Life experiences outside of church during childhood and adolescence (ages 1-17)					
Life experiences outside of church during adulthood (18 and older)					

In this final section, please share with me some other information.

18. You are: _____Male _____Female

19. Please write in the year in which you were born: _____

20. Which of the following best describes your current relationship status? Please check only one
    a. _____ Married
    b. _____ Widowed
    c. _____ Separated
    d. _____ Divorced
    e. _____ In a domestic partnership or civil union
    f. _____ Not currently married but in a relationship
    g. _____ Single, not in a relationship
    h. _____ Other (please specify):

21. How many children do you have? Please fill in the number: _____

22. What is highest education level you attained? Please check only one:
    a. _____Attended high school
    b. _____Graduated high school/obtained GED
    c. _____Attended college
    d. _____Graduated college
    e. _____Attended post-graduate school
    f. _____Obtained post-graduate degree

23. After high school, did you attend a …
    a. Community college _____ Yes _____ No
    b. State college (such as Fullerton State) _____ Yes _____ No
    c. Public university (such as UCSD) _____ Yes _____ No
    d. Private, non-denominational college (such as USC) _____ Yes _____ No
    e. Private, denominational college (such as California Lutheran University or Pepperdine) _____ Yes _____ No
    f. Other (please specify):

Thank you for completing the survey. If you would be interested in participating in a one-on-one interview with me, Pastor Andy Taylor, please complete this form. The interviews will allow me to gain a deeper understanding regarding the questions on the survey. Not everyone who offers to participate in the one-on-one interview will actually be interviewed. I hope to interview two-to-three people who describe themselves as not believing in God, two-to-three who describe themselves as believing in God but not active in a church, and two-to-three who believe in God and are active in a church. The more people who volunteer to participate, the richer the pool of people and perspectives I will have to choose from. If you do become one of the interviewees, I will contact you and explain the "informed consent form" that outlines what will be happening in your interview. If you have any questions, please contact me by phone at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or email me at email1@domainname.ext.

Name: _____

City, State: _____

Email: _____

Phone number: _____

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me a little about your life since high school.
   College? Married? Children? Career?

2. When you think about your youth group experience, what are some of your best memories? If you have them, please share with me any unpleasant memories.

3. I'd like to know something about your spiritual journey during your middle-school and high school years. What were some key experiences, both in and outside of church, that helped to shape you spiritually during those years?

4. Who were some of the key people who helped to shape you spiritually during your middle and high school years? What contributions did they make to your spiritual formation?

5. What sorts of things besides attend youth group did you do as acts of faith when you were a teenager (like prayer, going to worship, participating in servant projects)?
   How often did you do those things? Who taught and/or encouraged you to do those things?

6. Let me invite you to reflect on your youth ministry experiences in light of what was happening to you spiritually during your time in Confirmation and/or youth group. Which youth ministry experiences do you look back on as being most helpful? …as not being very helpful?

7. Describe for me your spiritual journey since you graduated from high school. What were some of the significant experiences since then that have either helped you continue in or discouraged you from having faith?
   What has been the outcome of those experiences?

8. What sorts of things, if any, do you do today that continue to shape you spiritually?
   In what ways are these individual activities, and in what ways do they include other people?

9. What are some of the reasons why you continue to/no longer attend church?
   If they attend church: What are some of the reasons why you attend that particular congregation? Are there any reasons you are/are not in a church that's affiliated with a larger denomination?
   If they do not attend church: Do you have mostly positive or negative feelings about the churches you've attended in the past? …about the church as a whole?

10. What have been your most significant experiences of the presence/absence of God?

11. What lasting benefits did your time in youth group have for you? What lasting negatives do you carry from your time in youth group?

12. Please share with me anything else about this conversation you would like me to know.

Thank you for taking the time to share with me about your life and spiritual journey!

APPENDIX C

INITIAL CONTACT MESSAGE SENT VIA EMAIL

Dear *First Name* - I am contacting you to ask you to participate in a research project I am conducting as a requirement for me to receive a Doctor of Ministry degree in Congregational Mission and Leadership from Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota.

I am asking former Confirmation and High School youth group members to answer a questionnaire about their youth group experiences, and about experiences they have had after youth group, that have helped or hindered them from believing in God. I hope to receive responses from those who do not believe in God, from those who do believe but do not participate in church activities, and those who believe and participate in church. Your answers will be kept confidential; only summary data will be used.

At the end of the survey, you may enter contact information if you wish to do so. If you do, I may ask you for an interview. I will ask a few of the respondents for an in-person or Skype interview about experiences both in youth group and later in life that have formed their thinking about God and the church. Your confidentiality will be protected throughout the process. I will use pseudonyms for those whom I interview.

Your saying "no" to taking the survey will not affect your relationship with me, and if you say "yes" and later change your mind, I will not use anything you have shared with me in the research. You would be doing me a favor, but other than that, there is no direct benefit to you. I am hoping you will say "yes," but feel free to ask me any questions prior to doing so.

If you are willing to participate, please reply to this message and let me know. I'll send you a link to the survey.

Thanks for considering this. – Pr. Andy Taylor

APPENDIX D

IMPLIED CONSENT LETTER

You are invited to participate in a study about the benefits and effectiveness of youth ministry. I hope to learn how aspects of youth ministry may have shaped the beliefs and lives of former youth group members. The information from this survey will be used in a research project as part of the Doctor of Ministry program in Congregational Mission and Leadership through Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you were a member of a youth group in a church while I was a pastor of that congregation.

If you decide to participate, please complete the enclosed survey. Your return of this survey is implied consent. The survey is designed to gather information on how youth group experiences may have affected the lives of former group members. It will take about 15 minutes. No benefits accrue to you for answering the survey, but your responses will be used to examine the lasting effects of youth ministry. I have designed the survey with the hope that any discomfort or inconvenience to you derives only from the amount of time taken to complete the survey.

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will not be disclosed.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relationships with me, the church where you participated in youth group, or Luther Seminary. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice.

If you have any questions, please contact me, Pastor Andy Taylor, at (xxx) xxx-xxxx or email1@domainname.ext.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Pastor Andy Taylor

APPENDIX E

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Looking Back to Move Forward: Youth Ministry and its Effect on the
Faith and Christian Practices of Today's Adults

You are invited to be in a research study of the benefits and effectiveness of youth ministry. You were selected as a possible participant because, during your adolescence, you were a member of a youth group at a church where I served as a pastor. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: me, Pastor Andy Taylor, as a part of my Doctor of Ministry thesis project in Congregational Mission and Leadership at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota.
My advisors are Dr. Craig Van Gelder and Dr. Alvin Luedke.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is: to examine which youth ministry practices were either helpful, or not helpful, in the spiritual journeys of former youth group members.

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, we would ask you to do the following things. Participate in an interview that will ask questions about your youth group participation and about your life since then.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
The study has no risks. I am only asking that you give your time.

The direct benefits of participation are: none

Indirect benefits to yourself/or the general public of participation are improved programs or policies in the area of, and contribution to knowledge about, youth ministry.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept confidential. If I publish any type of report, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. All data will be kept in a locked file in my home; only my advisors, Dr. Craig Van Gelder and Dr. Alvin Luedke, and I will have access to the data and, if applicable, any tape or video recording. If the research is terminated for any reason, all data and recordings will be destroyed. While I will make every effort to ensure confidentiality, anonymity cannot be guaranteed.

I will tape record our interview(s). I alone will have access to the tape recordings, which will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home. I will use them to report the results of the research, and will keep them for three years after submission of the thesis.

Raw data will be destroyed by May 31, 2020.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Luther Seminary, the congregation in which you were a youth group member, or with me. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

Contacts and Questions:
The researcher conducting this study is me, Pastor Andy Taylor. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me by writing me at xxxx Street, City, State xxxxx, by texting (xxx) xxx-xxxx , or by emailing email1@domainname.ext.
Phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx.
You may contact my advisors, Dr. Craig Van Gelder or Dr. Alvin Luedke at Luther Seminary, xxxx Street, City, State, xxxxx
Phone: (xxx) xxx-xxxx

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information or have had it read to me. I have received answers to questions asked. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature _____ Date_____

Signature of investigator _____ Date_____

I consent to be audiotaped:

Signature _____ Date_____

I consent to allow use of my direct quotations in the published thesis document.

Signature _____ Date_____

Created Date

APPENDIX F

IN VIVO CODES WITHIN FOCUSED CODES

FOR QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW DATA

Focused Code 1: Being in Community	
Same group	Other couples going through similar things
Small group	Learn about like-minded people
Core group	Commune and attach with them
Made a lot of friends	Puts you more and more involved
That friendship continues on	In military, I was alone
People who were there	You don't have friends, anybody
I could connect with friends	Bible studies with other church couples
I made friends	I like having community and like-minded people
Getting to be with friends	Community is my small group of friends and family
This was my community from birth	It would be cool to have a church community
I had a lot of friends	It would be nice to have an alternative community
I was alone	Like-minded people
I didn't get to hang out	No such community not based on churches
Able to talk things out in confirmation	Community of church is the big thing
Being with large group who share the same beliefs	This was my community and I wasn't going to stop coming
Be with like-minded people	Be involved in their lives
It was more community	See people I care about
I went to be with friends and family	People are a part of our lives
It was more a hangout than getting to know God	Finding like-minded families is important
We did it as a group	We hold each other accountable
Trips focus on community	I value their opinions
Instilled a fun, feel good community	Makes you feel like a part of the community
The bad is easier to endure when you've got somebody to confide in	Hope my children can find a community that helps, cares for and guides them
It was fun to hang out together	The church was my fun place

Focused Code 1: Being in Community (continued)	
Talk through issues together	Didn't have anybody
Powerful time to feel connected to each other	Suddenly found myself with a great group of friends
Let down walls	They picked me up
Even games brought us together	Showed me who was around me
Comfortable sharing struggles and growing together	Once I established friendships, I knew it was going to be OK
Able to talk in a small group	Friendships last
A more intimate experience	Friendships
This was my community	They are coming from the same place as you
Connections at church huge	Some of the most real relationships I have
Surrounded by ten people	Wish I had that kind of community now
I had my positive community	Away from people who were influences
I see value in having a community	My community now exists of work and family
I came to Christmas for a while to see people I missed	I have positive feelings about churches I've attended
Youth group was the positive experience that kept me connected with church	Church as a whole is definitely a positive

Focused Code 2: Experiencing Caring Adults	
Youth Pastor a real guy	Scout master helped me understand what I'm thinking now
Youth Pastor spoke on my level	Huge respect for Music Director
Current Pastor speaks on my level	Music Director was an inspiration
They were pillars to lean on	Getting to know Youth leader couple one-on-one
They gave advice	They cared about us as individuals
They set an example	Guide was understanding
They made it fun	Music Director a good example
Gave me opportunities to participate at church	My guide's the only person I see from my youth group
Made it somewhere you want to be and want to learn	Having a constant in a kid's life where they're accepted and loved and somebody cares is incredibly valuable
Youth leaders influenced me by having something positive in my life	I remember those people being very influential and helpful
Youth leader couple had a positive relationship	I felt like this church has real people
This is how to treat other people	I did a lot of music with Music Director
How to be a positive force for others	

Focused Code 3: Having/Not Having a Supportive Family	
We'd always talk about and discuss what we had learned and talked about that day	He changes denominations
At my age, my dad didn't have the belief or the openness to go to church	He cares more about leaders than denominations
Grandma believes	Dad wasn't forcing me the way I hear other people are forced into religion
Mom was the driving force	The church was so separate from him
I have aunts who are nuns	Mom doesn't attend church or anything like that
At my age my dad did not believe	I just never talk to mom about these things
Dad's a big supporter of churches	My wife has changed my perspective
Dad's not doing it to make me believe but wants me to go to church	I come to church for family
My parents were influential but were not as engaged	Dad was my biggest influence
Youth group was not exactly my choice but my father wanted me to do it	My mom never pushed
My brothers said youth group helped them not commit suicide	Dad wanted me raised religious until I was eighteen
Family—parents and in-laws—have faith	Dad never talked to me about religion
My kids are involved	Dad said, "You have to go to a church, I don't care which one"
It's important for my children to get to know God	Mom said "You have to let dad think you went to church"
My parents were very involved	He goes to his own separate church
My wife sings in the praise band	I did have to go to dad's church once which was super-boring

Focused Code 4: Practicing the Faith	
I have a lot of knowledge others don't have about faith	We attempt to go to church
I participated in Bible study and games	Ask God to watch over my friends and family nightly
Doing faith statements	I donate money to charities
I could pass the test but wasn't engaged	I'm doing my part to help other people
Tuned out of bible studies, they were super-boring to me	I kind of don't think there's anything I do to continue shaping me spiritually
I was able to worship through music and give back to the church	Silent time for my uncle
We always pray at night	I do a lot of connecting through music
I sang in choir	Worship is powerful
I played handbells	I'm going to do something good
I did not pray much	We can give more to the church
I prayed because I wanted something	I prayed hard for no cancer
Fed the homeless once	If you build a foundation for kids, some facts will help
I pray every day	I feel knowledgeable about the Bible
Volunteering	I know what church is about
Serving at the Interfaith Shelter	Be the best example of a Christian
Worshiping weekly	Serving the community makes you feel good
Prayed every night	I posted a bible verse on Facebook
Praying for things that were important to me	Show my faith through the way I treat people
I came to church services	Every opportunity to volunteer I took on
We did service projects	Did servant projects every two weeks
Familiarizing with the bible	Best experiences were definitely the trips
I can apply the bible to my life	I enjoyed Lutheran conferences
Games were more important than prayers	Really loved summer road trips
Made financial giving a priority	Pray everyday
Was involved in music	Big youth gatherings
Working in VBS teaching wood shop	Singing songs at campfire was an awesome experience
She roped me into bible study	I was youth representative to the denominational judicatory
Pray a lot	Trips were huge
Pray throughout the day	Trips took us out of our comfort zones
Read the Bible	Trips got us away from distractions
Read other Christian books	I remember the little conferences
My wife and I read a book and discuss it	Read devotions
Financial workshops	Kidnapped to go to Magic Mountain

Focused Code 5: Feeling God's Presence Personally

I grew myself in God
Can put all my stress on God
I felt like nothing was really happening inside me
Waited to feel something but never did
I never felt connection with any spiritual level
I knew the stories but never thought it applied to me
I was going and participating but never investing myself
I felt connected to my uncle who died
The closest times I felt to him were moments of silence in church
That's the closest I had to a spiritual thing
I'm open
The openness is the hope my uncle is in heaven
Nothing I ever felt
Had nothing to do with spirituality
Powerful to feel connected to God
I remember at the end of the session something to tie it all to God
Helpful not in spirituality but in growing up
I stopped and really thought about my religion and what it means to me
Drew us closer to God
Gradual growth in faith
Build roots and grow
My relationship with God is different
Have my own personal relationship
Able to find my own personal relationship
Praying, going to church, builds relationship
When I couldn't find a church, I realized the personal was important
Look for something to ground you
For me, it ended up being God
Individual in working through grief and loss
I feel nothing
Even if I had no church, I would commune with God

To me, it's a call, a grounding
Helps you make good decisions
Helps out with life
Calm came over me
I felt the presence of God in that place
God wouldn't desert me
Maybe it's God's way of telling me, "It's going to be OK
I would say God was present
When something is going wrong, I turn to him
God's on the back burner in my life
Moment of silence to think of my uncle
I feel weird that so many people believe, and I totally don't
I have trouble understanding why people believe
I just don't feel anything
I turn to it sometimes even though it's not as important in my adult life
I wouldn't have had any sort of relationship with God
You can be anywhere and connect with God
I can put all my stress on God
More than one way to connect with God
I didn't have the conviction I have now regarding Jesus Christ
I can tell you Jesus is God and give facts
I had faith
This is the most I've talked about not believing
I felt really disconnected from my faith
My faith is still there
It's in the back of my mind
Only time I reflect and pray is if something's not going well or someone is sick
I see no value or place in religion for me

Focused Code 5: Feeling God's Presence Personally (continued)	
I don't think believing is a conscious choice—you do or you don't	Calm came over me
Religion just doesn't appeal to me as a personal belief system	I do feel the presence of God often
I don't believe	I oftentimes feel a big presence of him
I felt closer to God	

Focused Code 6: Persevering through Suffering	
Home life not awesome, great to have a place that was separate and happy	They think it's God's plan
Got in a financial hole with two mortgages	They pray instead of becoming politically active
Sold the bigger house and renovated this one	They thank God for good that doesn't happen to others
It was a hardship	Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, character produces hope
Close friend died in a car accident	We've gotten deeper since the accident
Lost three friends in two years	It's really difficult but I take comfort that they are in heaven
I've been through loss but am rooted in faith	Taking a bad situation and making something good out of it
My wife had left a marriage and I had left a marriage, but a positive came out of a negative	I think that's why we go through hurdles here and there
Negative led to the best part of my life	I am able to handle sickness and loss
Negative can draw you closer to what you can latch onto	If we hadn't gotten through that we wouldn't have persevered and gotten to where we are now
I received a snarky reply and deleted it	The fire was close to home
I private messaged that I would be happy to tell you how I feel	I prayed and the house was saved
Turned into an adult conversation	I prayed hard for no cancer
	How could you let this happen?
Got bad news I wouldn't walk again	Found out my wife was cheating
Surgeon entered wearing a cross	Unhappy at my current job
We make poor choices	Younger people dying is really difficult to handle
God's not in the prevention business	They were at peace so we had to be at peace
God uses things that happen to make you better	I feel religion gives people an excuse not to care about people
God, I know you're trying to teach me	It was the hardest time in my life
Financial mess with renters led to where we are now	It made me stronger, showed me who was around me
Mom was healthy, I felt that (prayer) really worked	When things don't go my way, I don't blame God
My mom had just finished battling cancer	My mommy's in heaven

Focused Code 7: Seeing God in the World	
Don't know if all of it is relevant to how I live my life	I feel that life just flies by
I love Lutheran group, we're very accepting, but to me there's no right way to believe	The overall importance of it has taken a back seat in my life
God brought the surgeon	It's in the back of my mind
I think that was the work of God	I feel a big distance between me and the church
God made that happen	I'm so busy
God directed that	Realizing how this applies to real life
Others say God wouldn't have let the accident happen	I was able to apply it to my current life
I thought God was there for me	It's kept me straight
We can be good stewards of God's money	Two friends in jail, not me
It's not our money	Something else helped me
Stronger if I'm working and God's working	Real life is more important than something you are believing in
I've found there's always a reason	The only positive about religion is when people die, people can have more peace with it
The reason brought me comfort	Flip side is people don't put enough value into life here
I know they are now in the hands of God	It's become less important to me
At college I was bombarded with "God's not a part of this world"	It's not an integral part of my life
Universe had a beginning, will end	My wife—God brought us together
Innate part of you knows right from wrong	Makes me feel like someone's helping and guiding me
I think that was an aspect of spirituality there	

Focused Code 8: Responding to Judgmental Believers	
Faith and religion do wonders for searching people but it's not right what some people do with it	People here are not hypocritical
They tried to convert me to Mormonism	It's not like you're in the club or you're out
I'll not say "You're wrong. You're right"	This church is an island of awesomeness is a sea of non-awesome religiousness
I struggled with judgmentalism of other Christians	This church teaches acceptance and welcome
I am coming from a Christian perspective on how you treat people	Other churches you have to stay or be shunned
Offer love to everyone	They can't work together
You don't have to preach	Especially Lutherans are accepting
Provide an example	Christians just condemned the gays
Judgmental churches	Aren't we supposed to be about acceptance and forgiveness?
I would see this is how people view Christians	Wow, that's a lot of acceptance you're showing there
I would try to show them you can't judge people like that	Why are we labeling an entire population just because of the acts of the small or the few that are extremist views at the most?
I was a breath of fresh air to some of what a Christian could be	It reaffirms that religion is just not much for me in general
I am more accepting	People use religion as an excuse to promote racism or classism or homophobia.
I can take away the acceptance we have here	A Christian Scout Master was against female Scout staff
People here are actually caring, not homophobic, not racist	I can't tell him what to believe
I believe that you can't condemn the entire Muslim faith	But he shouldn't say that
Boy Scouts no gays policy was disappointing	Not as much acceptance as I would like to see
When policy changed, churches dropped scouts	

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